

## Hebrews 12:11-15

### Healing for Spiritual Lameness

*And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed – v. 13*

The key to this chapter and perhaps to the entire epistle is found in the exhortation of v.1 *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset [us], and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.* The Christian life can be likened to running a race. And the kind of race we're called upon to run is a long-distance race, rather than a short sprint.

Running a race – especially a distance race requires a certain amount of fitness and conditioning. We heard, on a couple of occasions, our brother Ron Barnes refer to his run in the Boston Marathon. It was a strenuous race that required preparation, conditioning and discipline. Those that run in marathons prepare for them months in advance. You cannot simply sign up for such a race, do nothing to prepare for it and then expect to be able to complete it.

The Hebrews, to whom this epistle is addressed, were in no shape for running such a race spiritually speaking. If a picture is said to be worth more than a thousand words then we certainly gain a very vivid picture of their sorry spiritual condition in v. 12. Look at what is implied regarding the spiritual condition of the Hebrew Christians in that verse:

*Lift up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees* the verse says. One commentator notes that *Strength resides mainly in the arms, and in the lower limbs, or the knees. If these are feeble, the whole frame is feeble. Fear relaxes the strength of the arms, and the firmness of the knees; and the expressions 'weak hands,' and 'feeble knees,' become synonymous with saying, of a timid, fearful, and desponding frame of mind.*

Imagine trying to run a race with arms that are heavy and knees that are weak. A runner's arms are essential for a distance race. By pumping his arms with each stride the runner provides for himself the extra energy that each stride requires. His arms practically function the same way pistons function in an engine. A runner with heavy arms has lost a vital source of energy. And of course a runner with weak knees has lost his primary source of strength. Each step becomes so painful as to make it practically impossible. Such a runner has become lame and can do nothing but drop out of the race.

We should be most grateful this morning that such a spiritual condition is recognized and dealt with in scripture. This is the kind of spiritual condition, you see, that most Christians don't want to admit to when it afflicts them. And I suppose one of the reasons that Christians don't want to admit to this condition is because it's their own fault when they end up in this condition.

When faith isn't exercised and the means of grace are not utilized and our vision is so strongly focused on the things of this world then we grow spiritually weak. In the realm of

spiritual things our hands grow heavy and our knees become feeble and we find ourselves becoming lame. Spiritual exercises become a heavy chore. It becomes hard to pray and devotions become forced. The worship of Christ becomes a duty to be performed rather than a delight to be engaged in. And where this lameness becomes chronic then our testimonies become null and void and so does our peace and our joy.

It's no wonder that the apostle calls for such spiritual condition to be healed. *Make straight paths for your feet*, he writes in v. 13 *lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed*. You're aware, I'm sure, that we live in a day that is filled with phony healings. Even a glance at some of the religious programs will show you dazzling displays of people rising out of their wheel chairs as well as many others being healed from diseases they didn't even know they had.

Here is a spiritual malady, however, that these religious charlatans are ill-equipped to deal with – It's the malady of being spiritually lame. Sinners are described by Isaiah as being sick from the sole of the foot to the head. And yet in salvation there is healing for the sickness of sin. How ironic it becomes for one who is healed from such a thorough leprosy to become some time later spiritually lame. And yet it's a condition I believe that we all have to admit to.

This morning I want to focus on this condition and in particular I want to focus on:

## Healing for Spiritual Lameness

The first thing we must learn with regard to the healing of spiritual lameness is:

### I. The Factors Which Lead to Spiritual Lameness

If an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure then it's well worth our while to see what leads to hands that hang down and feeble knees. The first factor that leads to this spiritual malady is a misreading of God's providence. We considered in our last study that the Hebrews had forgotten the exhortation which spoke to them as unto children or sons. Heb 12:5 *And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.*

They were misreading the chastening of the Lord. They had fallen prey to the temptation that tells you that your standing with God is discernable by your circumstances in life. If everything is going smoothly then you must be in the realm of God's favor but if life brings afflictions and dark providences then there must be something wrong with the Christian.

It's certainly an easy temptation to yield to and it has been one of the devil's most effective weapons throughout the ages. You have heard me reference the book of Job time and time again and I believe that one of the main reasons that God gave us the book of Job is to enable us to combat such a temptation that tells us that our standing with God

depends on how easy we have it in life. The gospel itself teaches us to disavow this kind of thinking because the gospel of Christ teaches us that the greatest display of God's love to our souls is not found in life being easy – it's found rather in Christ's atoning death. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* Christ tells us Jn. 15:13.

Such a glorious truth has to be foundational to how we read the providence of God. If we read God's providence from the perspective of Christ's atoning death then our confession will be *all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Rom. 8:28). When we drift from the foundation of the gospel then we are not able to make such a confession but instead question our salvation or question God's love or question our relationship to God through his Son.

