

Run With Endurance Part 7

Hebrews 12:12-13

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Take your Bible, if you would, with me and turn back to Hebrews chapter 12.

It's exciting to be back there. Thank you to Chris for preaching last week. A great message from James chapter 4. But this morning, we have the privilege of being back in our primary place of study, Hebrews chapter 12, specifically today in verses 12 and 13.

And while you're turning there, if you've lived any length of time, you know in this fallen world what it is to experience physical fatigue. Not that we need a definition, but WebMD lists the following symptoms of physical fatigue: Lack of energy, drowsiness, difficulty thinking, and apathy.

When our bodies feel worn down, when we've overdone it, we begin to feel this sense of fatigue, and our bodies are telling us it's time to rest. And if we don't heed that warning and that state goes on, then we will eventually cause harm to our bodies.

But physical fatigue, of course, is not the only kind of fatigue we experience in life. Spiritual fatigue is a real thing. We can reach a place of spiritual fatigue that presents itself as a kind of weariness of the soul. And often it comes with some outward symptoms that are not all that different from physical fatigue; a lack of energy and drowsiness and difficulty thinking and apathy. But sleep won't cure spiritual fatigue. You can't just take a nap and wake up from spiritual fatigue.

And yet, on the other hand, spiritual fatigue does require rest. Just a different kind of rest. It's a spiritual rest.

Spiritual fatigue is an inevitable result of being overwhelmed by the trials and difficulties of life. It comes when our faith has been tested. When God has put us in a difficult circumstance that's made us uncomfortable.

That at times seems to be beyond what we can personally bear. And the only cure for that is to rest in the person of God Himself and in His Word. That means we find our rest in believing God is who He says He is. And He will do what He says He will do.

So spiritual rest then is a matter of faith. It's letting go of our own desires, our own will to let His will be done. Our own attempts to steer our life and our situation into achieving only the desired outcome that we have for ourselves. Instead relinquishing our will to Him and trusting Him.

This morning, the author of Hebrews is going to call us to lay aside spiritual fatigue and to be strengthened in the inner man. To take our rest in Christ and His Word. As we come to that, remember the theme of the letter as a whole is **The Superiority of Christ** which has been proven to us in countless ways. He is superior to every aspect of the Old Covenant. They don't even come close. They are a mere shadow of our Savior.

In chapter 10, we turn the corner to application. And we've been applying that for some time now, specifically in chapter 12. We've covered the first 11 verses of chapter 12. And what we come to today in this new section in verses 12 to 17, is the application, really, of all that we've learned so far in these first 11 verses.

So because we have slept since we were last in Hebrews, I think it's important for us to remind ourselves of the context. Let's just read these first 11 verses. Shake off the cobwebs and remember the wonderful truths that are here before we begin to apply them.

So Hebrews 12 verse 1.

"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; ⁵and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

*"MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD,
NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;*

*⁶FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,
AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."*

⁷It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. ¹¹All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

I'll just quickly remember the structure of those verses.

Verses 1 and 2, the application of all that we learned in chapter 11. **Run Faith's Race with Endurance.** And we'll see that pop up even again in our passage today. That is the key idea. Run faith's race with endurance.

We were given the command then to **Consider Christ's Enduring Faith.** In verse 3, as He is the ultimate example of true faith.

We were told to **Battle Sin Unto Death.** In verse 4, and then **Embrace God's Fatherly Discipline** in verses 5 to 11, which is what we've been studying now for some time. We were told there that there are **Two Incorrect Responses to God's Discipline. To treat God's Discipline Lightly, or To Faint at His Reproof.**

Then we were told that **God's Discipline Actually Motivates Endurance.** If we think about it rightly. It motivates us to run the race of faith.

We saw the **Four Purposes of Discipline: Correction, Prevention, Instruction, and Demonstration**. And finally, the **Three Encouragements concerning His Fatherly Discipline**.

God's Discipline Affirms Our Adoption. God's Discipline Deserves Our Submission. God's Discipline Produces Our Sanctification.

Now all of that wrapped up in a bow is now given to us in the form of application. What do we do with all of those wonderful truths that we have seen? The answer to that comes in verses 12 to 17. We'll be studying these verses over the next two or three weeks. And I just want to read the whole section together. Even though today will only be in verses 12 and 13. So you get the whole picture of where we're going.

