

Going On To Perfection

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I have used this example before that I am going to open up the sermon with, but it is such a good example. It means so much to me, I felt I could use it again.

When I was a young man, many, many years ago, I was addicted to skin diving. I loved to skin dive. And back in those days, we did not have wet suits. We had dry suits; you had to wear your long underwear into the suit. And it seems every body of water I saw gave me a strong pull to jump in there, and see what was underneath the surface.

We dove into the ocean every chance we got—from northern California, from San Francisco north and San Francisco south. And one thing I observed after a long time was that nothing was stable in the ocean. Everything moved all the time one way or another. I could not help but think of it as it pertained to Hebrews 2. But I thought of us in these difficult times, that we too can become unstable. We really can if we are not careful.

Please turn over to Hebrews 2.

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

The *King James Version* says slip away. We should put more effort into what we have learned, what we have been taught, lest that any time we should let them slip. The *New King James*, as shown here, “lest we drift away.”

It brought back memories of my float that I used to use. It used to drift away. Our floats in those days were big inner tubes; it had a gunny sack hanging down in the center then to pick up the abalone (which is an unclean big underwater snail). And when we tossed the inner tube into the water it would

sit there for a while and everything seemed normal. We would talk a bit and I would look and it was 12 feet away, and if we kept on talking, which I am wont to do, it could be a block or two blocks away, or three blocks away. You would have to swim after it.

And later, we would just simply pick up the sack when it got full of abalone, and we would throw them over the top. If we wanted to swim, or when we just wanted to stay, we just let the sack hang down.

But it did surprise me that when I would enter the water, that tube seemed so stable right next to the rock or the pier. And I would chat. Then the next time I looked it would be over there. And if I did not get it, then it would be way over there.

Now it drifted away from me very slowly; this is key here—it was almost unnoticed because it seemed just to sit there.

That is exactly what is being discussed in the book of Hebrews. They were facing a difficult environment.

What is our environment today? It is extremely difficult. And the letter was written to the Christian Jews who were having a difficult time, which included a famine. On top of that, I am sure they were being picked on, and talked about by those who were nonbelievers.

What is the attitude of the world around us today? Let us spend a little time in II Peter 3.

II Peter 3:1-7 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts [this is true, even within the church], and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?"

For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

And indeed, we do not see God taking an active part here. I am sure that all of us have said, "When are You going to do something? Can't You see what's taking place in the world?" And we go on and we get sort of upset and sort of disconcerted.

II Peter 2:1-3 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

Today we have, what, five or six Two Witnesses? That is true. Have you not heard that? You cannot believe that somebody would say something like that. But they do. "I'll be the one to select the two witnesses." Or, "My wife and I are the two witnesses." And on and on.

Let us go to Matthew 24 because I think this pertains to us quite a bit.

Matthew 24:11-13 "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. [This repeats II Peter, and it is true.] And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. [That is where Paul (Hebrews 2:1 above) was going on this.] But he who endures [perseveres, or who does not let down] to the end shall be saved."

That is something we have to consider and hang on to. Plus, the environment around God's people could cause them to give up unto the filthy garbage that

permeated the society around them, and they were continually pushed to let down. And Paul saw this.

In our society, we find the same thing, but with more technology pushing it in every corner of our world: movies, TV, Internet, fashions, which are all morally at much lower levels than they have been, and have become the new standard.

You know, being 80 years old, I can look back and see when girls wore longer dresses. I can even remember when people went to college in slacks and sweaters—that is how old I am. They do not do that today. But we have TV, we have all kinds of things, and God's people are slowly absorbing the new marketing that is being presented. And *it is* being presented. You hear nothing of God anymore.

Paul was the author of Hebrews, and he could see that in the slack time for serious religious zeal and the building of godly character, that the people were quietly being lulled to sleep. They did not seem to care.

So, Paul starts out in chapter 1, and reminds them that the Father has spoken to them by the Son who was heir of all things; the One who made the world; the One who upholds all things, and even the angels worship Him; the angels have great power. They cannot remotely come close to what Jesus Christ is. This individual is the One who was working with them, and I might add, with us today. We cannot forget that!

