

STAY FOCUSED**HEBREWS 12:1-11**

How many of you have seen the giant California redwood trees up close and personal? They're truly amazing trees. How is it these trees live so long when others rot and die? Part of the answer is that the wood and bark of the redwood is full of something called tannin which discourages insects. Tannin also retards fire. When a wildfire rips through a forest, most of the trees die and nothing is left but charred trees. But only the most violent, overwhelming fire can pierce the redwood's tannin-filled bark. Indeed, fire is actually a necessity for redwoods. Yes, fire can damage and scar redwoods, but it also removes all competition for the forest environment. Other trees get consumed, but the redwoods have everything they need to fill in their scars quickly. For many years the Forest Service was probably too vigilant. Firefighters quickly extinguished most of the fires that affected the redwoods. Ranger observed, however, that where there were no fires, there were no new young redwood trees. Researchers discovered that the seeds of the giant redwoods didn't germinate until a fire cleaned away the branches, leaves, and fallen trees that covered the forest floor. They also noticed that the cones that held the seeds opened most fully during a fire and could then drop those seeds on fertile, ash covered soil most effectively. New redwood trees were born and older redwood trees got healthier because of fire – not in spite of it.

Several passages in the New Testament book of Hebrews share one thing in common. They all have the phrase "let us" show up once or several times. Each one is a challenge to stop or to start doing something that affects your life and mine spiritually. My translation has three "let us" phrases. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:1-2 NIV) I hear a challenge to stay focused. Remember the first recipients of this letter were Christians facing persecution for their faith in Jesus. Times were difficult. Some of them were saying or, at least, thinking, "I thought my everyday life was going to get better being a follower of Jesus, but in some ways it's gotten harder. Why are we being persecuted? Why is God allowing us to have so many problems? Maybe following Jesus isn't worth it."

The author of Hebrews realized he had to explain God's purpose in allowing problems. Ironic, isn't it? Redwoods are actually better off because of fire, not in spite of it. God's Word here and elsewhere tells us that followers of Jesus are actually better off because of problems, not in spite of them. A problem is any difficulty, trial, struggle, or disappointment we encounter in life. Problems come in all shapes and sizes. Some are small; others are gigantic. Some are merely annoying; others threaten to destroy us. In these verses God provides us with at least two critical insights. Here's the first one.

WHAT PROBLEMS - IN GOD'S HANDS - DO FOR ME.

Here's a very obvious truth about life even followers of Jesus forget: life is difficult. Life has problems. It's amazing how much we want to believe the myth that life should be problem free or that there's some secret that will make it easy. The Bible tells us that life is full of problems for all human beings. Sure, human sin is a leading cause of problems. But even godly people have many problems according to the Bible. It says, "The righteous person faces many troubles..." (Ps. 34:19 NLT) and "...we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22 NLT). Even Jesus said to His first followers, "...Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows." (Jo. 16:33 NLT) Our passage today reveals what problems can do for us in God's hands. They provide an opportunity for Him to build our inner character in an eternally positive way.

None of us like problems. They're painful and often unfair. They can be random and inconvenient, to say the least. Many problems just happen. There you are just living your life and minding your own business when – BAM! – a problem hits you right in the gut. In fact, some problems in life are the result of doing something right and good, not because you did anything wrong. For example, I've of people getting harassed by their fellow workers because they were intent on giving their employer a full day's work for a day's pay. The other employees resented them because they made them look lazy. Problems just have a way of happening no matter what you do!

