

RUN TO JESUS A PLENTY IN 2020

John 7: 37-39, Romans 12: 1-2, II Corinthians 12: 9-10, Acts 14: 19-20, Hebrews 12: 1-2, I John 2: 1-2, John 10:1-5, 27-30, and Jude 24-25

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What are you up against today? We all have our share of struggles, but we are not alone. Think of all the people who pray at the same second to Jesus. There are more people alive today than all the people of the past who have ever died. Don't worry. We can't overload our Lord. People often use this as their excuse for not praying. They don't want to overload the Lord. You can't! We may sense that God has abandoned us, but no. Jesus longs for us to come running to Him. Instead, we hold it all in all our struggles and the results are appalling.

I read a story this week by the senior teaching pastor of Trinity Church in Lansing, Michigan, Marvin Williams. Marvin is a writer for Our Daily Bread. I read this story in David Branon's book, "Together with God," Pastor Marvin Williams told about a lady in his church browsing in her local library. Karissa was holding her four-month old daughter who was babbling happily. An older gentleman walked up and rudely said, "Quiet down your baby or I will." Karissa didn't wilt for a moment. She replied, "I am very sorry for whatever in your life has caused you to be disturbed by my happy baby, but I will not shut my baby up and I will not let you do so either." The man was shaken by her rebuke. He put his head in his hands and said, "Forgive me, I am so sorry." Then he told Karissa about his son who died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome over 50 years earlier. Oh, the pain we bear when we fail to run to Jesus. God rightly calls us all sheep, for we all fit the bill. We are just that—born-again sheep, acting like we don't have a shepherd, one to run to for help.

Some years ago, I read an article in the Denver Post about a sheep rancher named Lexy Fowler. Quoting Lexy, the Post reported, "Like many sheep ranchers in the West, Lexy Fowler tried just about everything to stop crafty coyotes from killing her sheep. She used odor sprays, electric fences, and 'scare-coyotes.' She slept with her lambs during the summer and placed battery-operated radios near them. She corralled them at night, herded them during the day. But this southern Montana rancher lost scores of lambs—fifty lambs in one year. Then Lexy Fowler discovered llamas--aggressive, funny-looking, afraid-of-nothing llamas. "Llamas don't appear to be afraid of anything," she said. "When they see something, they put their head up and walk straight toward it." That is aggressive behavior as far as a coyote is concerned, and llamas take these coyotes' opportunities away." The Bible calls all of us as sheep that go astray, like you and me, to run to our Shepherd. God wants us to resist temptation when it strikes, by turning to Jesus and running to our Shepherd. The Lord Jesus never backs down from Satan, the roaring lion.

We can stand still and try to roar at Satan. But none of us as sheep or lambs ever intimidate a lion, wolf, or coyote, so that our predator, the devil runs off scared, with his tail between his legs? Earthly sheep need llamas and shepherds. As God's sheep, we need our Shepherd, the Lamb of God, who is also the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. We need to run to Jesus a plenty in 2020. Each of us face physical storms, with lightning and thunder, and mental, emotional, and spiritual storms when the only way through our challenges is by running to Jesus. Sometimes, like David of old, we may even wonder, "Where is God?" He is there even when He seems most invisible. and when He has been silent for a long time. The enemy wants to make us afraid of Jesus, and he wants to make us afraid of those who love, guard and counsel us the most. Why? Satan knows when he is defeated by the Lord, so the father of lies wants to make us isolate ourselves from the team of God's servants that He has raised up and provided for us. This makes us easy prey for Satan.

This Sunday morning, in this first message of the year, I am calling us all to run to Jesus a plenty in 2020. If we follow the Word of God, God wants to help us overcome temptation, overcome peer pressure, and to say no to running with the worldly crowd that is clamoring for our souls. I hope today, you will learn to run to Jesus a plenty in 2020. What does it mean to run to Jesus in 2020? Let me share seven ways we must run to Jesus a-plenty in 2020, if we are to overcome his temptations, his plans and his plots to take us down individually and as a church this New Year.

WE MUST QUIT LOOKING OVER THE WALL OF OUR SHEEPFOLD AND RUN TO JESUS, THE WELL OF LIVING WATER. (I.) Jesus speaks about this in different places. In John 9: 37-39, we read, "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now this He said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive, for, as-yet, the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." Jesus in speaking of Himself, was speaking of Himself as the well of living water. Twenty-five years ago, a missionary to India, Paul Hiebert, spoke of two ways of thinking as Christians, inside a fence—he called the Bounded Set and focused on a well, the Centered Set.

Thus, Paul Hiebert spoke of an analogy of fences and wells. For instance, if you are a farmer with a 3-acre ranch, you might build a fence to keep your cattle or sheep in and other animals out. This would be a Bounded Set—a way of thinking or farming or living for Jesus. This is also a way many churches view themselves as inside a fold, or out. It's one biblical view. This view of knowing the Lord is often a way of thinking that sadly makes people secure inside the fence or fold of church membership or inside the knowledge that they've prayed to receive Christ.

