

# SURROUNDED

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“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” (Henri Nouwen)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said people enter relationships with their own particular ideals and dreams of what community should look like. He wrote surprising words:

“But God’s grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community... The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both... Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”

John Ortberg wrote, “When you deal with human beings, you have come to the ‘as is’ corner of the universe. If you want to enter a relationship... there is only one way: ‘as is.’ Every one of us — *all we like sheep* — have habits we can’t control, past deeds we can’t undo, flaws we can’t correct. This is the cast of characters God has to work with.”

The leaders of our church (including current and former deacons and members of the Strategic Purpose Group) had a family meeting last week, gathering to sound off on some issues of relationship that have been creating friction — the first of several meetings in a healing conversation.

It is incumbent upon leaders — good leaders, in every sphere — to deal with such matters and not avoid them. And, where people are involved, such matters always, inevitably, surface. I do not have a final report to offer you at this time, for we have only just begun this conversation, but I mention this so that you might know that those who lead this congregation are realists, not escapists. We will not run from difficult issues, but pray the more for grace and understanding, and try to talk and walk them out together.

These are growing pains. For some, perhaps, the issues are “deal-breakers,” but for most they are the stuff from which relationships are forged and polished.

Relationships are wonderful. We were created to have relationship with God and right relationships with each other. Yet no one simply steps into an ideal relationship; every relationship begins from nothing, and trust grows, little by little, one day after another — some days calm; others, stormy.

Do you know what “fair-weather” friends are? Do you prefer “fair-weather” friends? Why not?

The Urban Dictionary defines a “fair-weather friend” as:

1. A friend who is only a close friend when circumstances are pleasant or profitable.
2. A friend who is only supportive when it's convenient.
3. A friend who is only around when *they need* you.

Most people have a distaste for “fair-weather” friends. Yet we each must ask ourselves: Am I someone’s “fair-weather” friend?

God is a “Friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). How close *does* a brother stick? The Bible suggests that “a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). That’s how close — *through* difficult times. But God has said, “I will *never* leave or abandon you” (Hebrews 13:5) God is our ideal friend. He wants to be your best friend. Think about how He demonstrates friendship toward you. Then, model your friendship after His.

Mature Christian friends are an awesome gift from the Lord. “Mature” does not mean perfect or sinless. Mature Christian friends will sometimes ignore you, sometimes offend you, but always try to work it out with you as an equal — one who messed up, but still a friend.

And if you’re the one who messed up, your mature Christian friend won’t abandon you, but try to help you, encourage you, get you on your spiritual feet again. They’re a great crowd to run with!

## Run the Race

*Hebrews 12:1 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.<sup>2</sup> We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne.<sup>3</sup> Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won’t become weary and give up.<sup>4</sup> After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin.*

*<sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, “My child, don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline, and don’t give up when he corrects you.*

*<sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.”*

*<sup>7</sup> As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father?<sup>8</sup> If God doesn’t discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all.<sup>9</sup> Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn’t we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?*

*<sup>10</sup> For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God’s discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness.<sup>11</sup> 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.*

*<sup>12</sup> So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees.<sup>13</sup> Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.*

Let’s examine these apostolic instructions more closely. It doesn’t take much to enter the race, Jesus has already paid our admission fee. What does it really take to cross the finish line?

## Strip Down

Just like a long-distance runner strips off bulky clothing or clothing that binds his stride, we are to carefully and thoroughly strip away every weight that slows us down — not necessarily sins, just stuff; the stuff that we imagine we have to have to live (could be material stuff, or emotional stuff, or intellectual stuff), usually stuff that we are persistently protecting or seeking *instead* of God. Of course, this also includes “the sin that so easily trips us up.” Everyone has one, but they are not the same for every per-

son. What is yours? Do you know it? It's the one that makes you moan, "Again!?! How long, Lord? When will I be free of this?"

The Christian life of faith is likened to a race (verse 1). Not a 100-yard sprint, but a marathon (the equivalent of running the 100-yard dash 461 times, back-to-back). This requires endurance — due to weariness and thirst, due to burning feet and an aching side. The life of faith knows similar hazards: compassion fatigue, spiritual dryness, pain of friction, heartaches, disappointments, and the endless wondering — Do I really matter? Is it really worth it? Am I making any difference? Does anyone care?

