

Finish Well (Hebrews 3:7-19)

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[0:00] It's funny how much you end up depending on technology to help you. And one of those ways was actually this morning, I came in and I was like, man, I'm tired.

I don't know why I'm so tired this morning. And it was five minutes before the service started, I realized that time had changed. And I was like, that makes sense. And I'm glad I realized that before the service started, so I can understand why we have a few less people here today. I would have been thinking, what did I say last week that offended so many people? But I am excited to be back having two services this week.

We had a wonderful Disciple Now weekend and looking forward to the fruit that comes from that for many, many weeks to come. But one of the things that we're going to be talking about today as we continue in our study of the book of Hebrews is finishing well.

And I know this may be hard for some of you to believe, but there was a time in my life that I actually used to run a good bit. I know it's hard to believe now, but there was a time when I ran a good bit.

[1:09] And in fact, in high school, during track, I would run long distance. I wasn't a very fast sprinter, but I could run a long ways relatively well.

And I can remember learning a very valuable lesson my ninth or tenth grade year. And that's not how you start a race, but it's how you finish a race.

And I learned this the hard way because if you've ever been to a track meet, and I'm sure the Thigpins will agree with this, that track meets can sometimes be very, very long.

They can just go on forever, and you're just sitting there waiting and waiting for a 10-second race, a 12-minute race at the most. But you're sitting there waiting for a long period of time for this.

And so one of the things that they do sometimes to help speed this process up is the longer distances, they will run the boys and girls together, especially like the two-mile.

[2:06] They'll sometimes run those together. And I can remember as a ninth or tenth grader, we were doing this. And then as soon as the race started, I realized that there was a lady, a young girl on our team that had an interesting strategy.

As soon as that starter pistol went off, she took off out of there. I mean, like sprinting. And I panicked. I'm like, I can't let her beat me. And so I took off running as hard as I could this first lap of the race.

And so I'm running just as hard as I can, got one lap in, and I'm done. I mean, I'm like tired. I'm breathing heavy. I'm done. And I realized I've got seven more laps to go of this.

And so I learned very quickly then, it's not how you start the race, but it's how you finish the race. And this was a lesson that served me well until college.

And I was coming back still at that time running some. I was coming back. And we had a KERHI military weekend, and we had the race up KERHI. And I was like, I'm going to enter this race.

[3:09] I've been running a good bit. And so I entered this race, and I'm running. And if you've ever been up KERHI, you know the last couple hills, there's a really long stretch where it's got this long straightaway.

And you just kind of have to put your head down and just run because you don't want to look up and see how far it is ahead of you. And I'm just running along. And all of a sudden, I hear somebody coming up beside me.

And then I look over, and it's this lady who, I kid you not, is in a long-sleeved button-down shirt just like this. It was buttoned all the way down.

A skirt that goes down to her ankles, hair in a bun, and tennis shoes on just running. And she just comes up beside me and goes, tough, tough hill, huh? And I'm like, yeah.

And I'm like, that's all right. It's not how you start. It's how you finish. I'll catch her on the way back. Never saw her again. Never saw her again. It's taken me a while to admit that. But I'm glad it's off my chest now.

[4 : 06] But all of this to say, much of this passage that we're talking about today is learning to run well. Much of our passage today deals with finishing well.

Not just looking at the part, at one part, but persevering to the end. If you remember from last week, we had a clear emphasis on the fact that Jesus is better than Moses.

Not just a little bit better. Not that they're a little bit equal and that Jesus just kind of passed them out a little bit. But no, that Jesus is far superior than Moses. And so on the heels of that, on the tail end of that declaration that would have been pretty significant for the original audience to hear, on the tail end of this declaration, we find ourselves in Hebrews chapter 3, verses 7 through 19.

And so if you have a copy of God's Word with you, I want to invite you to follow along as we read this. Hebrews chapter 3, starting in verse 7, this is what the Word of the Lord says. It says this, Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

[6 : 02] As it is said today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who were those who heard and yet rebelled?

