



RETHINKING DISCIPLINE

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Federal Way, WA
November 11, 2007*

As some of you know, tomorrow's my birthday. So tonight, we're going to Buca di Beppo, the family style Italian restaurant in Seattle. I love Italian food, so it's always great. But I'm not really going there for the dinner. I'm there for the double dark chocolate cake. They give you this enormous slice of the densest layered chocolate cake ever, with thick frosting in between each layer and sitting on a pool of creamy Sambuca sauce. I don't even know what Sambuca means and I don't care.

It's so good. And it's so rich. I can't even begin to finish a whole piece myself, although it might be worth getting sick just to take in a few more bites.

We're coming near the end of our study of Hebrews (2 messages left), and it feels to me like this has been a thick piece of double dark chocolate cake. Hebrews is so good, and there's so much there. It's so rich I can't even begin to take it all in. I hope our time with this book inspires you to go back to it for seconds and thirds on your own, because we've barely taken a bite out of it. There's a lot of good leftovers, and I'd encourage you to reread some of these chapters and spend some time getting to know the sections we've skipped.

Last week we talked about running the race of faith. We said it's a marathon, that it takes faith for the long haul. It's not an easy race. The author develops that thought in a somewhat different direction as we continue on with chapter 12.

Hebrews 12:7-13

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, 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!

Our 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. No 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.

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

When I was a kid, I used to like to check out books that had optical illusions in them. I was fascinated by them. There was always kind of an "aha!" moment when you saw something beyond the initial image.

But when they came out with those "Magic Eye" pictures, I could never make them work. They were really popular for a while, and everywhere you'd go, you'd see those posters. I would stare at them and stare at them, but I just couldn't see what I was supposed to see. They say you have to focus on some spot beyond the image and not just look at what's on the surface. But knowing that never helped me much. Even today, I can put this picture on the screen, and I know there's supposed to be a shark in there somewhere, but my eyes just can't do it.

The author of Hebrews wants us to gain some spiritual eyesight that's very difficult to do. He's telling us that hardship and difficult times in some ways are like those optical illusions. What we first see and feel as we go through them may not in fact be all they appear to be. The pain is real and unpleasant, but there's something more happening that we might not recognize immediately. We need to focus on what's beyond the surface in order to see what God is doing, which he defines as discipline.

Endure hardship as discipline, he says. Is that supposed to be an encouragement? There was nothing I hated worse as a kid than being disciplined. There was the guilt over what I'd done wrong, the dread of waiting to find out my punishment and the actual pain of whatever it ended up being. It was awful.

So you could easily make the argument that thinking of hardship as God's discipline only makes matters worse, not better. Because that makes me feel like I'm being treated as a child, like I'm being scolded. It makes me feel that God is harsh and stern. And it makes me feel like my problems are all my fault and I'm being punished for my mistakes. No thank you.

Yet the author clearly intended for his words to be taken as encouragement and not discouragement. He was presenting what he thought would be motivating and inspiring to his readers. How did we end up in such a different place?

We don't often think about discipline, let alone God's discipline. We might use the term "self-discipline" in a positive way and admire people who have it. We might even go so far as to talk about church discipline, when church leadership has to step in and speak to sin in someone's life. We can see the need for that.

But we're less used to thinking about God disciplining us. It doesn't make us very comfortable. How in the world could that possibly be a source of encouragement?

We'll get to that in a minute, but first I'd like to go back and look at what we're supposed to interpret as discipline, which is this idea of hardship or suffering. We're touching on an issue known as theodicy, which essentially asks this question: If God is good and all powerful, how can there be evil and suffering in the world? If he is good and created everything, he would want us all to be happy, healthy and safe. Which we're not. And if he were all powerful, he could do something to change the situation. But he doesn't. How can you reconcile that?

That was Job's question to God when he suffered so much injustice. But he didn't get an answer. Instead he got questions back from God, essentially asking, "Do you think you know better than me?"

