

EXERCISE THYSELF UNTO GODLINESS (1 Tim. 4:7)

(Written in Paris 8/19/05)

Everybody knows what exercise is. That's what people do to keep from having a heart attack. That's what soldiers do get ready for combat. That's what athletes do to prepare for competition. Paul reminds us by inspiration that bodily exercise only profits for a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise not only of the life that now is, but also that which is to come. So Paul tells Timothy to "exercise" himself unto godliness. Dr. Kenneth Cooper pioneered in the field of aerobics. He concluded that good health rested upon a three fold foundation consisting of a good heart, good lungs, and a good circulatory system. The only way you can have all three is by exercise that is both regular and vigorous. It seems equally obvious that no person can have good spiritual health without exercise that is both regular and vigorous.

While the Scriptures are filled with illustrations of spiritual exercise, let me select but one example from 1 Kings 18:41 - 46. Elijah had just confronted and defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. It was at this point that Elijah took his servant to the top of the mountain for some spiritual exercise. After reaching the top of the mountain Elijah bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. "Go and look toward the sea" he told his servant.

We are not told how far his servant had to walk in order to gain the proper perspective. It could have been a hundred yards and I suppose it could have even a mile or even further. I'm sure you know the story. The obedient servant had to make the same trip seven times. Six times he came back reporting that he had seen nothing. Each time he went up, however, he was going through a spiritual exercise anticipating answers to prayer. Each time he came down he was still going through a spiritual exercise wondering why God had not answered their prayers. When he finally saw something, it seemed quite insignificant. It was a cloud so small that it was only the size of a man's hand.

If Elijah had wanted his servant to avoid exercise he could have advised him to wait several hours until it was time for the cloud to appear. I'm not certain, however, that under such circumstances the rain would have come. The Bible is quite explicit that the stopping and starting of the rain was associated with the prayers of Elijah. **"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."** (James 5:17-18) Just as a young marine puts on a 60 lb. pack and hikes all day to prepare for war, the servant of Elijah was going through a refining process in a spiritual exercise that may not be immediately obvious.

When the small cloud at last appeared, the servant was told to go tell Ahab to hitch up his chariot and go down before the rain stopped him. This too was easier said than done. The prophets of Baal had just been slaughtered in the Kishon Valley and after reflecting on this Ahab may have been ready to retaliate. Further, a tiny little cloud did not necessarily provide a slam dunk certainty that rain was on the way. Nevertheless, the servant did as he was commanded, the rains came, and the spiritual exercise of that day provided a life long lesson to the young man about the power of faith and obedience.

This lesson has special significance for me today. Yesterday I left Nnewi, Nigeria at 10:00 a.m. with a brother in Christ named Oscar Brooks. We arrived at Enugu at noon and waited three hours for a flight to Lagos. At Lagos we waited over five hours for an 11:50 p.m. flight to Paris. We arrived here in Paris just before 6:00 a.m. and our flight for Dulles International Airport does not depart until 4:40 this afternoon. By the time we reach the U.S. we will have been traveling for about 40 hours and 18 hours of this time will have been spent waiting in airports. While this may seem like an inefficient way to get something done, just remember that time spent on a tread mill is not wasted time. You may not be traveling anywhere, but at least you are receiving exercise. I am not discouraged about this wait for there are many things about this trip that remind me of what Elijah's servant went through on Mt. Carmel.