

A Father's Discipline

Hebrews 12:4-17

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Good morning.

For those of you who don't know, I'm Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and this morning we're going to continue coming to the end. We're going to continue with our study of the book of Hebrews. And if you were with us last week, Penny opened up Hebrews chapter 12, the first three verses, and you might remember that in that passage, the author, he introduced this image of a race where we're the runners.

We're the runners running the race of the Christian life, and in doing so, he invited us to see ourselves as surrounded by the saints he just mentioned in chapter 11, a great cloud of witnesses, as he calls them. And it's like he was picturing them as spectators in a great amphitheater, cheering us on to the finish line. And their cheering us on makes sense to me. After all, at the end of chapter 11, in verse 39, the author says that although these saints had endured their own painful circumstances by keeping their eyes fixed on the promise of the Lord's coming glorious kingdom, and they'd been commended for their endurance, nevertheless, he tells us that they didn't receive what was promised. "Since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." You see, the author understood that the heavenly inheritance that these Old Testament saints longed to see wasn't promised to them alone.

Instead, it's an inheritance promised to you, and to me, and to all New Testament believers. In fact, it's only together as the whole people of God that will receive it. And so, having finished their race faithfully, the author pictured them as a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on to finish our race faithfully. So how do we do that? How do we endure the pain of the race of the Christian life? Well, as we heard last week, fundamentally, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. And yet, while this is absolutely true, I think sometimes this truth can be misapplied, and it can lead us to a sort of passive faith. It can lead us to adopt a sort of let go and let God approach to discipleship, where our active role as his disciples is diminished. And sadly, I think this sort of passivity in the Christian life is often the first step on the road to walking away from the Lord altogether. And the author of Hebrews, he wants us to avoid this mistake. And so in our passage this morning, he gives us more practical guidance on how we can run this race well.

So I invite you, if you haven't already, to open up to Hebrews chapter 12, and we'll be looking, focusing on verses 4 through 17.

I'll begin with verse 3, though. Hebrews 12, beginning in verse 3.

"Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

O gracious and mighty God, we bow before you, the Lord and giver of life, and we thank you for your word this morning. We confess our weakness, our ignorance, and we ask, Lord, that you, by your Spirit, will open our eyes, soften our hearts, help us to see what you would have us see, make us receptive to it, Lord, and in so doing, strengthen your people, that we might endure the race that you have set before us. And, Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock, my redeemer. Amen.

Most of you probably don't know that at one point in my life, I was an avid runner. I don't run anymore. Because of injury, I've had to hang up the running shoes, but in college, I laced them up with vigor as a member of the cross-country team. I loved the camaraderie that comes with running cross-country. I loved the peace and beauty and the challenge of the trails on Lookout Mountain. And seeing my zeal for the sport and my philosophical disposition, one of my teammates encouraged me to read Dr. Sheehan's classic book, *Running and Being*.

Running and Being, just the title is beautiful. Now, probably most of you aren't familiar with this book. So let me just say something about Dr. Sheehan. Dr. Sheehan was a rather eccentric philosopher, poet, cardiologist, runner. And this book is a sort of marriage between Socrates and Shorter, Frankie Shorter, the great American marathoner. It's like Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance only for runners. And y'all, I devoured this book. It ticked all the boxes for me as a runner and as a young, idealistic, often obnoxious, just ask my wife, philosophy student. But hey, in Sheehan, I felt like I'd met a kindred spirit. And as I was thinking about our passage this morning, I was reminded of what he'd said in this book on the uniqueness of the marathon. Listen to what he says. What is so special? What is unique about this 26 mile, 385 yard distance? Why this and not some other race? The answer is the wall, the physiological breaking point that comes at the 20 mile mark.

Runners claim that at this mark, the marathon is only half over, that the last six miles are equivalent to the 20 that went before. It is nearer to the truth to say that the 20 mile mark is where the marathon begins, there at the wall. The miles that have gone before are just foothills to this Everest. The wall is where the runner begins to come apart, either as suddenly as it takes to write this sentence or slowly and inexorably as the final miles turn into a cauldron of pain. Here, the runner finds himself pushed to the absolute limit and therefore needs to call on those hidden reserves to use all the fidelity and courage and endurance he has. Now, it seems to me that in our passage this morning, the author senses that some of his readers have hit this proverbial wall in their lives as disciples.

He sees that they're in danger of crashing to a halt under the pain and pressure and instead of enduring the race set before them, they're thinking of just throwing in the towel and walking away from Jesus altogether. And so here he picks up on the theme of endurance he'd introduced through his survey of the Old Testament saints and just brought to a climax in his focus on Jesus, and he's exhorting these faltering readers. He's exhorting you and me not to give up, but to endure. And to my mind, there are three basic angles the author uses in this passage as he exhorts us to endure the strain of this race. After setting the stage for his discussion in verses 4 through 6, in verses 7 through 11, he reminds us of several things we're apt to forget in the midst of our suffering. And then in verses 12 through 17, he both calls us to live out our endurance through action, and he gives us a solemn warning of the dangers in failing to endure.