Was it not all of those who left Egypt, led by Moses, and with whom was he provoked for 40 years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

And so from this passage, there's a couple of observations that I want us to clearly see today. A couple of observations that I think are very applicable to us, just like they would have been applicable in the time that they were written.

And to begin with, I want to encourage you to don't miss what is right in front of you. I want you to be careful that you don't miss what is right in front of you.

[7 : 05] It says, therefore, as the Holy Spirit says today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. On that day of testing in the wilderness where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for 40 years.

While this is not a major point of what we're going to be sharing today, I think it is significant to look at that very first phrase where it says, therefore, as the Holy Spirit says.

This is a clear reminder to us that these words, the words that we're studying, the words that we're reading, the words that we find throughout Scripture are God's words. They're authoritative to us. They're significant to us. This isn't just something that people made up and just decided to put all these collections together. No, these were divinely inspired and we should see them as such. And we should see them as God's words.

We should see them as authoritative in our lives, not only to tell us how to live our lives, but to also tell us where salvation lies and what we should be giving our lives to.

[8 : 11] And so basically what the author is saying here, he's saying, remember what God told us back in Psalm 95. And then he goes on to share how the people wandering in the wilderness didn't enter into the promised land because of their hardened hearts.

He's saying, don't be like that. See who God is. Clearly see what is right in front of you. Clearly see what we have been sharing over and over again, that Jesus is far superior to anything and everything and give your life to him.

The therefore at the beginning of this section tells us to consider what was just said. We just learned that from the previous section is that Jesus is greater than Moses.

He says, for Jesus has been counted of more glory than Moses, as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

He's saying, you thought Moses was great. Well, you're right. He was pretty great. But let me tell you about one who is far greater, far superior than Moses. The last section in many ways mirrors the first three verses of Hebrews.

[9 : 29] Hebrews chapter 1, the first three verses. In chapter 1, we are told that Jesus is the heir of all things. He is the creator of all things. He is the radiance of the glory of God.

And last week in that section, we were reminded that Jesus, as the son, is the heir. That he is the creator. That he's the true recipient of glory.

In light of all of this, the author is saying, don't harden your hearts. See who Jesus is. Don't miss what is right in front of you.

Don't miss what we have been shown, what we have seen, who Jesus is. He does so, and he does this. He has this reminder with a well-known example of Israel wandering in the wilderness.

Now, in the history of the world, you would be hard-pressed to find a movement of people on a large scale like this, of a group of people that started so well and yet ended so poorly.

[10 : 29] Think back to the last time that you read through Exodus.

Or for some of you, it may be here recently. But think back to the last time you read through the book of Exodus or maybe watched The Prince of Egypt. I don't know. Pay attention to this because some of these things might come up tonight in Bible trivia.

And I want to encourage you that, hey, come out to that. We're not putting anybody on the spot.

Guys especially, we need you to come out. I want to win this very, very badly. And so please come out tonight and help us with that.

Nobody's getting put on the spot, but we'll just have a great time with that. But looking back on these several chapters of this start of the Exodus out of Egypt, we see God working in some incredible ways.

When you start looking at Exodus 7 and where Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh, and Pharaoh says, no, you can't go. And then he says, okay, well, there's going to be some plagues that happen.

[11 : 39] And the first plague that we see here is the Nile turning to blood. The Nile River, the source of their life in so many different ways is turned to blood.

And then the next plague is all of these frogs that come about. And they start coming up out of the Nile and they get into everything. It starts talking about them getting into the ovens, into the pantry, and all of these different areas.

And then a lot of times you don't think about it, but then all of these frogs had to die at some point.

And I love how the ESV says it right here. And it lets me know that there was at least a few Southerners who were involved in the translation of this.

It says, and the frogs died out in the houses, in the courtyards, in the fields, and they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. It says the land stank.

And so we see that all of this is taking place. All of this is happening here. And then the third plague, the gnats, and then the flies, and then the livestock dying out, the boils that happen, the hail that comes.

