

You Can't Take Up Your Cross Without Hell Week

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

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You've probably seen the recent headlines, identifying dozens of parents who paid millions of dollars to "fast-track" their kids into Ivy-league schools. Many of them paid big bucks to buy athletic scholarships for their kids who had no real physical talent. It's the height of helicopter parenting to pad the way for their fragile children. Sadly, the end product of such behavior is often unproductive children, and most-likely jail time for the parents.

Consider, in contrast, the practices of our military branches. They not only begin their programs with the challenges of Boot Camp, but they then offer extended training into their own special forces groups such as the Green Berets, the Rangers, or the SEALs. And to pass into each of these elite service groups, you have to advance through an event known as, Hell Week.

Hell Week! The term itself carries a fearful and intimidating association; a horrific time of testing and endurance. In a military setting, the experience of Hell Week often is the epitome of all that the recruit will eventually face in the reality of war (sometimes even mimicking the real wartime experiences of such battles as Normandy, etc). In Navy Seal training, Hell Week falls in the fourth week and runs solid from Sunday (at an unknown time) until the end of Friday.

During this time the trainees get a total of 4 hours sleep and face constant training evolutions (with the exception of 4 meal breaks per day). The largest number of trainees drops out during Hell Week (80%). This extreme training is critical, though. Navy SEALs (and other Special Forces soldiers) sent on hazardous missions must be able to operate efficiently, oblivious to sub-zero temperatures and their own physical comfort. After all, their lives, as well as the lives of others, may depend on it.

Indeed, this situation is designed and applied for one reason; to determine whether the applicant or recruit has the determination and stamina to make it through what is most certainly going to be similar or worse conditions. Obviously, if a military recruit can't cut boot camp, or the brutal experiences of Hell Week, what is the likelihood that they will survive during the realities of war?

In very real terms, that is exactly what happened to Jesus on that first Palm Sunday almost 2000 years ago. You see, Jesus wasn't going through a sequence of haphazard individual circumstances and events. Jesus' ministry was not a series of surprises, in the way we experience life. In fact, sometime before Palm Sunday, we're told that Jesus "set his face towards Jerusalem," because He knew what was coming.

Matt 16:21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be

raised up on the third day. (see also Mark 8:31-9:1; Luke 9:22-27)

Matt 20:17 As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve {disciples} aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, 18 "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, 19 and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify {Him,} and on the third day He will be raised up." (also Mark 10:33-34; Luke 18:31-33)

I'm told that for a Special Forces trainee, the worst thing they can do is think about what is still ahead of you during *Hell Week*. In fact, the rate of failure for that person is almost 100%. A trainee just can't allow the fear of what is, or what might come at you to distract or deter them. But yet, this is exactly what Jesus did. Even before His incarnation, Jesus knew what lay before Him. And though he experienced this world in the same way we do, with all of its trials and pleasures, He still maintained the divine knowledge of what end awaited Him.

To Jesus, Genesis 3 and Matthew 20 were only a heartbeat away. Jesus was there when the Father told Satan, "He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." In that moment, Jesus knew that Hell Week was an established fact in His future, the same way a military recruit knows that Hell Week is a certainty the moment he signs up for the service. It's not a maybe, or a negotiable option; the reality of Hell Week is only a matter of time. Jesus both knew it, and accepted it.

The Crucible is a test every recruit must go through to become a Marine. When one of our former members from Minnesota, Coty, was going through the challenge of Marine Corp training, his focus wasn't on the Crucible, it was completing it. I remember him telling me about the difficulties of boot camp (and God's faithfulness through it), and the uncertainty of what the Crucible would hold for him. But his focus was primarily on its completion, not on the ordeal itself.

In the same way, our Lord Jesus looked past the horror of His personal Crucible and focused instead on the blessings that lay on the other side. And you see this not only in the passages I've referenced, but also in these familiar verses from Hebrews 12:

Heb 12:2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

It's interesting that though Jesus never underestimates the horror of His mission, it is never the focus of His attention. He is 100% alert to the culmination of His mission; the reclamation of a fallen world, and the restoration of a broken relationship. Even the loud praises and overt worship of the masses couldn't distract Jesus. None of it went to His head, as it often does with us.

Matthew 21:1-9 When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, Gentle, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” 6 The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7 and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. 8 Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9 The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!”

Indeed, by the time Palm Sunday arrives, Jesus is absolutely focused on what must be done. He isn't distracted by the spectacle of cheering fans, nor the condemnation of the religious elite. As we continue to read, He isn't put off by those who come to Him for healing, forgiveness, or support. He remains attentive and available.

To Jesus, all the components that he encountered in Jerusalem that week, were part of His Hell Week experience. The hollow ring of people's praise, the condemnation of those holding spiritual power, the fearful hearts of His disciples, the antagonism and condescension of the Roman authorities; all of it was part of Jesus' Hell Week. Jesus finds the temple filled with corruption, compromise, and conspiracy; so He cleanses it, restoring its purpose of worship. Another part of Hell Week. Jesus is surrounded by the needs of those who are blind and lame, and He heals them. Part of Hell Week still. (All this and much more on just the first day of Jesus' Crucible) And the week continues, with each day building to the horrific crescendo of Good Friday.

But to Jesus, it was all worth it. The commitment He made in Genesis 3, the plan that had been introduced and restated repeatedly through both priest and prophet alike, had to be fulfilled. The restoration of a fallen world, of billions of broken souls, had to be completed. For there could be no Easter, no resurrection, no victory, without Hell Week.

It is as we consider Jesus' personal Hell Week, and His victory over all its components, that we can gain both salvation, and personal encouragement as we press forward in our own walk with Christ.

Heb 12:3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.