

“The Lord’s Discipline” – Hebrews 12:7–12
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The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that we read this morning is unique among the many epistles of the New Testament in that it lacks an opening greeting. In other letters, for example, “From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus,” the writer’s greeting to the recipients is usually recorded at the beginning. However, the Letter to the Hebrews omits such greetings and begins abruptly with, “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways...,” which reads more like a thesis or a sermon. From this, it seems that the author was probably a kind of professor or church leader, someone who once lived in Rome but had since moved elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. While away from Rome, this teacher wrote the letter so that his disciples would not stray from the path of faith. In that sense, the letter is both a sermon and a word of encouragement and exhortation.

Regarding the circumstances that led to the writing of this letter, we may consider the following. The recipients—the author’s disciples—had, at the beginning of their faith, “endured a hard struggle with sufferings” (10:32). But as time went on in their Christian life, some of them began to “neglect meeting together” (10:25), “be led astray by strange teachings” (13:9), and fall into “immorality” (13:4). Knowing this, the author, who had once been a leader of this congregation, wrote this admonitory letter while anticipating the increasingly severe persecutions of the Roman Empire. From my own pastoral experience, I know the greatest joy for a preacher is hearing that brothers and sisters who once shared both joys and trials of faith are still connected to their churches and continue to support them. I have also had friends in faith from former congregations travel long distances just to attend worship and see me again—coming all the way from Kobe to Tokyo, or from Yamagata to Nerima in Tokyo. Sharing Sunday worship together in such moments has been the greatest joy. In the same way, the author of Hebrews wrote this letter with the desire that his disciples in Rome, who once shared the struggles of faith with him, would remain firm in the Word and not fall away from their faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, apart from the final greetings at the end of chapter 13, the Letter to the Hebrews consists of three major exhortations (sermons). The first part is, “Let us listen to the Word of God” (1:1–4:13). The second part is, “Let us hold fast to our confession of faith and be diligent in worship” (4:14–10:31). The third part is, “Let us run with perseverance, fixing our eyes on Jesus” (10:32–13:21). Today’s passage belongs to this third section, which especially exhorts believers to perseverance.

Although not included in today’s reading, in 12:1–3 the author recalls the heroes of the Old Testament who walked the path of faith and completed their lives, saying they now surround us like a great cloud of witnesses. He then presents Jesus Christ as the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Here, the Christian life of faith is compared to an Olympic marathon. We are urged to run with endurance, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. The author continues, saying that Jesus endured the cross, rose again, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. On a personal note, when I held my engagement ceremony more than 30 years ago, I gave my wife a Bible, and at the back I wrote this verse from Hebrews 12:2: “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith... let us run with perseverance.” In my twenties then, still strong and often running marathons, this verse immediately came to mind. After this metaphor of a marathon in verses 1–3, verse 4 adds,

“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” Whereas verses 1–3 liken the life of faith to a marathon, verses 4 and onward compare it to a boxing match. The word translated as “struggle” literally means “to have a contest.” In those days, boxing gloves were reinforced with metal, and it was not uncommon for fighters to bleed during matches. Thus the author says, “You have not yet fought against sin to the point of shedding blood.” At that time in Rome, persecution of Christians under Emperor Domitian in the 90s was looming, following the earlier persecutions under Nero in the 60s. Although the author speaks of struggling against sin, what he actually has in mind are the difficulties, trials, and persecutions Christians faced in the Roman Empire. But compared with the suffering and endurance of Jesus, the author says, your trials are small indeed.

Last Tuesday, I attended a lecture at Funabashi Church about the “hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan). It was said that in Tagawa County, Fukuoka Prefecture, more than 4,000 Christian farmers refused to trample on the fumie (images of Christ). Yet, the Tagawa domain reported falsely to the shogunate, pretending that the Christians had complied. Why? Because those farmers were diligent, honest workers who paid their rice taxes faithfully. That was astonishing, but even more surprising was that some samurai who had become Christians left letters saying, “Whatever happens, I will never abandon this faith.” It is thanks to the faith of such people that we are here today. I was deeply moved by the faith of believers like Hosokawa Okimoto, who endured persecution and lived faithfully in the Edo period.

From verse 5 onward, the theme of “the Lord’s discipline” is addressed. Even though we confessed Jesus as Lord and received baptism as children of God, why does God still allow us to experience hardships and sorrows? Sometimes we may wonder if it is because we committed some sin and are being punished. But that is not the case. Our suffering is not the result of God’s wrath. Rather, it is through difficulties and trials that God strengthens and trains our faith. When I entered junior high school, I joined the track and field club. Daily practices—horse leaps, rabbit jumps, repeated sprints, and running 1,500 meters—were very tough at first. But after several months, my thighs became muscular, I grew accustomed to the training, I stopped catching colds, and my stamina increased.

The Bible teaches that faith is the same. God treats you as His beloved children. He does not cause suffering because He hates His children. Earlier today we heard confessions of faith from new members, each of whom had also gone through times of trial. Truly, everyone experiences hardships in life. But for believers, these hardships are God’s training. Through such trials, God disciplines us, enables us to overcome them, strengthens our relationship with Him, and helps us grow spiritually. Think about it: yes, life brings difficult times, but they do not last forever. Sooner or later, circumstances change. Sickness and weakness often heal with time. Most importantly, God never seeks to take our lives away, but rather preserves them.

The greatest assurance for us is found in verse 10: “The Father of spirits disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share His holiness.” In other words, God works all things for our good. Even when faced with life’s trials and difficulties, let us have the strength and courage to overcome them. Even more, let us believe that there is hope in the midst of hardship. God loves you and will, in His time, deliver you from trials. Believing this, let us not abandon hope, but stand firm on our two feet and walk forward.

Let us pray.