

When You Get Knocked Down

Hebrews 12:4-6

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abel...

By faith Enoch...

By faith Noah...

By faith Abraham...

By faith Isaac and Jacob...

By faith Joseph...

By faith Moses' parents...and Moses...

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.

By faith the prostitute Rahab...

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,

who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,

quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground...

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Let's pray...

Introduction.

For the four weeks that he is away Pastor Jeff assigned the text of Hebrews 12:1-11 to those of us who are preaching. My assigned portion for today is Hebrews 12:4-6.

I mention that we were assigned these texts and did not choose them ourselves because I feel particularly unqualified to preach on this one. First of all – the imagery in this passage is all about sports. And if you know me I really don't care – about sports. So, I am a little at a disadvantage. Though if you do care you might relate well to this passage.

Secondly, this passage is about people who are being persecuted for believing in Jesus. I work at a Church, with really good Christian people, in a mini-Bible belt portion of our country. I haven't really been persecuted.

But there is a third aspect to this passage that I can relate to. It is about sin. It is about recognizing that sin is an enemy and that I can never forget that. And it is about how often we do forget that. Now that I can relate to. Complacency. I have and do, quite often, forget that this life and the joys that it offers that are less than godly are not the end goal. In fact they are distractions to completing that which has been laid out before me.

So, I guess I have a three point sermon. These are the three different ideas that the author of Hebrews layers on top of one another in this text. Let's look at them a little closer.

Sports.

We don't really know who exactly wrote Hebrews. Many people early on attributed it to the apostle Paul, others find that unlikely, but we cannot be sure. But the author of Hebrews is writing this letter to Jewish born Christians. These are people who lived their lives reading and memorizing what we would call the Old Testament, people who observed the feasts, who worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem, who did not eat bacon or shrimp, people who recognized Moses as a great prophet.

But these are also people who – contrary to their parents, their friends and their neighbors – have accepted the idea that Jesus, the Carpenter from Nazareth, is the promised Anointed One that the Scriptures told was coming, the Messiah, the Christ. In faith they have believed that Jesus is God, that Jesus died for sin and rose again from the dead to life.

Here in Hebrews 12 the author is comparing these people to athletes. In 12:1 he is comparing them to athletes who are running a race. In 12:4 he is comparing them to people who are boxing.

At the beginning of this sermon I started by reading excerpts from Hebrews 11 and 12 because the imagery the author is using is quite like he is saying to his readers: "You are an athlete. When you placed your faith in Jesus you started the race, you entered the boxing ring. But you are not the only one who has done this. Abel ran this race of faith. Enoch, Noah and Abraham ran this race. Moses, Rahab, they have entered the boxing match. From creation until Jesus all those people you have learned about your whole life from the scriptures – they too ran this race. They too boxed this match. You are not alone. But you know what? They were good players. They did their part. But Jesus, He too ran the race and He too boxed the match. But He completely crushed it!"

I have heard you sports people talking about the goat, the G.O.A.T. I had to look it up. The Greatest of All Time. Well, Jesus actually is the Greatest of All Time.

In fact, before Hebrews gets to this point in chapter 12, the whole first section of the letter is given over to showing that Jesus is greater than all the good things and people of faith that God provided His people up to this point.

Hebrews chapter one – Jesus is greater than the angels.

Hebrews chapter three – Jesus is greater than Moses.

Hebrews chapter four – Jesus is greater than Joshua.

Hebrews chapter eight – Jesus is greater than all the High Priests.

Hebrews chapter nine – Jesus is greater than all the blood sacrifices people offered for their sins and greater than the tabernacle and the Temple and all their furnishings.

Why, because Jesus originated this race, He started this boxing match. Then He ran it perfectly. He KO-ed Satan and sin and death. And He is victorious and is seated in the position of honor in heaven.

Hebrews 1:3-4 says “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So, he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”

He is the victor! Now go, go, go, run, run, run, push it, push it, you can do it, you can do it....Go team!

That is what this passage is. It is a pep rally.

Why do we have pep rallies? Because there is a big game coming up today.

Persecution.

The people who were receiving this letter had stepped away from the culture they grew up with and were getting push back from their communities, their families – pretty much everyone they had known up to this point.

Some of you know what this is like. Personally, the family and community I have grown up with only became more supportive and more proud of me as I went further into the faith I had received from them.

That is not true for everyone.

