

BELPRES  CHURCH

**Sermon Title: Soar, Run, Walk**

Pastor Scott Dudley

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**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:27-31

27 Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the LORD;

my cause is disregarded by my God”?

28 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,

and his understanding no one can fathom.

29 He gives strength to the weary

and increases the power of the weak.

30 Even youths grow tired and weary,

and young men stumble and fall;

31 but those who hope in the LORD

will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,

they will walk and not be faint.

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## Transcript:

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Well, thank you, choir. That was beautiful, and want to welcome all of you here. It's great to have you joining us for worship. Merry Christmas, a couple of days early. Thank you for joining us.

We are going to finish up our sermon series on Isaiah 40, and I will be reading toward the end of the passage, starting with verse 27. "Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God'? Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint."

Holy Spirit, as we look at these verses, ask that You would help us to understand them, apply them, and live out their truth. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, last week, my wife and I got a Christmas card with a cat on the front of it that said, "Meowy Christmas." I know, right?

Inside, there's a button, and if you press the button, it plays a song of cats meowing to the tune of carol of the bells, so (singing). In other words, my idea of hell. The people who gave it to us gave it as a joke. It is kind of funny, when my wife pressed that button and it got stuck, and it just kept meowing on and on and on. It would not stop.

I finally had to put it under the couch in another room, and it just, it basically went all night, (singing). It's like maddening, right? That thing had stamina. It could persevere. It could just keep going, which is what is one of the topics, is kind of one of the themes of the verses that I just read out of Isaiah 40, perseverance, only in a good way, not in a cat way.

Where do you need to persevere at something? Where do you need the strength to keep going with something? Maybe school is stressing you out, or maybe between parenting and homeschooling, you're just like worn out. Maybe it's a career, or a health, or a financial problem that you just need to persevere through. Certainly, this year has required perseverance with the pandemic and everything else that's going on.

It's required a lot of perseverance, and it's not just bad things, sometimes good things require perseverance. I remember when I was working on my PhD, the way I described it, it was like moving a mountain with a teaspoon. It just took forever. Worthwhile goal, but it required perseverance. Academic goals, athletic goals require perseverance.

Life requires perseverance, and it's similar in today's text, where the prophet Isaiah is addressing the people of Israel, who've been conquered and taken into exile in Babylon for 70 years, and the text starts out, "Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God'?" You ever feel that way? God, don't You see, we are here in exile. "Why aren't You helping us, God?"

"My way is hidden from You. You don't understand what I'm going through. How long do I have to wait until You do something about this, because frankly, this feels a little bit like waiting for a friend to show up, and they're late, and they text you and say, 'We're on our way,' which means they're still at home. How long, O Lord, until You show up?" Isaiah responds by saying, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" and this is the second time he's used that phrase in just a few verses.

He used it earlier in verse 21, and now, he uses that phrase here again in verse 28. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth." By using that phrase, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" twice in just a few verses, what Isaiah is trying to, pointing out is what the Israelites have already heard and already known to be true about God.

That is Isaiah doesn't give them a new revelation, he doesn't say anything to them that they haven't heard before. He points out what they have already known and already heard to be true about God, because most of the time, faith and hope are strengthened so that we can persevere, not by hearing something different, but simply by being reminded of what we already know to be true about God, because sometimes our circumstances can kind of obscure who God really is. Last week, I did the Hand Motions for the Children's Worship time, which I think we're repeating again today. Well, last Sunday afternoon, we did the drive-through, and just as an aside, we're doing another drive-through this afternoon, so if you didn't come last week, please come this week. We'll be handing out gift bags in a very safe kind of a way that's going to have some stuff in it that will help make participating in the online Christmas Eve services more meaningful.

If you could come by, we'll give you those bags, and I do hope that you join us online for Christmas Eve. The team here, they've just ... I can't say enough good things about the team here. They've done an incredible job figuring out how to make those online services meaningful and engaging, so join us online Thursday, 3:00, 7:00, 9:00, and 11:00. All the services are identical, and you're going to want to watch from the very beginning, trust me.

Last Sunday, I did the Hand Motions for the Children's Worship. That afternoon, these folks were kind of coming through the drive-through to pick up their gift bags. Several kids looked at me and they said, "Mom, that's the man from the Children's Worship." Okay, forget that whole senior pastor thing that I do, that preaching thing that I do, right? I am now forever Hand Motion guy.

That's my new identity. It's awesome. I love it. I'm going to quit my day job. I'm just going to do that full-time. My leading Hand Motions, for some people, kind of obscured the rest of my role here.

Sometimes our circumstances obscure who God really is, so Isaiah reminds the Israelites the truth they already know about God, so that they can persevere, because here's the thing, when we can't see God because of our circumstances, the way to persevere is to believe in the dark, which you have learned to be true in the light. Don't listen to the lies of the devil. God doesn't care. God's not going to help. Don't listen to those.