So Hebrews 12, beginning in verse 12.

"¹² Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

¹⁴ Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶ that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears."

If you want to put a theme to what we'll be discussing this morning, it's this: **Understanding God's discipline strengthens us to take heart and run with endurance!** Understanding God's discipline strengthens us to take heart and run with endurance.

What we have in verses 12 to 17 are three commands. And from those three commands, we'll see four responses to God's good design for the discipline of His children. Today we're just looking at the first two commands in verse 12 and verse 13.

So command number one gives us our first response. **Response Number One, Take Heart.** Take heart.

Notice in verse 12, he begins with the word *"Therefore."* As always, therefore is an important word. It points backwards, but also forwards. It causes us to stop and think about all that we have learned. Because now we're going to learn something in light of all that we have learned. Because those things are true, do this.

So it's going to keep pointing us back to the key truths that we've already learned. And it's going to tell us to do these things in response. Remember the primary application of Hebrews 11 was this call to run faith's race with endurance. And he told us how to do that in those first 11 verses.

First, we focus our attention squarely on the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, we consider our situation in light of God's good fatherly discipline.

But all that wonderful instruction from those first 11 verses will only benefit us if we actively apply it to our lives. It's not enough to simply know what is true. We must choose by God's grace to believe it and to live in light of it, to obey it.

What we have in this application is verses 12 to 17 is to do just that. To go beyond just knowing what is true and to actually do it. To be one whose life is conformed to what you now know.

To put our knowledge into practice. Verses 1 to 11 ought to affect the way you think, and the way you speak, and the way you act. And to encourage us in this, the author is going to turn our attention actually to a quote from the Old Testament. As he often does. From Isaiah, in this case Isaiah 35, verse 3.

In his own words, he says it this way in verse 12. *Therefore*, (here begins the quote,) *Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble*. That is a quote from Isaiah 35. Now if you were with us a couple of weeks ago on Christmas Sunday, I preached from Isaiah. Hopefully some of the context of Isaiah is still in mind.

But let me just remind you quickly, because it has an important bearing on our understanding of this verse. The theme of Isaiah is salvation. And in the book of Isaiah, the prophet is warning the people on the one hand that judgment is coming.

They have given in to idolatry, corruption, all kinds of sin. The northern kingdom of Israel, he says, is going to be judged through the army of the Assyrians. The southern kingdom is going to be judged through the military might of the Babylonians.

But there is this back and forth between passages of judgment and salvation. And Isaiah really is a book of hope. The future hope of Israel and coming salvation.

And it is in that context, in Isaiah 35, that we read these words. This is one of those passages that promises coming salvation. So Isaiah 35 verses 3 and 4 in the ESV says this:

³*Strengthen the weak hands,*

and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴*Say to those who have an anxious heart,*

"Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God

will come with vengeance,

with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you."

There it is, salvation. It says, have hope. Even though this judgment is coming, there is reason to have hope.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

Now the author of Hebrews sees in this simple quote, which would have been known to the people, something that is helpful in applying all that he has taught them so far in Hebrews chapter 12. Of course, when Isaiah was inspired to write these words originally, now at this

point some 700 years before they were written here in Hebrews, nothing about the circumstance of the Israelites had actually changed.

They were still going to be judged. It was still coming through the Assyrians and through the Babylonians. So he was not calling them to take courage because just around the corner, everything is going to get better.

This is a long-range plan of coming salvation. Instead, Isaiah is calling them to be encouraged in the present by trusting the character of God and the promises of God for the future, even though their current circumstance is bleak and terrifying.

In the same way, the author of Hebrews is picking up on that because the people here in Hebrews are going through a time of persecution. A very difficult time. We're told that some of them have even had their possessions taken. Some have been thrown into prison. This is a difficult time of persecution for these people.

He quotes this here in verse 12. Again, not to say everything is going to immediately get better. Don't worry, your circumstances are about to improve. But rather, think on, believe, and walk in light of the truths that he has just taught them. This is how you are to be encouraged.

Now he picks back up on the illustration of an athlete running a race. Remember, the beginning of the book started with that, the beginning of the chapter, that we're to run this race of endurance. He's picking up on that idea here, but in this case, the person running the race has become physically exhausted.

