

"RUN WELL AND FINISH STRONG" (HEBREWS 13)

Reminder: Cindy teaching next week, class party Aug 27th 5:30 PM

We're finishing up our study of Hebrews this morning. I've entitled this: "Run well and finish strong (Ch 13). I want to go back to our lesson from last week. Remember the author used the analogy of running a race. The race is a metaphor, a picture for the Christian life. He says, "Run with endurance the race set out for us..." (Heb 12:1). At the end of the lesson someone in the class asked, "Who set this race out?" My answer was, "God did." If the race represents the Christian life, then WHO is it that is running the race? We are. Christians are. We entered the race the day we got saved. The whole plan of salvation was ordained by God. In Acts 2 Peter is preaching at Pentecost and he tells the people in Jerusalem that it was God's well thought out plan for Jesus to die on the cross and to raise Him up again. Jesus's death was no accident. It was not some tragic miscarriage of justice. It was part of God's sovereign plan. It was His design all along. It was God's remedy for our sin problem. Why? He loved us and He didn't want to spend an eternity apart from Him. So if God set this plan up whereby we could spend an eternity with Him, then obviously His desire is for us to believe in Jesus and get saved. When we by faith believed and said "Yes" to Jesus, God did in fact save us. At that point the race we call our Christian life began. When will it end? At either our death or the rapture, whichever comes first.

Ok, so let's say we do God's will and get saved. Is that it? Do we now just bypass all of life's problems, pains and hardships; leave behind all of our obligations here on earth and head straight on to heaven? Is that God's plan for us? Apparently not because we're still here! God has something He wants us to do as saved people here on earth. We have a race to run. It is all part of God's purpose for us. That's what running this race is about. It's about us living like God wants us to live. It's about us growing spiritually. It's about us carrying out His mission to tell others the good news that saved us. We are running this race together. So this race is God's race. We

enter it by faith and we run it by faith (just like those folks we read about in Hebrews Ch 11).

Are there any rules in a race or can we just do anything we want while running? Take a short cut, trip a runner on purpose, etc. "Hey, I'm free in Christ! I don't have to follow the Law. I'm saved by grace." Here's the point. We may be saved, but there are still rules that we as the runners in the race are expected to follow. That's the idea presented in Ch 13 – general guidelines for how we are to run our race. We're in this race running alongside each other. What are we expected to do? How can we run well and finish strong? As we go thru this chapter you're going to see what God expects of us as believers as we run our race.

READ Hebrews 13:1

Let the rules begin! "Brotherly love" is the love of our fellow believers in Christ. Notice he says to let our love CONTINUE. He's saying, "You've been doing this. Keep on loving. Don't stop."

I love you all. I hope you know that. But as my brothers and sisters in Christ none of you is perfect in your behavior. Sometimes you can be difficult, petty, argumentative, unfaithful in your attendance, negative, fearful, hurtful – hey, I can be that way myself sometimes! Here's the thing about love. When you really love someone you think the best of them. You know they've got issues, but you focus on their good points. It's not easy to love some people. That's why we need to keep our focus on Jesus and follow His example. One thing that should distinguish us from the rest of the world is our love for each other. Jesus said, "Love one another. By this all people will know you are My disciples." (Jn 13:35) So keep loving!

READ Hebrews 13:2

Not only are we to love each other but we are to show love to people we don't even know. Specifically he mentions showing hospitality (acts of kindness). Examples of this practically – waiter, cashier, homeless guy. We Christians ought to be nice, gentle, sharing, giving, kind people.

I love that he says that “some have entertained angels unawares (without knowing it). I thought of the story of Abraham in Gen 18 when three men dropped by for a visit. Abraham and Sarah prepared a feast for these guys. They didn’t know that one of them was the Lord Himself and the other two were probably angels. The purpose of the visit was to let Abraham and Sarah know they were going to have a son in the next year.

Treat them well. Love them.

