

Greetings. Welcome to session 12 of this series on “Abounding in the Good Works of God.” We learned in session 11 that we can expect hardships when we are living a life of service for the true God. The apostle Paul was a phenomenal preacher and teacher of the Gospel in the First Century Church. Here is a prophecy given prior to the start of his ministry.

Acts 9:15-16

*15 But the Lord said to him (Ananias), “Go, for this man (Paul) is a chosen vessel to me, to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the sons of Israel,  
16 for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”*

God knew before Paul even began his ministry that he would suffer many things. How did Paul deal with those sufferings? What gave him the endurance to continue when the evil forces of this world knocked him down with punch after punch? It was in knowing that Jesus Christ will one day return to welcome us home, where he will hand out eternal rewards to those who have been faithful in their commitment to serve God in this lifetime.

When I was in high school, I competed on the track team in the 2-mile run. My track coach did not push me to work hard during practices. He was a very easy-going man. In order to succeed, I had to use self-discipline. Long after the coach and most of the others on the team had left the field, I was still running hard. Not for the coach. My motivation was to get a medal placed around my neck.

My self-disciplined training paid off. I won lots of medals and broke our high school record in the 2-mile run by more than 20 seconds. Being a disciple for our Lord Jesus Christ also requires self-discipline and sacrifice. The Bible illustrates this by comparing the physical sport of running to a spiritual race where great endurance is also required in order to be successful.

1 Corinthians 9:24

*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? So run in such a way that you attain it.*

The goal of competing in a race is to win a prize.

1 Corinthians 9:25

*And everyone who is competing in the games exercises self-control in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible.*

Self-discipline and control is required in order to win prizes. Prior to the actual competition, an athlete must go into serious training mode, committing lots of time and energy into intense workouts. My youngest daughter is on the high school cross country team. She starts to do serious training workouts in June, even though her first competitive meet is not scheduled until October. Those who desire to receive everlasting treasures from God must act in a similar manner.

1 Corinthians 9:26

*Therefore, I do not run like one who runs aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air,*

In order to succeed, clear goals must be established that have been well thought through. Our eternal rewards are at stake. Therefore, we need to devise a spiritual plan for success and not just leave it up to chance.

Philippians 2:13

*for it is God who is working in you both to want to do, and to do, his good pleasure.*

Isn't this an awesome promise? The word 'working' is a translation from the Greek word *energeo*. We get our English word energy from it. It means to put forth power. God promises to energize his power into our life in two areas:

1. Getting us to want to do his good pleasure.
2. Helping us to do his good pleasure.

Our spiritual success always starts with us listening to God, for him to give us a plan to carry out. Then, as we begin to act on that plan, God follows up by providing us with everything we need to make that plan succeed.

1 Corinthians 9:27

*but I treat my body harshly and make it my slave, lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified for the prize.*

Paul wasn't looking for God to send him on a pleasure cruise to Hawaii. He was ready to submit himself as a slave to God, even though he knew it would require much pain to his body. Why? His thoughts were on the eternal prizes God would be serving up for him at the return of Christ.

In order to be a successful distance runner, there are times where an athlete must push his or her body beyond what they think it is capable of producing. They are very tired. But instead of quitting, they push even harder, their eyes focused on the future prizes they have the potential to win.

I remember shortly after a hard-won race, a teammate asked me, "I noticed that you had a smile on your face while you were running that last lap. The other runners were grimacing in pain. Why were you smiling?"

"I disciplined my mind to focus on the happiness I would get by winning the race," I explained. "Those thoughts of happiness replaced any feelings of pain." My mind saw only one thing, the prize at the end. And that is why I smiled.

Hebrews 12:1

*Therefore, seeing we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us also run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

A big key to running a race is to shed any baggage that might weigh you down. Can you imagine a marathon runner carrying a large bag of potato chips while he runs? Or a female racer with a big purse on her shoulder, filled with all kinds of knick-knacks?

I was in the Marine Corps officer training program. On one particular day we were entered into a contest where we were required to run 5 miles with full gear, including our rifle and two full canteens of water. Those canteens were heavy. I decided to drink plenty of water prior to the race. Then, during the race I 'accidentally' spilt most of that water on the ground. I wanted to travel as light as possible when I ran. It helped, and I proceeded

to win that race. If you plan to travel fast and far, there is only one way to travel. That is light. No heavy burdens to set you back.

What spiritual baggage are you carrying? Watching too much garbage on television? Listening to music that is not Godly or edifying? Spending too much time hanging out with ‘friends’ who are not Christian and leading you in the wrong direction spiritually? We need to recognize and eliminate baggage in our life so we can run a strong race.

Hebrews 12:2

*fixing our eyes on Jesus, the leader and finisher of our trust, who, because of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, thinking nothing of the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

‘Leader’ is a translation of the Greek word *archegos*. It refers to one who takes the lead or sets the example. A predecessor or pioneer. Demonstrated by enduring the cross, Jesus pioneered what you and I need to do in order to endure hardships. His method worked. God is exhorting us to learn from Jesus and handle adversity in the same manner that he did.

Notice the words “thinking nothing of the shame.” Shame is that painful feeling you get when you have been disgraced or dishonored. Jesus’ entire ministry was about loving people. He healed many who were sick. And yet, men responded by arresting him, spitting in his face, ridiculing him, ruthlessly beating him and crucifying him.