[12 : 42] We also see the locusts, and then the darkness. And for three nights, or three days, there was darkness on the land. And so we're seeing all of these things.

And then finally, the night before the departure, at midnight, with the smell of roasted lamb in the air, which is far better than the stank of frogs, the smell of roasted lamb in the air, and the blood above the doorpost of the Hebrews, God struck down the firstborn of Egypt.

And with that, Israel began their departure after over 400 years of bondage. But God continued to work. God continued to provide.

God, He led the way with a pillar of cloud in the sky by day. And then this pillar turned to fire by night to not only provide them light, but show them the way to go. And then when Pharaoh comes and decides, He says, I don't want to let them go.

And he starts to pursue them. This pillar comes between Egypt and Israel, and it becomes as a barrier for them. And then God parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can walk through on dry ground.

[13 : 51] And then as the Egyptians come through, they get swallowed up in this. And all of a sudden, we see God provide over and over again for His people.

Yet they continually harden their heart against Him. It began so well, and yet ended so poorly. Of the 600,000 men plus the women and children that left Egypt, only two over the age of 20 ever got to see the promised land, Joshua and Caleb.

The rest died in the wilderness. Kent Hughes, he notes, he says, The grand and terrible lesson of Israel's history is that it is possible to begin well and end poorly.

He says, In fact, this tragic human tendency dominates much of human spiritual experiences. He says, Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

Now, this is a challenging passage on many fronts. You've heard me say many times in many different sermons that God, as our Father, wants His children to have an assurance of salvation.

[15:09] He wants them to have this assurance that they are His, and there is nothing that is going to be able to take them from that. In my opinion, it would be very difficult to read 1 John.

It would be very difficult to read other passages throughout Scripture and think differently. But when you look at a verse like this, it can be challenging. But we must understand and we must remember to look at the verses that are surrounding it.

Context is so helpful when understanding difficult passages like this. And so if you look down to just a couple verses past that, we were just reading verse 12 there.

And if you look down to verse 14, it says this, You see, perseverance is the evidence that you truly belong to Christ.

Perseverance is the evidence that you truly belong to Him. Those who are truly saved, who have placed their faith and their trust in Jesus, those who have seen that Jesus is far greater than anything and everything in this world, are the ones who persevere.

[16:21] George Guthrie notes, he says, The believer should take care or beware because within any Christian community, there may be those whose outward association does not reflect the inward condition of the heart.

And this is a reference to someone being inside the covenant community who seems like a believer, but later proves to have an unbelieving heart. Think of it like this.

I recently read a book or was reading a book that was on a completely different subject than what we're talking about today. But it was sharing an example. It was talking about the difference between the crowds and the disciples in Jesus' ministry.

You know, a lot of time we talk about the disciples and we think about those disciples who, those 12 that were with them and then more that would follow Him around. But there's also great crowds that would follow Him.

They were really interested in things. And the author was making this distinction based off of the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which takes place in Matthew chapter 5, Matthew begins the sermon by kind of setting the stage of what is happening, by kind of giving you an example of the scene that Jesus is getting ready to preach to.

[17:40] And it says this. It says, Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him, and He opened His mouth and He taught them.

And so there seems to be this distinction that is made between the crowds. There's a large crowd of people and then a small group of disciples. And when Jesus began to teach, the crowd was listening, but His attention was focused on the disciples.

You see, the crowd was a group of people who liked Jesus. They were really interested in Jesus. They were fascinated by Him, intrigued by His words and His actions. Wherever Jesus went, they were there.

The crowd was aware of His healing powers and miraculous signs, and they wanted to get in on that. Jesus was popular at this time, and they enjoyed riding that wave of popularity.

Jesus sounded like a great idea at this point. And they were called the crowd because there were a lot of them. And there always are. There always are those people who are interested, who like the idea of Jesus, but they're not ready to give their life to Him.

[18:52] And then there were the disciples. This is a smaller group of people who don't just like being around Jesus, but have decided to trust Jesus and to follow Him with their lives.