## **He Knows Our Way**

God has set the course before us. If there are steep hills or rocky paths or muddy swamps, He has set them before us. Endure them. He knows the way. The way before us is His way. Endure it.

We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, because He, too, endured. He initiated our faith, because of the joy that was set before Him — the prize at the end of the course, the joy of His bride, the Church.

And He completed, or perfected, our faith by enduring His testing to the end. Faith is not completed in its early bloom of fervor. Faith is only complete after it has been tested — stretched and scorched — and has endured. Faith is only complete when it has reached its end — not without faltering, but without quitting. Thus, Jesus' frequent question of His disciples: "Where is your faith?" It was not that they had none, but that they let go of it too soon, before the test was over.

Jesus never abandoned the course, never threw in the towel. When He was afraid, He submitted Himself to God. When He was abandoned, He pressed forward. When He was abused, He stood His ground. When He stumbled, He rose again. In severe weakness, He received the help of others, and so, He never quit. And that was Jesus! How much more does this depict our course with the Father? Hang on! Your faith will reap a great reward... if you do not toss it aside.

Keep your eyes on Jesus — think of all the hostility that He endured from people who meant Him ill — He endured and He overcame. They intended Him to be the victim, but He became the Victor. Don't feel sorry for yourselves. Think of what Jesus endured and you will be strengthened. Think of this and you will have courage to continue on in faith. After all, you're not dead yet!

## **Can Pain Be Good?**

God has encouraged us from the start, saying, "I will be your Father and you will be my child." And good parents don't abandon their children, they keep them close, they discipline them.

Eugene Peterson translates (Hebrews 12:5-6):

*My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline, but don't be crushed by it either. It's the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects.*

This is spiritual training, an education like no other!

It is foolish to shrug off discipline. The child who tries to escape discipline trades away wisdom and grace for wounds and bitterness.

The one who gives up under the weight of discipline is equally foolish, trading the pressure and pain that promised wholeness for fruitless self-pity.

*Every* child of God experiences disciplinary circumstances. By their very nature, these circumstances are unexpected and undesirable, they are interrupting and inconvenient, they are painful and pitiless. And, they are absolutely necessary. Without them, we cannot grow and we cannot become like Jesus.

We understand the role of discipline in the home; now we must learn the role of discipline in the life of faith. Faith cannot become complete without testing, and we cannot pass the test unless we endure until it is over. There are no shortcuts. Short-circuiting the test fails the test and guarantees re-testing.

Jesus endured; we also must endure. It is how good sons are raised. Our parents did what *seemed* best to them, but God is doing what *is* best for us.

God's discipline is always good for us. *Always good* for us. "We know that God is in all things working them together for our *good*" (Romans 8:28). This is an established truth; it is trustworthy. God is good, and He is good to *you*!

The result of His discipline is sharing in His holiness. The requirement of holiness is enduring Father's discipline. No endurance, no holiness.

## **My Cross**

That's a worthy and wonderful goal! But it doesn't make discipline feel any better. Discipline is always at cross purposes with our nature and preferences, or it isn't discipline at all. So it upsets us. Yet it yields a harvest of peace... in spiritual maturity (holiness).

My pastor used to say, "It's not death that hurts, but dying." Dying to self is the pits, but death to self is all peace. It's a painful process, but when the process is complete, the result is generous peace and righteousness.

With such words, the apostle urges his readers — as I urge you today — to make a fresh start. Your grip on faith may have become loose because your hands have grown tired of "just holding on." Take a new grip today. The God in whom we trust is so much bigger than you or your life or your life's difficulties. Reach out for His hand again.

Don't just kick those rocks to the side where someone else will stumble on them, but kick them clear off the path. Mark the pitfalls for the next guy. If we consider one another and help one another, we won't be injured. Instead, our weaknesses will turn to strengths and the weaker ones among us will become strong enough to help, too.

Take up your cross each day. Endure discipline like a good son, like a good soldier.

Jesus will bring you to a good end, crossing that finish line to victory.