

Hang In There

Hebrews 12:1-13

Typically, Americans are not a people who take well to inconveniences. The following are actual responses from comment cards left at Bridger Wilderness Area in 1996:

- Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.
- Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
- Please pave the trails so they can be plowed during the winter.
- A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed?
- Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.
- Too many rocks in the mountains.

Nobody likes to be inconvenienced. Many people turn to a kind of Christianity that promises prosperity and comfort. But, the Bible teaches that if we are too at ease in this world, we could be out of touch with the spiritual kingdom that is at odds with the prince of this age. If I read this morning's text correctly, it is not the nature of life, even the Christian life, that everything goes our way.

If you are interested only in the kind of religion that promises ease, health, wealth, prosperity as well as triumphs and victories over everything you'll ever face, then, you may not find Hebrews a very satisfying read. The letter was written to a people wavering in their faith. The leaders of the Jews had persecuted Christians from the earliest days of the church. Now, to compound the pressure, Jews and Christians alike in Jerusalem were fearful as the storm of a final bloody conflict with Rome gathered. For too long, in Rome's eyes, Judea had been a land of too many zealots, too many insurrections and too much brazen disregard for Roman order. Everyone sensed that something ominous was in the air.

For the believers in Jerusalem, faith in Christ had been exciting back in the early days. The resurrected Jesus had ascended into heaven promising not only to return, but by His Spirit, to never really leave them at all. Back then, the Apostles performed powerful miracles that made unbelievers marvel, and the church grew by thousands at a time. But, Jesus did not come back. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, months into years and years into decades. Coming to Jesus had cost many of His disciples their property and their families. Some of them had even died for their faith.

Some Christians were starting to feel worn down. All around them, their unbelieving Jewish brothers were pouring themselves intensely into their religious observances, as people in hot water tend to do. Discouraged, the saints were beginning to neglect meeting together. As they examined the temple practices they had observed from childhood, making sacrifices and returning to meticulous rituals may have seemed more tangible than simply placing faith in a Redeemer that had not been seen for years. Sight seemed more trustworthy than faith. Running back to their roots made sense, but their response to the pressure could not have been more backwards to what it should have been.

Hebrews was written to these Jewish Christians to encourage them to cling to Jesus. To make his case, the author carefully developed how Jesus, our Man in heaven, is superior to everything connected to the old way of Judaism. He is greater than the angels who introduced the old covenant to man. He is greater than Moses, the human mediator of God's Law. The Sabbath-Rest Jesus secures for His people is better than the Promised Land the Hebrews longed to enter in Moses' day. As a sinless priest and a perfect sacrifice, Jesus is a better priest and sacrifice than any priest or sacrifice of the old order. The atonement in Jesus is absolute, unlike any symbolic atonement of the Law. Even the promises of God in Jesus are superior to any promises worded to their ancestors.

Acting upon God's trustworthy promises was the thrust of Hebrews 11, one of the most famous chapters in the Bible. Old Testament saints obeyed God in amazing ways because of those promises, even though they never saw them fulfilled in their own lifetimes. A promise that God would undo the work of Satan compelled Abel and Enoch to act upon their belief in God. Because God said a flood was coming, the likes of which had never been seen before, Noah built an ark that would double as a floating zoo. A promise of a national homeland compelled Abraham to leave his own home and live as a nomad. Isaac, Jacob and the patriarchs also lived as wanderers. Moses, Rahab and the various judges of Israel lived toward the fulfillment of God's promises rather than be distracted by worldly fears. A vision of *Messiah's* kingdom gave courageous hope to many prophets and other heroes.

Now, in Jesus, all the promises of the former covenant had been fulfilled. The only promises that remained were new ones, the return of Jesus for His people and the eternal heaven. This was no time to bail out. Our text presents four pointers for successfully finishing the Christian life in spite of the hardships that this world throws at us. The first likens the Christian experience to a distance race.

