

Make Every Effort

† the agony of defeat (vv.18-21)

† the thrill of victory (vv.22-24)

In the Name of Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, dear family of God:

“The thrill of victory...the agony of defeat” – remember ABC’s Wide World of Sports? Who can forget the video of the ski jumper tumbling over the edge? Vinko Bogataj, a Yugoslav athlete, went back home after surviving his fall and became a landscaper. At the 20th anniversary of ABC’s Wide World of Sports, 1981, Bogataj received the loudest ovation, pictures and autographs from famous American athletes. He became the symbol for athletes who survive **the agony of defeat** even if they never reach **the thrill of victory**. That day Bogataj wanted to try again, but was denied by medical authorities.

In the quest for heaven, defeat is not an option. There are no second chances. In today’s Gospel Jesus describes how the door will be shut. Even those who knew Him socially and heard His teaching will not get in if they are caught unawares as *evildoers* to God. **“Make every effort”** (Luke 13:24 NIV84) – the Greek original (ἀγωνίζεσθε) sounds like our English “agonize,” and the same word Paul uses to describe competing in the Olympics. (1 Corinthians 9:25) Eternal consequences demand our very best.

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In the paragraph before our text the holy writer urges Jewish Christians: **“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”** (12:14f NIV84) A different Greek word is behind **“make every effort”** here. The word (διώκετε) is sometimes translated “persecute.” “Pursue” peace with others. Without holiness no one can see God. Like weeds in the pavement bitter roots can grow up. Pull them while they’re small. Don’t suffer **the agony of defeat**.

This week I wondered why the Lord wanted me to preach on this text. Wednesday I found out. After several weeks of prayer and preparation the Lord provided the time, the energy and good weather to make follow-up calls on our VBS Canvass. Recall two Saturdays back in June, twenty callers went door to door, some both weekends, to invite neighbors to VBS, give a brochure with our 24/7 New Life link, and ask for prayer requests. The contrast of what I found was as stark as the two mountains in this text.

The first mountain was Sinai where **the agony of defeat** is terrifying. Why did God see fit to come down on that mountain in fire, darkness, gloom and storm? There was a deafening **“trumpet blast”** and words so frightening that the Israelites begged Moses not to let them be hit with that again. **“The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’”** God said they were right; Moses should speak to Him for the Israelites. They had to put a fence around Mount Sinai so that no one, not even animals, could touch that holy mountain and have to die by stoning.

Many of our neighbors take God’s Law very seriously. They feel guilty when they’re gone too long from church and frustrated when some churches make it difficult for them to come back. You can see the gratitude in their eyes for our first callers and the follow-up that comes to invite them again. Some have even been baptized with God’s Name on them. His loving choice keeps calling them back from **the agony of defeat**. That holy mountain all ablaze with God’s glory pictures the impossibility of climbing up to heaven on our own. Even the Israelites could not keep the Ten Commandments for the forty days Moses was up there getting the tablets of stone. Death and destruction came to those who refused to repent. God’s glory is beyond our reach, but there’s only death without it.

After mostly positive reception, a grandma shared that her daughter would be very cold when she came home. When the young woman came back, I told her I'd love to hear her story sometime. She shared that a friend in high school angered her by saying she was going to hell for not believing in God. Then she adamantly explained how she found her own peace without God. I tried to share the Good News with her, but it just made her angry. "I have no sins," she insisted. No peace in her eyes, bitterness in her voice about a terrible parent who would make his son die for others. "But Jesus volunteered," I said. That too was "despicable." She wouldn't listen to anything I hoped to share. No other choice – I looked at her and said, "I love you enough to warn you." For that she told me to leave her driveway.

Sad souls cannot survive Mount Sinai. Their refusal to listen can only end in **the agony of defeat** because the Son of God says, "**Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.**" (Mark 16:16) What will happen if the Lord kindly leads her to repentance as I am praying He will? What will she do when hopefully during this time of grace she sees her sin against God? Look on that mountain how God rescued Moses and the Israelites from **the agony of defeat** to....

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The LORD God had threatened to make Moses and the Israelites go on through the desert alone. But Moses begged the Lord to go with them for the sake of His Name-reputation. Finally God explained what His Name really means: "**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.**" (Exodus 34:6f NIV84) That's what trips us up. How can God be both at the same time – the God who punishes sin and forgives sin? Aren't we still asking with Isaiah: "**Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?**" (Isaiah 33:14)

The first words of our text are so comforting. "**You have not come...**" to that terrifying mountain all ablaze in the desert. "**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly...**" To be able to see the myriads of angels, to hear their singing in **the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God** will be a sight to swell your heart and soul with joy. "**But you have come to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.**" "**Firstborn**" here is plural, not Jesus, but believers. We all have the rights of **firstborn** sons. Where did we get those? "**You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.**" Therefore we are set free from the terror of God as the righteous Judge. He literally brings us to the goal. God gives us the very holiness that He demands.

God's kindness leads us to repentance. So we **Make Every Effort** to receive what God gives as faith-born love cooperates with the Holy Spirit who called us by the Gospel. Nothing impresses the miracle of faith more than seeing stubborn unbelief in someone's eyes and realizing I'm no better. But for God's grace, there go I. God's gift of faith saves us by His grace. That's **the thrill of victory**.

Our last verse makes this crystal clear: "**You have come to Mount Zion... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**" Some are really offended by the "**sprinkled blood**" especially when you realize it was sprinkled by the priest onto the people. But like it or not, "**without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.**" (Hebrews 9:22 NIV84) Abel's blood cried out for vengeance when Cain committed the first murder. But Jesus' blood cries out for our pardon because God's **new covenant** is pure grace: "**Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.**" (10:17) Christ is coming once more to shake the heavens and the earth. "**Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."**" (12:28f) By grace alone, **the thrill of victory**. Amen.