

Warm-up

What do you have of great value for which you've set up a protection plan? Have you ever thought in terms of protecting your *faith*? 1 Peter 1:7 says that it is "*more precious than gold which is perishable*". What can threaten and weaken it? Or how about *wisdom*? Proverbs 3:15 refers to it as "*more precious than jewels*".

- Maintaining faith involves avoiding detours. It deserves to be protected.

Take Courage! (vs. 12-13)

"Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble," (v. 12)

I learned some things when dealing with physical trauma. I had to *choose* to recover; I had to be proactive and take the initiative to do the things that would maximize my healing. If I only did what the doctors or even the physical therapist told me to do my chances of a full recovery were less than they could be. I am walking today, in part, because I chose to "strengthen the hands that are weak", even when it hurt.

And so I say, "Take courage! Walk uprightly!" God has already taught me what I need to know and do to move forward with His strength. I must be *deliberate* in appropriating His help; i.e. studying / memorizing His word, praying, staying free from entanglements (Heb. 12:1), and fixing my gaze on Jesus (12:2). Without Christ in the center of my life I'm feeble; with Him in control I'm strong (Phil. 4:13). I must "*set the Lord continually before me*" (Ps. 16:8).

Notice in verse 13 that we are to "*make straight paths for our feet*". It matters which direction we turn and what we do when we get there. Making a wrong, "knowing better" turn can compromise our faith and expose it to decline. This verse tells us why, "*so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed*". Stable, effective, functional faith does not "go out of joint". We keep it strong by deliberately walking in God's light, even when it's tough. Remember, when I'm feeling out of kilter (disjointed) I've moved away from God. Intimacy with the Father produces healing.

"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). *"In Your light we see light"* (Ps. 36:9b).

- *Be courageous! Walk in God's light and stay strong.*

Peace Child (v. 14)

"Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord."

Pursue peace with everyone. Romans 12:18 advises, "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*" Forgiveness is often required to allow peace. I can choose to forgive, or I can allow bitterness to take root (see v. 15). The word "pursue" is the Greek word for a hound chasing a rabbit! God asks me to pursue peace with this singular focus, even with aggression. It is a top priority for Him! Jesus told us that His peace is free.

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." (John 14:27)

Our world tries to convince us that peace results from everything *except* God! God's word says that peace is a result of giving your anxieties *to* God. This results in "*the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil. 4:7)

When we harbor anger and resentment rather than pursuing peace we distance ourselves from God. When we pursue peace we draw closer to God and become cleaner (sanctified), seeing Him better and acting more like Him.

- *How strongly are you pursuing peace today? Is there someone you need to forgive?*

Don't Come Up Short (v. 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;"

Think about God's **grace**. It's the Greek word *charis*, meaning "*a gift or blessing brought to man by Jesus Christ; His favor gratitude, kindness.*" It means that God "*freely extended to give Himself away to people (because He is 'always leaning toward them')*". This is the God we worship and serve. He offers grace freely; we must embrace it!

What is it about *unforgiveness* and *bitterness* that is so destructive, pulling us away from God's grace? Allowed to grow it becomes a cancer in relationships. And it is jealous, always trying to attract others. It reminds me of gossip which Paul wrote about in 2 Tim. 2:17, saying that it "*will spread like gangrene*". You may know that the only cure for gangrene is amputation; it is that serious. Left unchecked bitterness will destroy the person along with others.

Do you remember Paul's stern counsel in 1 Cor. 5:1-5 about the man in the church who was living in open sin? The matter was so serious that Paul stated that they must remove this man from the church. He did not apologize for "judging him", even to the point of "delivering him over to Satan". It seems like God views bitterness as an equal threat. When the first evidence of it appears we are to take priority action ("see to it...") and get rid of it!

The bad stuff that tries to occupy our minds comes out of our heart. Bitterness is born there and can become rooted there. Feeding this emotion displaces godly thoughts and behavior.

¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰ These are the things which defile the man...." (Matt. 15:19-20)

"Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23).

► *God's grace must reign in the life of a healthy believer. Guard against anything that threatens to displace it!*

A Bad Trade (vs. 16-17)

"that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal." (v. 16)

I find it interesting that immorality is often the "hole in the damn" that leads to other ungodly choices and behavior. In 2 Peter 1 God lists 7 qualities that we are to pursue in our faith; the FIRST one is "moral excellence" (v. 5). He says that if do not diligently pursue moral excellence we are "*blind or short-sighted, having forgotten (our) purification from (our) former sins.*" (v. 9)

The first "bad trade" Esau made was to abandon moral behavior. This led to self-focus and ungodliness; it became rooted in his heart. It was the opposite of the pattern God outlined in 2 Peter 1, which begins with moral excellence and progresses to knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and Christian love.

Learn from Esau. He lost his hope and salvation ("he found no place for repentance" – v. 17). God hates it when we despise what He has ordained (see Malachi 1:3). Don't exchange God's provisions for something that we can attain on our own without Him. Jesus advised, "*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" (Matt. 6:33).

The expression "too little too late" is sometimes used. In the case of Esau I'm not sure that his heart was ever right, even when he seemed repentant later. Perhaps his sorrow was because of what he lost rather than because he now sincerely wanted to worship God. What do you think?

Prov. 29:1 says, "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy." One reading of this verse says, "beyond which there is no hope."

2 Chron. 36:16 says, "but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy."

Only God knows the heart. Through His word He "*judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" (Heb. 4:12).

Each of us inwardly desires the things that only God can give. *The battle is over submission*, yielding to God who "*works all things after the counsel of His will*" (Eph. 1:11). When we submit to Him He works in us "*for His good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:13).

► *What would you trade for in exchange for immoral tendencies in your life?*

Group Discussion

1. What attitude or action does God want you to strengthen as you walk with Him this week? (vs. 12-13)
2. Share a time when you pursued and experienced God's peace in a difficult relationship. (v. 14)
3. Can you suggest a list of progressive steps that lead to bitterness? Talk about how to short circuit this downward spiral. (v. 15)

NEXT TIME: Lesson 13: FAITH / Unshakable – Hebrews 12:18-29