

PREPARE FOR TOMORROW TODAY **(Hebrews 13:7-16)**

One of my favorite stories is about four pastors who were visiting with one another over lunch. The conversation turned to the topic of sermon preparation. One pastor boasted, "I prepare my sermons one year in advance. I can tell you what I will be preaching on Sunday morning 52 weeks from now." The others were impressed. Another said, "Well, I don't do it that far in advance, but I stay a month ahead in my sermon prep." A third pastor confessed, "Well, I pray and study every day looking for inspiration, but sometimes I don't even know until Saturday night." The fourth pastor had been strangely silent during the entirety of this conversation. Finally, in bewilderment, he asked the others, "What do you guys do during the offertory?"

I believe in the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit. God often leads a pastor to say something that you won't find anywhere in his sermon notes. It may be a thought or a word that comes to him as he is preaching God's word. While that is true, if I had a choice of listening to a pastor who is just talking off the top of his head, freewheeling it, making it up as he goes along or listening to man who has prayerfully and carefully studied the text and prepared the message, I am going with the latter.

I would rather eat a home cooked meal that has taken hours to prepare than fast food that is thrown together in just a few minutes. Wouldn't you?

The value and importance of preparation is found just about everywhere you look. It is seen in sports. Before the football game starts, the coaches have put together a game plan. The players have practiced all week. They have studied film of the other team as well as film of their last game in order to correct mistakes they made. By game time, they are ready. At least they hope they are because their opponent has gone through the same process of preparation. Usually, the team that prepares better is the team that plays better.

In business, an owner does his due diligence before hiring the applicant or investing in that new equipment.

The hospital practices how to respond to a mass casualty event. The police department drills for how to handle an active shooter situation. The military trains for the various scenarios they might encounter, and before the battle begins, they have a battle plan for how to win.

There is a word those shows up at least ten times in the NT. It appears twice in the text of Hebrews. It is the word *train*. Here is a principle we need to remember: *We succeed in the Christian life not by trying; we succeed by training.*

This afternoon I could try to run a marathon. I could try really, really hard, but I'm not going to get very far. If I want to run marathon, and that is the last thing I would want to do, but if I did, I would have to train to achieve that goal. We win by training not by trying.

We are getting close to the end of Hebrews. The author knows those Jewish believers to whom he is writing have experienced persecution, and he knows that more is on the way. He wants to steel them for the dark days that are sure to come. He urges them not to go back to their Jewish faith but to go forward with Christ.

Today's text may seem a bit scattered, somewhat random. I want to bring it together

under a unifying thought. I have sought to capture that thought with the following title for this message: "Prepare for Tomorrow Today."

Like the Jewish believers of the first century, we, too, are going to face difficult times. The time to get ready for those trying times is not when we find ourselves in them. The time to get ready is today. We have a saying, "Better late than never." We need to set the bar higher than that. Our motto should be, "Better now than later." Let's prepare for tomorrow today.

In vv. 7-16, the author of Hebrews gives us four training steps we need to take now to get ready for tomorrow.

Training Step #1: Let Us Sharpen Our Vision.

In vv. 7 & 8, the author tells us specifically what or rather who we need to watch closely. Notice v. 7. "Remember your leaders," he tells us. Which leaders? "Those who spoke to you the word of God." The leaders he has in mind are the teachers and the preachers. Later he is going to tell us to obey them and submit to them, but his instruction here is "remember them."

Interestingly, he doesn't use the present tense. He doesn't say "those who are speaking to you." It is past tense, "Those who spoke to you." Back in v. 3, he wrote, "Remember those who are in prison." Maybe those leaders who spoke the word of God to them are in prison, and thus they are prevented from speaking the word to their flock. Maybe, they have paid the ultimate price for following Jesus. Maybe, they have been martyred or died of natural causes. We don't know.

It seems, for whatever reason, those leaders are not presently with the church, and the people are encouraged to look back on their lives. "Consider their example; note their commitment," is the idea.

Look at the last half of v. 7. Have you ever considered the idea that your life is going to have an outcome? It is going to lead to something. If you want your life to lead to something positive and beneficial, if you want your life to make an eternal difference, then you need a good example to follow.

When people put together a puzzle, they routinely look at the picture on the box. If you got the puzzle pieces in a brown, paper sack with no picture, how hard would it be to assemble that puzzle.

Life often resembles a puzzle. We are trying to make the various pieces of our life fit together. We need a picture, an example to look at as we seek to become what we were meant to be.

What spiritual mentor did you have in the past, a Sunday School teacher, or a pastor, or a godly grandparent who made a positive difference for the Kingdom of God? Consider that person's life. Learn from him or from her. Imitate that person.

