

“An Anchor for the Soul: Treated Like a Child”

Hebrews 12:3-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 5, 2016

Unless you were kidnapped and brought here against your will, the fact that you are sitting here in a church this morning probably means that you have some interest in Jesus. Maybe you decided to follow Jesus a long time ago or maybe you just recently started following him, or maybe you're still not sure and you're here to find out more. But no matter where you are on your walk with Christ, your spiritual journey, there's a good chance that at some point you have asked, "Does God *really* love me? Am I really going to heaven?"

When Dr. D. James Kennedy created the Evangelism Explosion program, he had people ask others, "If you died tonight do you know *for sure* that you would be with God in heaven?" Many people will answer something like, "I *hope* so but I can't be sure." The great truth of the Christian life is that you *can* know for sure and the Bible tells us that there are a number of ways you can have that confidence, or as we traditionally call it the assurance of salvation. Today we're going to look at one of the ways you can know for sure that you are going to heaven – pain and suffering; difficulties in life; trials and hardships. Isn't that good news?

The writer of Hebrews is concerned about his congregation falling away from Christ in the face of hardships and persecutions. As things are starting to get bad the church members begin to think they're doing something wrong. You and I do the same thing. Psychologists tell us that human almost always work to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. So when things don't go our way we start looking for a way out.

But this pastor reminds us that the way of the Christ is not the same as the way of the world. He shows them that the way to God involves pain. He begins by reminding them that Jesus himself endured significant pain and even death. Then, quoting from Proverbs 3, he reminds them that God disciplines the ones he loves. Verse 7 says, "It is for discipline that you have to endure."

I think it's fair to say that nobody likes discipline. Children don't like it. Parents don't like it (usually). My mother used to say, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." Yeah, right. But then when I became a parent I learned she was right. Discipline is no fun. Verse 11 says, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant." But discipline is also necessary. It has a purpose.

I think these days many of us, when we hear the word "discipline," think "punishment." I messed up now I'm going to be punished. While discipline can include punishment, it's much more than that. There are basically three forms of discipline that we can receive and we find all three in today's passage. To help understand them, listen to 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The first type of discipline is *correction* and it can involve punishment. It's possible that you are experiencing God's discipline because of some sin or disobedience. Near the end of our passage we see several examples – sexual immorality and Esau's gluttony and greed. Think about the pain that we see people experience today because of sex and greed. Some of the pain is the natural consequences of their choices and some is God trying to get their attention in order to correct their behavior and their hearts. Verse 6 says that God "chastises every son whom he receives." The word translated as "chastise" literally means to flog or scourge. One commentator called it a "heavenly spanking."

Verse 15 is especially important. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." Often times the hurt we cause to others begins with a feeling of bitterness. God says, "don't let bitterness take root." The thing about roots is

that you rarely see them. They are below the surface. Like the roots of a tree, the roots of bitterness can grow deep and feed our feelings of anger or resentment. If you are experiencing feelings of resentment or bitterness, it may be that God has given you those feelings to point you back to Christ, “who endured from sinners such hostility against himself.”

So some discipline we experience from God is to correct our behavior or our attitude. But there’s more to discipline than correction. The second form of discipline we see here is *prevention*. When children are young we teach them all sorts of things for their safety. We teach them not to run out into the street or to touch the hot stove. We discipline them in order to prevent future pain.

Back in the early nineties there was a science experiment in Arizona called Biosphere 2. They built this huge facility that tried to recreate a completely independent ecosystem. The idea was to research the possibility of colonizing the moon or other planets. The project was a huge failure but one of the failures in particular they never saw coming. They created ideal growing conditions for their plants and trees. And the trees seemed to grow quickly. The problem was that when the trees grew to a certain height they would break and fall down. The wood in the trees was weak because it had never been exposed to harsh weather. The adversities of nature like wind make the wood stronger.

In the same way, the trials that God puts in our lives help to make us stronger, to keep us from falling away from Christ. The trials may be challenging or they may be painful. The Apostle Paul said God gave him a “thorn in the flesh.” Paul says he prayed that God would remove it but ultimately discovered that it brought God glory.

The third form of discipline that you and I will experience from God is what I would call *training*. There was a football coach that some of you may have heard of named Tom Landry. He once said, “The job of a coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do, in order to be what they’ve always wanted to be.” A couple

of weeks ago we talked about running with endurance the race set before us. To run a race well it’s not enough to try hard. You have to train and training takes discipline. We see this kind of discipline in the military and we see it in athletes. Many people today will hire a personal trainer to help them with their fitness goals. Why do you need a trainer? To make you do what you don’t want to do so you can achieve what you *do* want to achieve.

Verse 10 tells us that God “disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.” Then verse 11 goes on, “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.” The goal of this kind of discipline is holiness – to become like Christ. We don’t become Christ-like by trying but instead by training so that we can run with endurance and not grow weary or fainthearted.

So we’ve seen the kind of discipline we receive from God but it still doesn’t sound like something we should look forward to or be happy about. But we should. Here’s the really good news in this. Verse 7: “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?” Do you see that? God only disciplines those who are adopted into His family. If you have experienced hardship or even persecution, praise God! It’s a sign that God may be disciplining you because he’s treating you like a son.

If you are experiencing discipline from God, and I hope you are, there are basically three responses. Some people respond with *disdain*. They resent the discipline or they disregard it altogether. Verse 5 warns us “do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.” If you think something you’re experiencing might be God’s discipline, spend some time in prayer and in the Scriptures to find out why. Because if you don’t learn from it this time you will have another opportunity, I’m sure.

The second way people respond is with *despair*. They are so overwhelmed by their

circumstances that they, too, never learn from them. Again, verse 5 offers a correction: “do not be weary when reproved by God.” Remember, God has allowed your circumstances so you can grow in holiness. In the midst of the trials, look for God’s lesson.

Finally, the best response is *determination*. If you find that your spiritual life seems kind of stuck or unfulfilling, it could be that you are resisting God’s discipline somewhere in your life. It’s only by having the determination to learn from your situation that you will begin to grow again in your faith. The secret is submission. Submit your life to Christ. Let him lead you. Read the stories of Jesus’ life in the gospels. Verse 12 says, “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but

rather be healed.” Finding joy in the midst of suffering begins with finding God in the suffering. Andrew Murray wrote, “In every trial, small or great, first of all and at once recognize God’s hand in it. Say at once: My Father has allowed this to come; I welcome it from Him; my first care is to glorify Him in it; He will make it a blessing. We may be sure of this; let us by faith rejoice in it.”

So when things get tough, remember that God has put you there. Seriously try to determine if you are being corrected, taught, or trained. Praise God for giving you the opportunity to become more like Christ. And then get back out on the race that is set before you, keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus at the finish line.

Amen