We need to admit an uncomfortable truth found in today's Scripture passage. Like it or not, a problem in God's hands is a form of discipline. Now, there's a word that gets used a whole lot in these verses. What is discipline? Let's correct one major misunderstanding quickly. Discipline isn't always punishment for doing something wrong. It can be, yes, but discipline is much bigger and more positive than punishment. Here's a more comprehensive definition. Discipline is a kind of training that's necessary to be successful in life. In fact, discipline is necessary for success in any area of life. If a student is going to graduate from college, he's got to learn the disciplines of good study habits and how to manage his time. If an athlete is going to compete in her sport at the highest level, she must learn the disciplines of getting in shape and practicing her skills so they improve. If a person is going to succeed in business, he or she will have to learn the discipline of setting and achieving realistic goals. If parents want to help their children realize their full potential, Mom and Dad exert discipline that shapes and molds their children's character. The Scripture today says God also uses discipline to enable you and me to have a successful relationship with Him. One way that happens is through problems. In God's hands, problems have great discipline potential.

Do any of us like or enjoy discipline? Not so much. A lot of discipline is hard, painful, and uncomfortable. It's a little easier to deal with if we've decided to discipline ourselves. It's much harder if discipline is imposed on you from someone else. It's one thing to study extra diligently for a test because you want a good grade. It's quite another to have Mom or Dad impose a two hours a night study rule because your last grade in that subject was not acceptable. Likewise, that same principle is true spiritually. It's one thing to get up a half hour earlier than normal to meditate on Scripture because you want to grow spiritually. It's quite another for God to use a problem, a heartache, a difficulty, or a disappointment in your life to discipline you when

you didn't choose it or approve of it in advance. Problems, then, in God's hands can have a positive impact on your life and mine. They can be used by God to shape, mold, and build your character. For reasons known only to God Himself, He insists on using the problems of life to develop and grow each of us. Somehow and some way, we receive discipline through them that builds us up and doesn't tear us down.

Admiral William H. McRaven, a 36-year Navy SEAL veteran, gave the commencement address to the Class of 2014 at the University of Texas in Austin. He told the graduates about the discipline involved in becoming a Navy SEAL. It's all about problems. Every day during training you're challenged with multiple physical events—long runs, long swims, obstacle courses, hours of calisthenics—all designed to test your mettle. Every event has time standards you have to meet. If you fail to meet those standards your name gets posted on a list and at the end of the day those on the list are invited to something called a "circus." A circus is two hours of additional calisthenics designed to wear you down, break your spirit, and force you to quit. No one wants a circus. A circus means that for that day you didn't measure up. A circus means more fatigue. More fatigue means that the following day will be more difficult and even more circuses are likely. But at some time during SEAL training, everyone makes the circus list. An interesting thing happened to those who were constantly on the list. Over time those recruits who did two hours of extra calisthenics got stronger and stronger. The pain of the circuses built inner strength and physical resiliency. Life is filled with circuses. They're called problems. You and I will fail. We'll likely fail often. It will be painful. It will be discouraging. At times it will test you to your very core. But problems, in God's hands, will build you up spiritually not tear you down.

I like the way pastor and author, John Ortberg, puts it, "God isn't at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the me He wants." The best example of this principle – God using problems to discipline us - is none other than Jesus. God never punished Jesus because His Son never did anything sinful or foolish. But Jesus' life was full of problems, wasn't it? Why? God used problems to mold, shape, and develop the character of Jesus. The Bible says, "Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest, and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him." (Heb. 5:8-9 NLT) Jesus suffered direct temptation from the devil himself, denial and betrayal by his closest friends, and – above all – the extreme disgrace, humiliation, and physical pain of the cross. A Roman citizen couldn't be put to death by crucifixion because it was considered too degrading. Why did Jesus go through with it, then? We're told in our Scripture today, "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame." (Heb. 12:2 NLT)

In ways that we can't fully comprehend, the Jesus we worship and serve today became so precisely because of the problems He endured here in His earthly life. If God used problems to that effect in Jesus' life, why would God change His method when it comes to you or me? Through life's problems, God shapes, molds, trains, challenges, stretches, and disciplines us. He creates godly character through problems. Remember, sometimes it has nothing to do with being punished. God can take any

problem – regardless of who’s to blame or who’s at fault – and use it to create and build genuine godly character. God is never out to get us, but to make us! When you get discouraged, think about and get focused on Jesus. He’s our example, our pattern, and our blueprint. It might sound a little strange, but God used problems to enable Jesus to reach His own full spiritual potential. In reaching it, Jesus changed the universe!