I. Run Life's Race to the Finish (verse 1)

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

A. Know that You Are Being Cheered On

"A great cloud of witnesses" surrounds us. The author may have intended to convey a dual meaning with this picture. A "witness" is primarily one who testifies. Like Abel in chapter 11:4, these witnesses still speak even though they are dead. What do they tell us? Many of them were not profoundly spiritual people. Some pulled stunts we would never dream of. But, they tell us that even weak and sinful people can exercise great faith when they stop relying on themselves and start believing God. The other meaning that emerges from this "cloud of witnesses" is one of a heavenly throng pulling for us. They are witnesses "to" us in that they are examples in faithfulness. But, they may very well be witnesses "of" us. That should have the effect of inspiring our highest effort.

Listening to the wrong crowd throws us off stride. We listen to experts who re-label the flaws God calls sin as personality traits about which nothing can be done. Indeed, a man can do very little to defeat his temper, his propensity for obsessive worry or his proclivity towards sexual misbehavior. But, to deny that what God calls "sin" is sin is to shamelessly surrender to evil. Do you believe God in regard to sin? Do you believe He can change you? Then don't listen to the rationalizing voices of this age for they only mask a spirit of hedonism. Rather, heed the witness of those who have gone before us, who trusted the promises of God with much less revelation to go on than we have.

B. Travel Light

Ancient runners competed virtually naked. "Throw off everything that hinders." This could refer to anything from clothing to a few extra pounds. To us, it means anything that hinders our progress in Christ. Not everything that hinders us is necessarily sin. There are shades of gray. When does harmless moderation become sinful indulgence? When does the responsible stewardship of resources become sinful and tight-fisted anxiety over an uncertain future? When does the enjoyment of life's blessings become materialism? We need to be brutally honest with ourselves. We ask, "Is this technically sinful?" so as to walk near the edge. We should ask: "Does this help me to run or does it weigh me down?"

"Let us throw off everything that hinders AND the sin that so easily entangles ..." Many things are not gray. We give ourselves permission to hold onto little vices, taking comfort in the fact that we have given up the big ones, but one sin leads to another. The first lie leads to a host of lies. Hidden sins lead to cover-ups. Flirting with an environment or an association that tempts you in an area of weakness will lead to a fall. Sin surrounds us and easily "entangles" us. Avoid all temptation.

The race featured in our text is not a 100 meter sprint. It is a grueling endurance race. ESPN reports the winners of the big marathons in New York City and Boston. But, for most of the participants in such races, it's not about winning or about setting records. It is about finishing. If any of our runners went to Boston for the next running of that marathon, we probably wouldn't even look for your name among the top five finishers, but we'd all be proud of you were you just to cross the finish line.

II. Rivet Your Eyes on Jesus (verses 2-4)

²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood ...

A. Jesus Is Our Supreme Example in Endurance

Hebrews 11 was filled with examples of enduring faith, but Jesus Himself is the "author" of the faith by which we run. He endured everything that any of us might endure. He was tempted but He did not sin. He agonized in Gethsemane, but He did not balk. Jesus was completely innocent, but to die on a cross was to endure the most shameful, humiliating and excruciating kind of death imaginable. The struggle in the garden was intense. Jesus sweat blood. But, the author of our faith also became its "perfecter." He scorned the shame of the cross for a great cause. Jesus "endured the cross," because it stood in the way of His joy in saving those He loved and of obeying His Father's purposes.

B. Maintain Perspective

This letter from a daughter away at college caught my eye:

Dear Dad:

I'm sorry to be so long in writing but my stationery was lost when the demonstrators burned down my dorm. I'm out of the burn unit, and the doctors say I should get at least 80% of my vision back. I was rescued by a wonderful boy named "Chainz". I think we're in love, but my new tattoo got infected when I had an allergic reaction to his green hair dye.

Please disregard the previous paragraph. There was no fire, my eyes are fine and I have neither a boyfriend nor a tattoo. I am, however, failing Chemistry. I just wanted to be sure you received this news with a proper sense of perspective. Love, Mary.

