

Faith through the fire part 7; You can always run better

With the call to be the best we can be now, the people God created us to be despite our circumstances, we have looked at the idea of the deliverance from unnecessary conflicts and anxiety. We saw that we do this together as a united army of God by taking up God's equipment for the battle, to be able to stand firm on the patch of dirt God has placed you on. This impacts on how we rule over things like our finances and trust God's ability to provide what is necessary. The great challenge is not to be distracted by our struggles while in the pitched battle we find ourselves in, highlighting our need to be content with such as we have. God has offered the equipment and resources you need, so use them. Well, that's a quick summary of the things that have been discussed so far.

All of this is to be done with the realisation that we are meant to be ready and willing to share the message of life with those who are "dead" and spread the good news of our peace in Christ with our fellow soldiers. Our ability to share the message of life with willing audiences is impacted by the way we spread the peace of God to others who are in Christ. But our anxiety over things is what opens the door and rearms our enemies; both physical and spiritual. If we can't accept or live in the peace God has made in the body of Christ, then we load the empty gun that our enemy wields; we cause unnecessary conflict and war within the body by inviting the enemy inside. Simply put, living in the peace created in Christ is disarming for them but empowering for us.

Now, I want to add to these musings a very practical example. It's an example that should help us see the need to reshape our view of others to fit how the Lord sees them; to accept our place in God's plan and not be jealous of or downplay another's. But before we look at the example consider these wise words found in Hebrews;

"Therefore, strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which [holiness] no one will see the Lord [in you]: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this [root of bitterness springing up] many become defiled [by the root of bitterness]." Hebrews 12:12-15, with clarifying statements.

In Hebrews 12, the author has been drawing on the examples of the great men and women of faith in chapter 11. They are not great men and women of faith in our opinion only but in God's; the opinion which counts. They received commendation from God because of their faith. They have become for us "so great a cloud of witnesses" of living by faith, Hebrews 12:1. The picture is of a stadium full of athletes, who have finished their race, cheering you on as you run yours. So, as Hebrews 12:1-2 says, we should lay aside things that weigh us down, like anxiety and fear, and things that trip us up, like sin.

We have a race before us that we need endurance to run. As we run, we are not only to look at how others ran their race but also to our Captain, who leads the charge into battle, as a fellow athlete; a fellow runner. As we look to His example, we are reminded that it won't be easy. But the tough things we endure, the cramping, thirst, weary legs, or sheer boredom of running, are all a part of our Father's training regime, as we are reminded in Hebrews

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12:3-11. At times the training is because we made mistakes in our race or have run poorly, at other times it's endurance training so that we can run faster and further in our race, overcoming the things that would normally hold you back or slow you down. Our Father's training regime is to produce holiness in us; to make us like our Father, who is holy. This training "yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness".

"Therefore", Hebrews 12:12-15, be strengthened by the Father's training and strengthen your fellow runners. Following on with this picture of a race, the author perfectly pictures what happens when you run a long-distance race, or even short-distances for some of us; the hands start to hang low. Those arms that were helping you keep your stride and breathing in check now hang low with exhaustion. The knees start to turn into jelly and allow your feet to slide out into random directions, flopping around as they try to compensate. This runner is exhausted, but is it time to stop and take a breather? No. It's time to level out the track, Hebrews 12:1-2, and draw strength and endurance from the Lord. It's time to make sure that what is growing weary isn't dislocated from the body but finds healing to endure still more.

As a runner grows weary in the race, it's uplifting for fellow runners to come alongside and lift them up. We do this by pursuing peace with each other and the holiness that comes from our Father's training. We also keep a watch out that we do not fall from God's grace because bitterness is its end result. Bitterness is a root that, if it springs up on the track, trips more than one. That's right, the bitterness that starts growing in one lane spreads out as a trip hazard in the lanes of other runners.

This bitterness springs from things we have already discussed; discontent, anxiety and fear. It springs from how we view God's working in our lives and the lives of others. How can we overcome this? By reshaping the way we see our fellow runners in Christ. Being strengthened by God's work in them and not jealous or embittered by your own experiences. Seeing other runners as Christ sees them from the inside out, not how you see them from the outside only. Learning to trust in the length and difficulty of the race placed before you and not measure it up with the lane God has placed someone else in.

So, what is the practical example? What will help you combat bitterness? Well, it's a very short letter written by Paul, Philemon. In a sense, it's a tale of two runners, whose races started differently, but they needed to find a way to run together. This is very similar to the two ladies mentioned in Philippians 4. To help with this, a fellow runner, Paul, comes alongside yelling out words of unity and encouragement; calling for Philemon to see the race and his fellow runner, Onesimus, in a whole new light.

