

## THE PROGRAM: STRENGTH TRAINING Hebrews 12:11-13

### INTRODUCTION:

Strength training has been defined as “the discipline of exerting effort against resistance for the purpose of increasing muscle mass, power and endurance.” I know this to be true. I know because I’ve read about it.

But, by definition, strength training is difficult. There is resistance. The resistance may be the pull of gravity on the barbell, it may be the tension of the bands on the elliptical machine, it may be the drag of inertia when you are walking or running or biking but there is always resistance.

The resistance is what makes strength training difficult and the resistance is what makes strength training effective. In a zero-gravity environment, where there is no resistance, muscles weaken and atrophy. It is the discipline of exerting effort against resistance that strengthens us.

What is true physically is also true spiritually. In spiritual strength-training Satan provides the resistance, God provides the power but we must discipline ourselves to put forth the effort. Hebrews 12:11-13 speaks to this very issue. It reads:

*<sup>11</sup>No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup>Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup>“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

From this text, I want to make a few observations about the discipline of spiritual strength training.

### I. THE DISCIPLINE OF STRENGTH TRAINING IS PRESCRIBED

One of the things I notice in this passage is that the author of the letter to the Hebrews has said that those to whom the letter was written have feeble arms and weak knees. They are not being told to discipline themselves to prevent feeble arms and weak knees. They already have feeble arms and weak knees. They are already frail. They are already spindly. They are already puny. Their condition is already unhealthy and unacceptable. They need the discipline of strength training to correct their condition so their arms and knees will become stronger.

What do you suppose the author meant by “feeble arms” and “weak knees”? The text does not specify but I think it gives some clues. Earlier in this same chapter, in verse 4, the author wrote about resisting sin. It seems to me that there are two aspects of resisting sin. One way that we resist sin is to not commit it. We resist sin when we refuse to buckle to

temptation and stand strong in the face of sin's allure. I wonder if that is the reason for the reference to strengthening weak knees...so we will stand up to the tempter and not collapse before him.

Legs are so we can stand. Arms are so we can work. Strengthened arms may very well refer to training ourselves to do battle against Satan. It is not enough for us to stand up to the Devil and resist temptation, we must also work to defend our brothers and sisters and defeat the evil one. To defend others and to defeat the enemy, we need to strengthen our arms.

After knee surgery, patients are typically given exercises to perform that are designed to strengthen their knees. One of those exercises involves bending the knee to restore range-of-motion and then straightening it to restore strength. I think there may be a parallel here. When we bend our knees in prayer, we are engaged in strengthening exercises.

- Prayer strengthens us because through prayer we seek God's will and we commit ourselves to obey it.
- Prayer strengthens us because it is a way for us to acknowledge our limitations and invoke God's intervention.
- Prayer strengthens us because it renews and reinforces our relationship with the God who loves us and gave His son as a sacrifice to redeem us.

How shall we strengthen our weak knees? Bend them in prayer.

How shall we strengthen our feeble arms? Use them.

- Use them to lift a brother or sister who has fallen from the faith because that will strengthen you in your faith.
- Use them to lift your hands in praise because that will strengthen you in your adoration of the LORD.
- Use them to lift up Christ so others can see him and come to know him. Jesus said, "*If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me.*" Use your arms to lift up the Christ because, in so doing, you will be strengthened and so will those who see Jesus because of you.

Among the group of Hebrew Christians to whom this letter was originally written, there were some whose arms had become feeble and whose knees had become weak. The challenge was to rise out of lethargy and inactivity and exercise those limbs so they will get stronger.

## II. THE DISCIPLINE OF STRENGTH TRAINING IS PAINFUL

These verses are brutally honest, aren't they? They address the fact that some of the early Christians had already grown spiritually weak. And this text acknowledges that the discipline of strength training is painful. Verse 11 begins, "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.*" No kidding! That was my experience when my Dad used to discipline me. Like all the

rest of you, I got that old business about how “this is going to hurt me more than it is you.” I like what Mark Lowry has said, “Then why don’t you spare us both a lot of pain and just let it slide?” I like that but I never would have said it. There’s not much reason to make a man mad right before he’s going to give you a whipping!

Not only is discipline painful when it comes in the form of punishment, discipline is painful when it comes in the form of strengthening exercises. At least that has always been my experience. My muscles ache, my lungs burn, I get sharp pains in my side and my heart races. Then I have to go through it all again and put on my other sneaker!

But any athlete knows that you have to work through the pain. If a person only does what is easy, comfortable and effortless, he will never become fitter, he will never get stronger, he will never be in shape.

The discipline of strength training is arduous and it can be painful. But the old adage, “No Pain: No Gain” is true. An attitude of indifference will not make a man strong. A pattern of laziness will not make a woman fit.

As in the physical realm, so in the area of spiritual discipline, we get stronger when we resist temptation even when it would be easier to yield.