Only when we’re willing to trust God and be patient about getting answers will we ever understand why God allows some of the painful problems in our lives. The author of Hebrews says here, “No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.” (Heb. 12:11 NLT) Yes, someday we will understand how every problem we endured in this life played a part in God’s essential training, but that “day” may not come until Heaven! This morning you might be enduring a painful, exhausting, or humiliating problem. You don’t understand why it’s even there. You don’t understand why God is allowing it or why He hasn’t resolved it yet. It’s OK not to understand, but don’t ever stop running the race of life God has marked out for you.

Way back in 1968, the country of Tanzania selected John Stephen Akhwari to represent it in the Mexico City Olympic Games. Akhwari was a marathoner. Along the racecourse, he stumbled and fell, severely injuring both his knee and ankle. By 7 pm, a runner from Ethiopia had won the race and all the other competitors had finished. Just a few thousand spectators were left in the huge stadium when a police siren caught their attention. In came Akhwari his leg wrapped in a bloody bandage limping through gate number 36. As he completed the final lap of the race, those present in the stadium began to cheer. Later, a reporter asked Akhwari the question on everyone’s mind. “Why did you continue the race after you were so badly injured?” He replied, “My country did not send me 7,000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish the race.”

It’s no great challenge to start following Jesus. But God expects more from us than just beginning that race or that journey. He expects us to finish. “And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.” (Heb. 12:1 NLT) Hang in there. Hold on. Keep on keeping on. Persevere. Endure. Have faith. I love the little saying, “The oak tree is simply an acorn that held its ground.” Despite all the problems that little acorn went through – high winds, foul weather, cold winters, hot summers – it just held its ground. The result? Greatness. In God’s hands, problems can make you great.

WHAT PROBLEMS - IN GOD’S HANDS - SAY ABOUT ME.

Believe it or not, problems mean that God is your Father and you are one of His children. Problems actually prove, confirm, demonstrate, verify, and validate that relationship. Loving parents discipline their children. Remember, discipline is something much greater than simply punishing your kids when they misbehave. Discipline is a kind of training necessary to be successful in life. Loving parents know their kids need discipline to be successful, not just punishment when they do something wrong. So they provide a healthy structure for their children’s lives that gives them security. They give praise and affection that builds a healthy self-image. They observe

all sorts of things about their children: how they speak to other people, how they treat animals, how they eat cake, if they tell lies, what they wear and why, what they find entertaining, how they deal with stress. Everything and anything is fair game. Loving parents discipline their children by making constant little tweaks and adjustments – tightening here, loosening there, little lectures, frequent words of encouragement, a scolding when necessary, many hugs, kisses, and pats on the back. Genuine love is interested in helping another person – in this case, your child - become all he or she can be. It's all about helping him or her achieve his or her potential fully.

God loves each of us far more than even the best earthly father imaginable. Like any loving father, He disciplines us. His goal for you and me is spiritual greatness. He defines spiritual greatness as having a character like Jesus. Jesus is the template, the mold, and the pattern. Jesus' character is succinctly expressed in what we refer to as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal. 5:22-23 NLT) Do those character qualities dominate your life 24 hours a day, 365 days a year? Probably not! How is God going to get those qualities into you and me? He'll use a variety of things – some pleasant and some not so pleasant. One proven method is through problems! You only ever experience God's peace by facing the problem of anxiety. You only ever learn God's patience by facing the problem of frustration. You only ever learn to live out God's gentleness when you've been exposed to harshness. Those problems aren't God punishing you. They're not meant to harm or destroy you. No, they're intended by a loving Heavenly Father to shape, mold, and train you up into spiritual greatness. If God didn't discipline us through problems, it would prove only that God doesn't really love us and He's not really our Father. Strange, but true: problems are one way God disciplines those He loves deeply.

