

Hebrews 12:1-3; Jan. 23, 2022

Ephesians 2:4-10

The Right Focus for a New Year

Last week I talked about starting the New Year with determination and how worry can sidetrack us from doing God's will. No matter what the new year brings us, we need to stay focused on our primary purpose. As St. Paul said: *But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*, Phil. 3:12b. Christ found me. Christ saved me. He has a purpose for my life. The supreme purpose of my life is to discover His purpose for me! That could take a lifetime, and it will most certainly require our focus.

We might call it "holy aspiration" - focus on the one thing needful which is focusing on winning the prize which is life in Christ. That's what will make us able to stand before Jesus Christ and hear Him say, *Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord*, Matt. 25:21. To end well, we must begin well by setting our lives in the right direction. What direction are you headed?

When we turn to the Bible, we again find help for staying focused: *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*, Hebrews 12:2.

Now there's a phrase full of imperative: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." It says three important things:

1. "Let us" speaks of united action - we can do this together.
2. "Fix our eyes" speaks of a definite action. Don't just talk about it, do it.
3. "On Jesus" speaks of a single aim. Stay focused on the prize.

With that as a beginning, let's now consider what else this verse from Hebrews can teach us.

Our Focus

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus... Hebrews 12:2a. The word "fix" comes from a Greek word (αφορωντης) that means to look away from surroundings to something beyond; to gaze intently at something ahead. It carries the idea of concentrating your gaze so to steer a straight course. Years ago one of my seminary professors took me on his sail boat out on San Francisco Bay. He taught me some rudiments of sailing. I recall vividly holding the tiller as he instructed me to pick out a prominent feature in the distance (in this case a bridge pylon) and keep my eyes fixed on it. That's how you arrive at the right place. To fix our eyes on Jesus requires a holy habit of soul. We must consider how we use our time. What fills your gaze? What occupies your time?

Many years ago a man hired an experienced guide to lead him on a hike into the Swiss Alps. After many hours they came to a high and remote mountain pass. To the man's dismay, he saw that the path had almost been washed out.

What could he do? To the left was a sheer rock cliff, to his right a precipice that dropped nearly 1000 feet. Looking down, the man felt his head growing faint and his knees beginning to buckle. At that moment his guide shouted, “Do not look down or you are a dead man. Keep your eyes on me, and where I put my feet, put yours there as well.” The man did as he was instructed and soon he passed from danger to safety.

In this new year of 2022 no one knows what lies ahead for any of us. We all have our plans and dreams but the times and seasons of life are in God’s hands. Sooner or later we will all come to a dangerous pass where the way ahead seems to be washed out. At that moment we can panic and fall into terrible trouble. Or we can fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and mark carefully his steps before us. If we follow the Lord, we will find at the end of this year that we have been kept safe by His amazing grace.

Author of Our Faith

Did you ever consider that your faith might not be your own? Is faith a gift for those who ask for it? When the Bible states that Christ is the “author and perfecter of our faith” implies at least three things.

1. He laid the foundation for our faith by His death and resurrection. He made our salvation possible;

2. He provided the perfect example to follow for He trusted God perfectly.

Even when He was sorely tempted in the wilderness, He did not give in. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, He yielded up His human will to the perfect will of his Heavenly Father. No one was ever tested like Jesus and no one ever passed the test like He did;

3. He gives us the faith we need when we feel like quitting. All true faith comes from Him because faith itself is a gift from God. In Christ we find everything we need, always.

Our Example

***Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame,* Hebrews 12:2b. The words: “joy” and “cross” don’t seem to go together. The cross speaks of pain, suffering, shame, ridicule, rejection, and ultimate public humiliation. Crucifixion was a slow, agonizing death that often lasted for several days. It was the worst kind of torture, reserved for the very worst criminals. Where is the joy in that kind of death? There is none. But Jesus went to the cross and endured the pain and despised the shame that he might obtain the joy that would be his afterward.**

Did Jesus enjoy the cross? No. But he endured it for what would come later. Did Jesus enjoy the shame? No. But he scorned it for what would come from it.

He gained the joy of doing his Father's will, the joy of completing the work of redemption, the joy of bringing great glory to his Father, and the joy of triumphing over death and hell. These joys came at the cost of a cruel Roman cross. We can see this even in our fallen human nature. What gives people joy and fulfillment is not more rest or leisure, but victory.

