

Title: Running is About Finishing
Date: March 18, 2018
Subject: Finishing the spiritual race well
Scripture: Hebrews 13:20 - 25

7pm, October 20, 1968. The men's marathon winner at the Mexico City Olympics had finished over an hour earlier. The crowd dwindled as other competitors trickled in. Only a few thousand spectators remained when those near the stadium entrance heard sirens and police whistles. Soon all eyes witnessed a lone athlete, John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania, the last to finish. Half way through the race he was knocked to the pavement when runners jostled for position. His shoulder banged on the road. His knee was bloodied and dislocated. Medics applied bandages and he was urged to stop. He didn't. He kept running and walking, slowly making his way to the stadium and then around the track to the finish line. The spectators applauded as if he were the winner. Someone asked him why he had not quit since he was injured and obviously wouldn't win a medal. "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish it."

The Lord isn't interested in us merely starting the race. He wants us to finish well. After asking for prayer, the writer to Hebrews closes with a prayer of blessing that the readers would tap into God's provisions.

READ Hebrews 13:20-25

I. God's credentials

The God of peace. This designates his character. He's a God of peace. Not war. So many of the so-called gods worshipped by people were beings of ill will, hostility, malevolence, anger if not plain old all-out war against humanity. They were deemed to be anti-people and devoted to their destruction.

Not so with God. He is peace just as he is love. Strong's Concordance of the word used for peace: "To be safe, sound, healthy, perfect, complete, signifies a sense of well-being and harmony both within and without - Completeness, wholeness, peace, health, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, fullness, rest, harmony; the absence of agitation or discord, a state of calm without anxiety or stress." God is complete in himself. He doesn't need someone else to fulfill him. He is sound in every imaginable way – mentally, socially, psychologically, emotionally. He is a God of peace.

It also indicates his supply. He is a God who provides peace. James Montgomery Boice expresses this as "the good that comes to the one God favors." God seeks to bring who he is to people. Peace as in the absence of conflict with him but it's more than that. Peace brings who God is -- soundness, wholeness, completeness, tranquility.

God is the God of power. In a few weeks we have the day that is dedicated to celebrating his power when he brought Jesus back from the dead. He could have left Jesus in the grave if the sacrifice was found to be unacceptable. This would have been the case if Jesus had sinned in some way, if he had disobeyed the Father. The fact that Jesus has been raised proves he didn't sin and was totally acceptable to the Father.

Christ's death and resurrection sealed the eternal covenant. It will last forever. It won't be replaced or updated because of some defect. It won't lapse.

Jesus, as the great Shepherd, perfectly fulfills the description in Psalm 23. He leads the flock into places to eat and drink as he is the Word and the subject of the God's Word the Bible. He guards and protects the flock. He corrects and warns those who go in the wrong direction. He does this through his representative the Holy Spirit. He seeks to rescue and restore. He leaves the 99 who are safe in the fold to search for the one who is wandering. He walks with his sheep during the difficult times of life, through the valley of the shadow of death as he himself walked through that dark, lonesome valley, only He did it alone. The disciples failed to help by praying for him. He was nailed to the cross alone. He laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). He leads in the path the sheep are to take, directing them to the goal to live in the house of the Lord, his house, forever.

This is the grand theme of the book. Jesus is the Great Shepherd. He is not only vastly superior to angels and Moses and religious leaders since the book and current spiritual leaders, he is the one and only way to the Father. Through him, God brings comfort and hope.

The prayer continues with the plea for God be at work. May the God of peace equip and work in. There are various shades of meaning for equip. Some understand it as "to make perfect" -- complete or whole. It was used as a medical term for setting bones right. It would be putting people back together the way they should be. "It includes the ideas of harmonious combination, the supply of what is lacking, and the rectification of what is wrong or damaged" (New Bible Commentary note on Hebrews 13:20). Bob Utley, "means to make someone or something completely adequate, sufficient, or fully qualified...God's will is that believers are conformed to the image of Jesus (cf. Rom. 8:29), resulting in godly living which attracts the lost to Christ."

God wishes to supply with everything good, with everything that is helpful in fulfilling his commands. Hebrews repeatedly enumerates several of these -- faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. (11:6). Perseverance. Faithfulness. Obedience.

Doing his will. This was Jesus' motivation. Jesus told the Father this when he came into the world, "I have come to do your will" (Hebrews 10:7). He reiterated this during his ministry, "My food is to do the will of him that sent me" (John 4:34), "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). In the Garden Jesus prayed "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

We are to be like Jesus in our desire to do the will of the Father. In order for that to happen, we need to know the Father's will, know his mind.

Another way to put doing his will is to please God. The faith chapter mentioned faith as being necessary to please God. Earlier in chapter 13 there was a reference to pleasing God by doing good and sharing with others as pleasing sacrifices (Hebrews 13:16). We are to "Live as children of light...and find out what pleases the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8-10). Fantastic study on pleasing God.

This is all done through Christ. Through the union of our relationship with him, He provides the righteousness, resources, power and motivation. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

Similar to Philippians 2:12, 13 (Ephesians 2:8-10; 2 Peter 1:3-5). God equips, provides what is necessary but it's up to people if they will cooperate and accomplish God's will. God works in people as they submit their will to his.