Sadly, folks who look at Jesus' sheepfold this way often look at being born again or baptized, or joining a church as their spiritual security, but their focus often is looking outside the boundary of their fence or fold. Jesus even warns about the false security of the bounded set idea by declaring in Matthew 7: 21, "Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." Getting inside earthly fences, but still focused looking over the fence to the world is an unsafe place to live. Millions of believers speak of being saved, but they aren't focused on Jesus.

Now the other analogy is, if you are a rancher of thousands of acres, you might not think it wise to try to build fences around your whole property. So, you dig wells. Cattle and sheep won't often go too far away from their well, because their life literally depends on not wandering far away from their water source. This is the centered set idea, not counting on a fence for security, but running often to the well—the Lord Jesus for safety. This biblical analogy has some problems as it doesn't make it certain who is saved and who isn't. Some seekers of Jesus are not saved yet, but they are actively seeking Jesus. Yet, the believers who are really growing in Jesus are those who are focused on Jesus as their well of living water, and they are forever seeking after Jesus. Both pictures have difficulties, but I am calling us today in 2020, beloved, to forsake the idea of seeking our security in saying, "I'm saved, leave me alone. Don't tell me how to live or counsel me on how to grow in Jesus. I'm inside the fence. If I am focused on the world outside, look where I am standing; I'm inside the fold." Beloved, that type of thinking is deathly dangerous. I am calling us to learn the freedom of not relying on any earthly fence, saying, "I am resting on my Christian accomplishments." No, rest in Jesus, and run, run, run to the center of your life to Jesus, our well. Secondly,

WE MUST GIVE UP OUR BARNYARD MENTALITY, BEING SATISFIED WITH THE WORLD. (II.) Romans 12: 1,2 is so strong. "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Ronald Meredith, in his book "Hurryin' Big For Little Reasons," describes one quiet night in early spring: He wrote, "Suddenly out of the night came the sound of wild geese flying. I ran to the house and breathlessly announced the excitement I felt. What is to compare with wild geese flying across the moon? It might have ended there, except for the sight of our tame mallards on the pond. They heard the wild call they had once known. The honking out of the night sent little arrows of prompting deep into their wild yesterdays. Their wings fluttered a feeble response. The urge to fly—to take their place in the sky for which God made them—was sounding in their feathered breasts, but they never raised from the water. The matter had been settled long ago. The comfort of the barnyard was

too tempting! Now their desire to fly only made them uncomfortable.” Beloved, this can happen in church. Temporarily in church, we can be convicted to obey Jesus and to rise-up and run to Him, to run to obey His voice, to do what He calls us to do. Yet, staying where we are, yielding to temptation, by saying someday I need to run to Jesus is always enjoyed at the price of losing the capacity to fly.

God brings often the words and music by Chris Tomlin who wrote in 2009, “There's a peace I've come to know Though my heart and flesh may fail There's an anchor for my soul I can say "It is well" Jesus has overcome And the grave is overwhelmed The victory is won He is risen from the dead And I will rise when He calls my name No more sorrow, no more pain I will rise on eagles' wings Before my God fall on my knees And rise I will rise There's a day that's drawing near When this darkness breaks to light And the shadows disappear And my faith shall be my eyes Jesus has overcome And the grave is overwhelmed The victory is won He is risen from the dead And I will rise when He calls my name No more sorrow, no more pain I will rise on eagles' wings Before my God fall on my knees And rise I will rise And I hear the voice of many angels sing, "Worthy is the Lamb" And I hear the cry of every longing heart, "Worthy is the Lamb" "And I will rise when He calls my name No more sorrow, no more pain I will rise on eagles' wings Before my God fall on my knees And rise, I will rise! Like mallards, are we glued to the world, our barnyard, our usual way of living marginal lives for Jesus? Thirdly,

WE MUST LOOK TO JESUS WHEN OUR BODIES ARE WEAK. (III.)

Satan knows when to attack us most successfully. Married couples have their biggest fights, when? You are right, late at night when we are tired and worn out. When we are sick or we have our mental reserves drained, we react in negative ways. When did Satan attack Jesus early in His ministry? It was after 40 days and nights of fasting. For Satan, that was an opportune time. When we are at the limits of our strength, when weakness is setting in, then Satan loves to attack us. Be on the alert. We can't always avoid getting too tired, fatigued, or too hungry. But if we know we are vulnerable, we can watch our steps, and God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. II Corinthians 12: 9 declares from God to us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Jesus knew on the night he was assaulted by Satan in Gethsemane before the crucifixion, that His disciples were exhausted. Jesus told them to stay awake, watch, and pray so they would not enter-into temptation. Then Jesus in Matthew 26: 41, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” This year, in 2020, when demanding tasks and too sensitive discussions come up when we are out of gas, emotionally and physically, let's reschedule a talk and run to Jesus in a goodnight prayer and sleep on it. I have seen couples over the last 53 years of ministry, blow it all on a night of a big fight. Each of us can lose perspective, break up, and then make up too much.