In chapter 2 [of Hebrews], they are reminded that if they missed the boat, or neglect so great a salvation, what can they expect? That it was because of this individual, Jesus Christ, that they received the Holy Spirit, and that it was those that had been called, and thus were crowned with glory who were being prepared to rule the world. (And of course, you know, this covers you.)

Jesus Christ, the great God, suffered death in the most horrible of manners that they, and we might be saved. He did this in great love for us. And seeing that we are flesh and blood, Jesus took on the same composition of body that He might understand the suffering, the trials, and our needs as we go through our trials.

Though the question is not presented, it hangs in the air to be considered: “What should our response be to so great a sacrifice?” In chapter 3 we are asked to consider how faithful Jesus was to Him that appointed Him, and the tremendous loyalty that He displayed. He told them to take heed lest we have begun to acquire an evil heart.

Again, another question is not presented, but it still hangs in the air to be considered: “How is our loyalty? How is our zeal? How is our courage today to stand up for what is right?” We are to listen to Him in whatever we do, and we are not to harden our hearts. This is what Paul is saying.

And because of all of this is planned for us, and the calling given, we can come boldly before the throne in time of need and have great encouragement, for we have a High Priest that is touched with the feelings of our infirmities. He was tempted in all points and yet He is without sin. We can come right to Him asking Him what we need.

Turn over to Hebrews 5. This is the preparation that Paul put into this before he gets to this point.

Hebrews 5:7-11 [W]ho, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him [that is a good point to remember], called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

He was getting to the point that, “You people haven’t been paying attention. You’ve been sort of wandering off, and laying down on your sides, and not do anything seriously about this way of life.”

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. [In other words, God expects much more of His brethren.] But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

What are we saying here? They were told, “For the time when you should be teachers, you need to have someone teach you again the first principles; you are such that need again to be taught the basics.” This does not mean that everybody should be a minister. What he is saying here is you ought to be able to completely teach your children the correct things, and to answer people that come and say, “This is a difficult scripture.” This is something we should all be able to do. Study into it. Look into it and understand it.

But perhaps because of time going on, because of other interests taking precedence, you have dozed off spiritually. And because of this, you need to be taught the basics again. This should not be like that for us.

Paul goes on to say that strong meat belongs to those who are mature, even those who by habit of practice have their senses trained in mercy and exhorting one another, as Ronny Graham said, and loving one another in truth and in judgment by putting it into practice.

Hebrews 6:1-2 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

Now Hebrews 6, in the *New English Bible* reads like this: “Let us stop discussing the rudiments of Christianity. We ought not to be learning over again the foundations of faith in God; of repentance from deadness of our former ways; by instruction in cleansing rites; the laying on of hands; about the resurrection of the dead; and instead let us advance toward maturity. And so we shall as God permits.” That is what is being said there. The *King James Bible* says, “Let us go on to perfection.” We should aim for that perfection.

Now God truly wants us to make an honest attempt at being as righteous as possible, even though we see imperfections in ourselves, and we do. That can be so frustrating at times. (Luckily, I am at an age now when all those imperfections have gone away. We will not go into that!) He wants each of us to strive toward perfection.

Perfection is *Strong's* #5051. And it means: “to complete; a completer; a perfecter; particularly one who reaches the goal to win the prize.” This is what he is saying.

This is only used once in the Bible and it is in this verse. The commentator went on to say that Jesus Christ is the supreme model of this way of life, and that by His unerring life of faith has made a way to God for those who follow Him. And He has! It is very serious business! Is God asking the impossible for us? No, He is not. Did Jesus Christ have to be perfected? Yes, He did.

Hebrews 5:8 Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Learning by obedience is something that we can do as well. We must learn by obeying God.

Hebrews 5:9 And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

And so, that by His sufferings, He became perfected. He is the author of eternal salvation.

Zodhiates, in commenting in *The Dictionary of New Testament Words*, thinks that the thought here is not that Jesus suffered from a deficiency of character, or nature, and through suffering He underwent moral improvement. That is not what he is talking about here. In the case of Jesus Christ, it concerns His qualifications as becoming a Savior. “The appointed way to Saviorhood followed the path of testing in the most pressing hardship and suffering. Jesus remained obedient to His Father having successfully endured the trial of life, and He was proven fit to be the Savior of mankind.” This is what is being discussed there.