So there's the factor of providence being misread which leads to spiritual lameness and in close connection to providence being misread there follows sonship being forgotten. *Ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.*

Our sonship so elevates us into the realm of God's favor that nothing can separate us from our God. There is a vast difference you see, between being a rebellious sinner under the judgment of God and being a son under the chastisement of God. Chastisement is not pleasant. There is no point in trying to sugar-coat it and make it seem pleasant. *No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous* (v. 11).

Again I refer to Job where you find such a vivid example of one who knew God's chastening to be grievous – so much so that in his corruption he justified himself rather than God and was provoked to the erroneous notion that God wasn't treating him fairly. In the end Job saw his own folly and put his hand over his mouth and repented in sackcloth and ashes. The thing that must be kept in mind about Job is that his standing before God was never in doubt. His relationship to his God did not change and God's dealings with him although they were harsh and unpleasant and long were nevertheless dealings in grace and not in wrath – dealings in God's favor and not his displeasure.

So there's the factor of misreading God's providence and there's the factor of forgetting our sonship. And if our sonship is forgotten then it will certainly follow that we'll doubt God's love. Heb 12:6 *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

We've seen in our studies already that Paul stands out as a model when it comes to his being convinced that God was with him and God was for him. So long as that was the foundational truth to rule Paul's heart then he could suffer beatings and he could suffer imprisonments and he could suffer shipwreck and he could take the perils that came with his travelling. And he could view these things as light afflictions especially when he saw his blessings in terms of what eternity held for him.

So must we, then, either gain the victory over or prevent this malady of spiritual lameness from getting a grip on our hearts. And this leads to the next point of our

consideration. We've seen the factors that contribute to this condition. Let's think for a moment on:

## II. The Healing of Spiritual Lameness

I believe a prescription is given to us in these verses beginning in v. 12 in which we are to *lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees*; This is followed by *making straight paths for your feet* v. 13 which leads to *following peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord*.

Let's look at the component parts of this prescription beginning in v. 12. Notice that we're to *lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees*. Barnes, in his commentary takes this lifting up of the hands and the feeble knees to be an exhortation to each believer to take heart and fresh courage. He writes:

*They were to make every effort to bear up under their trials. The hope of victory will do much to strengthen one almost exhausted in battle; the desire to reach home invigorates the frame of the weary traveller. So it is with the Christian. In persecution and sickness and bereavement, he may be ready to sink under his burdens. The hands fall, and the knees tremble, and the heart sinks within us. But confidence in God, and the hope of heaven, and the assurance that all this is for our good, will reinvigorate the enfeebled frame, and enable us to bear what we once supposed would crush us to the dust. A courageous mind braces a feeble body, and hope makes it fresh for new conflicts.*

There is another perspective, I think, that can be applied from this part of the prescription also. When it comes to lifting up the hands the picture that immediately comes to mind is Moses, in the book of Exodus, whose hands were held up by Aaron and Hur while Moses was made to sit on a rock. So we read in Ex 17:12 *But Moses' hands [were] heavy; and they took a stone, and put [it] under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.*

I can't help but wonder if this is more along the lines of what Paul had in mind in Hebrews. We've already seen earlier in this epistle how we're to *consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.* (Heb. 10:24,25).

When it comes to lifting up hands that hang down and feeble knees it seems to me that the picture presented is of a believer that is so exhausted as to be beyond strength. I'm not sure that the power of resolution can be effective to renew strength in such circumstances. We certainly know from other places in the New Testament that we're to bear one another's burdens. And we know that the body of Christ functions through that which every joint supplies.

I'm inclined to believe, therefore, that when it comes to lifting up hands that hang down and feeble knees that this becomes a ministry that we must bear toward each other. We must pray for each other. We must encourage and exhort each other.

I can remember seeing some time ago a movie on television that told the story in detail of all that was involved for a marine to make it through boot camp. Rigorous training was followed by rigorous testing and in one scene in particular a marine had fallen hard and twisted his ankle so two of his comrades upheld him as they continued on their long march. The drill sergeant told them that each man had to make it on his own but then he clearly looked the other way in order allow the other two to uphold the one who had come so far but now needed help. It's the same in our Christian walk. We each have our own burdens to bear but we also have the task of upholding each other.

This is what makes church so important. This is what makes fellowship between believers essential. We need each other. We depend on each other and we must be committed to each other. We've been studying the subject of Church Membership in our Adult Sunday School class and I believe that one of the key reasons for church membership is that we may pledge to each other that we will hold up the hands that are heavy and the feeble knees.

The next part of the prescription calls for *making straight paths for your feet*. I think we can draw a vertical and a horizontal application from this statement. *Make straight paths for your feet*. In Isa. 40:3,5 we're told: *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.*

From a vertical perspective we can say that the way to God has been made straight. We have access to the throne of grace. There is nothing to bar us from enjoying communion with our God. The only obstacles to keep us from the throne of God are obstacles that we ourselves would place in our own paths through wrong thinking. So when we're called on to make straight paths for our feet I think the spiritual application would be to so adjust our thinking in such a way as to know and appropriate the glorious truth that we have access to God because we have a Great High Priest that is seated in the heavens at the right hand of God. A Great High Priest who will never deny us grace and mercy to help in time of need.

