

Respect Divine Discipline

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Hebrews 12:5-11

Sermon Series:
The Race to Run

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The largest congregation in America is a 47,000 mega-church in Houston, Texas, led by pastor Joel Osteen. Maybe you've seen his smiling face on TV; his worship services are watched every Sunday by another two million people. His church relocated to a former sports arena, the Compaq Center, after a nifty 100 million dollars worth of improvements. Osteen even draws better than the Houston Rockets, the pro-basketball team that used to play there.

This relentlessly upbeat pastor tells his flock that God wants Christians to be prosperous and happy. God desires people to flourish in all areas of life, including material success. He contends if you give generously, God will repay you many times over. He said in an interview with Business Week recently, "I believe God's desire is that we become successful in our career and that we be able to send our kids to college. God wants us to prosper in our relationships, our health and our finances."

His best-selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, gives expression to his theology of this-world empowerment through God. God not only gives us the promise of prosperity but the ability to claim it for ourselves. He writes, "We are to

declare God's blessing, speak prosperity and prophesy health, wealth and happiness into our lives."

Joel often enumerates in his sermons about how God prospers him. God has been known to upgrade his reservations to first class on long, international flights. God directed Joel and his wife, co-pastor Victoria, to flip a property for "twice as much as we paid for it." God was active in swinging a critical vote in the Houston Zoning Board to permit Lakewood to buy the Compaq Center.

This name it and claim it Prosperity Gospel was made popular in the late '70s by televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker. Osteen is one of a new breed of television preachers—Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes, Benny Hinn and Creflo Dollar among others—who preach a comparable positive, motivational Christianity, sometimes dubbed "Prosperity Lite."

At best, these Prosperity Gospel advocates teach hard work and generosity. At worst, they promote a religiously infantile theology. Any religious message that promises happiness and prosperity is difficult to reconcile with Christianity's founder, who had "no place to lay his head" and urged his followers "not to store up treasures on earth." We ought to become suspect whenever religion panders to our conspicuous consumption.

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Remembering Jesus' words, maybe we ought to remove the log from our own eyes before we rail too vociferously against the speck in the eyes of our Prosperity Gospel neighbors. When was the last time you heard a sermon from this or any other pulpit on God's discipline? I've delivered innumerable sermons on God's love. How come nobody talks about God's discipline anymore?

We're eager to tell would-be Christians the benefits of a Christian life, but we reduce to fine print any mention of God's discipline. If truth be told, maybe I would tell people every time I invite them to follow Christ—Come to Jesus, become his special children and receive his special discipline.

The letter of Hebrews is written to Christians who are being persecuted for what they believe. The suffering of Christians in chapter 12 is attributable to their association with Christ (Hebrews 10:32-34). I wonder how the Prosperity Gospel squares with Paul's hardship and the plight of Christians cited in Hebrews 11, who were persecuted and martyred for the faith?

Hebrews is written, we're told in 12:3, so that Christians will "not lose heart." The same injunction appears in verse 5, when we're told "not to lose heart" when God disciplines us. The Old Testament passage set off by quotation marks in verses 5-6 tells us plainly that "God disciplines those he loves."

Discipline conjures up negative images of punishment for some of

us. God's discipline is not punitive. God's discipline is redemptive.

The Greek word for discipline, *paedeia*, in these verses means to teach and instruct, as we would children. God's discipline is for the purpose of training and correction in righteousness. Pain can be God's proving ground.

Verses 7-10 elaborate on the training dimensions of God's discipline. Pain may not be a sign of God's displeasure but rather an example of God treating us as genuine sons and daughters. When parents discipline their children, they are assuming a responsibility that only parents can fully exercise. Fathers and mothers demonstrate their unique roles as parents in their ability to discipline their children. Fathers and mothers who refuse to discipline their children are not doing their children any favors. Indifference doesn't equate to love. Nowhere does Scripture give parents license to inflict physical harm on children. Gentle, firm discipline can be redemptive.

