

Hope and Discipline

Hebrews 12: 3-11

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

May 8, AD 2022
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Our text for this morning is found in Hebrews 12:3-11. It's at this point in the book where we find a very frank and, in some ways, perhaps, startling passage regarding the realistic walk of a Christian man or woman through the years. This walk -- or race, rather -- is far from easy and is beset with challenges. Every seasoned Christian knows this well, the suffering inherent in living out the call to faith, and so we find our passage today not only acknowledging that reality but also pointing beyond it to the hope to be found even in our greatest moments of doubt, pain, and suffering. It's with that in mind that we approach the text before us, but before doing so, let us pray for the Lord's help.

Our God and Father, you who set the heavenly bodies in their places and dictated their courses, dictate now the course before us and set your Word before our eyes. By your Spirit, cause us to hear with ears of faith, see with spiritual eyes, and draw near to you with genuine and contrite hearts. Speak, O Lord, for we wait upon you.

Hear the Word of the Lord, beginning at Hebrews 12:3:

“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.”

In Hebrews 12:1-2, the two verses just before the passage we have before us this morning, a beautiful and triumphant climax is reached. The whole book of Hebrews is really one long treatise to the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ as well as the need to cling to him and not to turn aside and all of that builds to the end of chapter 10 and into chapter 11, the well-known “Hall of Faith.” It’s in chapter 11 where a myriad of Old Testament saints is trotted out, each of whom “by faith” was used of God in mighty and amazing ways to the effect that those who follow them in our day also ought to live lives of faith and faithfulness. This climbs and climbs to 12:1-2 where the analogy of the race is set up and this “great cloud of witnesses,” the faithful who have run the race of faith before us, is pictured as beckoning us onward toward the finish and, above all, we’re told that we ought to look to the example of faith above all, Jesus Christ. But Christ is much more than just a good example to follow as we run, he’s the whole reason we *can* run! He is the “founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” reigning as Lord and King. If those verses don’t get you fired up to run the race, to just shoot out of the starting block, then I’m not sure what will!

But it’s just after that, as verses 3 and 4 connect Christ’s sufferings to our sufferings, that a note of realism enters the conversation. You understand as we mentioned earlier that this “race” is by no means short or easy. It is long, narrow, and filled with potholes, tree roots, and every hurdle imaginable. Inherent to the Christian life -- a guarantee for us, in fact -- is that suffering will come. It’s that very reality that our passage addresses because while running the race of faith is hard and suffering is sure, there is great hope to be found even in those trials. In accord with that, there are three things I want us to notice from the text before us as we work through it with regard to suffering: ***the source, the purpose, and the reality.***

The first thing that we’re confronted with as we read this passage, especially as we hit verse 5 and on, is that of the source in suffering. Where do our trials ultimately come from? We read, “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?” And then quoting from Proverbs 3, “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.” He then summarizes and says, “It is *for discipline* that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.” It’s stated plainly, matter-of-factly, with no apparent impulse to pull God out of the potential line of fire, that God is the ultimate source of the Christian’s suffering and pain.

You might be wondering if that’s a valid observation, so I think it’s necessary that we consider the present context. This is linked way back to the end of chapter 10 if you’ll follow me. Chapter 11 is really one long parenthesis leading to this point because in

chapter 10 the previous sufferings of these Christians, as well as their present difficulty, is addressed. We read that these formerly Jewish converts to Christianity were persecuted and that some of them were put in prison for their beliefs. Then, left with a decision to make, the rest of the Christians chose not to stay hidden and ride out the storm, but boldly associated with their imprisoned brothers and sisters, and, as a result, they “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property.” These Christians suffered imprisonment, mocking, scorn, hatred, and the loss and destruction of property at the hands of wicked and sinful men, fully responsible for their sin. And who does the Lord through the author say was behind it all? God was. More than that, their present condition was far from easy. It is apparent that they, after that struggle, faced pressure to return to the Jewish rites and ceremonies in the Temple. They were likely outcasts of their families and cultures because of their conversion and were facing derision, more mocking, and being cut off from those they once loved and formed their closest bonds of relationship. But behind every sinful individual who turned their backs on these Christians, we are told, was the loving hand of God. It was from him.

Is that something that comforts you? We, as Presbyterians, confess that the Bible plainly teaches that God ordains *whatsoever comes to pass*, yet that’s not always easy to find peace in during the heat of it all. It’s not easy to find hope in the Sovereign God when you feel outed by your friends, looked at as alien by the ones that once loved you, and feel profoundly alone all because you’ve chosen to live out your faith. It’s not easy to say that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass when you reach a point in your life when you feel as though you’ve only spent years tilling the concrete, working tirelessly and, for what? You have nothing to show and you feel darkness closing in as the reality of your own mortality sinks in. And that’s just the start, isn’t it? Because it’s certainly not any easier to say that God is working in the muck of your life when you’re diagnosed with cancer and it’s terminal, or you find that the one that should love you and cherish you has actually done irreparable harm to you and those around you, or you get the call that a drunk driver veered into the other lane and your parents or your child is gone. Does it comfort you to know that God is at work even there?