From a horizontal perspective I believe the word applies that we should make the most common sense decisions as to how we're to go forward in our walk with the Lord. This is the text, actually, that the Lord used in my life when it came to directing my family to Indianapolis from Chicago. My spiritual condition at the time could certainly be described as lame. I was under a heavy sense of failure since I envisioned planting a church in the Chicago area. When that little church plant was at last shut down the pre-eminent question on my mind was *now what?*

I had been blessed in the Free Presbyterian denomination. I viewed the preaching of Christ as being essential to the well being of my family. The straightest path for my feet,

therefore, was straight South down I-65 to Indianapolis where a small church plant had taken root. It just seemed to make the most sense for my own well being and the well being of my family and upon having this word sealed to my heart I took it to be the confirmation that this was indeed God's will.

There is always a dangerous, you know, that Christians will fail to take straight paths when things become tough. How many Christians have made wrong assumptions about how things would go for them spiritually if the head of the home found a higher paying job in another location. They simply assumed that everything would fall into place for them spiritually because there was this lucrative financial opportunity in front of them. This is the way of carnal expediency rather than the way of making straight paths for your feet.

There follows, then, in v. 14 the exhortation to follow – *follow peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord*. This can only be practiced through understanding and appropriating the gospel. Because we have made peace with God we are free to pursue peace with all men. Here again Paul stands out as an outstanding model to us. The very ones that would put him death would be the ones he could wish himself to be accursed if only they might find Christ. He was free from all animosity because he was reconciled to God.

And through the gospel we gain the right vision of God. We see God in his holiness but we don't see a God who is unapproachable. We see a God whose ways and whose thoughts are far beyond our comprehension but we also see a God who provision for us to enter heaven through the death of his Son. So we follow holiness by following Christ. We follow holiness by being conformed to his image. We follow holiness by pursuing the things that are pleasing to him and turning away from everything that is displeasing to him.

In this fashion, then, we gain healing from spiritual lameness. We lift up – we make straight – and we follow peace and holiness. It remains for us to consider finally:

### III. The Importance of Pursuing This Healing

Given the description of spiritual lameness that we find in v. 12 as well as the things we're to pursue in order for that lameness to be healed we see at once how important it is to overcome such a spiritual malady.

*Lift up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees* which means that apart from lifting up the hands and the feeble knees we will remain spiritually weak and will be to all practical intents and purposes spiritually dysfunctional. I wonder how many people here this morning can remember a time when they were so much more engaged in spiritual things than they are now. There was a time when you would never miss a service – you would never miss prayer meeting. You would rarely if ever miss your private devotion time with the Lord.

And then for whatever reason you became weak and instead of going from strength to strength you from weak to weaker. This is something that elderly people must especially watch for. You may have invented a rationale for your weakness. Perhaps you've come

under the misimpression that Christians retire from spiritual pursuits. Last week at the Nursing Home I was so encouraged to meet a lady who takes it upon herself to try to get others to come to the services. How encouraging and refreshing her testimony was. She sees the importance of the gospel, still. She has not allowed her spirit to go down the way she has grown weaker physically. She is doing her best to lift up the hands not only of others in the home with her but to lift up the hands of those that come to minister in that place.

There is no reason for those of us who are rapidly advancing in years not to be renewed inwardly so that our zeal for the Lord rather than growing weak may grow stronger. There is still so much to do in the Lord's service in terms of praying and witnessing and encouraging others. May we, instead of resigning to heavy hands and weak knees, make straight paths for our feet and avoid being turned out of the way. Let us, instead, be healed.

And then consider that without the pursuit of peace and holiness there will be no testimony that can appeal to others to come to Christ. And there will be no vision of the greatness and majestic splendor of our God and our Savior. We will cease to shine and will instead blend into a world that is steeped in guilt and misery.

And as we saw last week – the end of such a condition, if it is not healed is the grace of God failing and we ourselves becoming angry and bitter. Look at the words of v. 15 and take them as a solemn warning - *Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble [you], and thereby many be defiled.*

Isn't that a sad a tragic end to meet. Rather than being a blessing we become a source of defilement. Rather than being at peace we find ourselves constantly troubled. Better by far to lift up the hands which hang down and the feeble knees. Better by far to make straight paths for our feet – straight paths back to the throne of grace where we commune with our God and gain from him grace and mercy to help in time of need; straight paths back into the service of Christ our king where we endeavor to be used of him for the extension of his kingdom and the salvation of souls and the encouragement of other Christians.

We've come to the last Sunday of the year 2010. As we look ahead to a new year which will soon be upon us it may be that we should make this verse our motto for the year 2011. May we endeavor on a regular basis to take such an admonition to heart that we're to *lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*

May the Lord stamp his word on our hearts and give us grace to take his word to heart and may we be found to be doers of God's word and not hearers only in the days and weeks and months ahead.