One of my predecessors at the church on Monkey Island where I served as pastor for 5 years had gone to that church to be their interim pastor. He stayed 13 years. By the time I arrived, he had passed on to glory. He was dearly loved and fondly remembered. When I was their pastor, there was only one charter member of the church left. She had been there from the start. More than once I heard her say, "Brother Nick taught us to love one another."

I can think of no higher praise for a pastor, no greater compliment than for someone to say, “He taught us to love one another.” Someday, hopefully far in the future, I will no longer be your pastor. My prayer is that those who survive me would be able to say, “You know, Brother Matt, he taught us to love one another.”

What great lesson have you learned from a spiritual leader you’ve known and been shepherded by in the past?

We are to sharpen our vision by looking back, and then, we are to sharpen our vision by looking up. Notice v. 8. The author draws a contrast between our earthly, spiritual leaders and our heavenly one, Jesus. Our mortal leaders grow old and die or they can be taken from us, but Jesus is immutable. He is unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Be sure you look to Jesus. In his final letter, 2 Timothy, Paul wrote, “Remember Jesus Christ” (2:8). Focus on His life. Focus on His teachings. Imitate Him, and do what He commanded.

If we want to be ready for whatever comes our way, we need to sharpen our vision. We can do that as we look back and as we look up.

Tony Snow was a journalist, but he also served as the White House Press Secretary under President George W. Bush. He wrote the following:

The art of being sick is not the same as the art of getting well. Some cancer patients recover; some don’t. But the ordeal of facing your mortality and feeling your frailty sharpens your perspective about life. You appreciate little things more ferociously. You grasp the mystical power of love. You feel the gravitational pull of faith. And you realize you have received a unique gift—a field of vision others don’t have about the power of hope and the limits of fear; a firm set of convictions about what really matters and what does not. You also feel obliged to share these insights—the most important of which is this: There are things far worse than illness—for instance, soullessness.

Tony Snow died in 2008 after a three-year battle with cancer.

I would say that the art of dying is not the same as the art of living, but the first one helps us do the second and vice versa. If we learn how to die well, we will know how to live well, and if we know how to live well, we will be helped in knowing how to die well. To do both well, we need to sharpen our vision. We do that by looking back and up.

Training Step #2: Let Us Be Strengthened by Grace.

Look at v. 9. Then, as now, there are those who come to the church with strange teachings. The author seems to have in mind those who taught that spiritual growth could come to those who practiced a certain diet. They were all about what you should eat and shouldn’t eat.

We are told here in this verse that we are strengthened by God’s grace not by changing up our dinner menu. We are to devote and entrust ourselves to God’s grace not to diets and fads and the things we can control.

How does grace strengthen us? Listen to this parable told by Pastor Ray Ortlund:

We were married to Mr. Law. He was a good man, in his way, but he did not understand our weakness. He came home every evening and asked, “So, how was your day? Did you do what I told you to? Did you make the kids behave? Did you waste any time? Did you complete everything I put on your To Do list?” So many demands and expectations. And hard as we tried, we couldn’t be perfect. We could never satisfy him. We forgot things that were important to him. We let the children misbehave. We failed in other ways. It was a miserable marriage, because Mr. Law always pointed out our failings. And the worst of it was, he was always right! But his remedy was always the same: Do better tomorrow. We didn’t, because we couldn’t.

Then Mr. Law died. And we remarried, this time to Mr. Grace. Our new husband, Jesus, comes home every evening and the house is a mess, the children are being naughty, dinner is burning on the stove, and we have even had other men in the house during the day. Still, he sweeps us into his arms and says, “I love you. I chose you. I died for you. I will never leave you nor forsake you.” And our hearts melt. We don’t understand such love. We expect him to despise us and reject us and humiliate us, but he treats us so well. We are so glad to belong to him now and forever, and we long to be “fully pleasing to him” (Col. 1:10)!

Being married to Mr. Law never changed us. But being married to Mr. Grace is changing us deep within, and it shows.

The Law doesn’t strengthen us. It discourages us. It wears us down. But Grace, Jesus, He encourages us. He builds us up. We are stronger because of His grace. Because of His grace, we are not afraid of failure. We attempt to serve Him with gifts we have never used. We would not have risked that under the Law. Now, we know He loves us no matter what.

How do we receive this grace? The first thing to do is to ask Him for His grace. James told us, “You have not because you ask not.” God’s grace is always and only a prayer away. The second thing is to humble ourselves. The word of God promises that He gives grace to the humble. Don’t pretend or act like you have it all together. Don’t pretend that you are strong and in control. Be honest and tell Him that you need His help.

As I was preparing this message, my thoughts turned to the Mylon LeFevre song that is in our hymnal. I’ve shared his story before, but I want you to consider the lyrics. It is hymn #332, “Without Him.” Look at the two verses:

Without Him I could do nothing,
Without Him I’d surely fail;
Without Him I would be drifting
Like a ship without a sail.