READ Hebrews 13:3

Persecution in the early church was ramping up and many Christians were being thrown into prison for their faith. It happened to both Paul and Peter. So don’t forget about your brothers and sisters who are going thru a rough patch. Go visit them, invite them out to dinner, call them up. Offer words of encouragement. Show them compassion. Let them know you care about them. We are all a part of the same body of Christ.

The first three verses tell us how we should get the focus off ourselves and onto others. The author now shifts the focus onto us. Last week the point was made by the writer of Hebrews to keep our focus on Jesus. He is our primary focus. But that doesn’t mean we have blinders on and don’t see the people around us or recognize our own needs.

READ Hebrews 13:4

The focus of this verse is on maintaining sexual purity in our marriages. How do we treat our husbands and wives? Read Ephesians 5:22-33. In a broader sense this verse promotes godly living in general. Our behavior (outside) begins inwardly in our own minds (internet, music, books, movies etc). We then live it out at home among those we are closest to. And then out in the world. Our behavior matters. We honor God by the way we live our lives. First Peter 1:15 says that “we are to be holy in all of our conduct.”

READ Hebrews 13:5

We should be satisfied with and thankful for what we have. We should not covet someone else's wife or husband, money, power, or possessions. The quote here, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" was actually spoken by God to Joshua (1:5) when He commissioned Joshua to be Israel's leader after Moses died. The whole point is that God said that he would provide everything Joshua needed to be successful. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the author applies that verse to us as well.

READ Hebrews 13:6

Here we have a quote from Ps 118:6. Who or what do we place our confidence in? The psalmist's confidence was in the Lord. God not only provides what we need to run our race well, but He provides us the power and strength and endurance we need to run it. During our long race there are going to be many things, people, situations that come along and try to slow us down, block our path, distract us, veer us off into a different direction than what God wants for us. How are we going to respond?

One of the biggest enemies we have in our world today is fear. There are a lot of things out there for us to be afraid of. "I will not fear." Second Timothy 1:7 says, "For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control." The little church I grew up and got saved in had Psalm 46:1 posted at the front of the church and the Lord has brought to my attention many times through the years – "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." God is our Savior, Protector, Helper, Comforter, Deliverer and Guide. I heard a song this week called "You've Already Won." The chorus says, "I'm fighting a battle that you've already won. No matter what comes my way I will overcome." What a blessing and comfort to know that as we run our race our Lord is right there with us the whole way!

READ Hebrews 13:7-9

The writer of Hebrews is appealing to his audience to be stable-minded and doctrinally sound. Know God's Word. False teachers were a huge problem in the early church. They're an even bigger problem today.

In v 7 he says, "Look at your leaders. See how they live their lives, the faith they have. Be like them. In v 8 he says that there is an even better example to follow, and that's Jesus who never changes. Just look at all the distractions and temptations He had. And yet He stayed the course. Why was Jesus that way? If you read the Gospels you'll see that Jesus was always tuned in to His Father. He was committed to doing His Father's will. So then, the application for us is that we need to know the truth found in God's word and follow it. We shouldn't listen to all those strange voices!

Here's why I say that... the godly examples and influences God has given me through the years – my parents, teachers, pastors, Christian friends, spiritual mentors; the guidance of His holy word; the life of Jesus; the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. What a coaching staff, all of whom keep me on the right track. They help me to run my race well!

Well now we come to one of the most difficult verses in all of the Bible. Knowing the context, however, helps us to better understand what it is saying.

READ Hebrews 13:10-13

An Altar? Serve the tent? No right to eat? Bodies of animals? What on earth is the writer talking about here? You need to remember the original audience came from a Jewish background. They would have understood the analogy being used here. We Gentiles on the other hand need a little bit of explanation. So here it is...