Job 40:8-9

*Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?
Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his?*

God puts over 70 questions like that to Job, and by the end, you feel in your own spirit what Job said back to God:

Job 42:3

*Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.*

The answers to the big why question are like a big pie chart, and we only get to see a tiny sliver. I say that because as we talk today about viewing hardship as discipline, I hope we can hear the thought for what it is and not try to make it the explanation for everything. That's not the intent of the author of Hebrews. He's not trying to make a blanket statement about why all suffering in the world happens.

What he IS doing is giving us a framework for processing events in our lives that would normally be unwelcome. That framework is this idea of discipline.

Discipline is a loaded word that could mean many things. Usually we associate it with punishment. You do something wrong – you get what you deserve. Do the crime, do the time.

We can get the idea that some sort of cosmic justice is at work, that we've got bad karma and we're suffering exactly what we should because we've done something wrong. I used to work with this woman, and every time something bad would happen to her, she would come to work and say, "What did I do wrong? I must have done something."

But that doesn't line up with God's view of discipline.

Psalm 103:10

He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

God's form of justice does not involve payback on us. Why? Because he's already satisfied that kind of justice in what happened to Jesus on the cross.

Isaiah 53:5

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.

Discipline is not about divine retribution. There are definitely natural consequences to our actions, and we can reap what we sow in that sense, but God is not looking to squeeze payment out of us for all our wrongs. Otherwise, Christ's death has no meaning.

So what's a more Christian view of discipline? How can we change our understanding of it so that the next time we're going through difficulties we can know how to respond? Our text gives us some clues we can lean on.

One of the first things to grapple with is the truth that

Discipline is more about our future than our past.

We normally view discipline as a consequence for something we've done, when in God's mind it's more preparation for something we can become.

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No 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.

It's not what leads to the discipline that's so important – it's what the discipline can accomplish in the long run.

When I was a freshman in high school, I decided out of the blue that I wanted to go out for the soccer team. I had never played on a soccer team before in my life. And I'll let you in on a secret: my natural athletic ability wasn't really enough to carry me. I remember on the first day of practice, the coach went down the line asking each person how many years they'd played. Every one of them had 3, 5, 7 years experience. I didn't have much chance of keeping up. I made it through the season, but I didn't go back.

Similarly, I decided I wanted to start taking piano as a junior in high school. Call me a late bloomer. I had always been in band, so I had some musical training, but I only squeezed in a year of piano before I was headed off to college. I never really developed any true piano skills because it takes years to get good at it.

So, when I became a parent and had different opportunities to get my kids into various sports and activities or music lessons, I thought about my experiences in high school and thought about my kids future in high school. Karin and I decided that we wanted them to have some options when they got older, so we would try to give them broad

experiences when they were younger. Like most parents, we have tried to see where they gravitate and give them encouragement in those areas to pursue them.

Let me tell you, there's been a lot of protesting around our house over having to go to lessons or practices. Sometimes the kids have wanted to quit altogether. And there's always the fine line of not pushing your children into things they don't want to do. But as a father, my intention for my kids is not just to provide for them here and now, but also to look to their future. That means inserting some discipline now that could change life for them down the road.

As God disciplines us, it is with our future in mind. We can't see that. All we know about ourselves is our past, so we always assume that rough times come along because of our previous actions. Like that woman I worked with, we ask, "What did I do wrong?" And sometimes the answer is "nothing." God is the Father with an eye on who we are becoming, and he uses discipline to move us closer to that vision. Later on, the author of Hebrews says, this pain is going to produce something good.

Rather than asking, "Why is this happening?" a better question would be, "What might God want to shape in me through this?" I emailed back and forth with somebody this week who was having difficulty forgiving. It was some deep, long standing hurt. But rather than sit and question how God could allow it, they focused instead on what they needed to learn about forgiveness and dealing with bitterness they could see in their own heart. That's what the author of Hebrews means by enduring discipline – letting it have its effect on you in spite of the circumstances.

That won't necessarily make the suffering seem more enjoyable, but it at least points beyond it to a hopeful future. It says that a bad situation will not get the last word.

That frees us from worrying about what caused the situation and lets us focus instead on our response to it. God allows hardship and uses it as discipline in our lives because he is optimistic that we can change and grow. It's more about our future than our past.