Without Him I would be dying,
Without Him I’d be enslaved;
Without Him life would be hopeless,
But with Jesus, thank God I’m saved!

The recipient of God’s grace knows the difference between having Jesus and being

without Him. We come to Him, and by His grace, He strengthens us.

Training Step #3: Let Us Suffer for Jesus.

Look at vv. 10-14. These verses sound rather like a formal resolution:

- Whereas we have a better altar than those who cling to the old covenant,
- And whereas the blood of Jesus is better than the blood of the animals who were sacrificed under the old covenant,
- And whereas Jesus shed his blood outside the city to make us holy,
- Let it therefore be resolved that we will go to Him and suffer for the One who suffered for us.
- And let it be further resolved that this world is not our home. We are looking for that new and eternal city.

Verses 10, 11, and 12, lead to a climax in v. 13 and v. 14.

Persecution and suffering are not something that we normally yearn to experience. Yet, Jesus promises His blessings to those who stand with Him and for Him in the face of opposition. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In Philippians 3, Paul declared what his ambitions in life were. He wrote, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection." So far so good, but then Paul goes off the rails. He adds, "and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death." Then, he gives us his rationale for wanting to experience those things: "that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (3:10-11).

There is great spiritual and eternal benefit for suffering on account of the Savior. We are not to run from persecution. We are to embrace it when it comes our way. We are blessed by God when He counts us worthy to suffer for His name.

You and I can expect persecution. Jesus said "when" not "if." Listen to how Eugene Peterson put it:

God's revelation of himself is rejected far more often than it is accepted, is dismissed by far more people than embrace it, and has been either attacked or ignored by every major culture or civilization in which it has given its witness: magnificent Egypt, fierce Assyria, beautiful Babylon, artistic Greece, political Rome, Enlightenment France, Nazi Germany, Renaissance Italy, Marxist Russia, Maoist China, and pursuit-of-happiness America. The community of God's people has survived in all of these cultures and civilizations but always as a minority, always marginal to the mainstream, never statistically significant.

We can prepare for tomorrow's persecution by accepting today's raised eyebrows, today's funny looks, and today's under-the-breath insults when we stand up and speak out for our Savior and our God.

Training Step #4: Let Us Sacrifice What's Pleasing.

Notice vv. 15-16. Here, we find two kinds of sacrifices. The first consists of words, and the second consists of deeds. Verbally praising God is called the fruit of our lips. May that fruit always be in season. Make sure you cultivate the ground in which that fruit grows. It grows from a heart that is devoted to God. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). When our heart is focused on Jesus, we can't help but praise Him, and honor Him, and verbally extol Him.

Do you think God is pleased when His people continually offer up to Him a sacrifice of praise? Of course, He is.

Verse 16 shows us another way to present a pleasing sacrifice to God. We do that by doing good, and one way to do good is to share what we have. God is pleased when His people share what they have with those who are in need. It occurs to me that is exactly what God did. He sent His Son to those who were in need—you and me. When we share, we are being like God, and God is pleased when we imitate Him.

We are not going to give generously tomorrow if we are not giving generously today.

Let me give you a quick history lesson. Early in the 4th century AD, Constantine became the Emperor of the Roman Empire. Not long after ascending to the throne, Constantine converted to Christianity. He decriminalized the Christian faith thus ending the persecution of Christians. Less than 25 years after his death, his nephew, Julian became the emperor. Although he was raised to be a Christian, when Julian assumed the throne, he sought to return the Roman Empire back to its pagan roots. He was not successful. The Church was so generous that they won the hearts and the respect of a large percentage of the empire. In a rare moment of honesty, Julian identified the problem he faced, "Those Christians not only feed their own poor but they feed ours as well."

We may see persecution come to the church with greater intensity. We can't wait for that day to arrive before we become generous. We must practice generosity today.

Pastor and author David Wilkerson wrote a disturbing book in 1998. In the introduction to his book he claimed, "God is about to chasten the nations of the world through an economic holocaust, and His sword is already unsheathed!" In his book, he sought to prepare believers for this coming depression.

In 2009, two years before his death he posted a message to his personal blog. It was titled, "An Urgent Message." He wrote:

For ten years I have been warning about a thousand fires coming to New York City. It will engulf the whole megaplex, including areas of New Jersey and Connecticut. Major cities all across America will experience riots and blazing fires.

He also wrote that this would be part of an "earth-shattering calamity" affecting the whole earth, brought on by the wrath of God in judgement against "the raging sins of

America and the nations.” Regarding the timing of these events, he confessed: “I do not know when these things will come to pass, but I know it is not far off.”

Wilkerson’s counsel was not, “Buy a place in the country where you can dig your own well and grow your own food.” His message was, “Get your heart right with God. Grow in your love for Him.” He will protect His people, but we need to draw close to Him so we hear what He is saying.

Tomorrow is coming. The time to get ready is today.