The author, Josh Smith, said, he says, Jesus was never impressed by the crowd. The crowd didn't make Him feel better about His ministry. He was never interested in building a crowd.

He didn't see any real value in a large crowd of fascinated people. Jesus wanted disciples. He wanted people to trust and follow Him, not just be around Him.

And that's why when Jesus ends His Sermon on the Mount, He ends this sermon with an invitation. The crowd is still there. Many who are interested, but not yet followers, not those who haven't given their life to Him, saying, I want to follow you.

And this is why on most Sundays, I try to include a gospel presentation, because I can't tell the difference. Jesus could look out at the crowd, and He could see that there were those there who were not followers of Him.

[20 : 02] I don't have that ability. But Jesus concludes His sermon this way. He says this, You see, this message was not only called for a response from the crowd at this time, but this message calls for a response from us today.

Responding to Jesus means not only hearing Him, not only hearing His words, but trusting and following Him. It is believing that He is the only one who can save you from your sins, take you from death to life, and then in response to that belief, choosing to walk in obedience to His commands. This is what a disciple does. This is what a follower of Jesus does. The question becomes, Are you a part of the crowd? Are you just a face in the crowd?

Or are you one of His disciples? Don't miss what is right in front of us. The author over and over again has been telling us that Jesus is better.

He's far superior to anything and everything that we could put our confidence in. He's far superior to all those things that we could put our hope in. And He's saying, Now, don't miss this.

[21 : 55] He says, Our fathers, they missed it in the wilderness. They saw God perform all kinds of miracles. They saw God provide over and over and over again, yet they hardened their heart.

He's saying, Don't miss what's right in front of you. We've been given Jesus. We've been given the greatest gift we could ever imagine. He's left the glory of heaven.

He lived the life that you and I couldn't live, died on the cross for our sins, so that those who place their trust and faith in Him can go from death to life.

The author is now saying, Don't miss this. But the other observation that I want us to make today is this. And it's the importance that we hold each other accountable and finish well.

We must hold each other accountable and finish well. Verse 13 says, But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

[22 : 58] For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. We are to exhort one another every day, as long as it's called today.

I love the phrasing here. When are you to encourage one another and hold each other accountable? Every day. Well, what part of the day? As long as it's called today, do this.

All day, every day, we are called to help one another, to hold each other accountable, to encourage one another. And we are to do this, so that no one may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

In other words, we need to take this warning seriously and urgently while it is still today. We need to take this serious. We should be regularly exhorting one another to press on and to not drift away.

Michael Kruger, he notes, he says, Accountability is a great ally in the war against apostasy. And we all need it. Often times, our temptation is to say, I don't need this.

[24 : 03] Look, Brad, I believe in God. I don't need this in my life. I don't need those to help keep me accountable. I'm not going to fall away from that. Well, the Israelites could have said the same thing.

I don't think any of them would have said that they don't believe in God after all the things that they saw. Yet, how quickly were they hardening their hearts and turning to something else?

How quickly were they taking their eyes off of God and putting it on other things? We need accountability. We need people in our lives that love us enough to hold us accountable and to speak truth into our lives.

One of the reasons that we put such a heavy emphasis on Sunday school and live groups in this church is because of this. It's because smaller groups with people that you're close to foster this type of relationship far better than a large group like this might.

Small groups where you get to have that intimacy with one another are much more important in keeping each other accountable and having this sense of community than other things.

[25 : 11] We need corporate worship. Don't get me wrong. We need this. We need teaching that seeks to follow God's word as closely as possible. But we also need people that will speak truth into our lives.

We need opportunities to share our disappointments with people who genuinely love us. We need those that will celebrate with us. And we need people who love and care for us enough to step into our lives and to speak truth in love.

When do we need this? As long as the day is called today. We need this. A few years ago, well, actually 19 years ago when Catherine and I moved to North Carolina we went up there and we knew very few people when we moved up there.

Just a couple other couples were the only people that we knew when we moved up there. And so very quickly after we moved up there we began to visit some churches wanting to find a church to plug ourselves into and get planted into.

