

July 26, 2015

## *Unshakeable Faith*

Hebrews 12:1 – 29

The geologic experts tell us that a whole lot of shaking is going to go on fairly soon here in the Pacific Northwest. We are living over something called the Cascadia subduction zone, where a pair of tectonic plates are right now grinding up against one another under the Pacific Ocean. And they're headed, slowly but inevitably, toward a moment when the pressure that has been building there will become too great to bear. When that happens, a huge swath of the Pacific Northwest will be engulfed in the worst natural disaster in the history of North America. Kenneth Murphy, the director of the division of the Federal Emergency Management Agency that's responsible for Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington, said in an interview with journalist Kathryn Schulz, "Our operating assumption is that everything west of Interstate 5 will be toast." In other words, everything that can be shaken will be shaken. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with this information except run in circles, scream and shout.

But in this chapter, the writer of Hebrews is telling his readers exactly the same thing. Only he's giving them some direction and foundation, something solid to stand on when the earth starts shaking. He's writing to encourage and strengthen the faith of these believers who are teetering on the brink of giving up. And he's acknowledged their struggle in chapter 10: 'You've endured a hard struggle with sufferings' the writer says. 'You were publicly exposed to reproach and affliction'. People disapproved of your faith, and ridiculed you for it, and hated you because you were a Christian. And because you identified as a Christian, whatever public accusations were thrown at other Christians, hit you. Not only that, your faith in Christ sometimes led to prison and great financial loss – your property was plundered. You've been taken advantage of. But don't let go of God. Don't throw away your confidence which has great rewards.'

In some sense they are feeling the ground shaking beneath their feet and they're beginning to shrink back from a bold and confident faith. And the writer seems to be saying, 'This shaking you're feeling right now? Just wait – it gets shakier! *'...but now He has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."*' In other words, shaking things up in our lives is in God's plan, and one day even the heavens will shake. It isn't something to be feared or run from. The writer tells them, *"Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken--that is, things that have been made--in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.* God has in mind a kind of shaking that will shake loose everything that is not founded on God. If you build your life on accumulating money, when the money goes, and it will go, you'll not just be shaken, you'll be shattered. If you build your life on position, or looks, or abilities, whatever, when they go, it will shake you apart. Whatever your foundation is, it will be tested by shaking. If your hopes and dreams are built on things in this world only, when they get shaken, you get shook.

The whole thrust of this book has been to get us to put everything on Jesus, the unshakeable Rock of our salvation. In chapter eleven, he begins telling them stories of the shaking that went on in the lives of those who have gone before to inject hope and encouragement into their hearts. He goes through a whole list of people who by faith endured the unendurable because their hope was built on the solid Rock of Christ. And now he says, *'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...'* He is not saying that these men and women now in heaven are watching us as we run the race, like people seated in a stadium. The word "witnesses" does not mean "spectators." The word for witness is *martureo* and it indicates a confirming witness, not a spectator to some event. These people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, **their lives are bearing witness to us that God can, and God will see us through.** God bore witness to them in their life of faith and their lives are now bearing witness to us.

The writer sees this life as a race to run. There's a definite beginning, and a definite end. In between we encounter stuff that does its best to slow us down. He talks about weights that hang on us and sin that clings to us and tells us we need to continually be laying that stuff aside and run with endurance the course God has set for us – with our eyes on the prize – Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

In this chapter, the writer tells us that **there is a race to run; we need discipline to run this race; and the goal of the discipline is a faith that is unshakeable.** First of all he says that **we are in a race.** The word he uses is *agon* which originally meant a gathering of spectators at an athletic event. But it gradually came to mean the participants in the event, and eventually it described a contest or struggle. That's one reason our word agonize comes directly from this Greek word. In other words he's saying, 'Life is a contest, an agonizing struggle'.

He reinforces that idea down in verse four: *'...in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.'* He's not talking about cutting yourself to avoid sinning. Some early Christians popularized the idea that in order to stop sinning you needed to punish yourself ruthlessly and early monks and holy men used to beat themselves with a small whip to draw blood whenever they were tempted to sin. No, what the writer was saying must be seen in context with what he has been saying all along and that is that even as they have stood against the sin of unbelief in the midst of their current troubles, they have not yet been martyred for their faith while agonizing or struggling against the temptation to apostasize. That is why he points them to those who have gone before, those who have run the race and whose lives now stand as witnesses to their faith and their struggle.