So let's go ahead and take a look first at what he says about the things we're apt to forget when we suffer. And as we begin, we need to keep in mind the context of what he's about to say. You see, in verse 4, the author tells us that his readers were in a battle, a struggle against sin, he says. And given the broader context, I think what he's primarily referring to here is not a battle they were waging against their own sins, but rather one they were waging against the sins perpetrated against them by their persecutors. And this makes sense to me. After all, we already know from earlier in the letter that they were experiencing persecution. Some had suffered the loss of their property, still others had been incarcerated, and all of this because of their faith in Jesus, and the author had praised them for their endurance in the midst of these trials. But here he qualifies their struggle, and he tells us that unlike the Old Testament brothers and sisters, and unlike Jesus, they hadn't yet suffered such persecution that called on them to make the ultimate sacrifice, to shed their own blood for the sake of Jesus. In other words, the author's point here is that their current suffering was less than what either the Old Testament saints faced or what their Lord had faced.

But where these had endured, they were growing weary and fainthearted, and their lack of fortitude to the author was shameful. And as he reflected on it, he was led to the conclusion that they must have lost sight of some of the fundamental truths about the nature of the suffering we face as the Lord's people, truths which he saw beautifully expressed in Proverbs chapter 3, verses 11 and 12. And so he quotes this passage to them in verse 6. And it's with these verses from Proverbs as his starting point that the author proceeds in verses 7 to 11 to remind them of the things we're so apt to forget. And the first thing he reminds us of is that our suffering as believers is the Lord's fatherly discipline. Take a look at verses 7 and 8. Notice what he says there. He says "it is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

You see, in the midst of the persecution they were facing under its pressures and pain, the author's readers seemed to be losing their perspective. They were beginning to doubt their identity as his children, and perhaps they'd even begun to feel abandoned by God. And what they needed is a reminder that their suffering wasn't evidence of his abandonment. It was evidence of his fatherly presence. "It is for discipline that you have to endure," he says. "God is treating you as sons." And friends, I think we need to let that sink in. You see, as a loving father, the Lord uses the pain we've experienced and no doubt will continue to experience as we bear witness to him in the midst of a wicked world to train us in obedience, to mold our character, and to bring us to maturity. In fact, were he not to do so, this would be evidence of his lack of love for us, of our illegitimacy. But as it is, our suffering for his sake confirms our membership in his family.

It's an amazing thought. And yet, as precious as this truth is, I think it's also hard. It's a hard truth for us to accept, isn't it? I mean, it's not easy for us to find consolation in the knowledge that while we're locked in a battle against sin and being pushed to the breaking point, we're also being reprov'd and chastised, as the quote from Proverbs says, by our loving heavenly father. And I find what Tom Wright has to say about this challenge helpful. Listen to what he says. He says, "it may come as a shock to many Christians to discover that there lies ahead of them a life in which God, precisely because he is treating us as sons and daughters, will refuse to spoil us or ignore us, will refuse to let us get away forever with rebellion or folly, with sin or stupidity. He has his ways of alerting his children to the fact that they should either pause and think again, or turn around and go in the opposite direction, or get down on their knees and repent. When we find ourselves thwarted or disappointed, opposed or vilified, or even subject to physical abuse or violence, we may in faith be able to hear the gentle and wise voice of the father, urging us to follow him more closely, to trust him more fully, to love him more deeply. Suffering can be the trowel which digs deeply in the soil of our lives."

And the second thing the author wants to remind us of is that the Lord's fatherly discipline naturally calls for our submission. And in verses 9 and 10, he basically uses an argument from the lesser to the greater to make his point. And it goes like this, if we willingly submit to our earthly fathers who discipline us as best they can, despite their own selfishness and sinfulness, despite their limited understanding and the constraints of time, how much more should we submit ourselves to the discipline of our eternal heavenly father, who knows us intimately, who's completely trustworthy, and who always, always disciplines us for our good. For the author, it was a no-brainer. Of course we submit. And the obvious logic of this argument leads him to the third thing he wants to remind us of, and that's this. The Lord's fatherly discipline isn't arbitrary. It has a purpose. And this is something he underscores three times in this passage. In verse 9, he tells us that life is the reward of those who submit to the Lord's discipline. In verse 10, he tells us that "the Lord disciplines us that we might share his holiness." And in verse 11, he tells us that those trained up in the Lord's discipline will yield a harvest of the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Friends, these are the glorious purposes of the discipline of the Lord. For sinners like you and like me, what greater consolation in the midst of our suffering could there ever be than gifts like these? Life, eternal life, holiness, peace, and righteousness. These are the things our heavenly father intends for us as he disciplines us as children. And the author wants to remind us of these things. And yet, as rich and glorious as these purposes are, I think there's a danger here that we need to be mindful of. You see, sometimes, no doubt with good intentions, we quickly try to console people in the midst of their suffering by reminding them that the Lord is sovereign and that he has good and trustworthy purposes. And we do this

