

Title: An Encouraging Word
Date: January 28, 2018
Subject: How to face discipline/training
Scripture: Hebrews 12:4-13

Two couples were enjoying an evening together. The guys talked about sports, jobs and got around to restaurants where they'd eaten recently. One went on and on about a place that served the most delicious Mexican food. No, it wasn't Taco Bell. He bragged about the quality of the food, the atmosphere, etc., etc. His friend asked the name. "Let's see. What was it? Oh come on. I should be able to remember. It's an easy name. Uh, there's something to do with a flower, um, um, it's the kind that has thorns." "You mean, a rose." "That's it. Hey Rose, what's the name of the restaurant we ate at?"

Now that's a bad memory. Have you ever forgotten something that's important? Sometimes we as followers of Christ forget.

READ Hebrews 12:4-13

The background is the struggle against sin, primarily the comparison between what Jesus suffered and what people experience. We found that it could be worse as the struggle could include facing death. It hasn't reached that level for the readers and won't for most people. This indicates the relatively "minimal" nature of their suffering and also is intended to be upbeat. "Hey, you're still alive!" It's intended to encourage.

The receivers of Hebrews were discouraged. They're described as having feeble arms, weak knees. They needed to strengthen themselves so they wouldn't trip up themselves or disable other believers but help heal each other. Believers are counseled to think of Jesus so they won't grow weary and lose heart (v. 3).

People can become despondent and have a pity party when things go badly. Post it to social media, not for true support and encouragement, but just to get shallow reactions. Sometimes it seems like people in a perverse kind of way don't want the pain and discomfort to stop. They like being despondent.

Let's focus on the aspect of encouragement. They had forgotten the word of encouragement. The teaching seems to take an upturn in its focus just by mentioning encouragement. Most people hang on to encouraging words. It was the American humorist Mark Twain who said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." Compliments and encouraging words have incredible power.

They'd forgotten the encouraging words. It wasn't just a slip of the mind because there's so much stuff packed in the gray matter in their heads. It wasn't absentmindedness. It wasn't accidentally forgetting like when you go to the store and bring home an off brand of shortening though were told to only get Crisco. This kind

of forgetting is a complete and deliberate forgetting. It's like hitting the delete button to get rid of a document and when the computer asks "Are you sure you want to delete?" giving the okay. Now, computers never forget and a forensic computer dude could find it, but for all intents and purposes for the average computer user, the thing is gone. These folks clicked and re-clicked the delete button. "Encouragement? What encouragement?"

Just bringing up the word "encouragement" sounds hopeful. Add to it being addressed as sons. That's even better. "How great is love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). Sons and daughters of God. Get the party started!

The encouraging word is in vv. 5, 6. REREAD. Doesn't sound so encouraging. Encouragement and discipline. They go together like oil and water, like Packers fans and Vikings fans, like chocolate and bacon. Wait, that last one's good. You get the idea. Encouragement and discipline seem to butt heads. But they don't.

The words used in the quote are discipline, rebukes and punishes. Other translations are chastise, reprove, corrects, instructs, whips, scourges. I don't know about you, but I like the sound of discipline, rebuke and punish more than whip and scourge.

God has a purpose in everything he does or allows. We're cautioned about the attitude we take toward his discipline. Two inappropriate responses are fight and flight. Ted Turner, the media mogul who founded the first 24 hour news network (CNN) and pioneered the superstation concept (WTBS). He also owned the Atlanta Braves, grew up in a family that went to church. When his sister died, his father grew bitter and walked away. Ted followed suit and is on record as being agnostic. He's an extreme example of how people seek to flee.

Sometimes there's the fight response. Fight God in what he's attempting to do. Get mad at him. I guess Turner was a combination of both flight and fight. We're charged to not make light of the Lord's discipline. Don't dismiss or minimize its value. Allow it to have it's full benefit.

Jesus went through the same thing the children of God go through. The earlier part of the chapter gave a synopsis of Christ's suffering. He endured the cross. He scorned its shame. He endured opposition from sinful men. We shouldn't expect to be treated any differently than the Son of God. READ 5:8, 9.