In the first three verses we are introduced to Philemon and their local church. At the time of writing Paul was a prisoner in Rome. As we saw in Philippians, this wasn't hindering Paul's race but had its advantages. Paul addresses the letter to Philemon, a beloved friend and fellow worker. These are not throw-away polite terms. Paul meant every bit of what those two ideas sum up, just read verses 4-7.

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Paul was thankful for Philemon as a beloved friend and fellow worker because Philemon had demonstrated his faith in the Lord and his love for fellow believers; they were working towards the same goal and on the same team. There was no doubting the value of Philemon in Paul's mind. He had been a great source of refreshment to other runners; "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother!". But Paul was also praying that Philemon's partnership in the faith would become even more effective. In a way Paul, a fellow runner, was coming alongside and encouraging Philemon that he was running a good race but Paul wanted to give him a few pointers on how he could run it even better.

How would Philemon's partnership become even more effective? By Philemon acknowledging every good thing that is in him in Christ Jesus. Odd? It sounds like, "hey Philemon you're going great but are your shoelaces tied?", "ditch that jumper it's only weighing you down", "Philemon, do you remember who you are?". It's a moment to mentally pause and take stock, to remind yourself of all the things that are good in you because of what Christ has done for you and offers you; how you got into the race in the first place, how you have gotten this far, how you will keep on going and what is waiting for you at the end. This moment of mental pause, while running, will boost Philemon on still more, but only if he takes that time, between strides, to remind himself of all the good that is in him in Christ. If he doesn't, then what Paul is about to yell across the lane will trip him up and he'll fall flat on his face.

"Now about old mate, Onesimus!" You can almost feel it in your own body. After a few good, needed deep breaths, reinvigorating strides, followed by some "God is good" and "God's got this", Paul's words in verses 8-10 come out. The knee just over-bent a little, you accidentally strike your chest with your hand as you're striding instead of it sliding past, and your ankle buckles. That's probably how those verses hit Philemon.

You see, Onesimus was Philemon's slave. The last time they were together, Onesimus wasn't even on God's athletics team. He had stolen from Philemon and bolted. Exactly what he stole we don't know, but suffice to say, he at least stole himself. Now Philemon was a wealthy man. He was a slave owner and the church at Colossae met in his house (verse 2). He was doing a great job of graciously ministering and sharing from his resources with others. But, for that gracious ministry to become even more effective he had to make peace with his new teammate, Onesimus. Was there cause for anxiety, bitterness, jealousy and the like? Absolutely. But that would hinder Philemon's race, it would hold him back. You can almost hear the root of bitterness cracking up in his lane and spreading into the local body.

What would propel Philemon over it, stopping him from tripping up? Paul has already told us; by acknowledging every good thing that is in him in Christ Jesus. Then, taking his understanding and acknowledgement of those good things and acknowledging they are true of the other; Onesimus. There's a challenge; write down all the good things that are good in you in Christ and the promises He has made. Then, reassign them to the person you are struggling with. In that time of reflection, you may be confronted with all that is not so good in you. That's a healthy reminder that all that is not good in the other person isn't a problem unique to them.

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There is a great play on words here that is missed in English. Onesimus' name means "profitable" or "useful". Now catch Paul's words in verse 11, "who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me." Paul wanted Philemon to see that his run-away slave, who he thought was unprofitable, useless, was profitable to both Paul and his ministry as well as to Philemon's. He wanted Philemon and Onesimus to run as though they were on the same team.

Paul, as a fellow runner, sensing the danger from the trip hazard, the root of bitterness, does something remarkable. In his position, Paul could have just commanded Philemon to do what Paul wanted, but Paul didn't. That could have caused even more problems. Instead Paul spoke from love. In this love speech, Paul sought to remove any hurdle by penning a contract with his own hand, "If we are partners, then receive him as a partner as well. But if he has wronged you and owes you, charge that to me. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand, 'I will repay'..."

Now, Paul could remind Philemon and compel him, because Philemon owed Paul his life. But the contract in inspired ink was to challenge Philemon to do this willingly and not begrudgingly; no anxiety, no bitterness, no resentment, no compulsion. Philemon needed to acknowledge the good that was in Onesimus in Christ. If he could acknowledge this then, like Paul, he could see that perhaps this all happened the way it did just so Onesimus could meet Paul and become a beloved brother. Philemon could now receive and embrace him as a brother forever. Perhaps there was use and profit in this Onesimus after all.

This is a powerful example of reaching out to strengthen the hands hanging low, and the feeble knees, and making straight paths for Philemon's feet; Paul the track side physician. But what would it take from Philemon? A willingness to acknowledge that all the good that was in him in Christ was the same good that was in Onesimus, now he was in Christ. If you aren't looking at the right things, bitterness and jealousy easily springs up and you will trip and fall flat on your face. Unfortunately, like those clips from the pelotons in the tour de France, you often take others with you.