

THE DISCIPLINE OF SUFFERING

Hebrews 12:1-13

Have you ever noticed how caught up in sports events we tend to be as a nation? We are not the only ones affected this way. Many people throughout the world have avid interests in sports. The modern day Olympic contests and World Cup Soccer games are witnesses of the far wider mania in which people get caught up. Many social conversations are centered around a certain team or particular sport. This is nothing new. It has been going on for thousands of years. There are many references in the New Testament to various sports.

We encourage our children to participate in team sports or individual sports because these can be microcosms of the real world and there are lessons to be learned in what should be a nonthreatening environment. For example, in sports you can learn that breaking the rules can set your team back or even get you rejected from the game. If one has to learn that lesson in the real world it may exact a high price. Sometimes when people break the rules they must go to prison or they might get killed by accidents of their own making.

Another lesson that could be learned from sports is that often quoted phrase, “no pain, no gain.” To be successful in competitions there has to be training and exertion of effort. As all of us know, you can’t run a marathon race of more than 26 miles without conditioning your body and pushing it to the limits of endurance. The pain and suffering that the runners experience are thought to be worth the effort in order to accomplish the intended results.

It has been argued that such lessons that children might learn in sports would be applied to their lives beyond the world of sports. To be successful in whatever we might do takes training or conditioning and exertion of effort (work) to accomplish the intended results. Whether it is in academics, social interactions, marriage, job or career, or whatever, knowing and following what is acceptable and hard work are essentials to success.

In the list of examples of those people who were faithful that we find in Chapter eleven of Hebrews, there were many who were confronted with opposition and barriers that went beyond the kinds of challenges that we find in the sports analogy of a race to be run. In real life situations that these people experienced, many found opposition from others who actually inflicted harm upon them and some died as a result of their faithfulness. Others were mocked and scorned, beaten and imprisoned and yet they were so disciplined and so intent on being faithful to do what God had called them to do that they endured the suffering and pain. The gain came about because they found approval from God.

The link between faith and endurance which is made in Chapter 11 forms the basis for the call to endurance in Hebrews 12:1–13.

Enduring – 12:1-3

¹Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3 (NASB95)

The imagery used here is that of a long distance race. I used to think that the witnesses referred to in this passage were like spectators watching the race that we are running and we should be careful to not disappoint them. That probably is not the right picture. The witnesses are, of course, those people mentioned in the previous chapter of Hebrews and others like them. What they witnessed and what they are still testifying to us about was the fact that “faith in God

is the most certain surety in the world.” They exercised their faith in God by being faithful and they could testify (give witness) of the rightness of trusting in God. Having the witness of the success of those who were faithful should encourage us to prepare for and run the race that is before us.

Part of the preparation for successfully running a race is to be properly dressed for the occasion. The runners need to be unencumbered and not wear something that would trip them up or slow them down. In the race of life, the encumbrances are sins that we carry around and/or those things of this world to which we are attached. We are told to “throw off” these things. If we are told to do it, then you must conclude that we have the power (ability) to do just that. God will not require us to do something for which He does not empower us to accomplish. What are typical things that people want to hold on to that hinders their success in various venues of life? I think we are dealing with a universal principle that applies to more than success in our spiritual lives. There are encumbrances that hinder our success in family, work, social interactions, and other things in which we may be involved.

You remember the story of the tortoise and the hare. The point of that tale is this: It is not necessarily the fastest or most powerful that wins the race, it is the one that doesn’t give up and crosses the finish line. Many exceptionally bright children (and even adults) do not achieve or accomplish greatness because they lack a sense of closure – a need to finish what is started.

We are told here that we are to run the race with patience. Most people think of patience as being a passive thing – just sitting around waiting but having a good attitude about it. A lot of people sit around and wait and do NOT have a good attitude and we call them “impatient.” But they both sit around and wait. That interpretation of patience will not win a race for you. The English word that is closer to the meaning in the original language is perseverance which is the ability to stick to the job until it is done. This requires commitment. Commitment grows out of discipline and vice versa. Commitment feeds on discipline which creates more commitment. You mix the two together and both will grow.

How can we be assured that faithfulness and perseverance and confident assurance really work when we have obstacles on our racetrack of life? Most of us would like to see examples of such an approach working. We admire the people who are listed in the “faithfulness hall of fame,” and they can provide a sense of encouragement for us as we realize that remaining faithful and committed is possible as seen in their lives. The supreme Model for faithfulness in the face of ridicule, scorn, opposition and even death on the cross is Jesus. However admirable any Old Testament figure might be, none of these are credited with being both the Author and Perfecter of our faith. The word “author” suggests that Jesus “pioneered” the path of faith Christians should follow. He also “perfected” the way of faith since He reached its end successfully.