On Monday, January 23 an e-mail went out on the prayer chain here at church. Pastor Jeff asked us to pray for a man named Dr. Swamy. This man had been out on the streets of India in Hyderabad preaching about Jesus and handing out Bibles. Because he was doing this a group of men beat him up. Then the police came and took him back to the police station and beat him up some more. Dr. Swamy ended up in the hospital partially paralyzed and in a coma.

On his trip to India Pastor Jeff is hoping to meet with Quresh, now known as Mussa, and Maria. They grew up in a Muslim community. They lived their whole lives with Muslim friends, Muslim family, going to mosque together, celebrating Ramadan together. And one night they watch a preacher from America on TV and he talks about Jesus. Muslims know Jesus, he is one of their prophets. But this preacher is talking about Jesus in a different way. Jesus is God, Himself. That is blasphemy to a Muslim. The Koran says that God is neither Father nor has a son. So, Quresh watches more and more of this preacher and eventually discovers that something has changed. He now believes in this Jesus – not as only a prophet, but as God, as His God. He starts to invite other Muslims to watch this preacher. Eventually he declares that he is a Christian. He is now – not a Muslim. What is his community to do but to beat him and demand that he recant? What can the family do but beat up Quresh's relative, Amir, who has also believed, and drag him out to the forest where he is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies?

Psalm 88:8 must ring true for them: “You have taken away my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.”

This is nothing like my life. This is nothing like my experience.

This is exactly like the experiences of the Jewish people to whom the author of Hebrews is writing.

In the early days of Christianity, Christianity was seen as merely a different sect of Judaism. But the more those who were Jewish grew in their understanding of faith in Jesus they saw that Jesus fulfilled the law in a way that released them from the need to find their right standing with God through keeping the Law of Moses. The more these people trusted in Christ and the less they relied on the ceremonial requirements of the law the less they looked like Jews to their community. And what could their community do but beat them or prevent them from getting jobs - or at least throw them out of the synagogue.

Now since we live in America it is hard for us to understand why communities "have to" do these things. Why does Quresh's community have to try so hard to get him to believe what they all believe? Why does the Jewish community of the first century have to push their friends and family to be Jewish in the same way they are? Why can't everyone just let people be who they want to be?

Since the beginning, we have not liked other people in our communities stepping out and being different from what the community accepts.

However, our need and desire for community comes from a good place. In Genesis 2:18 God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."

God is in constant perfect community with Himself for He is Trinity. So, when God created us in His image He imprinted in us the need and the desire for us to also be in community. Perfect community is good and natural to how we were designed.

Yet we haven't been perfect since Eden, and our imperfect communities can be very difficult. They can be downright crushing, and here in the West we have run from imperfect community - to extreme and equally imperfect individualism. But much of the world is actually still working in community.

Still, we wonder, why can't these people be affirming communities?
Why can't we let people believe what they want?

Well, I don't have time to answer that fully, but let me just ask this question: Why do you and I persecute people? "Oh, me?"

Yeah, why do you persecute people? "I don't persecute anyone. I know Muslims and Hindus and atheists and we get along fine."

Really. Teenagers, when was the last time your dad came out from his room in some strange outfit and you said: "Are you really going to wear that? Like outside...in public?"

Way back around 2002 when my wife, Megan, and I were first married, she came to church not wearing stockings. Actually she never wore stockings. She hates stockings and pantyhose and such. For at least a decade before that the only time she ever wore them was for our wedding. But now that Megan was married to one of the church staff an elderly woman from our congregation approached her and gave her a hard time for not dressing appropriately for church. For all her life this woman had been taught that it was right and proper to wear hosiery and Megan was not following those community rules. So, this Christian woman persecuted Megan about hosiery.

I think we all do this to some extent. Some a lot more than others.
But why?

I think there are various reasons, but one of the primary ones is that we are afraid. Deep down we are programmed for community. More than we realize we want to do what everyone else is

doing. So, when someone else is doing something we don't want to do there is this little fear that I might have to do it too.

I imagine that elderly woman – very unconsciously - was afraid that everyone was going to start NOT wearing hosiery – which probably had already happened – but she was afraid that she too would be expected to not wear them anymore and she could not do that because her whole life she had been taught that that was in some way deeply inappropriate.

Why do you make fun of people who put mayonnaise and mustard on their chocolate cake? Eh, gross. "Because it's weird!", you say. But what difference does it make to you? Is it ungodly to do so? No. Is it really all that more unhealthy for that person? Not really. They're already eating the cake. Deep, deep down we are afraid that we will have to put mayonnaise and mustard on our cake.