Believe in the dark what you have learned to be true in the light, and when you do that, your strength will be renewed. Isaiah tells the Israelites, he wants them to remember five particular characteristics about God, five specific things that can renew our strength to help us persevere. The first is this, Jesus is power made personal. Right before the verses I read today, Isaiah says, "God brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name, because of His great power and mighty strength," that is God is powerful enough to make the stars and personal enough to know each one by name, and that is a winning combination, because power by itself, that's great. Personal by itself, that's great, but power made personal is life-changing.

He is not the deistic God up there somewhere remote, doesn't care about us, not paying attention. He is all powerful, but He knows you by name, which is what we celebrate at Christmas, that the God, the Creator of the universe became a baby, came to us in the person of Jesus so we could see what He was

like in person. If we invite Jesus into our lives, He is with us, He guides us, He leads us, so whether you feel it right now or not, believe in the dark, which you have learned to be true in the light about God, because when we know His power made personal for us, it gives us hope, and hope gives us strength to keep going because we know that it's not, well, hopeless, so we can keep going, keep persevering. Second characteristic about Jesus is endless resource. The text says, "Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall," and in the original Hebrew, the word there for young men means the elite, like the cream of the crop, the Olympic team.

Even they get weary and tired. All of us at one point reach our limits, so if you feel exhausted or worn out, don't think there's something wrong with you, right? We all have our limits, especially this year has been exhausting. Everyone at some point reaches their limit, except God. The text says, "God will not grow tired or weary."

The God who comes to us in Jesus never runs out of resources. He's never out of options. There's never a time when He says, "Well, now what are we going to do? This one's got me stumped." Never.

He's always got something He can do. Third characteristic to remember, Jesus plays the long game. The text says, "The Lord is the everlasting God," which means He works on an eternal calendar, which means His timing is not always our timing. That means that we don't know how God is going to use whatever it is we're going through in any particular moment, how He is going to use that in our life, not just tomorrow, but 10 years from now, because He's playing the long game. Sometimes we go through something that we don't understand and we don't know why we had to go through it until years later.

Sometimes God has a blessing that He wants to give to us, but He doesn't give it to us yet because we're not ready for it and we just mess it up, or if it came too easily, we wouldn't be grateful for it. I've shared with you before that I spent most of my 20's and early 30's trying to figure out what my career was going to be, so first, I decided to be a professor, so I got a master's degree in English literature, and then I changed my mind and decided, "No, I want to be a pastor," so I went to seminary only to change my mind again and get a PhD in literature so that I could be a professor. Along the way through all of that, I ended up going through a very painful divorce, and there were so many moments of frustration and confusion. Certainly the divorce was very painful, but after I'd finished seminary, I'd done all the requirements I needed to in order to be certified to become a pastor, except for a few things. There's like an essay I had to write and forms I had to fill out, something like that, but I was so sure I didn't want to be a pastor that I just didn't do it, and I went to Stanford and started working on my PhD in literature instead.

Well, eventually, the committee that oversees people, preparing for ministry, sent me a letter and they said, "We haven't heard from you in a long time. What are your plans?," so I met with these two retired women who were on that committee. I told them my story, and I said, "So take my name off whatever list you've got it on. I'm never going to be a pastor. Just forget about it."

They said, "Well, you're almost done. I mean, you just got these few things you got to do. Why don't you just finish, because you never know? God may want to use it someday." I said, "No."

I remember, I'm like, "No, no, no, that I'm never going to be a pastor. No, no, no," and then one of them grabbed my hand and said, "Oh, sweetie." She called me sweetie, and she said, "You're almost done. You're on the five-yard line, and it's first and goal. You really want to kick a field goal?"

Oh, football. I never thought of it that way before, so I finished the process, which eight years later, eight years later came in pretty handy when I actually decided I was going to be a pastor after all. It was a long time frame, but God used every single part. He wasted nothing. I draw on the lessons I learned from my divorce constantly, in counseling and preaching, and I learned so much from the people I met when I was working on my PhD, like my wife, who I met at Stanford.

I'm convinced the only reason I got into Stanford was so I could meet my wife and because there was only one man in the country who could talk me into going into ministry, and he happened to be a church in the Bay area, and I needed to meet him. When we know, when we remember Jesus is playing the long game, it helps us persevere because we know He wastes nothing, and knowing Jesus is using every minute, everything we go through, He is using every single part of it for the future He has prepared for us, that gives us hope. It gives us power to keep going. Power made personal, endless resource, plays the long game, fourth, Jesus is beyond our comprehension, and that's good news. The text says His understanding no one can fathom.