So, as we strive to follow the example of Jesus striving to overcome the tests that confront us, does this then qualify us to be in God's Kingdom as kings and priests and helpers to rebuild a tired, shattered world? You bet it does! That is what it is all about. That is what we have to work at.

Are there different levels of maturity? And perfection? This should be encouraging, here in Matthew 25, if you would, please.

Matthew 25:14-15 “The kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.”

Did you get that part? Each according to his own ability. This is key. We do not all have the same goal of perfection to hit. God has looked at us, and He has called us, and expects thus and such out of us. And he gave five talents to one, and to another two, and to another one. Again each according to his own ability. God did not ask him to do more than he could do.

Matthew 25:16-18 “Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.”

He buried his chance of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 25:19-20 “And after a long time the Lord called his servants and he settled accounts. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’”

“I've grown. I've improved. I've overcome, I've accomplished things that I never thought I could.” And Jesus Christ said, I'm proud of your progress, I'm proud of your maturity. I'm proud of your perfection,” if you will.

Matthew 25:21-22 His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant, you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ He who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more besides them.’”

He was all excited. “I didn't gain the five. I'm not as good as that guy maybe. But I gained two more.” And Jesus said, “I'm really proud of the maturity that you gained, the growth, the understanding, the love, the compassion you've had for all the brethren.”

And he came to the last man. I think this is something nobody ever discusses. It just occurred to me that this last man really did not think his calling was valuable. I will put that into here. As far as the talent goes, he just felt, “Oh, this is no big thing! Christ will accept me like I am!” You have in the Ten Virgins that attitude there too.

So he buried the talent that was given him, and Christ came back and said, “I offered you the world; I offered you the universe—the stars, the heavens, everything! And you declined it!”

Was that a big thing to Christ? You bet it was! And so is your calling, brethren, and mine. We cannot let down. We just cannot! That is just how it is.

Each individual receives his reward for his individual perfection based on what Christ knew he was like, what he did, what he could accomplish.

Christ has not told me how far I have to go, or how far you have to go. And you do not know, either. But Christ does. He has not given you more than you can handle. I think we have to realize that, as frustrating as it can be—struggling to overcome and put on the Father and the Son.

It is comforting to know that we have been asked to do what is *possible* for us to do. And so when you are crying, and saying I cannot do it, I cannot do it. Forget that! Get on and do it!

We have not been asked to accomplish any more than what we can each accomplish. God knows exactly what we need, exactly what we can do, and this is what He is doing.

Are we being asked to do exactly what Jesus would? You bet we are! We are being asked to be perfected by the calling that is been given us. We are being asked to be perfect and being perfected.

In our society, many things come easily. But, brethren, this is not one of them; this comes with difficulty—a lot of work.

Turn to I Corinthians 9. The apostle Paul knew the struggles he had to fight. And he was such a good example.

I Corinthians 9:24-27 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate [self-control] in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air [shadow boxes]. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

What would happen to the flock that Paul took care of if he let down? If he gave up? It would discourage others. As was mentioned in the sermonette, we all pull together as a family; we exhort; we know each other. It is extremely important that we keep the fight going, that we cannot let down because sometimes you really want to. Sometimes [I feel like just] put me on an island somewhere and get me out of this mess—that does not work. We have got to support and lift each other, as Ronny [Graham] said earlier.

Now, Paul is using an analogy that we can all relate to, that of a physical contest, and the training involved in the contest. The diligence of prayer and

study and putting into practice what you learned. Paul is saying to all of us that we must run spiritually to obtain a prize of glory, the crown incorruptible; therefore we must make constant, consistent exertion that we might not fail.

Expositor's Commentary presents it this way: “When Paul says, ‘do you not know’ he assumes it is common knowledge about a foot race, and he tells them everyone should run as these runners do, with the all-out effort to win the prize.” Now we can read over that and say, yeah, yeah, that is true.

Have you ever stood by at the end of the track, or beside the track, while the races were being run, where you can see these people close up, and see the strain on their faces as they struggle to try and beat the man next to them? No small thing! This is what he wants us to understand. That we have to do just that—we have to picture the race, not just read over the words.