And we found a church that we really enjoyed a lot. The pastor was a great communicator.

Catherine has said before he's probably one of the best exposures of God's Word she's ever heard.

[26 : 26] Now I'll take that a little, you know, personally. But no, at that time he was a great exposure. They had a great worship team that did all kinds of things. But what really plugged us into this community was when we started going to a Sunday school class.

And we started getting plugged into this sense of community because all of a sudden we went from knowing very few people up there to having a whole group of people that loved us, that loved us enough to invite us over to their homes, that loved us enough not to just spend an hour with us on Sunday mornings, but loved us enough to invite us in their homes, to see their kids, to come over to our house and began to do life with one another.

This group helped keep us accountable, helped us to focus on the main things. And it wasn't just something that was for a season in our life. This is something that has continued to be a blessing in our lives.

Just a few weeks ago, it was actually the beginning, one of the first Sundays in February, I was getting ready to come up on the stage to preach and I got a text from one of those guys in that class.

And the text just said, preach the word, praying for you this morning. What an encouragement.

Preach the word. I'm praying for you this morning, helping keep me accountable to stay true to God's word when I teach his word.

[27 : 51] What an encouragement. What a challenge. We need Christian community in our lives. We need Christian community in this journey, in this race, in this long obedience in the same direction.

We need those who will keep us accountable. Perseverance is the true test of faith. Jesus made this point in the parable of the sower when he indicated that some seed, and this is the seed that fell on the rocky ground, some seed immediately sprang up, but it didn't last because it had no depth of soil.

You see accountability groups, the people that will love you, that will hold your hand through difficult times, that will be there for you when things are going great and when things are going bad.

We need that because that helps develop in us a depth of soil. It helps us develop in us a strong faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Verse 14 again provides some great commentary on this when it says, For we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

[29 : 06] This verse reminds us that God is the one who saves. But we also are called to hold our confidence to the end.

And ultimately, here's the thing. Ultimately, we need God for this as well. We need God to save us and we need God to sustain us. The Bible tells us in Philippians and says, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

He who began a good work in us will also be with us. He who began that good work of salvation in us will also sustain us in this journey of our Christian faith.

And again, in 1 Peter, it says, According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again.

God causes us, God saves us to be born to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept for you in heaven, who by God's power are being guarded.

He saves and he guards and he sustains through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. We also see this as we continue in the book of Hebrews.

[30 : 24] We need God to save. We need God to sustain. And in his grace and in his infinite wisdom, he has given us a community to encourage one another along the way and to hold each other accountable.

Again, as Kruger says, accountability is a great ally in the war against apostasy. We all need this. Think about how differently it might have been for Israel if they had daily encouraged one another instead of being so negative.

Instead of grumbling and quarreling, instead of putting themselves in isolation, isolation and particularly isolation from the mutual encouragement of the body is a dangerous thing. In isolation, we are quick to listen to the world. We're quick to value the things that the world values. When you're alone and unaccountable, it is tempting to take the easy course instead of the right one.

We need this accountability in our lives. And so may we never lose sight of what God has already done for us. May we never lose sight of what God has already done for us.

[31 : 41] May we clearly see the love God has displayed for us on the cross. keep your eyes fixed on this truth of God's word. Persevere in what he's called us to do.

Don't miss the good news of the gospel that is available to each and every one of us. Don't rely on a past experience where you may have prayed a prayer or done something where it really didn't mean something.

You wanted the insurance, the fire insurance, but you didn't give your life to Jesus. May we see the value of giving our life and following him with it.

The author has shown over and over again that Jesus is better than anything. He is the one that can give life to us.

He's the one that gives us his life. He's the one that will never disappoint. So don't just be a face in the crowd, but be a disciple.

[32 : 46] Verse 19 here, it tells us, it says, so we see that we, so that we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

They were unable to enter because of unbelief. I had a professor who told me one time, he says, you want to know what you truly believe?

And we're like, well, yeah, we want to know what we truly believe. You know, I believe what the Bible says. I can get all of these answers right on the test. He says, if you want to know what you truly believe, then there's a formula for that.