Now they've got weak hands, weak arms, and feeble knees. If you've ever run long distance, you know when you become tired, your arms start to feel very heavy, and it suddenly becomes difficult to keep your arms in the correct position to keep your running form. And if you keep running, your legs get tired, and when they get really tired, they start to feel somewhat unstable, feeble, weak knees.

That's the idea here. This person is physically exhausted, but of course this is not speaking of a physical fatigue, but of a spiritual fatigue. This is a crisis of faith.

These Christians are walking through a difficult time of persecution, and as we've already said many times before, they're feeling fatigue, spiritually so, and that's what's described here of these weak knees and these weak hands or arms.

Now, by God's grace, we're not living in a period of persecution right now, not in the kind of persecution that was happening here, but I want to ask us, what are some of the other circumstances in our lives that often tempt us towards spiritual fatigue? Think about that in your own life. What tempts you to feel weak and weary in the inner man? I've come up with a few examples, 12 just off the top of my head, but there are many others.

Let me give you this sample list, but as I go through these, be thinking about your own life and areas of things that tempt you specifically to give in to spiritual fatigue. Things like this,

- Unmet expectations. We thought something was going to happen this way, and it ended up happening this way.
- Unmet desires. We really wanted something, and we didn't get it.
- Physical suffering. A new illness, difficulty, the kind of illness that doesn't go away, where every day you feel the effects of that kind of suffering.
- Broken and strained relationships.
- Financial hardship, the loss of a job, or your investments not panning out the way you planned.
- Damaged reputation. Rumors spread about you at work or even in your family, and people begin to view you differently than what is reality.
- False accusation.
- A lack of understanding. Sometimes we get spiritually fatigued because we don't know what God is doing. We don't understand. Often we don't understand why He has planned the path for us that He has planned. In addition to that, we often have
- A lack of direction. I'm not sure what You would have me do next, God. I don't know what the next choice is that I need to make in this situation. Number 10,
- The sin of others. When people have sinned against you in a legitimate way that has hurt you, that can cause spiritual fatigue if we let it.
- Fear of the future. How is this going to pan out? What if this happens? What if that happens? And number 12, just
- Unjust treatment. Being treated in a way that, by all accounts, from anyone's perspective, we would say that that was wrong. You shouldn't have been treated that way.

Now that's just a short list, but I want you to think for a moment, and I really want you to come to a conclusion here. What is the thing in your life that most frequently tempts you to feel spiritual fatigue? Weariness, spiritually speaking.

Now, when you have that in mind, hopefully you have it, consider this now. In verse 12, the word *strengthen* is a command. "*Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak. Strengthen the knees that are feeble.*" It's a command. That is, it's not optional.

Verse 12, in that sense, is not presenting a diagnosis of the problem, but the cure for the problem. It's a call to respond in faith regardless of our circumstance. In other words, it's as if the author is saying, hey, Christian, take heart.

Take heart in the inner man. Be strengthened in the inner man. All of you this morning who feel like your spiritual arms are starting to hang at your side, all of you who feel that your spiritual knees are becoming unstable and wobbly, be strengthened in your faith.

And you might say, well, that's all well and good, but how? I would love to feel strengthened in the inner man, but how do I do that? Well, the answer to that comes again in verse 12 in the very first word. *Therefore*. Therefore.

Now you say, how is that the answer? Well, obviously, in the mind of the author, when he was inspired to write this, he believes there's enough information in the first 11 verses that we now know that we ought to be able to strengthen our weak hands and our feeble knees.

Something is contained in those first 11 verses that would lead him to say, therefore, in light of all of this, hey, be strengthened. Take heart!

So we need to think of it that way. We need to think of what is it in those first 11 verses that we are intended to use to strengthen our weak faith. Really what this is a call to do is to encourage your own heart by preaching the truth to yourself and then choosing to live in light of that truth.

Holding on to those truths by faith and choosing, come what may, to live them out. Let me show you how to do this in practice. If you want to know very practically how do I strengthen myself in the inner man, this is what you do. We'll just walk through this passage.

Look back at verse one, chapter 12, verse one. We're going to look at what the verse says and then we are going to preach it to ourselves in the form of a prayer.