The writer is using the analogy of the sin offering from the Old Testament. When a sin offering was made on the altar, once the animal was killed you couldn't eat it. It was different from the other offerings. You could eat the meat from those offerings, but not the meat from the sin offering. The carcass of the animal that had been sacrificed on the altar as

part of the sin offering had to be taken outside the camp or the city and burned. It was defiled. So it had to be disposed of away from the people. The Jews knew all about the sin offering required under the Law, the old covenant. Under the new covenant Jesus also made a sin offering – He offered up Himself. Jesus was rejected by His own people and He was sent off to be crucified outside the city walls of Jerusalem. What the writer is saying here is that we as Christians need to identify ourselves with Jesus outside the city rather than with the masses of people who remained inside the city carrying on with their lives as usual.

Separation from the world and identifying with Christ is the whole idea here. We are in the world but not of the world. That's the point of this analogy.

READ Hebrew 13:14

Here's the reason why we need to be separate, different from the world. We have no ties to this world or city, what he calls, "no lasting city. It is all passing away. It's all going to be done away with eventually. We are looking to the heavenly city, "the city that is to come." Ours should be a heavenly perspective. Laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

READ Hebrews 13:15-16

The Jews whole religious system was built around the various sacrifices and offerings. In Christ we no longer need to offer sacrifices. Well, not those kinds of sacrifices. The sacrifices that God wants us to offer Him are (1) the sacrifice of praise, the worship of our lips; and (2) the sacrifice of love which is characterized by action – doing good and sharing what you have with others, the selfless giving of ourselves. Did you realize that your acts of love are actually a sacrifice to God, an act of worship?

READ Hebrew 13:17a

We are to submit to the leaders God has placed over us – pastors, teachers, other spiritual mentors. They are the ones God has entrusted to

“keep watch over our souls.” In other words their job is to minister to our spiritual needs, to strengthen us by teaching us God’s word and helping us to apply it. They will have to give an account.

How are we to obey and submit to our pastors and teachers? Look at the rest of v 17... READ Hebrews 13:17b

In other words without complaining and criticizing.

Let me give you two examples of faithful men of God who had completely different experiences with the people they ministered to – Paul and Jeremiah. Both faithfully went where God directed them to go. Both proclaimed God’s message. But they had completely different experiences!

Paul spent 3 years ministering to the church at Ephesus and when he leaves them for the last time there is this moving scene in Acts 20:36-38. You see their mutual love and affection for each other displayed in Paul’s tearful farewell.

Jeremiah on the other hand – the only tears shed were his own! He preached to the people of Jerusalem for years trying to get them to repent and come back to God. But he never had a single convert. Jeremiah 13:17 and 10:19.

Two different servants of God with totally different experiences. All because of the response by the people they ministered to. Paul received affection. Jeremiah got only rejection. Many a congregation has sent their preacher to an early retirement or change in vocation. Ministry is hard!

READ Hebrews 13:18-19

The writer is asking prayer for himself. We can see from this verse that he probably had been a part of this congregation before. Perhaps he was one of their former pastors or leaders. To him their prayers mattered. He felt that their prayers would make a difference. We don’t know the situation, but they would have known.

Having just asked prayer for himself he now prays the following prayer for the people in this community that he's been writing to...

READ Hebrews 13:20-21

He prays that God will equip them, train them, give them everything they need to run their race, to do His will, to please Him. What a prayer!

He closes the letter with some final words and we do not know any of the details. Remember, when you read the epistles, the letters, like Hebrews here, you are in effect reading someone else's mail! This is more than some lengthy theological discourse. He's writing to real people with real needs. They are at different places in their spiritual journey.

READ Hebrews 13:22-25

We don't know the names of any of the people in this congregation. We don't even know where they lived. So there's no way to know the specific circumstances of their lives. We can piece together some trivial facts about them. They knew Timothy. They did not live in Italy. But we don't know much more than that. We don't know who any of these people were and it really doesn't matter, does it?

I don't know who the writer of Hebrews was but I thank God for his wisdom and his insight and for his heart for these people, whoever and wherever they were. You can tell he had a deep love and concern for them. More important you can see his great love and high regard for His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whom He saw as Above All Else. And there you have Hebrews.

May God bless the reading and study of His holy word.