In our Scripture passage today, our author contrasts a loving, earthly father with our Heavenly Father. Earthly dads discipline their kids to help them achieve earthly success. Our Heavenly Father disciplines us in order to help us achieve spiritual greatness – the likeness of Jesus. An earthly father's discipline is temporary. It lasts just a few years. Our Heavenly Father's discipline is eternal. Even the best earthly father's discipline is flawed and imperfect. He's going to make mistakes along the way. Our Heavenly Father's discipline is perfect – just right and always effective. Maybe not from our perspective, but from the standpoint of the One who sees the past, present, and future all at the same time. As odd as it may sound, the Bible is teaching us here that when God uses problems to discipline us, He's showing us His great love.

Let me close today by describing five possible reactions to the problems God allows into our lives. Number one: "That's life. This is my fate. I'm just a pawn on God's great chessboard." This person receives God's discipline with defeat - never willingness nor joy. Number two: "I'll keep a stiff upper lip. I don't like this problem, but I'll just get through it. Don't expect me to be grateful for it either." This person receives God's discipline with defiance. It's all about being grim and determined. Number three: "What did I ever do to deserve this problem? Nobody has it harder in life than me. If God really loved me, He'd make this problem go away right now." This person receives

God's discipline with self-pity. He or she whines a lot. Number four: "God is out to get me! Problems just prove how little God really loves me." This person receives God's discipline with resentment. I've probably reacted to problems God has allowed into my life in all four of those ways. Do you know what I've discovered? Whining about problems or getting angry with God for allowing them don't make God stop using them. Our Heavenly Father has invested far too much in you and in me to just stop because we're offended or upset with Him. The Table before us today reminds us that God invested the body and blood of His own Son in you and me. That's too great an investment for Him just to give up on us because we complain. Spiritual greatness – resembling Jesus – is the goal, the destiny, and the prize for all God's children.

Here's a fifth and final reaction: "Thank you for loving me enough to make me grow." This person receives God's discipline with joyful endurance. No defeat, defiance, self-pity, or resentment allowed. "Father, I believe you can use any and every problem to make me more like Jesus. I know you will never allow me even one needless tear." Full disclosure! I haven't reacted like that to life's problems very often. That's because I'm a work in progress and so are you. But change happens when we hear God's Word – like we have today - and then, by God's grace and through His power, we apply His Word to our lives. It's not easy to get to that place, but that's where we all need to get. That's what problems – in God's hands – do for us and what they say about us.

Mark Coleman loves to hike, and he passed on that love to his son, Peter. When Peter was only 5 years old, his dad, Mark, planned an easy hike on the northern part of the Appalachian Trail. Mark would lead them around a mountain to a lake in Vermont where they planned to spend the night. He made thorough preparation for the trip, including coaching his son. Over and over he told him that it would be tough. It was okay to be tired, but they had to keep on walking. They had to keep on walking. Unfortunately, the walking was longer and tougher than expected because Mark led them over the mountain instead of around it. The trail was steep and broken. Little Peter stumbled time after time on loose rocks, but they kept on walking. The hike was a burden, not a joy, but they kept on walking. Peter fell so many times that he ripped the knees of his jeans, but he kept on walking. Finally, after one fall too many, he sat down on the trail and cried. As his dad, Mark, approached him and began to speak, Peter cut him off: "I know, Dad. It's okay to cry, as long as I keep on walking."

Life's problems can become so difficult, sometimes all we want to do is just sit down and cry like little Peter. But it's then I hope we will hear the voice of our Heavenly Father whisper to us, "Son, daughter, it's OK to cry, as long as you keep on walking." In the loving hands of God, problems do something eternal for us and say something eternal about us. Would you proclaim those wonderful verses with me? "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith." (Heb. 12:1-2 NLT) Stay focused. It's OK to cry, just keep on walking.