Verse one, *"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,"*

So you take that truth, you impress it on your heart in a prayer and say, oh God, I know that You have strengthened Your people throughout history. I'm surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who have been faithful to You and You have held them fast. You will not fail me now. You never change and so You will hold me fast.

And you go to verse two, *"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith,"* Oh Lord Jesus, help me to fix my eyes on You and to remember what You endured on the cross, that You know what it is to be treated unjustly and yet You did it without sin. God, strengthen me to be like Christ. Help me to keep my eyes fixed on Him.

And you go to verse four, *"You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;"* and you remember: God, You've strengthened Your people throughout history, even to the point of martyrdom. Many Christians have died painful, awful deaths in faith and my situation is so much less than those situations. Therefore, I know, God, I know that You can strengthen me to live in faith in what I'm going through.

You go to verses five to seven and you remember about the Lord's discipline.

*"MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD,
NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;
⁶FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,
AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."*

And you begin to pray, oh God, thank You for reminding me again that I am Yours. Help me not to throw in the towel. Help me not to quit but to be encouraged that I'm Your son. I'm Your daughter and You love me and You are at work in me through this difficult trial in my life.

And you go to verse eight.

⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and

we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.¹¹ All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

And you begin to pray, oh God, help me not to miss the message of what You're teaching me in my trial. Train me by it. God, I can't believe that You would ever want to share Your holiness with me. But You say You do, so please sanctify me. Make me holy. Help me not to miss it.

This is how you strengthen your faith Christian. That's how it works. That's what it is to hold on to the truth of scripture. To preach it to yourself. To stop listening to the voice in your head of your flesh that's tempting you to go into the woe is me and all the what ifs and the ifonlys. You drown out that voice with your own voice preaching truth to yourself and you choose, I will believe that God is this kind of God and that He will do what he says He will do.

And you do that and you will notice strength in the inner man. Strength beginning to well up inside of you spiritually to keep running the race. That's what he says. That's why he says it in the form of a command.

Therefore, in light of all that you now know, strengthen the weak hands. Strengthen the feeble knees. How? With what you just learned. By believing it. By holding it fast.

Let me ask you, is that how you personally fight for faith on a daily basis? The way that I prayed, is that how you pray? Is that how you cling to the truth? Remember, this is a command which means we have to take action.

Stir up your faith by preaching the truth to yourself and realize this is a daily activity. This is not something that just happens at salvation and then we magically become sanctified. No, it's a battle, it's a fight. It's a daily reality to preach the truth, to hold on to the truth.

The question is, will you choose, Christian, and take this personally, I mean you, each of us individually, will you choose to believe the truth and to preach the truth to yourself and strengthen yourself by God's grace in the inner man?

Because you see, we often get into patterns of thinking that produce the exact opposite, don't we? We foster anxiety, we foster fearful thoughts, we foster angry thoughts and we do that because instead of preaching truth to ourselves, we allow our minds to be consumed with thinking on what if this happens, what then, if only this would happen, my life would be so much better. Listen, when we fill our minds with that kind of thinking, it's no wonder that we're so often discontent, fearful, angry and depressed.

We lead ourselves there because we're listening to ourselves instead of preaching truth to ourselves. Listen, you have emotions, you can't control your emotions, they come, they go, but you can preach truth to yourself and lead your emotions with the truth instead of listening to your emotions.

So this is verse 12. We take heart. This is a battle that largely takes place between your ears. Most of this is going on during the day internally as you preach the truth to yourself, but it can't just stay internal, it's supposed to affect the external as well and that's where we come to in verse 13.

Verse 13 gives us another response to the fatherly discipline of God. **Run Straight.** Run straight. Verse 13 says, ¹³*and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

The command here is the word “make.” Make straight paths for your feet. Now what does he mean by this? Make straight paths for your feet? Well, it seems that there is here another reference to a different Old Testament passage, this time from Proverbs chapter four and specifically verse 26.

Before we dive into that verse, let me just give you a little bit of an understanding of chapter four of Proverbs as a whole. Chapter four is broken down into three segments of instruction. Each of them is addressed from a father to his son. It's as if the father is dispensing this wisdom to his son and we're to take it as if we're the children hearing the father's instruction. Each verse that starts those three segments, verse one, verse 10, and verse 20, all start with some version of “my son.”