He reminds us we should run as these athletes do, in an all-out effort to get the prize. Luckily God has a lot of prizes, if you will. But the one main prize is the Kingdom of God (which we will see in a moment). He reminds us that athletes do this for a corruptible crown, but that we have the ultimate goal for God's people—it is the crown of eternal life and fellowship with God forever. No. Small. Prize.

Albert Barnes states it (in a bit of archaic language because it was written a long time ago) this way:

Christians may obtain this crown when they give themselves wholly to God and make this the grand business of life . . .

In other words, this does not take second place. It is in first place [in your life]. They have their jobs. That is fine. But this comes first.

. . . when they lay aside every weight and renounce all sin, and all improper attachments; when they do not allow themselves to be diverted from the object, but keep the goal constantly in view . . . [This is why Ronny's message was so good.] . . . when they do not flag, or grow weary in their course; when they deny themselves; when they keep their eye fully fixed on Christ as their example and

their strength; and the kingdom of God as the conclusion of the race and the crown as the reward.

So we are running to a conclusion of the race.

Has God provided us with a list of those that have gone on to perfection? You bet! They have gone before us, that we might be encouraged. It has been discussed, and I will do it again: We have Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Moses' family, Rahab, Gideon, Jephthah, David, Samuel, Barach, Samson; ordinary church members receiving their dead raised to life. Others being tortured and not accepting deliverance that they might obtain a better resurrection; while ordinary folk face mocking, scourging, plus chains and imprisonment; they were stoned, sawn in two, tempted, slain with the sword, wandered the sheepskins in the wilderness, being destitute, afflicted, and tormented.

Were these people perfect as the world views perfection? Of course not! Every one of them had their problems and suffered because of them.

What set them apart? What set them apart in God's eyes as being perfect or mature? And, what will set us apart in the same manner?

They kept their eyes on God in daily prayer, rather than the pull of this world. In short, we all must seriously pay attention to eternal things. It is a must.

We have the advantage today of Bibles, correspondence course, booklets, *The Forerunner*, and the telephone hookups. And because of this we should be able to get our prayers in daily without fail, and our study too, because the time may come when these things may not be available and we will need all the help that we have had.

I John 2:15 reminds us all that the lust of the flesh, pride of life, and the lust of the eyes will pass away. But he that does the will of God, he that endures, and perseveres, will endure forever.

It is really important, brethren. Really important!

Please turn over to I Thessalonians 5. You are all very special to God! And I think you need to really understand this. Sometimes we do not feel like we are worth anything, but you are extremely special to God the Father, and to Jesus Christ, and probably to your guardian angels as well.

I Thessalonians 5:4-9 But you, brethren, are not in darkness [you have been called to the Light, which is really important], so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. [That is who you are!]

Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober [self-controlled]. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation [referencing the armor of God in Ephesians 6]. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what you were called for. Not for wrath, not for collapse, or anything like that.

I Peter 1:3-9 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead [you have been called, and begotten], to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

This is where you are going. This is what your purpose is.

Turn over to Hebrews 12. This is something that John [Ritenbaugh] mentioned, and it is something that I cannot help but get emotional over. Every time I consider Hebrews 12, this is where the conclusion of Hebrews 11 is. It is where John mentioned it was like being in the arena and you have seen the current movie, *Gladiator*, where he is fighting in the arena, and all the people are cheering them on, and so forth. And this is the picture it presents.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

It is almost as if the stands are full of people saying, “We’ve been there; we’ve done it; and we know you can make it.” And I pictured the arena, and the Kingdom, and those in the stands who have gone before, cheering us on saying, ‘Apply yourself! Don’t let down! You can do it!’”

Hebrews 12:2 Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is what we have to consider: We have to follow Jesus Christ. This goal is for us too.

Brethren, we have to remember that God did not give us an impossible task. We *can* make it! I hope that does not sound too simple. It is not simple, but we can, because God gave us what we need. He called us with maturity in mind that he wanted us to arrive at, and we can do it.

Now for the final scripture. I am probably going short on this, or close to it.

I Peter 5:5-11 Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.