So **there is a race to run** – life is a race. Paul says the same thing to the Corinthians: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.* Not only is there a race – the Bible says that only one will win the prize. In other words, there is no prize for second or third – it is not good enough to run 'pretty well' – there is first place – and there is the losers bracket. We need to have the realization that every day when we get up – there is the race course stretched out in front of us and a race to run today. And there are three things we need to do to run effectively. There are weights to be shed, clinging sin to be laid aside, and endurance to be maintained.

There are things in our lives that are not necessarily sinful – but they slow us down. These are things we do, things we think, things we say, that get our eyes off the race and onto ourselves or other people or the circumstances around us and effectively stop us from running. And while most Christians would ask the question, 'Is it sinful?' they fail to ask the more relevant question, 'Will it help me run, or will it slow me down?' What is it in your life that you might consider weights? What is it that slows you down? Causes you to meander off course, or even stop? What are the things that take your eyes off Jesus and focus them either on yourself or the world? Get rid of them. They won't help you run.

We need to also get rid of the *'sin which clings so closely'*. The word describes something that entangles us, that trips us up, causes us to stumble. While he does not name any specific sin, the writer was probably referring to the sin of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept Israel out of the Promised Land, and it is unbelief that hinders us from running the race getting to the finish line. And in the context here, the sin that clings so closely is not believing in the goodness and providence of God. When things go well for us we are quick to say 'God is blessing me'. But when things go bad, usually our first complaint is 'God, why did you allow this to happen?' Unbelief is never very far from our hearts. It clings to us. And the writer is saying, 'Look at the witnesses; look at the life of the author of your salvation'. Some made armies flee, yes – but others were tortured and sawn in two. Look at Jesus, *'...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'*

Because this race is not a sprint – it's a marathon. Now I've never actually run a marathon, and by God's grace, I hope I never have to. But I do know, intellectually at least, that what you need in a marathon is endurance. A lot of endurance. Here is that word again that shows up over and over in Hebrews: ***hupomone***. And in the context of this chapter means that you keep running even when you would rather stop. It implies patient persistence under stress and one commentator puts it like this: *"We commonly associate patience with lying down. We think of it as the angel that guards the couch of the invalid. Yet there is a patience that I believe to be harder—the patience that can run. To lie down in the time of grief, to be quiet under the stroke of adverse fortune, implies a great strength; but I know of something that implies a strength greater still: it is the power to work under stress; to have a great weight at your heart and still run; to have a deep anguish in your spirit and still perform the daily tasks. It is a Christlike thing! The hardest thing is that most of us are called to exercise our patience, not in the sickbed but in the street."*

So in this race we need shed the weights that slow us down, strip off the clinging sin of unbelief and run the race with endurance. How do we do that? The writer tells us that it happens as we look to Jesus. Other translations tell us to 'fix our eyes on Jesus'. We have the testimony of the witnesses, but the most compelling testimony is that of the founder of our faith. *'...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.'* When things are tough, when the circumstances are against us, when we feel the shaking going on, we need a fixed point of reference. Something that isn't moved by time or tide. We need **someone** that remains unchanging, ever-faithful, always steady. Someone who has already endured the worst the world could offer and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Our tendency is to look at the trouble we're in and lay down in the middle of the race. The suffering we go through tends to lead us to depression and unbelief, because we look at the circumstances and conclude that God is not trustworthy. If God loves us so much, why are we in this pickle? But the writer says that this pickle is teaching us something. What he tells us is that **we need something he calls discipline to run this race.** *5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives."*

Look at what is going on here. He says, 'Don't be discouraged here. Have you forgotten that everything that comes your way is coming from a loving Father who knows what you need? John Newton, in a letter to one of his friends, put it like this: **'Everything which He sends is needful; nothing can be needful which He withholds.'** The word **discipline** comes from the Greek word *paideia*, which means training as in the training, teaching, chastising and punishment of a child, with the goal being an obedient and useful citizen of the community with the proper development of character and self-control. The word **reprove** is a word that means to expose for the purpose of steering the guilty party toward redemption. It is used to indicate reproof for the purpose of restoring relationship. The word **chastise** means to whip, or flog or beat. It was the normal, legal preliminary to crucifixion. In other words, discipline is painful. And the writer himself says, *'For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant...'*