In the case of Christ, was the goal (the prize for winning the race) of enough significance (value) to justify going through the obstacles? He was looking at the redemption of mankind which involved restoring the purposes of God that were being thwarted because of sin. That was the joy that was set before Him. It just may be that the reason we see so little disciplined commitment is that people have goals that are really not worth the hassle for going through the inevitable obstacles that will be there. This is a matter of setting priorities in determining what we will expend our energies on. If we get involved in a lot of low value goals, then we have little reason for seeing them through with discipline and commitment. What happens is that we wind up spending valuable time and effort that could otherwise be spent on something more worthwhile, something that would bring out discipline and commitment (perseverance).

Jesus put up with a lot of resistance from people in authoritative positions. It is one thing when we get contradicted by the village idiot; however, it is something else when the accepted experts contradict us. Are we going to continue to have faith in what we believe even when the experts say that we are wrong? If we have a higher authority on which to rely, then we have some basis for sticking to our beliefs. Jesus had a message from His Father.

This same type of resistance faced the leaders in the early church. Peter and John were arrested and told to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Their response was simply a question that they asked of the religious leaders of that day: “Should we obey God or man?”

Nothing is more natural for a person than to overestimate the severity of his trials.

Disciplined – 12:4-7

⁴ You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; ⁵ and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; ⁶ FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? Hebrews 12:4-7 (NASB95)

At the time of the writing of this letter to the Hebrews, some of these Christians were beginning to turn away from Christianity because of opposition and persecution. The challenge put to them was to consider if the price they were paying was anything compared to what Jesus did for them. We can make the same argument for ourselves when we are persecuted. Christ suffered and died for us – we haven't resisted to the point of losing even one drop of blood in our striving against sinful men who bringing opposition and persecution upon us.

A very helpful way to view the hardships of life is to see if these trials and sufferings are learning opportunities to grow and to put behind us the things in our life that keep us from reaching our goals. Such hardships are possibly the means of disciplining us to develop the strength and confidence for accomplishing greater things. If we were just allowed to drift and not be challenged to grow, then either God would be a negligent Father or we would already be perfect. How we respond to discipline affects the Father-child relationship we have with God.

Long-Term Benefits – 12:8-13

⁸ But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us for our good*, so that we may share His holiness. ¹¹ All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. ¹² Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Hebrews 12:8-13 (NASB95)

Apparently, those who received this letter were complaining about their situation in life. Just as we tell our children that we must limit them in what they are allowed to do, we should expect God to provide necessary limits for our own good. These limits are not just for our protection, but also for our growth. We send children to school to learn – they would rather play. However, because we make them endure the disciplined life for a certain period of time, they reap the benefits later in life. What God is trying to do for us is much more important than formal education. He wants us to be partakers in His holiness which is to be like Him.

Drawing on the analogy of the discipline of earthly fathers, we should be encouraged to have a submissive spirit to the discipline of “the Father of our spirits” which is intended to be life-preserving and to make us productive in what He has called us to do. God’s discipline is necessary to keep us on track to eternal life. Parental discipline is limited to our childhood years

(*for a little while*) and may not always have been wisely administered (*as they thought best*). But God, in his infinite love and wisdom, consistently throughout our lives *disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness*. We will experience His holiness (as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit). Our involvement is to be cooperative with all that God is doing in our lives and let this discipline have its full effect so that we will be trained by it. The outcome involves a harvest of righteousness and peace.

The challenge is for us to recognize the meaning and purpose of God's discipline in our lives and to respond with trust and willing submission. Chastening is the evidence of the Father's love. Satan wants us to believe that the difficulties of life are proof that God does *not* love us, but just the opposite is true. Sometimes God's chastening is seen in His *rebukes* from the Word or from circumstances. Some have argued that God may use physical suffering as a means of getting our attention. We should view the trials of the Christian life as spiritual discipline that could help a believer mature. Instead of trying to escape the difficulties of life, we should rather be "exercised" by them so that we might grow. In verses 12 and 13, we see a final appeal for endurance that stresses the need to strengthen those who are weak or exhausted and tempted to abandon the race which was what these Hebrew Christians were experiencing.

The conclusion is that we should be encouraged rather than discouraged when we see challenge before us. How do we face life? When something unexpected comes up that gets in our way, do we respond with slumped shoulders and a "let's just give up" attitude or do we rise to that challenge and throw our shoulders back and have a "let's go get 'em attitude?" We need to do the second option and encourage others to do so. If we give up, we will influence others to do so. If we press on, in spite of the obstacles, then others will also be influenced to do so.