without ever pausing to acknowledge the very real pain they're facing and without entering into it with them. In other words, I think sometimes we're quick to assume that what suffering people need is a theological corrective when they might just need a tender arm of reassurance and our quiet presence with them. C.S. Lewis put it this way. He said, "we're not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us. We're wondering how painful the best will be." And I want you to notice too that the author is sensitive to this. In verse 11, he says, "for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant." You see, he acknowledges that the Lord's fatherly discipline is at times painful. And we need to do the same.

And so, friends, as we are called to endure the Lord's discipline as children submitting to the good purposes of our heavenly Father, let us do this with tenderness, patience, and empathy for one another, reflecting the compassion of our Savior who said, "come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Well, in the time we have remaining, I'd like us to briefly consider two other angles that the author uses as he exhorts us to endure. They come in verses 12 through 17. And in a sense, I think they're two sides of the same coin. On the one side, the author calls us to action as we endure. And on the other, he warns us of the very real dangers that exist for us if we fail.

So, what does he call us to do? And what dangers do we need to be aware of? Well, the first thing I want you to notice is that verses 12 through 15 are filled with commands. Here, the author tells us to lift drooping hands, to strengthen weak knees, and to make straight paths for our feet. He tells us to strive for peace with everyone and for holiness. And he tells us to see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no bitter root springs up, and that no one is sexually immoral and unholy like Esau. And it's obvious to me that what the author's doing here, at least initially, is he's picking up on that imagery of the race he'd used in verses one and two. And he's acknowledging that some within his reader's community had hit the proverbial wall as they struggled to remain faithful in the midst of their persecution. Their tired arms had begun to hang low. Their knees were beginning to buckle under the strain. No doubt they were finding it difficult to live peaceably in the midst of their pain, certainly, I think, with the persecutors, but perhaps too with their brothers and sisters in the Lord, and bitterness. Bitterness, I think, at the Lord's fatherly discipline was threatening to take root in their hearts. And they were flirting with rejecting the grace of God found in Jesus if it would mean a respite from their troubles. And in the face of this, what the author's doing here is he's calling us to communal action. He's calling us to compassionate and truthful intervention on behalf of our faltering brothers and sisters. And he's calling us to do this so that the weak might be supported, rather than left to go it alone. So that their path might be cleared of obstacles that trip them up and divert them, rather than lead them to the finish line.

He's doing this so that they might not despise the gift of the Lord's holiness, of which they'd been made partakers by the Spirit, or so that they might not spread the defiling poison of bitterness within the community, or follow in the ways of Esau, who profaned and despised the Lord's kindness by selling his first born birthright for a temporary respite from the pain of hunger for a single meal. Brothers and sisters, the Apostle Paul taught us in 1 Corinthians 12 that God has so composed his people that we are a body with many members, so that we may have care for one another. If one member suffers, he says, all suffer together. You see, the Lord has given us to one another, not only for the sweetness of our fellowship and the joy we experience in our worship here on Sunday, but also as a boon against the temptation to walk away from the Lord in the midst of the pain of his discipline. And friends, make no mistake, the danger of walking away, the author may explain, is real and frightful. To reject Jesus for a

momentary respite from suffering like Esau did, is to reject the only one through whom the God of the universe can be seen and known.

Again, Tom Wright, he says this, “every Christian fellowship, there may be some people, whether few or many, who are, as it were, passengers. They're enjoying being where they are, they like the company of Christian people, they feel safe and secure, but they have not done business with God for themselves. They have not sought and found his grace, that loving mercy, which goes down to the root of their being and transforms them at the core.” Nobody, says the author of Hebrews, should lack God's grace. Other members of the community must take care at this point, must watch out for one another, and make sure, as far as it depends on them, that grace reaches everyone. That is what he's saying in these last verses. Brothers and sisters, we're in this race together. Let us therefore hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as we see the day drawing near.

Let's pray.

Almighty God, thank you, Lord. Thank you for your word. Thank you for the power of the Spirit, through whom you have changed the hearts of sinners, through whom you have adopted us into your family. And so call us sons and daughters, and in your love, discipline us as you see fit. Father, we thank you for that. We ask, Lord, that you will help us to submit joyfully. Give us strength by your Spirit to endure the race set before us. We pray all this in the precious name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.