Now we never think this consciously. But I think this is why we persecute people. Tease them. Speak badly about them in front of other people. Ostracize them. Hit them. We are trying to get them to change – partially because we don't want to have to do what they're doing.

Now I am not saying we should not ever try to teach, to disciple, to encourage or to admonish people in godly, biblical behavior – but the motivation for that must be love.

The motivation for persecution is fear. The Bible calls us to tell people the truth...in LOVE. And that is what the writer of Hebrews is doing here.

These people have left their previous lives for Jesus and now they are being bullied to come back. These Jewish Christians are being persecuted and they are giving in to the temptation to sin - primarily the sin of apostasy – the sin of turning back from the truth of Jesus, of recanting their faith.

Sin.

In December Pastor Jeff encouraged the elders to record a short video encouraging Quresh (Moosa) and Maria in their faith. They had given up so much and their lives were so hard.

I know that the elders really wrestled with this. What could we say to encourage these people? What do I say from the comfort of my comparatively luxurious home surrounded by friends and family who actively support my faith and in my case even pay me to do Christian work?

"Hang in there. It will be alright," seems rather...insufficient.

In Hebrews 12 the author has this same task. Here is his approach to encouraging them. In the first 3 verses, which were already covered in the sermons from the past two weeks he says – Keep looking to Jesus. You are not the only one who has run this race. You are not the only one who is running it now. But the race has been set out and Jesus stands at the end line. Keep your eyes on Him.

In today's text the author continues this encouragement. The imagery here is of a boxer. There is no boxing ring in ancient Greek boxing. There are no boxing gloves. The boxers wrap their fists in leather straps with a harder piece of leather on the top to make each hit more effective. If you get knocked down your opponent can keep hitting you. Since you are not bound by a ring you can fight more defensively than offensively. There were no rounds so you just kept fighting until someone gave up or was unable to do so.

So if you look at your Bible's at Hebrews 12:4 – after telling these dear persecuted people in verse 3 to “consider Jesus, who endured persecution” He tells them that they should not grow weary and lose heart. But instead...

Vs. 4: In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

In our words he is saying: “You are still in the midst of the match. You are boxing against sin. Sure you may get knocked down, but you can get up again. It is not yet at the point of the match where you are unconscious or are all bloodied and need to quit. Press on.”

Notice the author does not say – you are boxing against those people who want you to be like them. The enemy here is not other people. Surely the persecution is coming at the hands of other people but the fight itself is against sin.

When there is someone in your life that is really persecuting you or maybe you would say they are just being really annoying - do you stop to see the sin that is underneath the issue? Whatever the problem you have with another person it would bring great clarity to the situation if we could all say “In my struggle against sin.”

That person is not my enemy. Sin, death and the devil are the enemy. Sure, that person is sinning. Very likely I am sinning too. We get so focused on the people that we miss the bigger picture.

Imagine a boxer who is so angry and distracted by someone standing around watching that he is not focused on his opponent. Our struggle is against sin.

So, this begs the question. Am I struggling against sin? Or have I welcomed it into my life with arms opened wide?

It seems strange that the author of Hebrews writes to persecuted people and tells them to make sure they are boxing the right opponent. He doesn't coddle them or say “Now, now...” They are struggling with real and severe persecution and he asks – “are you fighting the right opponent?” I think we would all be offended. But I think our offense would just illustrate that we do not have the right fight in mind. You are never going to win if you are targeting the wrong enemy. I cannot embrace sin in my life AND successfully run the race that is the Christian life.

Jesus warned us many times – “count the cost before you follow me”, “if you follow me you will have persecution”, “if they hated me they will hate you”. But Jesus also said – “love them” – because they are not our fight.

Ephesians 6 - “Take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil.”

And the reason this writer is cheerleading us to keep struggling against sin – back to Hebrews 12:4 – is because we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood.

The phrase “shedding your blood” means: the point when the match ends. I don’t think it means just a cut or a bloody lip or even a severe bloody wound.

I think he is referring to the end of the match when the boxer either quits or is unconscious or dead – when the boxer “sheds his blood” in such a way that the match has to end.

But of course the author is also reminding us of the match Jesus fought where He died on the cross. Jesus fought against sin throughout His life so strenuously that He reached the point of resisting sin where He was shedding His blood – for our sins.

As long as we are on this earth we have not yet resisted “to the point of shedding blood”, to the point of the match being over.