So why, you might ask, is this encouraging, and not ultimately demoralizing? And the answer is that it is God who is doing the disciplining, the correcting and the scourging, and we can trust Him completely. One of the reasons we grow weary and give up is because we don't see the suffering we experience as coming from His loving hands. We need to have this perspective. Perspective is crucial. If you do not see the trouble that comes into your life as something God thinks is necessary and ultimately good, you'll shrink back and run away. And that is one of the things the writer is saying here. He points them to Jesus: *Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted*, and then he says, 'Don't try to ignore the suffering you are going through, and don't get discouraged by it'. The writer is making a direct correlation here between the suffering Jesus endured and the suffering we can expect in this life – and he says that this is good for us because it comes from the loving hands of a faithful Father. Just as the suffering Jesus endured at the hands of evil men was meant for the glory of God, just so the suffering we endure as discipline from God produces an eternal weight of glory.

He tells us this so that we won't fall into one of two common responses. When trouble hits, we tend to go one of two ways. We either tell ourselves that this too shall pass, we man up and soldier on, we tell ourselves that this won't touch us. The other response is depression; we fall into despair and we melt down. The writer says, 'Don't act as if you're not suffering; but don't fall apart under it.' One translation says, 'Do not despise the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him'. Don't despise the suffering, don't treat it lightly, but don't faint, don't melt under the pressure. Because the suffering and pain God allows in your life has a goal and a purpose, to train you up as a son or daughter. *7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.*

We need to have this perspective: We experience suffering and pain, not because God hates us, but precisely because He loves us. If you have children and never discipline them, I may not know much about you but I can tell you without a doubt that you do not love them.

*'Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him'*. Proverbs 13:24  
As a society, we tend not to believe that. We have to a large degree bought into the idea that we should never bring pain into our children's lives, and so we have begun to regard pain and suffering as something to be carefully avoided. Furthermore, many of us have had very bad disciplinary experiences with our earthly fathers and we can't imagine what good this pain and suffering will produce. And very often, because we can't see any earthly good in suffering, we either dismiss it as just something that comes with living, or we melt under the pressure and say 'If God is so good, why is there suffering in the world.'

You see, we can't base our approval of divine discipline on our experience of discipline from our parents. As a parent you know this. Our discipline is inconsistent, sometimes excessive, sometimes unloving, sometimes used as payback. It isn't at all perfect. Just ask my children. But the writer anticipates this: *For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. Besides this we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?* In other words, as inconsistent as they were, as imperfect as our parents discipline was, we in some sense respected that discipline because in the end we understood that they loved us and wanted the best for us. **How much more should we embrace the discipline of our heavenly Father who knows exactly what we need and when we need it?** God is the perfect Father who allows designed pain and suffering into our lives so that we will live and not die. He has exact limits on what He allows and will not let the thing run one second past the allotted time.

And it is painful: *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* Discipline takes the long view. Discipline says, 'A little temporary pain right here will yield eternal rewards. When he says 'those who have been trained by it', the writer uses a word for trained that comes from the gym – **gumnazo**. And he has in mind the kind of training athletes endure to win first prize. Have you ever looked at an Olympic athlete compete and say to yourself, 'I could do that'. No you can't. Sources I looked up said on average that it takes four to eight years training full time, six days a week, 365 days a year, to make it to the Olympics. And there is a lot of pain involved. But that is just for one shining moment in the sun. The training the writer has in mind however has eternity in its sights.

You need to notice here too, that this is not just for our selves – but for those who follow. **12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.**

Just as we saw in chapter 11 in the lives of those who suffered the heavenly discipline of the Father and were approved by Him, so too our lives ought to bear witness to the goodness and grace and sovereignty of God for those who come behind. The tendency is to become bitter when we suffer; to turn inward and say 'Why me? Why now? Why this?' But the charge is to not only not become bitter ourselves, but to help others not to become bitter. When we run with endurance, through adversity, through tough times, through sickness, and death and reversals and loss – and don't give up – that helps those around us, those who come after us, come to Jesus. And when the world sees the people of God stand firm in spite of all those things, and not only stand firm but with joy, they too are attracted to this Jesus. What we need, what the people around you are looking for, is a faith that is solid and unchanging and full of promise. An unshakeable faith.