Our quote here in Hebrews comes in the third portion of instruction there in Hebrews four. And so I want to read that section, verses 20 to 27, but specifically pay attention to the end, verses 25 to 27, because it's those verses that really are brought over here to Hebrews. So Proverbs four, beginning in verse 20.

²⁰*My son, give attention to my words;*

Incline your ear to my sayings.

²¹*Do not let them depart from your sight;*

Keep them in the midst of your heart.

²²*For they are life to those who find them*

And health to all their body.

²³*Watch over your heart with all diligence,*

For from it flow the springs of life.

²⁴*Put away from you a deceitful mouth*

And put devious speech far from you.

²⁵*Let your eyes look directly ahead*

And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.

²⁶*Watch the path of your feet*

And all your ways will be established.

²⁷*Do not turn to the right nor to the left;*

Turn your foot from evil.

Now notice specifically in verse 25, and it follows down through verse 27, there is this emphasis on looking straight. Look straight ahead. Walk straight ahead. That is carried over now in sort of a summary fashion into our verse here in Hebrews 12, verse 13.

The idea of walking in the scripture is often used as an illustration of our pattern of life.

So Paul uses this often. Walk this way. The idea is live this way. Live with intentionality is the idea of this passage. Focus your gaze on the right destination, which we've already seen is Christ. So fix your gaze on Christ and run straight.

As you run the race of faith, run straight along the path of righteousness and obedience. And we know that because at the end of verse 27, he says *turn your foot from evil*. So what he means is stay on the straight path, which is the path of obedience. To turn off the path to the left or the right is to chase after sin. Keep your eyes fixed on Christ and run the race of faith, staying on the path of obedience. Guard your heart so that you walk in righteousness.

So it seems that verse 26 is the primary verse in mind.

²⁶ *Watch the path of your feet*

And all your ways will be established.

²⁷ *Do not turn to the right nor to the left;*

(Verse 27) *Turn your foot from evil.*

Now how does that fit specifically into our passage here in Hebrews 12? How do we match this together with what we've seen, or verse 13? How do we match it with verse 12? Well, the author's highlighting here for us, for a group of people walking through difficult times, that obedience to God's word is always the appropriate response. Regardless of your circumstance, regardless of how difficult it gets in your life, obedience to God's word is always the appropriate response.

So when we put verse 12 and verse 13 together, we have a well-rounded instruction that addresses the inner man and the external. Internally, we are to strengthen our faith by preaching the truth to ourselves and trusting it. Externally, then, we are, now that we're encouraged and strengthened, to walk the path of obedience, to actually do the work, actually physically obey what God is calling us to do.

Remember at the end of verse 11, we were told that God's chief aim in disciplining us is what? Sanctification. He says to share his holiness with us. So this fits perfectly, then. He's now saying, so do it, be encouraged by the truth, and then get up and run along that straight path of righteousness.

This ties in with that illustration of a runner running the race. His arms and legs have become tired, he's growing weary, and when you begin to do that, you start to look for alternative paths. Maybe this is not the best path. Maybe I just take a shortcut. If I go left, it'd be easier if I go right.

That's the idea. The more tired you get, the more exhausted you are, the more you start thinking about abandoning ship, right? Either stopping running or running along a different path. So this is a description of the temptations that come to go left or right off of the path of obedience.

And what most often tempts us to take an alternate route, is it not trials and difficulties in life? You're running the race, you're on the path of obedience, and God providentially drops into your circumstance something you did not expect. Now we are faced with the temptation to either run forward or maybe to get around this some other easier way, our

flesh says, by going left or going right. When things get really tough, and honestly, the longer we're in that situation, the easier it is to justify thinking about sin. We start to think things like this: Hey, we all have our limits. We're all sinners. After all, I've given it my level best. I've been faithful. I've put up with a whole lot, and I've continued to follow after the Lord, but what just happened is over the line.

I cannot believe that he or she just said what they said to me. I cannot believe that he or she just did what they did to me, and God will forgive me, but I'm going off path. That's how we begin to think in our temptations when we're in the midst of trials.