That means His brain is bigger than ours, so we don't always understand what He's doing, and here's why that's good news. Just because your brain can't figure out how God can use whatever it is you're going through for good doesn't mean that God can't figure it out for good, because His ways are bigger than our ways. That means there's more hope than we think there is because He's not limited to what we can understand. If you want the peace that passes understanding, as the Bible talks about, you need to give up your insistence on always understanding, the way that God's going to work. Power made personal, endless resource, plays the long game, beyond our comprehension, and then finally Jesus is for you.

The text says He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. What that means is when the pandemic is getting to us, when parenting seems impossible, when school isn't going the way we'd hope, when our social life isn't what we want it to be, when we are carrying a heavy burden of bad news, or grief, or loss, or pain, or when we are striving for some good and worthwhile goal but we haven't gotten there yet, Jesus doesn't look at us and say, "Oh, that's too bad. Sucks to be you." No, no, no. See, all five of these characteristics about the God who comes to us in Jesus are for you.

They're not just abstract, theological concepts, they are for you. He is power made personal for you, endless resource for you, playing the long game for you, beyond your comprehension for you, gives strength for you. Jesus is for you. If you don't know Him, and if you want to know more about what it means to follow Jesus, you can just click the button in the chat. There are people who are waiting, wanting to talk with you about that, because when we focus on Jesus, not the problem, we renew our strength and we can persevere.

Every day, I work out on my elliptical machine for about 35 minutes, and while I'm running on it, I read because I found that if I don't read, all I'm thinking about is how out of breath I am, and, "How long is it going to take? Am I almost done, and oh, rats, it's only been three minutes and it feels like it's been five hours." Time just drags, but if I read, it goes much faster because I'm focused on something other than how tired I am, how out of breath I am, something other than the pain. In life, if we focus on the problem, we start to get out of breath, we start to get tired, we start to lose steam, but if we focus on Jesus, we are renewed and can persevere, which is how this chapter ends. This is one of the most eloquent chapters in the whole Bible, and it ends with this beautiful poetry, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength."

"They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint." Other translations will say, "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength," and to wait on the Lord is not just marking time, right? It's not like sitting in a waiting room in a doctor's office, waiting for the doctor to see you. Waiting is active. Waiting on the Lord is active, not passive, and you can see that in the original Hebrew.

In the original Hebrew, the word there for hope in, or wait for, or trust in, that word that's used there can also mean rope or a braid. The way a braid or a rope works is its multiple strands interwoven with each other, so the text is saying literally those who braid their life in Christ, those who interweave their life with Jesus will renew their strength, and that means to interweave my goals, my financial decisions, my sex life, my relationship life, how I treat my fellow students, how I treat my fellow co-workers, interweave all

of that with Jesus, not just an hour on Sunday, but every hour, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. If you think of that image of a braid, braided hair, it can't be blown around in the wind, and a life that is interwoven with Jesus, braided in Christ can't be blown around by the winds of circumstance because it's wrapped up, tied up, tangled up with Him, and we intertwine our lives with Jesus through worship, and prayer, and scripture, and community, and serving, and giving. When I do that, I exchange my all-too exhaustible strength for Jesus' endless resource, so practically speaking, application. Two application points for this week.

The first is practice, because it takes practice, practice trusting Jesus. The way to do that is when we're worrying, is to stop and say to Jesus when we're in the middle of worrying, it helps to just say it out loud, "Jesus, I accept that Your brain is bigger than mine, so Your way, not my way, Your timing, not my timing. I trust You." As I said last week, worrying is a way of denying the Lordship of Jesus in your life, because worry at its core is saying, "You know what? If I were ruling the universe, I could do it a whole lot better than this Jesus guy." There's a story about the reformer Martin Luther, and he was friends with another reformer named Philip Melancthon, who was a huge warrior, and so at one point, Luther said to him, "Let Philip cease to rule the world," so to practice trusting Jesus means let [Dudley 00:17:55] cease to rule the world, or at least try to, and just over and over remind myself, "Jesus, You're bigger than me."

"I give this to You." I have to do that almost every day. Second application point is to expect, to wait expectantly, because if everything in this chapter is true about Jesus and it is, it means that we are not coming to Jesus as Lord if we come with tiny, little expectations, because He can do so much more. Dr. Tony Evans says, "A low view of God in a crisis means the crisis owns and controls you. A high view of God in a crisis means the crisis no longer has the last word," because we understand who God is and what He can do.

Wait expectantly. As the old hymn says, "Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with you bring. For His grace and power such, none can never ask too much," and when your worry is humbled through practicing trusting Jesus, and when your vision has been kindled by expecting that God is big, your heart will be liberated, and you will have strength to keep running the race, which is how this chapter ends. People who interweave their lives with Jesus will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary.