The writer was sensitive to the plight of his readers, but he wanted them to maintain perspective. What they had suffered was mild compared to what others before them had endured and certainly nowhere near what Jesus had endured. "You haven't bled yet," he told them. It sounds a little tough like, "Gut it up, you whiners!" And, yet, it must have been encouraging, for real faith inspires. They were doubting that their faith would be rewarded, but many before them had stood fast through even more severe trials. Was God not the same God? They must believe Jesus and face whatever lay before them as their fathers and as Christ Himself had.

III. Respect Your Heavenly Father's Wisdom (verses 5-11)

... ⁵And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

A. Discipline Evidences a Caring Parent

It was universally understood in those days that discipline was a part of parenthood. In Christ, we know God as our Father, and what is a part of human fatherhood is also a part of His divine Fatherhood, only to a perfect degree. "Discipline" seems like a harsh word, but the root of the word here is the word for "child." What the writer is talking about here is child-shaping, which is far more exhaustive than mere punishment. Child-proof latches, fences around the yard, a gate across the top of the stairs, verbal instruction, encouragement - all these things are parts of shaping a child.

Discipline in all its forms was so much understood to be a part of fatherhood that the absence of discipline meant that one was not loved. To "make light of the Lord's discipline" is to dismiss it, to despise it or to endure some hardship while altogether missing God's hand in it. The best human fathers make mistakes when they discipline their children. They act in rage. They lose control. They are too lenient at times. Sometimes, they miscalculate. But, generally, they do their best. God is the perfect Father of our Spirits. He makes no mistakes. In hours of trial, the believer must trust His heavenly Father.

B. Loving Discipline Is No Fun, But It Always Has a Good Aim

"I'm doing this for your own good." "This is going to hurt me worse than it is you." And, of course, the child always responds, "I understand, Father. You do your best to mold me into a man of character, and I am profoundly grateful." No? More likely, they say, "My parents hate me." But, grownups also have a hard time believing that God's love always undergirds the trials He sends our way. By nature, just like our own children, we balk at the notion that bad things happen to bring about good results in us. The author understands and concedes that discipline never seems pleasant, but adding, "Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Mr. Krodel was the vice-principal at James Fannin Junior High. He and I spent a lot of time together in my seventh and eighth-grade year. In those days, swats were not only permitted by parents, but they were appreciated. My dad's position was, "Take him out." After administering whatever punishment was due, Mr. Krodel always made me shake his hand. At the time, I thought, "This is a sick man." But, in the spring of my ninth-grade, he wrote in my yearbook by his own picture, "I missed you this year, J. Krodel." Somehow, I had made it through nearly an entire school year without a single trip to his office. Maybe discipline does work. I had become a model citizen without even realizing it.

In this world, we have hardship, but that does mean that we are paying a debt to God as a convict pays his debt to society. We could never pay such a debt. In all things, however, we are being molded into the image of Jesus by a Father Who loves us. This is how we are invited to view our trials. Self-pity and resentment do not serve us. Playing the martyr just annoys everyone else. Knowing that God is taking us somewhere in all things encourages all who are willing to believe Him in this matter.

IV. Revitalize One Another (verses 12, 13)

¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

A. We Need Others to Help Us to Endure

The best way to be strong is to be strong with others and for others. Even Moses, the greatest man of Jewish history, needed others. *JEHOVAH* gave him Aaron as a mouthpiece to go before Pharaoh. Moses called the elders of the people to counsel him on leadership strategy. "Strengthen your feeble arms" reminds me of one key battle in which God promised victory to the Israelites so long as Moses held up his arms. As his strength held out, Israel would win the conflict. As his strength waned, the tide of the battle would turn. Finally, others came to assist Moses by holding up his exhausted arms.

B. The Weak Need Us to Facilitate their Paths

"Make level paths" for the sake of the lame. The idea is that when others already have difficulty walking a path, we should make the way as "walkable" as we can. We do this by knowing the difference between Christ's commands and our own applications of those commands. We do this by committing ourselves to be examples in faith. When any of us, especially leaders, make choices out of the fears within us rather than by faith, the effect can be devastating to the weak. We are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses" who endured incredible trials. There may be someone who needs you to be numbered in his "great cloud of witnesses." The people in your life need strong witnesses. Always cling to your hope in Christ. It will serve you well. It will build up others as well.