It's like a car. The vehicle is provided to you. It has all the parts. Nothing is missing. It has gas. But it just sits there. What needs to happen? Whether the key needs to be turned, the button pushed or the knob turned, the mechanism for starting the ignition has to be manipulated. Then you have to put the car in gear and push the gas.

God supplies what's needed. He provides the equipment, the motivation, the empowerment but the Christian life can just sit there until the person decides that they will cooperate with God's plan. Engage the ignition, put life in gear and give it the gas.

God hasn't made people to be puppets. He didn't do that for people becoming part of his family where he just put people in. They have a choice. We have to balance God's sovereign control with the free will that he decided to give people. People having the ability to choose doesn't negate God's control since he's the one who gave free will to people.

The goal is to bring glory to Jesus and the Father. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23, 24).

Steven J. Cole, "God saved us by His grace, and He prepared the very works that we should do for Him beforehand. But, we have to walk in them. Our aim every day, beginning on the thought level, should be, "God, I want to please You because of Your abundant grace that You have shown me. Empower me today to do that which is pleasing in Your sight" (Lesson 57: God Our Provider, bible.org).

I'm reading the Bible chronologically. Been cruising through Deuteronomy. It's quite fascinating reading Moses' farewell speech as he reminds the people about what the Lord has done, their history of rebellion, what they should expect in the future, and their response to the Lord. I kept coming across the same thing again and again that sounded a lot like the book of Hebrews.

They were specially chosen by the Lord to be a holy people because the Lord set his affection on them and loved them, not because of anything they'd done (Deut. 7:6-8). They weren't to leave the Lord (to the right or the left – Deut. 5:33) to follow after some so-called god. They were to remember how the Lord led (Deut. 8:2) and not think they'd achieved anything by themselves (Deut. 8:11, 14, 19). “Do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live” (Deut. 4:9). “If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him” (Deut. 13:1-4)

They were tested to see if they would love the Lord with all their heart and soul. Love is so pervasive in the book that it's been said, “The love relationship of the Lord to this people and that of the people to the Lord as their sovereign God pervade the whole book. Deuteronomy's spiritual emphasis and its call to total commitment to the Lord in worship and obedience inspired references to its message through the rest of Scripture” (NIV Study Bible introduction). It's about God's love for them and how they are to love him back.

I found at least ten times where love for God is called for. There may be more as I get to the end of the book. It's mingled with calls to fear the Lord, serve him, hold fast to him, walk in obedience, observe his commands which he often says is to love him. “If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him and to hold fast to him” (Deut. 11:22). The rest are noted in the sermon notes.

There's the responsibility to pass on what has been experienced to the next generations, to others. The Israelites were frequently told to teach their children and their children's children, impress them on their hearts, talk about them all day long (Deut. 4:9; 6:7-9; 11:19, 20). They were to teach future generations because they saw the Lord at work and those who came after them didn't have that privilege (Deut. 11:2-7, 19).

The writer of Hebrews urges readers to pay attention to the exhortation to keep making forward progress in holding on to the faith we profess. This was only a brief letter, just skimming the surface. He could

have made it much longer in an attempt to do justice to describing the superiority of Jesus. We sing about the Lord using words like indescribable, uncontainable, all powerful, and incomparable and that “to write the love of God above would drain the oceans dry. Nor could the scroll contain the whole though stretched from sky to sky.” Add in trying to explain how we should respond to such a great salvation while we are on earth with the expectation of the unfathomable riches of glory in heaven with Christ.

Stephen Hawking, regarded as one of the world’s great intellects, died this past week. He had a decidedly different perspective. “We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the universe. That makes us something very special...For millions of years, mankind lived just like the animals. Then something happened which unleashed the power of our imagination. We learned to talk and we learned to listen. Speech has allowed the communication of ideas, enabling human beings to work together to build the impossible...I believe the simplest explanation is, there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization that there probably is no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that, I am extremely grateful...The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.” Me thinks, sir, that you were correct in that last statement. “The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.” The greatest enemy of coming to know Christ in a living and vital relationship is peoples’ illusion of knowledge.

A personal touch is added at the end about Timothy who often accompanied Paul as a valuable servant of Christ. The desire is that Timothy and the writer would be able to visit the church. In the meantime, greet the leaders and all of God’s people. The phrase “Those from Italy” has been understood in various ways. Basically, he’s passing along the love and connections of believers. We’re in it together.

The final words are a bestowal of the blessing of God’s grace to be with everyone as they run the race marked out for us. There’s nothing left to say as grace includes all that the Lord has for his people – his boundless goodness, favor, love, mercy, care and grace. Some translations add Amen. Amen means “so be it.”

Jean and I visited the kids and grandkids on Tuesday. Jean figures she read 30 books to Chloe. Sometimes she would sit real well for the story, Chloe, not Jean. I guess Jean too. Sometimes Chloe would turn the pages of the books before Jean was done reading the few sentences on the page. One was a book about colors. Chloe whipped through the book with Jean hurriedly sneaking in a few of words and then adding, when Chloe closed the book, “Amen.” Jean put the book down. Chloe grabbed it, read a few pages, closed the book, “Amen.”

God’s grace be with you all. Amen.