Discipline is more about interaction than correction.

When I was in junior high I went to summer camp at Millersylvania. That was always a highlight of my vacation. Now the food was never very good. But one thing all of us looked forward to at dinner was the chance to catch somebody putting their elbows on the table. Because if we did, we would all shout their name and sing this song, and they would have to get up and run around the mess hall. There's nothing better than humiliating one of your friends in front of the whole camp.

Do you ever feel like God is sitting and waiting to pounce on your mistakes? Maybe discipline feels like finishing school, where God is constantly picking at you and prodding you until you're completely boxed in by rules.

That's correction. That's top down management from the outside. But God gives us discipline as a gift that we actually participate in. Look again at that verse:

No 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.

That word translated as trained is the same one we get our word gymnasium from, and I think that's a helpful analogy. When you're working out with a trainer, it's not about them giving you advice: It's about you working with them, learning from them and improving your own technique. It's this interactive process where you're taking in their instruction and acting on it yourself.

My dad for years has had his own business. He will go into a company and put on a training seminar in business writing. In those seminars, he doesn't go in and correct papers – he goes in and gives the participants new tools that they can use to raise the level of their own writing. It's practical, hands-on, involving kind of training.

Not only that – training is specific and essential. It's not theoretical knowledge, it's vital. Ask any state patrol officer if their training at the academy mattered in the way they drive during a high speed chase. Ask any doctor if they needed training before giving a shot. There is concrete help that comes out of going through the discipline of a hands-on training program.

I don't tend to think about God's discipline in the same way. Hardship is something that happens TO me. Suffering is from the outside, forced on me. I may accept that it's from God, then hunker down and grit my teeth through it. But viewing it as training is going one step further: I am supposed to get involved in this discipline. I internalize it and learn new skills from it so that I can do things differently than I did before.

This shifts our attention from whatever the hardship is to what potential it has for a positive side effect. Instead of asking "When will this end?" we can ask, "What does this experience have to offer?" If I see this as some form of training, what's the nugget of wisdom, the one insight I can walk away with?

Most hardships that God transforms into discipline can fall into four main categories. I use the acronym CLAP, and just as one hand comes against another, you can think of it as what you come up against in life. Here they are:

C – Conflict. I find myself fighting against a person or a situation, and I'm not getting my way.

L – Loss. Someone or something I care deeply about has been taken from me and I am grieving.

A – Anxiety. This is the not knowing – not knowing what the future holds, not knowing how I will get through this, not knowing if I can meet expectations.

P – Pain. I am physically suffering or emotionally hurting. There’s an illness or a wound getting in my way.

There are probably exceptions to those categories, but the bulk of our hardships can be filed under one of those headings.

Once we’ve identified the type of hardship we’re encountering, we can then think more specifically about it to see how people in Scripture handled similar types of suffering and found the discipline in it. This chart gives some examples of ways to begin thinking along those lines.

| CONFLICT | LOSS | ANXIETY | PAIN |
|--|---|--|--|
| Scripture: Matthew 5:21-24 Romans 14:13 Ephesians 4:32 | Scripture: Psalm 31:9 Psalm 34:18 Psalm 119:28 | Scripture: Psalm 139:23-24 Matthew 6:25-34 Philippians 4:6 | Scripture: Psalm 119:107 2 Corinthians 12:7-8 1 Peter 2:19 |
| What can I look for? - Holy Spirit’s leading - Reconciliation - Correction - Strength | What can I look for? - Comfort - Perspective - God’s presence - Hope | What can I look for? - Unexplained peace - Courage - God’s resources | What can I look for? - God’s strength - Appreciation of Christ’s suffering - Healing |
| What can I practice? - Grace - Patience - Forgiveness - Self-control - Listening | What can I practice? - Dependence on God - Empathy for others - Leaning on church | What can I practice? - Dependence on God - Prayer - Asking for help | What can I practice? - Dependence on God - Perseverance - Empathy for others |

This is not meant in any way to be a comprehensive list or a guarantee of what you will experience in your own situation. I only offer it as a way to get the wheels turning and to say that part of the point of God’s discipline is for us to take it and do something with it.