It gets hard, and we have a choice to either obey God or to take a different route, which is sin. The key then to winning the battle is verses 12 and 13 together. First, strengthening in the inner man, preaching the truth to ourselves and believing it. Secondly, choosing to stay on the straight path, which means very practically just obey. One decision after another, just simply obey. If you want to put it in two words, verse 12, believe. Verse 13, obey.

This is what we're called to do because honestly, the fleshly temptation to think that there is an alternate route that either makes more sense or that will be easier is always a lie. Always. It's always a lie. In fact, taking that alternate route off of the path of obedience will not provide spiritual health and healing. It likely will provide injury and disaster.

That's what he says next. Verse 13, *"make straight paths for your feet so that,"* so he's about to give us a reason why we should stay on the straight path, *"so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint."* Literally put out of joint is the word dislocated.

So here's the picture he's drawing on. When the runner who is in this weakened state and their knees are already wobbly decides, you know what, I think this path is going to be a better path and they go off the path, what they find is this is not a nice groomed path. This is now a path with rocks and hills and potholes and they're likely to step in one of those and end up dislocating one of those weak knees. That's the idea here.

As I was thinking on this, I was reminded of something I witnessed once while riding a ski lift in Winter Park, Colorado. When I was a college pastor at Countryside Bible Church, we would take our students up every winter to Winter Park. I love that place, it's a beautiful place. And if you've been skiing, then you know the mountains covered with these wonderfully groomed trails. In fact, they've got people, it's their sole job at night to groom the trails again so when you go back in the morning, you have this nice, beautiful trail to ski down with no obstacles and it's a very safe trail.

But, some people like to take shortcuts. Maybe you're one of those people. They don't want to be on this trail, they decide they want to be on that trail, but to get to that trail, they've got to go off the path, usually through the trees, usually through snow that has not been manicured, it has not been kept and you don't know what's hiding under that snow.

And so I was riding this ski lift and I noticed someone at the corner of my eye skiing that was obviously a beginner. They're doing the pizza wedge, trying to make their way down and they had decided to go off path. They decided for either they thought it would be more exciting or a faster route. They went off path, but they were coming off that trail now to get

back onto the groomed trail and all that remained in their way was one little sapling. You know, maybe this big around. And all they had to do is either go left or go right.

An intermediate skier or above could easily have navigated such a task, but this person was not that and I could see what was happening, but I could do nothing to stop it. In their brain, likely they were saying go left or go right, but their legs both got a different message and their legs went like this and they ran right into that tree and it was one of the bad ones where they're laid out and the ski patrol's got to get them and take them down the hill. It was a bad situation because they made the foolish choice, particularly with their level of skiing, to go off the trail.

The promise of a better route, a more fun route, an easier route ended in disaster. And that's the idea here. Particularly when that path is a sinful path, it will always end in disaster. It will never provide the relief that it says. Instead, you'll find yourself with a spiritually dislocated knee. The consequences of sin will come.

Instead, the path to healing is to stay on the trail. End of verse 13, *"but rather be healed."* That is, make straight paths for your feet so that you won't become lame, put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The best path is always the path that God lays out for us in Scripture, the path of righteousness, the path of obedience. And the author is warning us that we have to preach the truth to ourselves and then we've got to stay on the path and just simply obey.

Now, it's easy to speak about these things in generalities. I think hopefully everyone would agree. Yep, we need to stay on the path. We don't need to go off the path.

But I think it's also helpful to think about some specific hypothetical examples of how this happens because this happens to us in real time and we don't always perceive what's happening in that moment. The truth is, sin is deceptive. To give in to sin means you have to believe a lie every time.

When you give in to a sin, you believe a lie. It started in the garden. What happened? Eve believed a lie about the character of God and about the word of God. Satan told her that he had ulterior motives and she believed that and she sinned and paid the consequences as we all did.

Sin promises happiness, joy, and life, but it gives destruction and death. It promises to add to your life, but it only steals from your life. So let's think of this as a couple of examples.

Let's take, for example, the sin of lying. In what circumstances are you most tempted to lie? And don't lie to yourself and say that you don't ever deal with the sin of lying. Yes, you do. We all do. What circumstances most tempt you to lie? And if you think about it, it will probably be some temptation, some situation in which you believe telling the truth will cost you something you don't want to pay.