They will walk and will not faint. Notice anything odd about that progression, namely that it's not a progression, it's a regression? It goes from the greater to the lesser, right? Doesn't it seem like it should be other way around? It doesn't seem like it should be soar, run, walk, right?

Doesn't it seem like it should be the other way around, walking is good, running is better, best of all is to soar? The point is actually so much of life we have to walk through. Yes, there are times when God swoops down like an eagle and picks you up and helps you soar, and does the big miracle. Then, there are other times in life, not necessarily a miracle, but you're running and things are going well, and you're progressing, and then things are happening, but then there are those times when the point is to walk. You just have to walk. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

It may take years, and you can't run through it, and you shouldn't run through it because it'll just exhaust you if you run through it. You have to walk through it, but along the way, Jesus gives us what we need to keep going, that word of encouragement from a friend, that sermon that feels like it was written just for you, that memory that He calls to mind, those times in prayer when you feel His presence. Last week, I told you a story about a family that lost their six-year old boy to cancer, but in the middle of that, God became more real to them than He'd ever been before. They experienced Him at a deeper level than ever before. They had His courage, they had His hope, they had even His joy, and they could use that word.

Out of that, the mom, Jesus led the mom to have a whole new career where she's now helping under-resourced kids. That is not the kind of thing you soar through. That's the kind of thing you have to walk through, hour by hour, day by day, and that's what they're doing. They're walking, and they're walking, and they're walking, and they're discovering that Jesus is right there with him. Emmanuel, God with us.

There's a pastor named Banning Liebscher, which is just like the coolest name ever. Like if you've got that name, you're going to be a great pastor. You're going to be great at anything with that name. Well, he tells a story about his son who was in second grade when they moved to a different city, and so the son had to go to a different school, second-grader, but he couldn't connect with the kids at the new school and he was struggling socially. He was struggling academically.

They talked with the teachers about it, but it didn't really help, and it just kept going on and on and on, so finally, they started to think about, "Well, maybe we need to put him in a different school," but they weren't sure. They'd been praying about it. They were worried about it because this is their son's education, this is his future, so finally, the dad said to his second-grade son, "Let's pray about this together," and that's what they did. This time, they prayed for a really long time and thanked God for the good things that He had given them, and they left space for God to speak and those thoughts that maybe weren't their own thoughts. When they were done, the son said to his dad, he said, "Dad, when we were praying, I got this picture of Jesus with a backpack on, and He was going to school with me, and He said that I'm going to make friends eventually."

"It may take a while, but I'm going to make some friends, so dad, maybe I should stay in this school. Maybe we shouldn't switch schools. Maybe I should stay in this school, only I should take Jesus to school with me every day," so that's what they did. Some days at school, he soared, and other days, he could run, and some days, it's all he could do is just to walk through the day, but Jesus is with him. It took most of the year, but eventually, he began to adjust to the new school.

Meanwhile, the parents learn maybe not to helicopter so much, and then maybe their highest goal for their kids shouldn't be protecting them from discomfort and pain, but helping them grow through pain because that's a life skill that we all need, and an ordinary problem at school became an extraordinary moment where they all experienced Jesus. They didn't learn anything new that they didn't already know, they experienced what they already knew to be true about Jesus. His power made personal for them, His inexhaustible resources, and they didn't always understand what He was doing and it was taking longer than they had hoped, but they discovered that the God who comes to us at Christmas in Jesus was with them, and for them, Emmanuel, God with us. Now, you may say, "Well, that's not a very big miracle, right? I mean, didn't the second-grader start a nonprofit or convert everyone in his school?"

"That's kind of an ordinary thing. That's not a good sermon story, Scott. That's kind of ordinary." Yep, it is. Most of life is ordinary, and sometimes God does do the big miracle.

Last week, I told you about an Iraqi man in prison on political charges, and Jesus showed up in his dream and said, "You're going to be miraculously released in three days." That happened. He fled. He became a Christian. He went to Greece.

Now, he's in a refugee camp, helping other refugees know the power and the strength and the hope they have in Jesus. That's a soaring story, but the thing about life is it's just so daily. It's like you have to live it just like one day at a time, and so maybe the real soaring is when we learn how to walk, day by day and take Jesus with us wherever we go to school, or to work, in our relationships, our finances, just like the second-grader went to school with Jesus every day of his life. Where do you need to keep persevering? Remind yourself what is true about God and be renewed by His promises.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord your God is the everlasting God, and He does not grow tired and weary, and they who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary.

They will walk and they will not faint because He gives strength to His people and power to His saints, and Jesus, You're the only one who can do it, and so we give our lives to You, those places, whether it's a good, worthwhile goal or a difficult thing we carry, we give it to You, Jesus, and we wait on You. You alone can give us the strength we need to keep walking. Do that, and we will point to You as the author and finisher of our faith. In Your name, Jesus. Amen.

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