We read, "The Lord disciplines those he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts" (12:6). God disciplines for our well-being (12:10).

Maybe instead of asking, "What did I do to deserve this?" we ought to ask, "Could there be something God is trying to teach me through this experience?"

We read in Hebrews 5:8, that "Jesus learned obedience through suffering." If Jesus learned that submitting to God's will is sometimes painful, how much more true for us. If the Son of God

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- C. S. Lewis

learned obedience through suffering, what makes us think we will get off pain free? There are some lessons that can only be learned through pain and suffering.

A dad I know gently spanked his four-year-old daughter for her sassy remark. Afterwards, the little girl asked whether God ever gives mommy and daddy a spanking when they misbehave. This little girl is onto something. God refuses to spoil us. There are times when God must spank us or, if I may say here, “kick our butts!”

We do everything in our power to avoid pain. When German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke toured the United States in the 1970s, he was asked about the greatest defect of American Christians. He answered, “Christians in America have an inadequate view of suffering.”

Do we really want to live life without pain? Some people suffer from a rare genetic disorder that makes them incapable of feeling pain. This congenital insensitivity to pain is caused by a gene mutation. You might think it would be a godsend to be pain-free, especially if you suffer from chronic pain. But what would it be like not to feel red-hot heat from a stove top burner? People with this genetic mutation can scald themselves with hot water or cut themselves without knowing it. They're often unaware of the damage done to their bodies until it is too late. One man did permanent damage to his leg by unknowingly walking on a broken leg.

Author Sheldon Vanauken calls pain a “severe mercy.” I like that! Mercy can be gracious or severe, yet still be merciful.

One of my favorite quotes from C. S. Lewis comes from his book, *The Problem of Pain*. “God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Hardly anyone thinks about God when life is going well. Lewis writes, “Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well for us. We ‘have all we want’ is a terrible saying when ‘all’ does not include God. We find God an interruption. As St. Augustine says somewhere, God wants to give us something, but cannot because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.”

Sheldon Vanauken became a Christian after a lengthy correspondence with C. S. Lewis. He writes about his initial reluctance to embrace God. “I didn’t want God. He was too heavy. I wanted Him appearing from a considerable distance. I wanted to be free—like a Gypsy. I wanted life itself, the color of fire and loveliness of life. And Christ now and then, like a loved poem I would read when I wanted to. I didn’t want to be swallowed up in God. I wanted holidays from the school of Christ.”

Thomas Merton asks a penetrating question: “Why do we find it difficult to give up our dreams for things can never satisfy us?”

“The world breaks everyone and afterward some are strong at the broken places.”

-Ernest Hemingway

Why does God go through all the trouble to teach us this way? Why doesn't God just fix it? I don't know how to say it any more clearly. There are some lessons in life that only pain can teach us.

For those in considerable pain right now, this sermon might not seem like much consolation. You may be feeling, “I've had it. I'm finished learning what God has to teach me.” You may be going through horrendous pain right now. I certainly wouldn't want to minimize your pain. But listen to Hebrews 12:11: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

We've been talking about running a race of faith this August. Hebrews imagines running a race surrounded, as it were, by a great cloud of witnesses who have already run this race of faith and are cheering for us (12:1a). The author implores us to throw off every sin that weighs us down to run with endurance the race marked out for us (12:1b). We run this race looking to Jesus, our pacesetter and trailblazer in the faith (12:2). Jesus ran this race to perfection from start to finish. As we run this race of faith, we will invariably encounter obstacles and challenges (12:3-11).

Pain has a hidden benefit. What seems initially to be our enemy turns out, in the end, to be our friend.

Pain is the gymnasium of the soul. Pain “exercises” our faith.

Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Farewell to Arms*, “The world breaks everyone and afterward some are strong at the broken places.” Those who become strong at the broken places have come to the place where they are willing to ask, is there something God is teaching me through this experience? How can this experience be used redemptively in my life?