- If telling a lie might get you out of trouble but you tell the truth anyway, that strengthens you.
- If you hold your tongue when you feel like spouting off to someone, that strengthens you.
- If you refuse to pass along gossip, that strengthens you.
- When you serve in ways to which you are unaccustomed and stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone, that strengthens you.
- When you give more than you know you can afford and you trust God to sustain you, that strengthens you.

The spiritual discipline of strength training can be uncomfortable and even painful but without it, we cannot become stronger.

### **III. THE DISCIPLINE OF STRENGTH TRAINING IS PRODUCTIVE**

The language of this text also leads me to conclude that the discipline of developing spiritual strength is productive. *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

Here in the Midwest, we understand the idea of the harvest. Farmers have to be disciplined in the spring if they want a harvest in the fall. I know of no one who has expressed this better than Del Tarr, a veteran missionary who served in West Africa. Del Tarr writes:

*I was always perplexed by Psalm 126 until I went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna more than four thousand miles wide just under the Sahara Desert. In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four-month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds of the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets inside your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. The year's food, of course, must all be grown in those four months. People grow sorghum or milo in small fields.*

*October and November...these are beautiful months. The granaries are full -- the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday's Cream of Wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, drop it into a bit of sauce and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep.*

*December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day. By February, the evening meal diminishes. The meal shrinks even more during March and children succumb to sickness. You don't stay well on half a meal a day. April is the month that haunts my memory. In it you hear the babies crying in the twilight. Most of the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel.*

*Then, inevitably, it happens. A six-or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. "Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" he shouts. "Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks." "Yes, we have!" the boy insists. "Out in the hut where we keep the goats -- there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall -- I reached up and put my hand down in there -- Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!"*

*The father stands motionless. "Son, we can't do that," he softly explains. "That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it." The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest.*

*The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing it hurts so much that he cries. But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, "Brother and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to sow in tears." And I want to ask you: How much would it cost you to sow in tears? I don't mean just giving God something from your abundance, but finding a way to say, "I believe in the harvest, and therefore I will give what makes no sense. The world would call me unreasonable to do this -- but I must sow regardless, in order that I may someday celebrate with songs of joy."*

Hebrews 12:11 reads, *"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."* The discipline of spiritual strength training is prescribed, it is painful but it will be productive come harvest time – so keep on keeping on.

#### **IV. THE DISCIPLINE OF STRENGTH TRAINING IS PROTECTIVE**

*<sup>11</sup> No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup> "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

Did you notice the preventive and protective element in the discipline of strength training? We are to strengthen our spiritual arms and legs so we can make level paths for our feet "so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed." The words for "feeble arms" and "weak knees" that are used here both come from the same root that means paralyzed. We know a bit about paralysis in our house. And we know how important it is that weak limbs be protected.

I mentioned last Sunday that I had to take Sandy to the Emergency Room the previous week. The x-rays did not reveal any broken bones but the pain and swelling indicated a severely sprained ankle. Sandy has been on pain medicine ever since. And we've gone back to using a brace to immobilize and protect her ankle. And she has spent a lot of time in her wheelchair to rest her ankle. It is possible that she could have kept walking on her injured leg but we were afraid that would do her more harm. We do not want her further disabled; we want her healed.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews uses that precise imagery to reinforce the plea for exercising the discipline of spiritual strength training. If we do not become strong in the Lord, we will be disabled by the enemy of our souls. While spiritual strength training is arduous and requires

sacrifice, the cost is nothing compared with the price of being unprepared to engage the enemy.

The first recipients of this letter were already spiritually feeble, weakened and disabled. God's will for them and for us is to become strong enough to put our path in order and facilitate our journey from here to eternity. When we are strengthened spiritually, we can remove the stumbling blocks and fill in the pitfalls. We can straighten the bends and eliminate the detours. We can remove the hazards so we can arrive safely home with The Father.

**CONCLUSION:**

Jack La Lanne, who became America's fitness conscience starting in the 1950s, will turn 96, on September 26<sup>th</sup>...and he is still working out daily.

La Lanne was inspired to adopt a healthy lifestyle at the age of 15. The young La Lanne attended a lecture by a nutritionist who said exercise and proper foods were the keys to a healthy life. La Lanne says he stopped eating sugar, became a vegetarian and joined the local YMCA. He says he hasn't had a sugary dessert — or missed a daily workout — since 1930. 1930! That's 80 years without a sugary dessert. That's 80 years without missing a daily workout even once. That is over 29,000 consecutive days of vigorous physical exercise!

And that, my friends, is an illustration of discipline. Now if Jack La Lanne can be that disciplined so he can be physically fit, can you not be disciplined so you can be spiritually fit? If La Lanne lives to be 110, his body will one day die and he will become a lean corpse. But your soul? It will live on for eternity if you exercise the discipline of spiritual strength training to revitalize yourself for His service. Will you commit to that discipline today? Then come as we sing.

**INVITATION:**       #552 – *"I Am Thine, O Lord"*