He says, it's stated belief plus actual practice will show you what you actually believe. Stated belief plus actual practice will show you what you actually believe.

He says, you can say that you believe in whatever you want to believe. You can say that you believe that you can fly, but you're not going to jump out of a plane without a parachute. He says, you can say whatever you want to say.

[33 : 45] You can say that you're faster than a lion, but I can promise you if you're in a jeep on a safari, you're not going to jump out of that jeep and slap a lion and then take off running because you think you're faster than it.

You can say whatever you want to say, but your actions are going to show what you actually believe. You can say that you believe that Jesus is greater and better than anything in this world. But what are your actions showing that you think is the best? What are you giving your life to? Because you're going to go after, you're going to follow whatever it is that is most valuable to you. Stated belief plus actual practice equals actual belief. If this is something that you're ready to do today, to give your life to Jesus and not just be a statement that you're making, but you're saying, hey, I really believe this.

I really believe that Jesus is better. If this is something that you're ready to do today, then I encourage you to come down in just a moment during our time of invitation. But if you are a disciple, then I encourage you to do two things.

[35 : 01] One, love those around you enough to speak truth into their lives. I don't and you don't have magic glasses that tell us who saved and who isn't, but the Bible does tell us that we will know those who follow Jesus by their love and by their fruit.

Love people enough to point them to Jesus and encourage them to follow Him. But two, put yourself in a position to have others come alongside you and keep you accountable.

Maybe that means joining this church. Maybe you're not ready to come down this morning, but maybe you're ready to have a conversation with me. I'd love to have that conversation. But maybe that means that you're ready to join a Sunday school class or a life group and get plugged into that community where it's not as easy just to be a face in the crowd, but you'll have people who love

you, who will walk alongside you, who will encourage you, who will be there for you during difficult times, who will be there for you when everything's going well, and who will love you enough to hold you accountable.

There is a level of intimacy and community that is hard to reproduce in a large setting, so maybe you need to get plugged in. And I realize that these things can be difficult to do.

I realize that sometimes it's hard to step in and do this. You may have had a bad experience before, but don't let that stop you. This is something that is so important that don't let a bad experience stop you from getting plugged in.

[36 : 38] I'm sure we've all had a bad meal before, but we don't stop eating, do we? No. This is something that is vital to us that God has called us to have as a part of our lives.

So make sure that we intentionally get involved and plugged into these things. I know that it can be challenging, but God, but if God is moving in your life, then I encourage you to follow Him.

Jesus is better and Jesus is worth it. Don't miss what is right in front of you and hold each other accountable and finish well.

Father, thank you so very much for who you are. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the difference that He makes in our life each and every day. Lord, thank you for loving us.

Thank you for sending Jesus. And so, Lord, I pray that as we go through this study of Hebrews that we see you more clearly. See who you are and what you've done for us with fresh eyes.

[37 : 40] To see you clearly and help us to not miss what is right in front of us. Help us to not miss you as we go through this study. Lord, help us to see you clearly.

Help us to give our lives to you. And so, Lord, I pray that if there's someone here today that hasn't given their life to you and they're ready to do that, Lord, that you would give them the boldness and courage to step forward, come down, have a conversation with me at this time or maybe right after the service, grab me and say, Brett, I need to talk.

I need to get this right because I see Jesus clearly. I see that He is far better than anything and everything that I'm giving my life to and I'm ready to give my life to Him.

But Lord, I also pray for those of us who've given our life to you, those of us who aren't just a face in the crowd but are your disciples, Lord, that you would give us the boldness to hold those accountable in our lives, that you would give us the grace to receive that accountability when it's given to us in love by others.

And so, Lord, however it is that you're speaking to us today, that you're moving in our life today, Lord, I pray that we respond in a way that shows that you and you alone are worthy.

[39 : 10] We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to invite you to stand. We're going to sing a song of invitation this morning. If God is speaking to you, won't you come as we stand and sing?