

Hebrews 12:1-13

Proposition: God's discipline produces good fruit.

In this passage, the writer to the Hebrews uses word pictures to get his message across. First; a great crowd, then an athlete, a loving parent, and a straight path.

The crowd of witnesses is all the faithful mentioned in the previous chapter and many of us may like to think of our loved ones who have gone before us, all together cheering us on from heavenly sidelines. But there's more to it than that, the Greek word for witness is the same root word from which we get 'martyr'. So rather than witnessing our actions, the writer means they are bearing witness to us of the faithfulness of God, from the word of God in which their stories are written.

While we, being the ones witnessed to, are marathon runners, our marathon is life, and in this passage we are being strongly encouraged to get rid of anything that will slow us down and trip us up, specially the sin that clings and is hard to get rid of.

Most mature Christians have dealt with a lot of stuff in their lives through the years. We may get to a place where we think we've got it sorted, then things start happening again and you realise you're not as sorted as you thought. Maybe it's even something you thought you'd dealt with years ago. This is the sin that clings. And just because it's so hard to deal with, doesn't mean we get a free pass.

Even though it is so painful to us, it also serves a valuable purpose of keeping us reliant on Christ and humble.

This is a point in our race where we need to be determined, because true faith is not for wimps and it does cost us something.

Like the runner who 'hits the wall' at that point it is not his physical strength that will carry him through but his mental strength.

(When the All Blacks won, it was their mental toughness that seemed to have the whole world talking.)

When the runner who hits the wall – the worst thing he can do is look down at his feet, he needs to look up, keep focussed on the finish line.

Likewise, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus so that we don't become overcome by our weariness, and emotional fatigue which will tempt us to give up.

I just want to add here that although this scripture is referring to 'clinging sin'; there are many other circumstances of life that bring us to the same place of weakness and weariness.

I got to the place of weariness, after five years of having my husband's parents live with us, during which time my sister-in-law developed secondary breast cancer, and passed away. My mother-in-law's grief took her into depression. Later her won health failed through having multiple seizures, me being the carer at home, made many hospital trips by ambulance with my mother-in-law. One time I took my mother-in-law to church; she had a seizure in the middle of the worship time and stopped the whole service, which turned into a prayer meeting until the fire service arrived to tend to her. Then my daughter developed separation anxiety which showed itself as stomach pains and panic attacks, because of the times I had to get my husband to come home early from work, to pick her up from school and I wouldn't get home from hospital with nana, 'til after 11.00 at night.

Eventually I suffered from burnout, was diagnosed with depression, and during counselling, discovered I was trying to be all things to all people because I had a need to be needed and was always trying to prove that I was competent. And this was because I believed a lie told to me in childhood that I was incompetent. Discovering this lie has set me free to stop enslaving myself to other people's wants and needs, and I no longer feel deep shame, if the house doesn't look immaculate when I answer the door.

In verse two it says Jesus leads us and makes our faith complete. In NIV it calls Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. This means that he initiated it, he fully accomplished everything that our faith would require and he brings our faith to the goal he intended for it.

So Jesus is the basis, the means, the fulfilment and the example of follow for our faith.

For us it means that nothing that has, or will happen to us, is outside of his knowledge, experience or ability to deal with.

And if you have given your life to Christ then there is nothing in your life that is outside of his realm, that is not his concern, because your life is not your own anymore, you have given it away. But in return you have received all that Christ is, all that he has accomplished, all his dreams for your future, and his Holy Spirit in you to make it happen.

So calling Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith is no small thing.

The next picture is one of loving parental discipline, which although the child sees it as unpleasant, is useful to train up a responsible mature adult.

One important difference between the discipline of the athlete and the parent – the athlete disciplines himself – which is self discipline and a necessary life skill to learn, while the other discipline is applied from outside of the will of the child who has no control over it.

Although the passage uses the word ‘punish’ it is in the context of loving training given to amend action and attitudes rather than its other meaning of retribution.

Rather than being punishment or judgement, the tragedies of life happen because we live in a fallen world, with fallen people, and our frail human bodies are prone to making mistakes and getting sick.

But in the middle of the pain that life brings us it is possible to see the Lord’s hand lovingly guiding us into a closer relationship with him.

And just as an obedient child is a calm and peaceful child, so when we listen and are led by our heavenly father it brings about in us the fruit of a well lived life and peace with God.

The NIV says “God’s discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have trained by it.”

The peace talked about here is not the absence of fighting, but the reconciliation and restoration of relationship between two parties previously in disagreement.

And just as fruit is for eating so a harvest feeds a whole community. The purpose of a harvest isn’t to store it up, but to make it available to feed and provide for the hungry.

In Matthew 5:9 Jesus says: “God blesses those people who make peace, they will be called his children.” The purpose of our

harvest of righteousness, which is a life rightly lived, is to show and tell other people how they can be reconciled and have peace with God.

In verse 12, then the writer goes back to the picture of the exhausted athlete, and its no ordinary exhaustion – he is bent over, shaking, and walking a wobbly path.

The image in my mind is of the competitive walker Hamish Carter, who wobbled and collapsed just before the finish line.

But writer is actually making a reference to Isaiah 35:3-8 – read out

In other words, for those whose walk has become a trudge along a path of difficulty and pain, you are called to hope in the coming, the justice, and the blessings of God. The strengthening of the arms and knees means to take heart, hope afresh in the Lord.

In verse 13, the phrase “walk a straight path” is a reference to Proverbs 4:26, which tells us to make level paths for our feet, meaning choose to live rightly before God.

And the reference to “the lame” is another image of exhaustion or the crippling effect of spiritual discouragement.

Running a race on an uneven path full of bumps and potholes, is not only inconvenient but also dangerous, especially for person who is already exhausted. The writer is warning the hearers therefore that if the wrong path is chosen their spiritual condition will get worse but the right path leads to healing.

What this means for you and I facing dire situations, and situations that have gone on way too long, and in desperation we are tempted to pack it all in to get some respite, the Lord’s plea to us is: “Don’t

give up, hang in there a little longer, your healing is coming, soon
your life will produce a harvest of righteousness and peace.”