It’s important to note that the author of Hebrews is not in any way suggesting that these “take-aways” from hardship mean you’re supposed to be happy about having to go through it. He’s very candid in his words when he says, “No discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful.”

All too often, Christians are uncomfortable seeing other Christians admitting that they hurt, because they think it somehow undermines faith. If we say we don’t like what we’re going through, if we show our weakness, then we feel like it reflects badly on God. I am so grateful that Hebrews doesn’t ask us to sugarcoat suffering. It’s still suffering. We’re not asked to put on a brave face and pretend it’s all better because we’re learning from it.

It's not better. It hurts. And one of the greatest gifts we can give each other is the freedom to walk through it without feeling like we need to hurry up and get over our wounds.

Peter Greig wrote, "Whenever life gets tough and we cry out to God for help, our desire is always to be airlifted out of the theater of war. But more often than not, instead of airlifting us to safety, God parachutes down to join us in the muck and chaos of our situation."

Seeing hardship as discipline is not a way to make it less uncomfortable – it's a way to see that God is right there with us in the middle of it, redeeming it and turning it into a source of his grace in our lives.

This is where the concept of discipline starts to make sense as encouragement rather than discouragement. The most fundamental truth the author wants us to understand is that

Discipline is more about love than discipline

Instead of seeing hardships as signs that God has abandoned us, he says "They're just the opposite. They're signs of how much he cares."

That's a radical idea. It turns everything on its head. When we talk about a loving God, we don't think of one who disciplines – we think of one who loves us just as we are. We don't see the two ideas as being compatible.

In his classic book, "The Problem of Pain," the great C.S. Lewis put it really well:

What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves", and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of the day 'a good time was had by all.'

We would never say it that way, but he's on to something. We want a God who doesn't make too many demands of us. And when we talk about his love, we generally focus on his forgiveness.

But it's his discipline that demonstrates his relationship to us. It's his discipline that shows he's our Father. If I have the misfortune of being drug to a McDonald's play area that's full of kids doing things they shouldn't, I'm not going to go up to each one and put them in time out. They're not my kids. They're not my responsibility.

Parents discipline those they claim as their own, and we can see God putting his claim on us through suffering. If he didn't care, he wouldn't bother allowing things into our life that have the capacity to help us. If his love was weak, he wouldn't have the stomach for watching us endure so much. But he's our Father. That's the only way to find any

consolation in the middle of our troubles. God is loving father who only has our best in mind.

Not only that, because he's our Father, we can be sure that he won't allow more grief than we can bear. Hebrews talk about human dads, and how their discipline can be imperfect. They do the best they can at the time, but they don't always know.

God does. He not only knows what he hopes we'll become, he knows how much we can or can't take at any given time. And his discipline will never exceed what's right.

Psalm 103:13-14

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

Why can we endure hardship as discipline? Because viewed in that light, it shows that a loving Father is in control. His goal is not punishment – Christ took that for us. His goal is not fault-finding. His goal is to equip us and shape our hearts. He's treating us as sons and daughters.

Christ is the model of what it means to be God's Son, and we see him going through this same process in his life on earth, in a sense enduring God's discipline, even though he never did anything wrong. Earlier in Hebrews, it says,

Hebrews 5:8-9

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

The hardship became an essential part of his relationship with God the Father. He took it, endured it, interacted with it and gave it to God, who worked through it. The resurrection is proof of the final outcome

What's your hardship this morning? Have you offered it to God? He will transform it. As your loving Father, he will walk with you through it. Even your suffering can become a vehicle of his grace. And in the end, God will raise you up. Resurrection awaits, because God is treating us as his children and preparing us for an eternal home with him.

Isaiah 45 says this:

Isaiah 45:3

I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.

When we are going through those dark times of discipline, it's good to know that God has treasures hidden in that darkness, riches he wants to give to us so that we can know him – this God who calls us by name, who asks us to call him Father. That's the true key to hope in hardship.