

In 1969, the North West County Council (which was the Northern NSW electricity board), extended their network further into QLD and so, a Single-Wire-Earth-Return power line was built to our farm, and that's where it ended and so, we were the end-of-the-line (23 miles North of Goondiwindi).

So, 1969 was a very happy year for my parents, because not only was it the year they got electricity, and it was also the year that I was born.

And so, in 1969 old Kerosene fridge became a cupboard, and they bought themselves a brand new 240Volt refrigerator...

It may have also had something to do with my arrival, that the top of the fridge became the location for 2 items, and they were there until the day Mum and Dad left the farm 22 years later.

One of those items was a 3-tier aluminium cake-tin sort of a thing, labelled "Cake; Slice; Biscuits"... And the biscuit tin always had rolled-oat ANZAC biscuits in it... Presumably it lived on top of the fridge so we kids wouldn't just help ourselves...

But the other thing that lived on top of the fridge, was "the strap"... And I don't know if they did this on purpose, but it was always put just close enough to the edge, so that we kids could see it, and be reminded that it's there...

And sometimes we'd do something wrong, and get a quick smack. But when we did something outlandishly wrong, and a bigger lesson would need to be learned, and mum would say,

“You wait until your Father gets home”. And we knew, that it would involve “the strap” ...

Today we’re going to be talking about discipline – Christian discipline – the forgotten imperative of discipline, but it may not be what you’re thinking...

For some folk, when the Scriptures talk about the discipline of God, it mightn’t make a whole lot of sense to them. For some, they have suffered severe physical abuse (at the hands of their parents) – anything but loving parental discipline...

And then others, may equate “Christian suffering, as some kind of penalty that God is placing upon us, for what we’ve done wrong”. But that is not what the discipline of God is about (at least not usually).

And to fully grasp what this passage is teaching us, today we’re going to journey through images of:

- sporting grandstands;
- military battles;
- the loving discipline of a father; and
- the learned holiness and righteousness of God.

I’ve given today’s message the heading, “The forgotten imperative of Discipline”. (“Imperative” means it’s a “must do”).

So, we've just come out of Hebrews 11 (that magnificent chapter on faith). And Chapter 12 begins with:

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let **us** run with endurance the race that is set before us

Now, most times I've heard these verses preached on, (probably because most Australians are sporting tragics), the illustration has gone something along the lines of *"Imagine you're in a sporting arena, and the crowds in the grandstands are watching you perform, and they're cheering you on."* Alright, so we've got the great heroes of the faith, up in the grandstands, watching you and me, running the race for Jesus... And there could be some truth in this, but I think it misses what's most important.

You see, in the New Testament, a "witness" is never a mere spectator. A witness is always actively involved. It's about "being a witness **for** Jesus". The original Greek word that we translate as "witnesses" is μαρτύρων (martyrōn) from which we get our word "martyrs". The great cloud of "witnesses" are those who have been actively witnessing for Jesus...

They have run hard the race that God set before **them**; They have endured in **their** faith – they have suffered/endured...

And for **us** to be faithful, let us do the same.

How?...

Firstly, *lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely*

When we are following Jesus, the unnecessary weights that hinder us, is worldly stuff.

When Jesus told the parable of the sower, the seed that fell on the thorny ground, represented those who start out following Jesus, but then:

- the cares of the world;
- the deceitfulness of riches;
- the desires for other things; and
- the pleasures of life

choke them out, and they don't produce a crop.

Alright, that is a different analogy for the same thing.

It's the:

- the cares of the world;
- the deceitfulness of riches;
- the desires for other things;
- the pleasures of life

that weigh/slow us down.

It's all unnecessary weight that we don't need to carry. ... I mean: How can I be pursuing eternity with Jesus – setting my heart on eternity, and striving with Him, for the building of His kingdom, while I'm pursuing these other things?; and carrying all these other things; and craving these other things?

Remember what Jesus said to the rich young ruler... He knew his heart. And He said, "Sell up everything you have and give

it to the poor, and then come and follow Me. You'll have treasure in Heaven." The great wealth that he had, was like a weight that held him back from following Jesus...

And Hebrews goes on: put aside every sin which clings so closely

You see, as Disciples of Jesus – if we are followers of Jesus, we are pursuing a life of holiness. So we repent of sin, and follow Jesus with **all** of our heart. And the Devil's not going to like that. And so, when you start running whole-heartedly for Jesus, what the Devil does, is he tries to trip you up with sin...

And part of the Christian life, is we face temptations. But here's some good news. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can throw sin off. I'm always challenged with 1 Corinthians 10:13. It says: *God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation, He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.... Therefore flee...*

I suspect the reason that we end up sinning, is because God provides a path for us to flee from sin, and we do not.

