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Cleveland Chinese Christian Church

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Pastoral Letter, February, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we think about *Straining Godward*, the action itself may seem contradictory in some ways. Some one may ask questions like these:

- Jesus and the New Testament authors seem to repeatedly remind us that our works will not make us more acceptable to God. Doesn't Jesus say, that if we want to come to God by our efforts, we must be perfect (Matthew 7:48)?
- After all, Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28); that doesn't sound like straining after God does it?
- And the Sabbath rest that is written into creation points to the promise of rest for God's people. How can straining after God be reconciled to the rest that God promises?
- So, are we really called to "strain after God"?

Questions like these are fair questions and should be addressed to make certain we all understand exactly what I mean when I challenge C4 to Strain Godward. I want you to be sure that I am not trying to bring you under a heavy burden, but rather trying to help us find the fullness of rest promised to us in Christ.

First, yes, both the New *and the Old* Testaments make it clear that we can not draw near to God by our efforts. The whole book of Galatians is written to make this one point: "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith" (Galatians 3:11). In no way would I suggest that we can come to God or know more of God if we just try harder to be good.

Furthermore, when Jesus invites us to find rest in Him, He is speaking to people who have been beaten down by that very effort. Judaism had become a works religion which taught that man could become righteous by working harder to keep the law. The continual effort to become righteous by those who were constantly reminded of their sin had left them worn out, and fearful that they could never be accepted by God. For such people, the law had been doing its intended work. They were discovering their powerlessness to overcome sin in themselves. To them (and to people like them), Jesus promised rest, and the means to finding that rest was coming to God by faith in Jesus—"Come to Me..." Faith in Jesus alone brings us into a right relationship with God.

To the third question, yes, God promises a rest to His people. We are promised an eternal rest and a kind of rest in this life that foreshadows our rest in glory. The rest we find here, we experience by faith in Christ Jesus. In fact, this helps us to get to the issue of *Straining toward God*. The author of Hebrews so concerned that God's people find this rest that he spends two chapters (3-4) to tell us the promise of rest still stands, to remind us how Israel missed God's rest, and to warn us not to make the same grave error. As he draws to his conclusion we find this admonition:

"Let us therefore *strive* to enter that *rest*, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11; italics mine).

Do you hear the paradox there? We are called to strive—strain, labor, exercise force—to rest. The striving is not to do the works of the law. The striving is for faith in God's promises that overcomes sin's power. The danger we face is unbelief in the promises of God (3:12) that causes us to live like the world. The temptation to coast and settle for what we can gain in this present world, instead of pursuing God Himself by the power of His promises (4:12) is an ever-present danger, a danger that calls for great care (3:12), fearing God (4:1), and striving (4:11).

So, when I seek to challenge us to *Strain Godward*, I mean let us help one another to fight for faith in the promises of God so that we may behold, experience, and enjoy more of Him. Let us dig deep into the Word of God knowing what He has promised to those who love Him; let us be bold to approach His throne of grace in prayer; let us labor to kill the sin that hinders us; let us strengthen and exhort one another to press on for more of God.

Let us strain to follow the example of the Psalmists:

O God, You are my God; earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding Your power and glory (Psalm 63:1-2).

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4).

Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:25-26).

Praying for a grace to strain Godward,

PASTOR HOUSE