So, since we’re not dead yet, there should be a maturing that takes place. In our spiritual lives this maturing is the process of moving from conversion to perfection. The perfection will never come in this life, but when we die – if we are in Christ - we will be glorified.

It is hard to keep this in mind because on this earth things decay. As we get older we might mature in our behavior but our bodies seem to revert to a sort of infancy as we lose ability and strength. So, we consider physical death – and rightly so – a lessening, a weakening, a demise.

But in the spiritual life it is the opposite. Your spiritual life should not be a progression of decay but rather a process of invigoration.

From the time my boys were young they always asked me to tell them stories. They like the made up ones the best. In one story I told them there was this race of elves who could run really fast. But among these elves, younger elves did not run as fast as older elves. As the elves aged, rather than getting weaker like humans would, the elves grew in speed. Each year they would get faster and faster. So quite often it was the older elves sent to do great heroic feats not the younger ones. And one day the elves would run so fast that they would just disappear. Rather than weakening and dying like we all experience, they were – in a sense – glorified.

Now that is just a made up story to entertain my children, but that is the kind of image this passage is trying to get us to envision. In your spiritual life if you keep fighting sin and keep maturing in your faith than you are getting more and more mature in Christ. And we need to keep maturing in Christ because we have not yet reached the point of “shedding our blood” – of the match being over.

And we can be encouraged because when the match is over, then at that time this persecution will all end, the fight against sin will end and you will be the most mature you can be. You will be completely saved – not only from the penalty of sin and the power of sin - but you will be saved even from its presence.

Conclusion – So what do we do?

Hebrews 12:5-6 says: And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Do you see that this verse says I have forgotten something. Someone has told me this “word of encouragement” before and I have forgotten it? Funny, I don’t remember that. Do you?

Well it turns out that He is quoting Proverbs 3:11-12. He is quoting scripture. At the time this letter was written the Old Testament was all the scripture he had.

Now there are those who say things like, “Well, that is in the Old Testament, what does the New Testament say?” Well, note that 54% of my text for today is simply a quote of the Old Testament. In the whole New Testament, one verse in every 22 ½ verses is a quote from the

Old Testament. 1/22nd of the New Testament IS the Old Testament. Do not diminish the authority, wisdom and profitability of the first 39 books of your Bible.

The author of Hebrews is quoting the book of Proverbs – what I have forgotten has been available to me and to these persecuted Jewish Christians for a really long time – and in Proverbs it is actually translated slightly differently and says: “The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”

God is letting persecution come into your life because He delights in you.

Since we seem to forget that our real battle is with sin – and since we seem to make treaties with sin and give it comfortable places in our lives God sends discipline into our lives to spiritually invigorate us – to keep us moving toward maturity rather than a spiritual lessening. This discipline we often call hardship, difficulties, persecution or maybe his name is John or her name is Elizabeth.

The painful situations we endure are forms of discipline – like sports training or like child-rearing. This discipline prepares us to stand firm against temptation. In this particular context the temptation these Jewish Christians are facing is the desire to avoid painful things at all costs, to take the easy way out – to reject their new faith.

All these young Christians in India whom Pastor Jeff is ministering to right now are being tempted by their communities to take the easy way out and to come back to their Muslim and Hindu communities. They are being told to reject Jesus and resume life in the community.

But God is calling to them and saying,

“No – you are my children. I delight in you. Continue to fight against sin. The devil wants to use your family and your community to call you back to the empty way of life that was handed down to you by your ancestors, but I have already called you to a new and eternally rewarding life.

“So, I am now using your family and your community and their mistreatment of you – because they are afraid – I am using that to train you. And this training will keep going until you are perfected – until you are glorified – when you are face to face with me in my eternal glory.”

We are standing in the hall of victors. We have 6,000 years of examples of spiritual athletes who entered the race and ran hard – who joined the match and fought hard against sin. We have Jesus Christ standing before us, victorious and urging us onward. And yes, we have a very real enemy – sin. We are still in the fight. We have not yet been glorified.

Have you been knocked down? – then get back up again. Keep fighting sin. Don’t make peace with it.

Have you been persecuted by people around you – who, out of fear, want you to stop being so different. Who say, “Stop being so weird and different like a genuine disciple of Jesus – just be a regular American Christian.” ? Don’t do it. Don’t give in to the temptation to avoid painful things and take the easy way out.

This pressure you are facing to take the easy way out is actually God’s loving training in your life. So, don’t be discouraged – but be filled up with this truth – Jesus delights in you. So, press on.