It could be your reputation. It could be a peaceful relationship. You're worried it'll get strained if you tell the truth. It could be a desire to hide some secret activity that you don't

want to give up so you don't want it to be exposed. Whatever it is, though, we lie when we think the truth is too costly.

But what happens when we choose to lie and then later that lie is revealed? The thing that we tried to protect is ruined in a much deeper way. It's harmed in a much deeper way than the truth ever would have been. Now your reputation's damaged because you've been proven to be a liar. Now that relationship that you lied in order to protect is actually damaged further than it would have been if you just told the truth because now they're hurt that you lied to them.

And you see the temptation to sin came because this divergent path looked good. You were running down the path. You're obeying the Lord. A situation has dropped in your path and you have a choice to make and you said, I think it'll be easier just this once if I just go off path around it and get back on the path. It's always a lie.

Another example, the sin of discontentment. In a difficult trial, the sin of discontentment is always lurking around the corner. Isn't it? Always. And it comes when we make the choice to diverge from the path of righteous thinking onto an alternate path of sinful thinking.

So again, picture yourself. You're running the race of faith. You're doing what you, by God's grace, what you can to obey the Lord and in God's providence, a health crisis comes. I mean a big one, a legitimate one either in your life or in the life of someone else. A life-changing health crisis or maybe a major financial crisis. Job loss, something of that magnitude. Maybe a major marital problem. Just dropped sin that you had no idea was there and now it's exposed. Or a major crisis with your child or your grandchild.

So what are the divergent paths of sin to the left and to the right that we're tempted to take in those situations? All of a sudden, our thoughts are tempted to turn to what we don't have. You're tempted to think on the what-ifs and the if-onlys. You're tempted to see the social media life of a friend or a church member and their seemingly perfect little life and perfect little family and to think that's not fair.

You're tempted to think on all the things that you did right and why this isn't right and fair to you. You start to replay what happened. You start to replay the way things used to be, wishing you could go back to then and all of those paths lead to the same destination: discontentment.

And isn't it strange that our flesh lies to us and tells us that thinking on those things will actually provide comfort, doesn't it? It seems like it'll comfort me to stew on this and to think about this but it never does. It's always a lie. In fact, what it actually does is discontentment is like a gateway sin that opens into a host of other sins.

When you give in to that alternate path of discontentment, now you'll find yourself adding to your discontentment anger at God, anger with others, bitterness, and an inability to see the goodness of God in your life.

That's what it means by you go off the path and you end up with a dislocated knee. The path looks better. It's not better. It only takes you deeper into sin, the path of healing. In this

illustration, stay on the path. Obey the Lord. It's always right and good. So don't miss the point of these illustrations.

What I'm trying to illustrate is how these alternate paths pop up in real time in our life and that's where we've got to win the battle in preaching the truth to ourselves and choosing no matter how hard or costly it may seem to stay on the path of obedience.

So when you resolve to obey God, you will do two things round the clock. Verse 12, you will preach the truth to yourself and choose to believe it. And verse 13, you will choose to obey God's commands one choice at a time. So as you run the race of faith, you will choose to forgive. You will choose to speak the truth in love. You will choose purity. You'll choose to believe the best about God and to believe the best about others. You'll choose to hope in God. You'll choose to have integrity. You'll choose to have gratitude. You'll choose humility. You'll choose selflessness and you'll do it again and again and again.

This is what it looks like to make a straight path for your feet and to stay on it. So as we bring this to a close, there really are just two applications and if you've been paying attention, you can guess them.

First of all, Christian, **Take Heart**. Take heart this morning. I want you to consider what is the current state of your spiritual life.

Would you describe it as strength? Would you describe it as weakness? Are you discouraged this morning? Are you weary? Do you feel like your spiritual arms are getting heavy? Do you feel like your spiritual knees are starting to wobble just a bit?

If that is true, and that can easily be true of any of us on any given day, I want you to start by analyzing the pattern of your thought life. Honestly assess the way you allow yourself to think on a daily basis. Are you making the daily, moment-by-moment choice to rest your heart and mind in the character of God and in His truth? Are you making the mistake of knowing what is true but failing to actually believe it and trust it?