The goal of the discipline is a faith that is unshakeable. **18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."** The writer of course is referring back to the experience of Israel in the wilderness. And the testimony of Israel was not one of unshakeable faith. Every time they encountered hardship or suffering, they shrank back, they got hard and bitter and they grumbled a lot. And they kept saying, 'God why did you lead us out here to die?'

In other words, they saw God as someone who was all the time upsetting their world, a God who made life miserable for them. They kept saying, 'Whatever you tell us, God, we'll do. Just say the word and we'll do it'. But they never did. From start to finish they never embraced the discipline. But when we get into the presence of God, all our stuff falls apart. The earth shakes beneath our feet. Everything we trusted in blows away. The confidence we have in ourselves is shattered. In fact as you read through the Bible, that is the testimony of everyone who gets near God. Isaiah says 'Woe is me. I am ruined'. Job puts his hand over his mouth and throws himself to the ground in dust and ashes. You see, God is in the shaking business – every time He speaks, something shakes – usually the ground underneath our feet. That is because He doesn't want us to trust in that ground – He doesn't want us to get comfortable in the here and now, and plant our hopes and dreams and lives on what we can see, but on Him.

So the writer encourages his readers to see the shaking going on as something designed to turn their faith from the shakeable present to the unshakeable future. *22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.* He's turning their eyes from their troubles in the present to see what awaits those who endure in the faith. He says, 'You're inheriting the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. A perfect community where there are no sirens in the night and no gangs that roam the streets and no homeless hiding in the woods. You're coming to a festal gathering of the angels – a party, not the darkness and gloom and fire of Mount Sinai. You are coming to God, the judge of all who will right all wrongs and see justice done, and to Jesus and His sprinkled blood that washes away every stain of sin.

He tells his readers that faith in Christ means that right now they can have an unshakeable faith because they have a foretaste of their eventual future. He says, '**You have come!**' In other words, the unshakeable future has implications for right now. In other words you can have some of that incredible joy and security and love of that future heavenly city in community right now. It's possible to have a faith that won't be shaken by anything the world, the flesh and the devil can throw at you. And the writer pleads with his readers: *25 See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject Him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time His voice shook the earth, but now He has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken--that is, things that have been made--in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.*

On a Sunday morning last September, hundreds of Christians gathered for worship at Pastor Joel Billy's church. The pastor walked down the platform steps, laid his hands on the children's heads, and delivered a harrowing message. "It is the plan of Boko Haram to come and drive us from our homes and from our churches," he remembers telling the little ones. "If they do come here, never deny Jesus. If they kill your parents, never deny Jesus. If they take you away to the Sambisa Forest, never deny Jesus Christ." Boko Haram did come that morning and over forty of the congregation were shot and killed because they would not deny Christ.

How do we get this kind of faith? The writer tells us that we have come to God the judge of all who is even now shaking things. The shaking is His judgement. God shakes things up to see if there is anything solid, anything eternal, anything lasting there. He shakes up everything to see what cannot be shaken. The presence of God exposes our sin, exposes our flaws, exposes everything that is not eternal, everything that will not last. Isaiah knew it. 'I am ruined' he said. Job knew it. 'I repent in dust and ashes', he said. In other words, 'I am shaken to the core, I am shattered, I am undone.' And we know we cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. We know that we will be shattered by the shaking. So how can we stand? The only way we can stand the shaking is to stand in the One who has been shaken for us. You see the writer says that we have come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. And it was Jesus who bore the ultimate shaking of the judge.

Matthew tells us when Jesus was on the cross that, *'...from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying..."My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"...And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.'* You see what happened? Jesus got the shaking that we all deserve. The Judge of all the earth judged Him so that we won't be judged. And what came out of that shaking on the third day is Someone we can put our trust in to keep us from be shaken. God will shake everything that can be shaken. Even now some of you are feeling the ground move beneath your feet. Put your trust this morning in the solid Rock that is Christ and receive an unshakeable faith.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Build in us an unshakeable faith – a faith that is not worried or fearful, a faith that does not hide underground till the storm is over – but a faith that endures all things, a rugged and resilient faith that perseveres and is not easily discouraged. Help us to embrace and not despise Your discipline in our lives and in place of weak hands and feeble knees give us strength and courage. Grant us grace today – grace to run this race without stumbling or falling, without taking detours or running completely off course. Impart to us the grace to trust that You are always good in all Your works and not to doubt Your love for us. May we worship You with all the white-hot fervor You deserve, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.*