Do we get the vibe that this is lesson 101 – first year, first course of the Christian life training manual? And then it's a recurring subject in our education. It's not a one and done. It's there, each year, each semester. And some go through graduate level courses.

V. 7 "Endure hardship as discipline." There's an interplay between discipline and suffering. Of the various kinds of suffering, we usually focus on the ones that are visible – physical afflictions, financial woes or have emotional components. There are those that are more hidden -- deep emotional, mental, or spiritual. All suffering is somewhat related to being a Christ follower because the person is a Christ follower. So even if the

suffering is a result of the world dominated by sin and the devil, it impacts the person as a Christ follower. Some suffering is more directly related since it comes because of a person taking a stand for his faith. Suffering can be initiated by people or the devil.

The Lord takes suffering imposed by evil sources and desires to turn it into a training mechanism. He's allowed it into our lives and seeks to use it to refine us even as gold refiners seek to remove that which doesn't have value. Sometimes the Lord initiates hardship as a means to fine tune us.

John Bishop was a pastor of a church in Arkansas (story from FamilyLife Today, 12/29/17). One evening he got a severe pain in the back of his head. His wife, Donna, rushed him to the hospital. The doctors discovered he had Aseptic Meningitis. John went into a coma.

John recalls, "When I woke up from meningitis, I did not know her. I didn't know my name. I really didn't know anything. I had a very unusual case of amnesia. I didn't just forget names and people. I forgot everything. I didn't know how to eat. I'd forgotten how to chew food. For several weeks, she had to do everything for me...I say *everything*. I was like a baby...It took me near two years to where I could walk. I didn't know what words were. That's why I couldn't read or write. My Donna taught me phonics finally, and my ten year old son would come home from school, sit on the couch, and help Daddy learn to read. I didn't know what I was, either. I said, "What am I?" She said, "You're a preacher." I said, "What's a preacher?" Of course, my family telling me, "You're a Christian" but I didn't know what that was. All I remember is from 1995 to this day. I remember nothing before that...I think the Lord just decided, "If I'm going to use John, I'm going to have to break him all the way down and start over." God breaks down people, whether it's completely or partially by knocking of pieces and chunks, so that he can to rebuild.

The example of good, loving earthly fathers is brought up. They aren't perfect but try to do what's best. They mete out discipline to correct behavior and train in doing what's right. They have short term goals – treat siblings with respect, don't embarrass the family. Earthly fathers are limited in their use of discipline to childhood. Who's heard of an 80 year man disciplining his 55 year old son by taking away his driving privileges for staying out past curfew? There's appreciation and respect for those who utilize loving discipline.

The Lord has short term and long term goals. Overall, He desires to bring spiritual growth for his children which is for our good (v. 10). It isn't that he's neglecting us or fighting against us. There is the provision that training is only for his kids. While all people undergo hardship, those who don't belong to God are left in the wind. God loves and accepts his children (v. 6). Discipline brings assurance of the relationship. V8. Those who don't have hardship and face Lord's discipline might want to look over their shoulders to see the true nature of their relationship or non-relationship with the Lord.

The Lord wants to impart the need for submission, to trust him that he knows what he's doing. Francis and Lisa Chan were on Family Life Today this week to talk about marriage. The host asked about something Francis wrote in their book (*You and Me Forever*) about manuscripting prayers. Francis answered, "So, it's like what David says in Psalm 27, verse 4, when he says, "This one thing I ask of the Lord and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple." That was his one prayer request: "God, I want You—I want You. I want to see You. I want to be with You." So, the question is: "Give me a manuscript of your prayers for the last month. I want to *bear*. 'What do you hunger for? What do you want?' You're coming before the Creator, the Sovereign One, who is in control of this *whole earth*; and what are you asking for?"

The co-host inserts, "And most of us are asking for: "Fix this, make life easier or better—for me—right? Is it illegitimate for us to pray—I'd like things to go better in my life"?"