And what about his closest disciples? Did they stand with Jesus when he was arrested and continue with the ministry Jesus had prepared them to do? Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. Peter publicly denied knowing Jesus. Where were the others? Not only was Jesus completely disgraced by unbelievers, he was publicly humiliated and shamed by those he had poured his heart and life into.

How did Jesus respond to all of this? With joy. So how is God expecting us to respond to mistreatment from unbelievers? And when those we have disciplined have setbacks in their faith and turn their backs on us? With joy.

I know what your next question must be. How in the world can you get any joy from that? The joy Jesus had was in looking at the future. What was set before him.

Hebrews 12:3

*Yes, think carefully about him who has endured such opposition from sinners against himself, so that you do not grow weary, becoming exhausted in your souls.*

Jesus Christ endured a ton of opposition from sinners. I talked about this in session 7, “Understanding Jesus Christ.” We need to consider carefully what we are having to go through in our stand for God compared to what Jesus went through. Whatever harsh treatment our service for God is costing us, Jesus endured much more.

Hebrews 12:4

*You have not yet resisted to blood, striving against sin.*

How does God know you have not yet resisted to blood? Because you are still alive!

1 Timothy 4:7-8

*7 But avoid worldly and old wives’ myths; rather, train yourself in godliness.*

*8 For bodily training is profitable for a little while, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of the life that is to come.*

I love sports. And one of the most exciting things in sports competition is to witness the celebration when a team has worked so hard all season long and then they win the championship. The happiness on their faces as they jump up and down, hugging each other, with tears rolling down their cheeks. Everything they have worked so hard for has been worth it.

What God is telling us in this verse is that the celebration of these athletes is only momentary. Soon the excitement will die down and they will go back to a world where problems and trials confront them each day. There are many stories of athletes who, after reaching the top level of success in their sport, don’t know where to go from there. Many live out the rest of their life in depression and sadness.

God is exhorting us to train for something much different than a momentary physical reward. If we will choose to give God the same discipline and self-control that a physical athlete sacrifices in order to achieve a worldly goal, he promises us rewards that are both momentary and eternal. Which would you rather have, temporary rewards? Or eternal rewards? God says that when we discipline our lives to serve him, we will receive both.

2 Timothy 2:3-6

*3 Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*

*4 No one serving as a soldier entangles himself in the affairs of this life, so that he will please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.*

*5 And also, if anyone competes as an athlete, he is not crowned unless he competed according to the rules.*

*6 The farmer who labors must be the first to partake of the fruit.*

In order to be successful in spiritual competition, we mustn't become entangled in the affairs of this life, such as worldly pleasures. Instead, we should maintain our focus on the study of God's Word, our prayer life and in fulfilling the plan that God is guiding us towards. When we do that, we will reap great rewards that we will have earned for ourselves. When a farmer puts the labor in, he gets to enjoy the fruit of those crops during the harvest season. And when we put labor in for God, we will enjoy the fruits that God will bless us with.

Matthew 5:10-12

*10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of their righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

*11 Blessed are you when people reproach you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil things against you falsely because of me.*

*12 Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

No one likes to be persecuted. The rejoicing comes from knowing that God will greatly reward us when we are persecuted while we are in the process of carrying out his will for our life.

1 Thessalonians 4:13

*Now, we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, in order that you will not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

There is always sorrow when someone we loved dies. However, if that person was saved, our sorrow is not as difficult to deal with because we know that we will see them again when Christ returns. And when we see them the next time, they will not be dying of cancer or some other disease. They will not be in a wheelchair or have loss of sight, hearing or memory. They will have a new body. And we will have a new body. And we will be able to enjoy their fellowship again. But this time it will be for all eternity!

Revelation 21:4  
*and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more; the former things have passed away.”*

That’s a prophecy as to how life will be for us in the future. Pain and suffering will no longer exist. It will be wiped away completely, for all eternity. It will never rear its ugly face upon us again. Eventually, that day will come. We need only be patient and wait. Can you imagine the joy and rejoicing that will transpire during that time period?

Romans 8:38-39  
*38 For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,  
39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What a comfort to know that absolutely nothing in this world can separate us from God and his awesome love. This knowledge enables us to go forth with great confidence and boldness, ready, as Jesus Christ was, to face any hardships thrown our direction.

Is spending eternity with God a little hard for you to grasp? We know from Revelation 20:1-6 that a very small portion of that eternity will be a 1,000-year period where Jesus Christ will reign on earth. It is known as the Millennial Reign. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 it says that we who are saved will forever be with the Lord. This means, wherever he goes, we will be going with him. Therefore, we know that you and I will get to experience this

thousand-year reign with him. I believe that our faithfulness to stand for him and carry out God's will in this lifetime will determine what privileges and responsibilities we will receive from Jesus Christ during those 1,000 years. A thousand years is a really long time! That is more than ten times the average lifespan of a person right now. I can't wait for that even to take place! How about you?

In session one of this class we talked about how special we are, and that God has a wonderful plan for our life. Ephesians 2:10 says we are God's handiwork and that he has already prepared in advance for us to do good works. Now, in this last session, we learned about the joy of the future hope of the return of Christ. It will help keep us steadfast in performing those good works when persecution and hardships come our way.

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