A young man went to confession once, and he confessed a few little minor things: "I kicked the cat; I said a few naughty words..." And the priest, knowing the heart of young men, said "Have you been entertaining any impure thoughts lately?" "Oh no, Father, but they sure have been entertaining me"...

Let us not dabble in sin; Let us not be entertained by our sinful thoughts... Throw it off. **Sin**, is the sort of thing that will trip us up, in our run with Jesus...

And my heart is saddened, when I think of the many renowned preachers who (over the years) have been caught out in sin... And their very public humiliation and disgrace have been so harmful for the Kingdom of God.

And so we discard the things of the world that weigh us down. We throw off sin, that tangles us up. And we look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. And just as Jesus endured, we endure.

Jesus endured suffering. We endure suffering.
Jesus endured shame. We endure shame.

And so let us:
run with endurance the race that is set before us

Now, at this point, I'm going to throw a bit of a cat among the pigeons... I know we're familiar with the image of "running a race". A more literal translation would be: **run with endurance the [fight] that is set before us**

You see, the author of Hebrews could have chosen the Greek word *athlēsis* (from which we get our word "athletics") which is more fitting for a sporting contest. But instead he

used the word ἀγῶνα (agōna), which means “fight” and from which we get our word “agony”...

It can also mean “contest”, but the actual word is “fight”... And I suspect we’ve been given **this** word on purpose. It helps us to understand the sort of discipline he’s about to move on to talk about.

We move quickly with **endurance**, in the **fight** that is set before us... And this shouldn’t come as a surprise. The reality of being a Christian, is we are in a spiritual battle. It is not some kind of social running race. In **Ephesians 6:** (ESV) ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

And so, running the race – being a Disciple of Jesus isn’t some kind of social sporting endeavour. It is an agonising, gruelling contest of **striving** and endurance to survive... And the confidence we can have in this, is God is with us. The Lord God Almighty, is the Commander in Chief of His army.

So: Why have we been moved from a picture of a sporting event, to a battle? It’s because of the example of Jesus...

He endured the cross.

V3 tells us to put two and two together – Consider how Jesus endured hostility against Himself from sinners... and this word “hostility” is a strong verbal opposition. A more literal

translation might be “think of how he put up with so much defiance on the part of sinners against himself”ⁱ”

And as we remember how Jesus endured the cross and as we remember how Jesus put up with such hostile defiance against Himself, we remember, so that we may not grow weary or fainthearted. – Keep at it, folks. This is the way of Jesus....

V⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

And once again, the word “struggle” is “fight against”. Now, for some Christians, their fight against sin, will mean their persecution and maybe even death. But, I guess (at the moment) we’re in the same position as the Hebrews. Most of us have not yet been injured or killed for our faith...

And V⁵ asks a very pointed question “⁵ And have you forgotten...”

⁵ ... have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

And he quotes Proverbs 3:11&12

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,

nor be weary when reprov'd by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."

You see, God treats us as "sons". A loving parent must discipline a child, to train them in righteousness, and to bring them up to be:

- a fitting member of the family;
- a good citizen in the world;
- a person of honour, who cares for others;
- honest and fair;
- helpful and kind...

And I'm going to be blunt: If I am a parent, who is not disciplining my children, I have abandoned the example of Godliness set by our Lord...

V11 says: ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

And you get that, don't you? For a parent disciplining a child, we instantly tend to think how **un**pleasant it is for a child. But disciplining a child isn't pleasant for a loving parent either. And yet, it's something that's gotta be done.

And at the moment of discipline, it might **not** seem very peaceful, but in time, it yields the **fruit** of peace. it yields

the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by discipline.

You see, the whole point of “discipline”, is about “training”. It’s not so much about punishment, retribution, or vengeance... It’s about training.

When a loving parent is bringing up their child in the ways of the Lord (righteousness/peace),,, discipline, is all about training... Sometimes, that training will include what’s called “reproof”.

V5 says:

do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

To be “reproved”, can be to rebuke/correct/set-straight,,, and sometimes it may involve punishment.

And something I’ve noticed (with both children and adults), is the more one cares about righteousness/doing the right thing/holiness, the deeper it cuts when we are rebuked... Whereas those who don’t care about righteousness, “rebuke” is like water off a duck’s back.

But let’s come back to “discipline” and talk more about what “Godly discipline” is trying to achieve.

In discipline, we are being trained for the Spiritual Battle. And to help us to understand this, it’ll be helpful for us to know a little bit about military discipline.

I've been reading a series of historical fiction novels (written by Bernard Cornwell). And they've been following the Napoleonic wars – the wars between England and France in the early 1800's.

And as I've read these books, I've read a lot about “discipline”, and why discipline is necessary.

In the past, I've seen paintings and even movies of troops in musket battles with each other, and I've thought to myself, “They are crazy”. They march into the face of the enemy, as one solid line, and they don't take cover. They just get gunned down...