Satan knows the opportune times. Let's beat him to the punch and learn to say. "Let's continue this conversation after we've had time to sleep on it and get some physical rest and some spiritual perspective. It may seem foolish to tell you this, but I will. In 2020, "Don't expect to do your best on a test without a nutritious breakfast. There are times to fast, but breakfast is not one of them. Break your fast. If you are going to throw your stone from your sling straight at Goliath, be mentally and physically prepared as much as possible. Volatile times need wise believers who are ready to fight. Fourthly,

WE MUST RISE TO THE OCCASION WHEN TEMPTATION

STRIKES. (IV.) If there is one thing my Dad taught me by example as he fought health issues, 32 heart attacks before he died, it was over and over, rise to the occasion. I have seen him, weak as a dying pup, get up and serve the Lord. Dad also told me shortly before he died, "Rich, learn early what I failed to learn until it is nearly too late." Then he quoted Bob Pierce, who said, "Oh, God, give me what it takes to do all that needs to be done that only you can do through me." God may want another person, not you, to rise to the occasion. Yet in temptation, God always wants us to rise above the snake line. Did you know what a hawk does when he is attacked by kingbirds. Watch hawks and eagles. Big birds don't often counterattack. They just soar higher and higher. They rise to the occasion. As they go higher in ever widening circles, they get above the comfort zone of their tormentors who now leave them alone.

What are you tempted to do if you were stoned to death and left for dead, but aren't quite dead? Give up, right? Listen to what Paul did in Acts 14: 19,20, "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city." There he continued his preaching tour. Let's learn to rise to the occasion when it is God's will, and we must run to Jesus when temptation strikes. 5thly,

WE MUST LOOK UP WHEN WE ARE TRAPPED TO SEE THE WAY

OUT. (V.) Hebrews 12: 1,2 is so familiar but its main words for today are, "fixing your eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith." Did you know if you put a buzzard in a pen six to eight feet square, it will not be able to fly to escape? In spite of its great flying ability, a buzzard will be your prisoner until death. The buzzard must begin his flight from the ground with a run of 10-12 feet. Without space to run, he is in jail for life in a jail without a top. A bat flies around like he owns the heavens at night, with remarkable nimble zooms and vrooms, but he can't take off from a level place. Put a bat on a flat surface or on the ground and it can only helplessly shuffle. To fly, it must hang from a surface so that it can fling itself into the air. Then it is off like a bat, like a flash. The bumblebee flies like he owns the garden you work

in, but is hopeless in a jar. He will wander around the bottom of a jar seeking escape, but he will never look up to fly out, though he could. The answer for the bumblebee, the bat, and the buzzard and you and me, is just above us. Up above our heads is our answer—look up and run to Jesus in 2020. Sixthly,

WE MUST GET BACK TO THE HEART OF JESUS WHEN WE GO

ASTRAY. (VI.) When we enter a plane, the attendant insists we find the nearest exits and where the emergency doors are. We'd better do that in life as well. No matter how steadily we live for Jesus, each of us fall at times. We can survive a fall. The greatest saints alive did. The key is, go back to the place you fell, get up, dust yourself off, and return to the heart of Jesus—run to Him. Don't listen to the voice that says, "You're no Christian. You are a hypocrite. You aren't saved." The Bible qualifies our lives when we fall by pointing us toward our Advocate in I John 2: 1, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that you sin not. And if any man sins, (as we all do) we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Run to your Advocate. Don't stay down. Don't let your failure be an excuse for future compromise. God will help you as you run to Jesus. I love the words of the song, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about you, it's all about you, Jesus, I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it, when it's all about you, It's all about you, Jesus." When we're weary, He's our power. When we're afraid, He's our courage. When we're uncertain, He's our security. When we stray, let's get in the Word, let's identify where we went astray, and let's start running back to Jesus—as the prodigal went home to his father. Seventhly,

WE MUST RUN TO JESUS WHEN HE CALLS OUR NAME AS OUR SHEPHERD, BUT WE MUST NEVER LISTEN TO STRANGERS. (VII.)

Lastly, John 10: 1-5 and 27-30. Judith Fain is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Durham. As part of her studies, she spends several months each year in Israel. One day while walking on a road near Bethlehem, Judith watched as three shepherds converged with their separate flocks of sheep. The three men hailed each other and then stopped to talk. While they were conversing, their sheep intermingled, melting into one big flock. Wondering how the three shepherds would ever be able to identify their own sheep, Judith waited until the men were ready to say their goodbyes. She watched, fascinated, as each of the shepherds called out to his sheep. At the sound of their shepherd's voice, like magic, the sheep separated again into three flocks. Just like these sheep, what distinguishes us is not so much the "pen" we inhabit, but the Shepherd we follow. Some sheep come running as soon as their Shepherd calls, but some struggle to obey His lead, going astray whenever temptation strikes. We are called to be disciples of our Shepherd. He is always on the move; He wants us to go with Him, to make disciples to the ends of the earth. We must recognize His voice, go where He wants us to go, and imitate Him, serving Him and sharing His good news with the world.