It did for Joseph. His brothers nearly killed him, tossed him in a pit, sold him into slavery, and told his father that he had died. Senseless and sinful. Yet, at the end of his life, Joseph looked back on those things and said, “as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” It took years, but he came to see that in the greatest injustice and suffering of his life, God was working good even there. We see an even stronger picture of this at the cross. Pilate, Herod, the Jewish leaders, and the Roman soldiers were all sinners complicit in the death of our Lord, but who was really at work? In the most unjust act of all history -- the murder of the sinless God-man -- the hand of the Lord was at work to save sinners like you and me.

Brothers and sisters, our God is not a God of accidents. He isn't a God who is surprised by your pain and he's not a God whose plans are thwarted by the sinful actions of free and responsible people. He is a God who plainly ordains whatsoever comes to pass. Do you see now why we *must* believe this? Not only is it biblical, but it's also the only thing that can give meaning to what you go through. You must see and know, even in the darkest night when all hope seems remote, that God is not far. No, in fact, he is the very source of it all, and it comes from his love.

Now, before we can deal with the second point, we must address something. God is the source of your suffering, that much is plain, but why all this talk about "discipline?" The word occurs 9 times in these 9 verses. Hearing that word, one might naturally as if it means that somehow God is *punishing* you for your sins when you suffer. The short answer to that question is "no," for those who are in Christ by faith, your sins have been punished once and always. Christ has paid it. This term, however, as discipline even in English always should, goes beyond punishment. Discipline, properly framed, is education, it's correction, training, shaping. In my own life, the discipline my parents gave me that was most powerful was never given with a twisted frown and a red-hot face of anger. Rather, it was given with calm words of love, love that cared so much for me that -- though it pained my mother and father to reprimand me -- discipline was given in view of long-term good, preparing me for something.

So what is it that God is preparing you for in all your suffering? We're told in verse 10 that "he disciplines us for our good, *that we may share his holiness.*" All our pain, grief, and sorrow is aimed toward something: holiness. That's why the picture of the legitimate son being disciplined by the father fits so well. In those societies, the legitimate sons were the only ones who would typically inherit, so the discipline given them was to train them to be ready for the inheritance, to carry the family name, and to bear its likeness. Likewise, we are being trained and made ready for the inheritance, eternal life with God, which requires that we be holy as he is holy, bearing the family resemblance. In short, your suffering is making you ready for heaven, making you ready for God.

In John 7, Jesus calls to him those who thirst. In Matthew 5, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In Matthew 11, that famous gospel call, Jesus calls all who are weary and heavy-laden. Thirsty, hungry, weary, exhausted, heavy-laden... those descriptors don't apply to someone who's been floating through life on a breeze and has never known suffering. No, it characterizes those who have gone through the fire and are only holding on by God's grace. I know many of you have suffered considerably so I'll ask you, do you thirst? Are you weary? Are you dissatisfied with the emptiness of the promises this world gives and ready for

more? Do you grieve over the sins in your own heart that crop up over and over and yearn for the day when that struggle will end? Have you lost a child and cried out from that place of angry frustration that naturally comes from living in such a broken world? Only when you begin to thirst, hunger, and recognize the weariness of your own soul as God trains you through suffering will you be ready for him. It is through your suffering that God is teaching you to look away from yourself, this world, and even your loved ones and to fix your eyes on the heavenly city, our true and eternal home. That is the purpose behind your suffering, that you would be holy and so be made ready for life with God when all the pain will finally be consumed by joy.

So we've seen the source of suffering -- God -- and have acknowledged and found hope in its purpose, but we lastly need to make peace with the reality of it all. In verse 11, we read about that reality. "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." In the moment, as you suffer and feel the sting and pain of loss, it's not going to feel good. It's going to hurt. Sometimes we think, in those times, when grief and anguish overtake us, that these feelings are only cropping up because we haven't transcended to a level of spiritual maturity that will take it all on the chin and not move a muscle. That's just not the reality.

Have you spent time really reading the Psalms, praying over them, even? The beauty of the Psalter is that it encapsulates the whole range of human emotion, and one massive chunk of the Psalter is all about lament, it's about crying out to God in the midst of the pain. Brothers and sisters, it's not because you lack faith that you feel the pain and sting, you feel it because it is real and it is painful in the moment. It's about what that pain produces in you, though, that truly matters. That is, do you react to the doubt and hurt by turning away and hardening yourself toward God? Or, like the psalmist, do you turn to him and cry out from the depths, leaning on his everlasting arms? We know that all things work together for good for those who are called according to God's purpose, but that doesn't mean every step is going to *feel* good, it means that it one day will be revealed as ultimate good, and sometimes we must trust that the answer to "why" isn't clean and easy, but the reason will be made known in glory. It's in response to this very difficulty that I'd like to end with a stanza from one of my favorite hymns. May this be our prayer. It goes, "whate'er my God ordains is right, here shall my stand be taken. Though sorrow, need, or death be mine, yet I am not forsaken. My Father's care is 'round me *there*, he holds me that I shall not fall; and so to him I leave it all."