And I've always wondered, “Why don't they take cover?” Why would you march into the face of the enemy, while they are shooting you? I'll tell you why. It's because a solid, unbroken line, is what wins a battle.

As soon as one side breaks and heads for cover, they've lost. And the advancing troops will massacre them.

Can you imagine the discipline required, to keep the troops in order, when they are under fire...

Do you know where they learn it? It's drilled into them on the parade ground. They repeat the manoeuvres over and over again, so that in the mayhem of the battle, they don't panic – they just mechanically and automatically carry out the same manoeuvre they've practiced over and over again.

You see, “discipline” isn’t just about getting into trouble when we’ve done something wrong. Discipline, is about being trained for a purpose.

Disciplined troops:

- will stand their ground when ordered;
- will advance into danger when they are ordered to do so;
- may be afraid, but they trust the tactics and the orders of their commander; and so
- obey...

Do you see where I’m going with this?

We’ve been learning about “faith”. And now we’re hearing about “discipline”.

It is:

- for discipline that we endure.
- **with** discipline, that we don’t grow weary or faint-hearted;
- with discipline that we follow Jesus to face hostility;
- with discipline, that we follow the path to holiness.

And let me tell you, being a Disciple of Jesus, takes a lot of discipline.

- Jesus endured hostility.
And if we are not disciplined, when we encounter hostility, we may be tempted to flee; or we might be tempted to **retaliate** with hostility...

Disciplined Disciples of Jesus will stand firm and respond with love...

- The blood of Jesus was shed.
And when Disciples of Jesus suffer persecution, those who are not disciplined may either become deserters, or they may take up arms themselves...

But disciplined Disciples of Jesus remain loyal, and they will love their enemies to the end.

That's the sort of discipline we're talking about.

And so, it should **immediately** become apparent, that Godly discipline is very different to worldly discipline.

Godly discipline, is the learned holiness and righteousness of God. Are you with me? Discipline, is a means of teaching. And so, Godly discipline, is the learned holiness and righteousness of God.

Now, from a human perspective: for a child, it's their father's responsibility to discipline them, and to teach them the ways of righteousness. And when their mum is left to do that on her own, she's got a tough job ahead of her.

While we were kids: Discipline probably didn't seem very nice... But when our parents have been loving parents, we can look back, and:

- respect them; and
- honour them; and even
- thank them

for their loving parental discipline.

Spiritually, when we endure troubles/suffering/hostilities (for our faith), and we have to suck up the discipline to endure, this is God treating us as Sons... It doesn't mean that God is punishing us. It means that He is training us in His ways.

You see, some people with their name-it-&-claim-it prosperity theology preach that the Christian life is a life without troubles or hardships... Do you know what they're preaching? They're preaching spiritual illegitimacy.

You see,

- a life without trouble
is a life without discipline;
- a life without hardship
is a life without discipline;
- And a life without spiritual discipline,
Is a life without a loving heavenly Father.

That's what we're being taught here.

And so, "Prosperity theology", is preaching "spiritual illegitimacy"...

^{V7} It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without

discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

So there you go: When we suffer, it is a reminder that we are children of God.

Our Earthly fathers disciplined us for a short time (as best they could). Some fathers have done it better than others. Some fathers have failed dismally. But our Heavenly Father disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

Now, this might seem strange, but the deeper I studied the passage that we're in now, the more I felt sorry for anyone who would have a trouble-free life.... And the more I understand why the great heroes of the Old Testament endured times of great suffering and torment...

It was the discipline of God. It was training into the ways of God.

You see, It is at the cross that we see God as He truly is (the Suffering Servant)... And the discipline/training to holiness and righteousness, leads us into Christ-likeness... His ways become our ways, and we learn to love as He loved.

When we have:

- suffered, we can better love those who suffer.
- been tormented, we can better comfort those who are being tormented.

- stood strong in the faith,,, we can urge our brothers and sisters on in the faith.

It might be painful at the time, but later on, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Have you forgotten?

Have we forgotten the Godly imperative of discipline?

A discipline to stand strong and keep on in the faith;
A discipline to live a life of righteousness and holiness.
A discipline to yield peaceful fruit for the Lord.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
We don't usually want to thank You for our troubles,
but as we study Your word today,
we have seen that this is You being our Heavenly Father;
It is You disciplining us and loving us,
to become children of our Father.

Lord, in times when we suffer,

Help us to look forward.
Give us an expectant hope of what is to come.

Help us to look back,
remembering the example of Jesus;
and remembering the example of
the faithful who have gone before us
(that great cloud of witnesses).

In faith we trust You.
Give us the discipline to follow You,
Wherever You would lead,

Amen.

ⁱ Louw, J.P. and Nida, E.A. (1996) *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York: United Bible Societies.