There is a principle here that can have great impact on our lives. It's the principle of delayed gratification. We can see this principle at work in our own lives on two different levels. Level 1 is giving up the good to obtain the best. In the early days of the New Year, we know that our sincere resolutions depend on this principle. We give up food that we might lose weight. Students give up a night out to study for final exams. A young couple gives up dinner and a movie because they are saving to buy a new car. There is sacrifice involved, but both sides of the equation involve genuine human pleasure. One is forfeited that a higher one might be achieved.

Level 2 of delayed gratification is enduring pain to receive a reward. The Winter Olympics are coming up very soon. Every athlete there has gone through countless hours of training, giving up other "fun" things, enduring pain in many cases, to have a chance of winning a medal. Aspiring pianists practice for hours when they might be watching TV or playing video games. They do it hoping that some day they may play for thousands. In a different way it's why cancer patients endure the rigors of chemotherapy. It's why people keep themselves pure. They want to enter marriage someday with joy and with no regrets. It's why some people leave their loved ones and travel as missionaries to the ends of the earth. They want the joy of seeing the others come to Christ. In all these things there is pain involved, but it is pain endured for the sake of the joy that comes when the goal is reached.

Jesus said, "Follow me" and He went to the cross. Can you follow Him that far? Can you endure pain and difficulty in order to know the joy of fulfilling God's will for your life?

It's like Jesus was saying: "I want the joy of seeing my Father's house filled with his redeemed children. If it takes the pain and shame of a brutal death on a cross, I'll do it." No pain, no gain. No suffering, no glory. No tears, no joy. No cross, no crown.

We all like the empty tomb. But you have to die before you can rise again. Keep your eye on the prize.

Our Hope

***And sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, Hebrews 12:2c.* Jesus sat down because His work was finished. In the Old Testament the priests on duty could never sit down because their work of offering sacrifices for sin was**

never done. But once Christ had offered Himself as the final sacrifice for sin, no other offering could be made and no other offering would be accepted. That's why theologians speak of the "finished work" of Jesus Christ. It means that His work of redemption is now complete.

He sat down at God's right hand, the place of supreme honor in the universe. Therefore, to Him belongs all praise and majesty and that's why God has given him a name that is above every name. When we pray to him, we are confident because we have a Friend in high places who can help us in our time of need.

Look at that phrase from our other Scripture reading. *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him*, Ephesians 2:6. "Raised us," and "seated us" are in past tense – like it's already accomplished. Because we are joined with Him by faith in a living union, where Christ is right now we are there with Him. We already share in the victory He won through his death and resurrection. Do any of you feel raised up or seated in heavenly places? It's hard to believe when most of us are slogging through the mud of daily reality. But from God's point of view, the battle is over and the victory is already ours. And someday when we see Christ, all that is His will become ours because we are "joint-heirs" with Jesus. So we keep going in the race set before us because the finish line is there and along with it our seat with the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. There we can sit down our work over, the victory finally won.

Stay The Course

Here's three things to remember about starting and continuing the New Year right:

1) Start with Jesus, not your problems. In hard times don't start with your circumstances and try to find Jesus. Start with Jesus and then go back to your circumstances. Tough times can trip us up because we can't understand why God would allow bad things to happen to us. But if you start with your problems, it will be nearly impossible to find the Lord. Go back to the Bible. Review what you know about our Lord—His mercy, His grace, His kindness, His power, and His wisdom. Lay that foundation from the Word of God, and then go back to your circumstances. You may not understand all that happens to you but your starting point is crucial.

2) Stay focused on Jesus. That's the only way to really finish the race well. For encouragement we have the testimony of the saints who have gone before us, we have the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we have the promise of coming glory when we finish our earthly course. Don't be turned aside or distracted by the things of the world. Don't look back. With all your might keep going, eyes ever fixed on Jesus.

3) In God's eyes you are already a winner. When you feel like giving up just remember that. Even now you are seated with Christ in heaven. The score may seem against you, but if you know Jesus, His victory is yours. That's why when

people ask how I'm doing, I respond, "I'm winning." *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of discipline, II Timothy 1:7.* Remember who you are and whose you are.

"Is your faith strong?" a Christian man was asked a few hours before his death. He replied, "No, but my Jesus is." In 2022 your faith will rise and fall according to the seasons and tides of life. But we are not saved by our faith in Christ. We are saved by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. That's a completed work. Lean on Him – He has the strength. In fact, He has all we need to finish the race... power, grace, wisdom, encouragement, forgiveness, boldness, determination, and more.

Let no one falter on the road to heaven this year. Let no one drop out because of discouragement, fear, doubt, despair, anger, or bitterness. The Lord Jesus has already covered the course. He is the Captain of our Salvation and the Savior of His own body. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus in 2022 and it will be well. Amen.

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, Hebrews 12:2.