Are you really fixing your eyes on Christ? How often really throughout the day do you bring your mind back to your Savior and who He is and what He says and what He's done for you? Do you really believe that God is in sovereign control of your life and that everything you're experiencing right now is part of His providential plan to do good to you and to bring glory to His name? Do you really believe that? Do you really trust that He's using your circumstance right now, whatever you're living in to sanctify you? That He might share His holiness with you?

Are you more tempted to listen to yourself or to preach to yourself? That's the way that Martin Lloyd-Jones would say it. Stop listening to yourself and start preaching to yourself. Are you listening to your emotions and being led by them or are you preaching to your emotions and leading them? This is what the author is calling us to do. When we preach the truth to ourselves and choose to cling to the truth in true faith, we strengthen the weak hands and the wobbly knees.

And Christian, let me just say, you can trust Him. God really is that good. He really is that faithful. His grace really is that expansive. Trust Him. He's worthy of it.

And secondly, **Run Straight**. Run straight, which we now know means live a life of obedience regardless of the cost. Stay on the path.

Are you facing a circumstance this morning in which obedience to God's commands feels unreasonable to you or even impossible to you? Is God calling you to forgive someone this morning who's sinned against you in terribly personal ways? Is God calling you to confess a sin this morning that you have for a long time hidden in the darkness?

Is God calling you to reconcile with someone whom you're at odds with today? Is God calling you to have integrity in a situation in which your coworkers or family or friends are encouraging you just to kind of fudge the numbers a little bit? Is God calling you to lay down your preference on a particular matter that's very important to you and to prefer someone else over yourself? Is God calling you this morning to trust Him with your finances? To trust Him with a wayward child? To trust Him with a person that you know you need to share the gospel with but you're afraid? Is God calling you finally to put sexual sin to death and to finally clothe yourself in purity?

Listen, what are the shortcuts or the alternate paths that your flesh is tempting you to go down today and will you by God's grace confess those, repent of those, and run on the straight path of obedience? This is what He's calling us to. Preach this proverb to yourself. Proverbs 4, 25 to 27.

*²⁵ Let your eyes look directly ahead
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.*

*²⁶ Watch the path of your feet
And all your ways will be established.*

*²⁷ Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
Turn your foot from evil.*

Remember Christian, obedience is always the right answer, no matter the cost. Always.

Now, this is a call for us primarily, I believe, to strengthen ourselves, to preach to ourselves, to encourage ourselves with these truths to run the race, but it swings the other way as well, having helped yourself, help others. You know, when we're in a trial, we're tempted to be so self-focused, only thinking on what we're going through and what we're feeling and what we're needing, but this is also a call to look up. Come along beside somebody else and now you know what to do.

What do you do? Ask them about how they're thinking and encourage them to think on the truth and preach the truth and believe it. Ask them on what path they're running. Are they running down a path of sin? Are they committed to a path of obedience? Encourage others to run the race as well, even this morning.

And if you're here this morning and you're saying, you know what, I don't know anything about the path of righteousness because my life has been lived in the wilderness. I look

around and I've gone so far down the path of sin, I don't even see a path of righteousness. I don't even see a sign that says which way to go. What about me? What do I do?

The scriptures are clear that there's the good news of the gospel for you, that that's actually where all of us was, were when Christ found us, wandering dead in our sin. The Bible says, for all who will repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ, there's forgiveness of sin. There's adoption into his family and by his grace, if you will humble yourself, believing that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is your only hope and His resurrection, then He will not only save you and redeem you, but put you on the path of righteousness.

Understand none of us deserve to be on the path of righteousness and if we're on the path of righteousness, it's not because of our doing. It's because God saved us and He put us on the path and He's keeping us on the path and He will cause us to finish on that path. He does it all, but it begins by humbling yourself today in repentance and faith and believing the gospel.

If you're not in Christ, heed the good news of the gospel even today and if you're a Christian, then take heart and run straight. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, I pray that we would take heart today in the battle for our faith and the battle against sin. I pray God that we would believe that obedience is always the right answer and never to believe the deception of our flesh or the enemy of the world that sin offers a better path, an easier path, a more enjoyable path.

No, the path of righteousness is the only path that brings healing in life. God, help us to believe these things and to live in accordance with them. Strengthen us today and help us to strengthen one another until you bring us home.

It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen