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SERMON TITLE

After The Fresh Start

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Matthew 24:13

SYNOPSIS

Anybody can start something. The real question is, who keeps going when it gets hard?

HIGHLIGHTS





☞ After the Fresh Start

Good morning, everyone! Last week, we talked about fresh starts and new beginnings. We talked about taking that first step. And I hope some of you actually did it. I hope some of you started that conversation, made that commitment, took that leap of faith.

But here's what nobody tells you about fresh starts: they get hard. Like most marriages, the honeymoon phase doesn't last forever. That initial burst of motivation fades. That clarity you felt gets cloudy. The confidence wavers. And suddenly, you're standing there wondering if this whole "transformation" thing was just another thing you got excited about and then abandoned.

If you're crushing it, that's fantastic. But if you're struggling—if you've already stumbled, missed a few days, or already wondered if you should just quit—you're in good company. You're in the majority, actually. And more importantly, you're in the exact place where real faith gets built.

☞ Because here's the truth: **anybody can start something. The real question is, who keeps going when it gets hard?**

☞ **Matthew 24:13** says, ***"But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."***

In Exodus 14, we find the Israelites in a terrifying situation. They've just left Egypt. They've seen the plagues. They've experienced the Passover. They've walked out of slavery into freedom. Everything is exciting and new. God is clearly with them. The future looks bright.

And then they hit the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army bearing down on them from behind. In **Exodus 14:10-12**, the Israelites cry out: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

These are the same people who just witnessed ten miraculous plagues... Who just walked out of four hundred years of slavery... Who are literally following a pillar of cloud and fire. And now, at the first real obstacle, they're ready to go back!

☞ But here's the thing. When the excitement wears off and reality sets in, **when you're caught between where you were and where you're going, that's when doubt creeps in.** That's when you start questioning everything.

Moses responds in verse 13: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the

☞ Lord will bring you today." Stand firm. Not run away. Not go back. **Don't panic. Stand firm.**



The valley between your vision and your victory, between the dream and the reality is where most people turn around. That's where *fresh* starts become *false* starts. But that's also exactly where God does His greatest work. So, stand firm.

☞ 1: Expect the Middle to Be Messy

Sarah had been away from God for a long time, but finally rededicated her life to Christ. Then, she was on fire. Started reading her Bible every morning. Told everyone what God was doing. But about two months in she was exhausted. She said, "I don't understand. I thought following Jesus was supposed to make life better. But I'm more stressed than ever. My family thinks I've joined a cult. My old friends don't want to hang out anymore. I'm trying to read my Bible, but half the time I don't understand what I'm reading. And honestly? Some days I don't even feel like God is there. Did I do something wrong?" Her pastor told her, "Sarah, you didn't do anything wrong. You did something right. And now you're in the middle."

The middle is messy. The middle is where the old life is fighting to pull you back and the new life ☞ hasn't fully formed yet. **The middle is where you realize that transformation isn't a moment—it's a process. And processes are slow.** And uncomfortable. And often confusing.

In **Philippians 1:6**, Paul writes, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say, "He who began a good work in you will complete it by next Tuesday." No. The work continues until the day of Christ Jesus. That's your whole life. You're not supposed to have it all figured out by February.

Think about when Jesus called His disciples. These guys walked with Him for three years. They saw the miracles. They heard the teachings. They had front-row seats to the Son of God. And yet, even after all that, Peter denied Him three times. Thomas doubted. They all scattered when things got hard. Even after the resurrection, they still didn't fully get it. It wasn't until Pentecost—after Jesus had ascended—that things really clicked. If the original disciples needed time, if they stumbled and doubted and failed even with Jesus physically present, why do we think we should have our act together after just a few weeks?

☞ Here's what you need to know: the mess is part of the process. The confusion is normal. **The struggle doesn't mean you're doing it wrong—it just means you're doing it.** Most people never get messy because they never actually start. You're in the middle. That's not failure. That's progress.

☞ 2: Stumbling Forward Is Still Forward

There's a story about a guy who struggled with anger—explosive, relationship-destroying anger. He'd blow up at his wife, his kids, his coworkers. But then one day he decided he wanted to change.



He was tired of being that guy. So, he prayed. He started meeting with a counselor. He memorized scripture about self-control. He was serious about it. But about a month later he was devastated. He'd lost his temper again. Yelled at his son over something trivial. He said, "I'm never going to change. I'm a failure. I should just give up." But his pastor asked him, "How long did the anger last?" He thought about it. "I don't know, maybe five minutes?" "And how long would it have lasted a month ago?" "Probably an hour. Maybe longer." "So, you went from an hour to five minutes, and you think you're failing?"

Sometimes we're so focused on the stumble that we miss the fact that we're still moving forward. We're so fixated on the problems that we can't see progress. **Proverbs 24:16** says, "For though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again." Notice it doesn't say, "The righteous never fall." ☞ It says they fall seven times. **The difference between a righteous person and an unrighteous person isn't that one never falls—it's that one gets back up.**

Peter is the perfect example of this. This is a guy who constantly said the wrong thing. Who tried to walk on water and sank. Who swore he'd never deny Jesus and then did it three times in one night. Peter was the king of foot-in-mouth moments. But you know what Jesus called him? The rock. Not because Peter was stable and perfect, but because Peter kept getting back up.

In **John 21**, after the resurrection, Jesus finds Peter fishing—probably going back to his old life because he'd failed so spectacularly. And what does Jesus do? He doesn't shame him. He doesn't lecture him. He doesn't say, "Peter, I'm really disappointed in you." He makes him breakfast, restores him, and recommissions him. And then Peter goes on to preach at Pentecost. Three thousand people come to Christ. Peter becomes one of the pillars of the early church. Not because he never stumbled. But because he kept getting back up.

☞ **Your stumbles don't disqualify you.** Your mistakes don't mean you should quit. Every time you get back up, you're building the muscle of perseverance. Every time you choose to keep going, you're developing the character of Christ.

Progress isn't linear. It's messy and back-and-forth; two steps forward and one step back. But if you're still in the game, still trying, still trusting God even when you stumble, you're winning. Stumbling forward is still forward. But, even then it wouldn't hurt to have some help.

☞ **3: Pull Together**

Last week, I challenged you to lean into community. Join a ministry team or a small group. Show up to the special events we plan. Your presence matters. Your struggle matters. And *together*, we are much stronger than we could ever be *apart*. The early church nailed this: **Acts 4:32** says, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their



own, but they shared everything they had." Shared stories, shared stuff, shared struggles. It turned a ragtag group into a revolution.


This week, you can follow their example by reaching out to others. Text a friend: "How's your fresh start going? Mine's wobbly—wanna chat?" Mix and mingle... Because isolation slows you down; but iron-sharpening-iron speeds you up. We're better together.

Have you ever seen those draft horse pulling competitions at county fairs or on TV? Here's what's amazing: if you take one horse—a strong, powerful draft horse—and you harness it up to pull a load, that horse can pull about 8,000 pounds. Four tons. That's some serious strength.

Now, you'd think if you take two horses and put them together, they'd pull 16,000 pounds. Just simple math—double the horses, double the weight. Makes sense. But that's not what happens.

When you put two horses together, pulling side by side, they can pull somewhere between 22,000 and 24,000 pounds. That's not double—that's nearly three times what one horse can do alone! Something happens when they work together. They encourage each other. They find a rhythm. They lean into that load in a way one horse working alone just can't manage.

But here's where it gets really interesting. If you take two horses that have been trained together—horses that know each other, that have practiced working as a team—they can pull 30,000 to 32,000 pounds. That's four times what one horse can pull by itself. Four times. Not by adding more horses. Just by learning to work together. That's not addition, friends. That's multiplication.

And I think that's exactly what God had in mind for us. We weren't designed to pull our burdens  alone. When we work together in unity something supernatural happens. **Our efforts don't just add up. They multiply. The kingdom work we can do together is exponentially greater than what we can do on our own.**

Hebrews 10:24: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Spur. Not shame or shoulder the load alone, but spark motion together.

And, those draft horses were built for pulling, not speed. You'd never see a draft horse winning the Kentucky Derby. Likewise, our faith-walk is not a sprint, it's a marathon; it's a long haul.

4: Plan On The Long Haul

Following Jesus isn't about dramatic, emotional, mountain-top moments—though those are great when they happen. It's about the long obedience. The showing up day after day. The faithfulness in the mundane. The perseverance when nobody's watching.



Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

☞ **Run with perseverance. Not speed.** Not perfection... Perseverance. **Keep your eyes on Jesus.** Because He's not just the one who started your faith—He's the one who will complete it.

So here's my challenge for you today: Don't quit. Maybe you've stumbled. Maybe you've had a terrible week. Maybe you feel like you're failing. Get back up. Take the next step. Even if it's a small one. Even if it's just showing up here this morning.

Don't compare your middle to someone else's highlight reel. Don't beat yourself up for not being where you think you should be. Just keep going. And remember: you're not in this alone. God is with you. This community is with you. We're all in the middle of something. We're all stumbling forward together.

So, what's your next step? Maybe it's not a new step. Maybe it's accepting that wrestling through some problems is just part of the process. Maybe it's getting back up from a stumble. Maybe it's choosing to open up and lean into others. Maybe it's just deciding that today, you're not going ☞ to quit. Whatever it is, take it. The race isn't over. The story isn't finished. And **God's not done with you yet. Keep going.** We're all in this together.

God, You are my God