

RCC in the Word
Week of October 28
Hebrews 12:3-13

Have you ever watched or read about incredible feats and been inspired to do the same thing? I loved watching the Olympics as a kid. It didn't matter which sport. I could find myself fascinated with the idea that in the whole world these were the best at this particular event. And of course there would be the "World Record" ticker in the corner of the screen so that we could compare the current performance with the greatest in history. It was fun to think "I could practice and do that too!" Perhaps you've enjoyed a beautiful piece of music, fallen in love with the sound of a particular instrument, and decided you would play in an orchestra. Maybe you've seen a beautiful garden full of perfect vegetables and not a weed in sight and thought "We are going to grow our own food!" Insert whatever example you like, you get the idea. Usually at some point sooner or later we realize that it is actually really hard to do whatever it is we had gotten so excited about. Presuming we actually have the capacity to do this thing, it is going to take time (which means sacrificing other things) and discipline. Shortly after this we come to the realization that sacrifice and discipline are not nearly as fun or exciting as the end result we thought we wanted (which are far from the results we have at the moment), and we say "is this really worth it?...nah". New Year's "resolutions" are of course notorious for this.

I don't know about you, but by the time I read Hebrews through chapter 12 verse 2, I am pumped. "Yes, let's run the race that is set before us! Look at that great cloud of witnesses! Get off me weight and sin that clings so closely!" And so we should be inspired. But I think the writer of Hebrews also understood that we needed to know what it would take to run that race. He gives us not only notice of the fact we need discipline to live the Christian life, but where that discipline comes from and how we should consider it.

In Hebrews 12:2 we are told to look to "Jesus, 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." This is inspiring, but it also foreshadows the heavy lifting that will be drawn out more in verses 3-11. Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Don't miss the middle part. He endured the cross, despising the shame. Verses 3 and 4 continue: "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."

Again we are directed to our Lord, to consider the suffering which he endured, with at least two aims in mind. One, we should be humbled to realize that if we are getting complacent with our struggle against sin, and use the imaginary idea that we have been working really hard and deserve a breather...or even a pat on the back...we are only getting started. Jesus overcame sin and death by sacrificing himself on the cross. At his death when the guard pierced him, blood

and water flowed out from his side. His hands and feet bled from the nails fastening him to the tree. He was also flogged, whipped and otherwise beaten, causing bleeding. And being fully God, though he could have escaped, he willingly endured this as simultaneously fully man. And it hurt. He suffered.

There was another time we can read about where our Lord and Savior, in a struggle against sin, shed blood. Luke 22: 44 “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.” In genuine agony, even with the ministering strength of an angel with him, the anticipation of the cup he was about to drink was known and felt in a real struggle, to the point of shedding blood. Lest we give ourselves a pass on the sin we know is there, considering it unrealistic to struggle “that hard”, we are told to consider him.

Another aim, at the same time, is to encourage us. Not only is Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, our greatest example and teacher. He also empowers us by his Spirit fight this good fight. We are no longer slaves to sin. Consider Jesus. He has freed us to struggle. He has promised us a helper in the Holy Spirit. He has overcome the world. He has known us and loved us since before the foundation of the world. No one will snatch us out of his hand. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He that began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. Consider Jesus, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

A helpful description of discipleship is that we are to equip the saints to preserve and protect the gospel, and prepare them to endure the suffering which results. 2 Tim 1: 8-9 “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...”. In no way would I undermine the persecution of the saints in Christian history, or our brothers and sisters today who are tortured and killed due to their faith. However, even where God has us in relative peace, we are to share in suffering for the gospel. This suffering can happen in many forms and places. But most immediately and most importantly it takes place in our own hearts in the struggle against sin. And remember that it is by the grace of God that you have these sufferings, and by the power of God that you endure.

Wait a minute, wasn't this supposed to be about discipline? What is with all the “suffering and enduring” stuff?

It is an important transition that the writer of Hebrews takes us through in asking us to consider him who endured suffering, to then take us back to Proverbs. Hebrews 12: 5-6 continues: “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 absolutely critical to understand that suffering which we experience as Christians is a good thing, and that it is discipline from our heavenly Father. We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing

that suffering produces endurance (Rom 5:3). God graciously provides suffering for us to grow in our faith, and produce endurance, to continue the struggle against sin.

In thinking about the discipline from God let me take a moment to clarify that discipline is not punishment. The motive of punishment is wrath. The motive of discipline is love.

You may have heard these before:

- “But if God loves me, why is he allowing me to suffer in this way?”
- “I don’t understand why God, if so powerful, allows so much suffering in the world.”
- “I don’t think God really has all these restrictions/unreasonable expectations.”

Verses 7-11 continue: “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.”

Here we have the connection between endurance (of suffering, including in the struggle against sin), and discipline which is administered by God. We are assured that as God’s children, loved by God, we have to be disciplined. And this is a good thing! The writer understands, no one is saying “Yay, give me some more of that discipline!” For the moment it seems painful. But it has beautiful purposes. The peaceful fruit of righteousness and that we may share in his holiness. Surely then “for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials” (1 Pet 1: 6), that moment is worth it. And so “do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.” Don’t ignore it. Don’t misunderstand its source. Don’t stay the same as a result. “Nor be weary when reproved by him.” Don’t despair. Don’t exhaust yourself trying to understand why this is happening to you. Instead...

Verses 12 and 13 continue: “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight the paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.”

We’ve got work to do! “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:” (Col 3:5). We must be strong for this kind of battle. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God...” (Eph 6: 10-11). Embrace the discipline of the Lord, and by his grace grow in wisdom and understanding. Let his word be a light unto your path. By it make your path smoother and straighter, so that as you continue to run the race, what lameness remains can be healed.

-Written by Jason Yokum