

Discipline: Training toward Healthy Maturity

One of the important truths that's clearly taught in Scripture, as well as what we know from our own experience, is that we get weary and discouraged at times.

This can come about for any number of reasons — e.g., prolonged illness, our own feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, as well as just general disappointments in life — and yet, the passage that we'll be looking at in this series begins by reminding Christians of the weariness and faintheartedness that can be brought about by mistreatment from others.

This type of suffering should be no surprise to us, because our Lord suffered considerable mistreatment. "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." (Hebrews 12:3)

Looking back to Hebrews 10:32-36, we're reminded that this little house church had already experienced some measure of persecution in the past. Scholars generally believe that in that portion of the letter, our author is referring to persecution that happened under the Roman Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D., when many Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome as recorded in Acts 18:1-2.

If that's true, it's been quite a few years from that time in history to the time when this epistle was written.

And yet, it seems that the pastor of this church wants those who're receiving this word of exhortation (Heb. 13:22) to know that persecution could arise at any time, and, if we're going to persevere in the Christian life, it will help to know God's intent in our suffering.

Look with me now at Verse 4: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." In Verse 3, we were encouraged to "consider him (Jesus) who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Our author is reminding them that not only did many of the heroes of the faith, as given in Chapter 11 of Hebrews, give their lives as martyrs rather than denying the faith, but even our Lord Jesus had to die a horrible death in order to fulfill the Father's will.

Running this race of faith can be costly, and we need to be prepared. The "struggle against sin" that our author mentions is not defined specifically, but it certainly implies that this may be the sin of others toward these first-century Christians. And yet, it can also refer to the personal "struggle against sin" that we all face.

Although we're not given any details in this letter of a specific historical accounting of suffering, I want to take a few moments to share with my readers what many believe at least some of these Christians would soon face and how this persecution came about.

Historians teach us that sometime after midnight on the July 19, 64 A.D., the night after a full moon, a fire broke out at the northeast end of a huge amphitheater in Rome called the Circus Maximus. The shops which stood in a colonnade around the outer face of the

Circus were full of combustible materials which provided ready fuel for the growing blaze. Fanned by the wind, the fire raged throughout the city for five days.

When it was over, of the 14 districts into which the city was divided, only four were spared; three were completely destroyed, and the remaining seven received severe damage.

When the fire began, Nero, the Roman emperor, was in Antium (Anzio), a seaport town about 30 miles south of Rome. He hurried back and threw himself vigorously into the organization of relief.

But he received little credit from the people, many of whom were unwilling to believe that the fire was accidental. It was believed by many that Nero had planned the fire and saw to it that others carried it out because he wanted to rebuild the city according to his own plans.

As the city was being rebuilt, the suspicion continued to point to Nero. He needed to take the suspicion off himself, and it was the Christians whom he chose as scapegoats.

Why the Christians? Among other reasons, they were disliked by many because of their perceived anti-social attitude. So much of the Roman way of life was bound up with immorality and idolatry, in which Christians refused to take part. This made them the obvious choice to bear the brunt of the people's rage over the fire.

The Roman historian Tacitus, himself no friend of Christians, writes that "those who confessed were arrested." Confessed to what — to starting the fire, or to just being Christian? Whatever form the confessions took, those who confessed were compelled to give the names of other Christians.

Tacitus records that "a huge crowd was convicted, not so much of arson as of hatred." The execution of these Christians became a form of popular entertainment. Some were crucified; some were sewn up in the skins of animals and hunted down by dogs; some were covered with pitch (tar) and set on fire to serve as torches to light the way to Nero's palace.

Nero's famous persecution of Christians would last for four years and claim the lives of apostles Peter and Paul. Although these Christians who received this pastoral exhortation had "not yet resisted to the point of shedding (their) blood" — i.e., they had not yet had to die for their faith — this pastor is preparing them for whatever may come their way in God's sovereign plan.

Notice now Verse 5: "And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.'"

The word translated "exhortation" has been used already in this letter (3:13; 10:25). We've seen that it's used both as "warning and reproof" as well as "encouragement and comfort," and we'll see that in this section, as well. As you can already see, key to this

section that we're now looking at is in understanding what is meant by "the discipline of the Lord."

When we think of discipline, we often think of the word in terms of punishment for wrongdoing. Actually, the word speaks of training — both positive and negative — that's designed to mold character, and, in this case, it's training that's connected to spiritual maturity.

The Greek word used here — translated by the English word "discipline" — is used in that same way. It's a word that often speaks of the training of children. This certainly seems to be the way that our author is using it here, but the "children" who are being "trained" is us.

That is to say, it refers to all Christians, no matter what our age.

Just as Christian parents "train" their children, God is training us toward healthy maturity so that we'll be biblically prepared for all the struggles, trials and disappointments that we'll face in this life.

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