Chan, "No; ...the Lord tells us to bring what we desire before Him; but also, the things that we desire reveal a lot about us; you know? It opens our eyes to: "Wow! That's what I'm about?—is: 'Get rid of all my problems,'"—because I don't see that in Scripture. It's more about, "God, give me the *strength* to make it through this—develop my *character* through these trials." You know, that's what I see in Scripture."

Leah was one of two wives of Jacob, four if you count the maidservants (Genesis 29). The Bible doesn't condone his actions. The Lord overrode his choice. Jacob was in love with Rachel but was tricked into marrying Leah. He was also given Rachel after the wedding week for Leah was done. He continued to love Rachel and not Leah. However, Leah had the first four sons. With the first son she pronounced, "The Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." It didn't happen. With the second she stated the Lord gave her another son because he heard she wasn't loved. With the third, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Wanting to be loved, settling for an attachment. With the fourth, "this time I will praise the Lord." Seems like the Lord was working in her heart to direct it toward him.

The Lord wants us to produce a bountiful harvest. In v. 10 it's phrased as "share in his holiness." In v. 11 harvest is used. It's a harvest of righteousness, of being rightly related to him. There are present and future implications. The Lord wants us to become more like Christ in our experience now and be prepared for heaven.

Timing is everything. In America we're locked into the immediate if not sooner. We're in a hurry to get things done fast and now. How many people would go to the dentist if a cleaning lasted 6 hours? Or think of the trauma if you had to face an IRS audit for 4 days. God's economy operates on his time table. V. 7 says endure hardship now. V. 11 brings together the present and the future. REREAD. The idea of the hardship is the sowing of the seed. The harvest comes later. There may be unpleasantness during the hardship and

discipline even as the athlete has aches, pains and bruises while in training but the exertion pays off later in the game. The press for quick resolution can be because we don't have the big picture in view.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed, "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, everything I have learned, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness. If it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable" (*A Twentieth Century Testimony*, in *Reader's Digest* [1/91], p. 158).

What's the greatest difficulty/challenge you face? What happens to our faith if we don't get what we pray for, dream about or hope for? What happens if the prodigal spouse, child or parent takes a long time to return or never does? What if we have to suffer with a debilitating disease? What if friends abandon?

The Lord desires to develop not destroy. The devil has the opposite approach. He wants to destroy not develop. A good question to ask is "What does the Lord want to do?" We started the reading with struggle against sin. Maybe we should view the verses that follow it as the struggle to be blessed.

A fellow preacher offers this advice, "Maybe you're wondering, "If all trials are God's discipline, designed to make us holy, is it wrong to seek to get out from under them? Is it wrong to go to the doctor when we're ill? Is it wrong to try to get a better job? Is it wrong to try to resolve problems that irritate us? Why not just submit to them, if they are designed for our good?" The answer is, it depends on our attitude toward the Lord in the trial. Is my heart in submission to the heavenly Father? Am I relating each trial to His providential love for me, trying to learn the lessons that He intends? Am I willing to accept His will if it does not coincide with my will?... So in every trial, whether major or minor, stop and examine your heart. Are you truly in submission to God? Are you seeking to learn and grow in holiness through the trial? If so, it is not wrong to ask the Father to remove it, if it's His will, and to take steps to resolve the problem. Often, In His grace and love, He will remove it. But, sometimes, He says, "My grace is sufficient for you." When He does, we have to trust that He is our loving Father who has our good in view. If we submit to Him, He will produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness in us" (Steven J. Cole, bible.org).

Author Philip Yancey writes about Solid-Rock Faith (*Our Daily Bread*, 4/6/17). "Difficult times may help nourish faith and strengthen personal bonds... Faith boils down to a question of trust. If I do stand on a solid rock of trust in God the worst of circumstances will not destroy that relationship. Solid-rock faith allows me to believe that despite the chaos of the present moment, God does reign, regardless of how worthless I may feel, I truly matter to a God of love. No pain lasts forever, and no evil triumphs in the end."