

“Endure Hardship”

“Endure hardship as discipline” (Hebrews 12:7).

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” This was one of my grandpa’s favorite sayings. I can still remember complaining to him about a simple household chore or homework assignment and hearing his firm and steady refrain, “Thomas, when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It was his not-so-subtle way of telling me to stop complaining and encouraging me to get my work done.

There are all kinds of catch phrases and mottos that convey a similar message. Athletes are familiar with the slogan “No pain, no gain.” Ben Franklin was once quoted as saying “Energy and persistence conquer all things.” Thomas Edison is famous for his adage that “Success is one-percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” And in today’s world dominated by slick advertising campaigns and brash commercials Nike’s “Just Do It” has become part of our cultural vocabulary.

Motivational sayings like this look good on t-shirts and locker room walls, but the truth is that despite all the of inspiring clichés that we so often hear, hardships and struggles are not things we look forward to. In my experience as a coach it never failed that as we would get close to the end of practice a number of players would suddenly be plagued with mysterious injuries; injuries that they thought should keep them from participating in our closing wind sprints. And to some degree we are all like that. When hardship or suffering comes our way, our natural inclination is to avoid it.

Part of our aversion to hardship and suffering comes from the misconception that we have been treated unfairly; that we have been dealt a hand we didn’t deserve or that an injustice has been done to us, and it’s easy to fall into the delusion that we are simply innocent victims. Once when comedian Bob Hope received a special award for his work he responded in his acceptance speech by saying, “I don’t deserve this, but then I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that either.” And somewhere in the back of our minds, we all hold the idea that we don’t deserve to suffer and when the inevitable hardships of life find us, we insist that we have been wronged.

The Bible deals with the reality of hardship and suffering, and in a way the Bible teaches that we *don’t* deserve hardship or suffering. Actually, it teaches that we deserve much worse, in fact, the Bible tells us we deserve to die. Paul breaks down this teaching as clearly as anyone in Scripture when he writes that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Our sin is an incredibly serious issue! It is a reality that we cannot escape and yet like my players trying to avoid their sprints, we think that by drawing attention to how we’ve been injured, or by holding up the all the good things we’ve done compared to others, our individual situation is somehow changed, and the punishment that we deserve should somehow be reconsidered. These attempts to justify our sin are absolutely worthless and, according to God’s Word, at the end of the day our sin still needs to be addressed; it needs to be dealt with; it needs to be punished. And that is exactly what happened on the Cross!

On the Cross, Jesus embraced hardship. On the Cross, Jesus willingly suffered. On the Cross, Jesus

took what we deserved. On the Cross, in the person of Jesus Christ, God punished our sin. He did this all for us, and on the Cross, our lives were redeemed! The writer of Hebrews tells us to, “Consider (Jesus)... who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Because of what Jesus has done for us in His death and resurrection, our sins have been forgiven, we have been given the gift of eternal life, and because we are in Christ, our lives here and now have new meaning, and even our hardships have a purpose.

For the unbeliever, hardship is pointless. For the unbeliever, suffering is merely an unpleasant stop on a path that ends in grave. For the unbeliever, suffering and hardship are to be avoided at all costs and the goal of life is consumption and self-gratification. But in Christ, we have been freed from this fatalistic worldview, in Christ we have been given a future, and in Christ, our understanding of hardship and suffering takes on a meaning and importance that before would have been impossible for us to see.

In today’s reading from Hebrews, we are told “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons” (Hebrews 12:7). And because of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, as we deal with difficulties and hardships in this life, our Father is using them to shape us, to strengthen, and to turn us into people who can reflect His love to others.

One writer tells a story of a man who once found the cocoon of an Emperor Moth. Emperor Moths are quite beautiful when they come out of the cocoon and so the man decided to take the cocoon home watch the moth emerge. The Emperor Moth can remain in the cocoon for years, and the man waited for quite some time until finally, one day, a small opening appeared in the cocoon. For several hours the man watched as the moth struggled to make its way out of the cocoon, but it seemed that as much as the moth labored to get out of the cocoon it couldn’t seem to force its body past a certain point.

The man had waited so long to see this Emperor Moth and as he watched it thrash around trying to break out of its cocoon he decided that something must have gone wrong. He resolved to help the struggling moth and taking a scissors, the man snipped the remaining bit of cocoon, freeing the moth to emerge easily. When it fell out of the cocoon the man noticed that body of the moth was large and swollen, and the wings were shriveled and very small. He watched and waited, expecting that in a matter of time the moth would spread its beautiful wings and begin to fly, but after hours of observing the moth dragging around its swollen body, the man realized that moth was not going to spread its wings. He examined the empty cocoon and then realized that the constricting cocoon and the struggle involved with passing through the small opening were necessary elements for forcing the fluid from the swollen body into the wings, and in helping the moth avoid the hardship of working through the opening, the man had actually kept the moth from the growing and maturing it needed.

God’s Word tells us that “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” (Hebrews 12:11). This is what suffering and hardship means in the life of a believer. It means that even the face of pain and loss, we can endure knowing that God will use our suffering for His purposes. It means that we can thank God in the midst of situations that seem hopeless because we have the promise

that “All things work for the good of those...who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

The going *will* get tough, that is certain! But in the love and forgiveness of Christ, we have the promise that in all things God will bring good to us – in *all* things! This week I spoke to members of our church family about all kinds of hardships. Some were dealing with the medical fears. Some were struggling with the pain of shattered relationships. Some were crumbling under the guilt of their sin. Their hardships were very real and very painful, and yet for each one of those people Christ died! And for each one of those people – and for each one of us – God has promised to bring good – in *all* things!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, even when we struggle, even when we feel that we can't go on, even when we are sure that there is no way out, God's promise remains, and in all things God will work for our good. Christ endured the hardship of sin for us, and because of what He did for us, we can endure hardship knowing that God's purpose for us will be accomplished; that He will be with us, in good and bad; and that because of His love for us, we will share in His holiness, now and forever. Amen.

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