

Introduction

- **Oscar Wilde: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."**
- Do you ever feel like you are in the gutter?
 - tossed aside, not really important, in the mud and the muck at the side of the road?
 - life can be wearying - all too much for us - a drag!
- That's the situation writer to Hebrews is writing into.
- Seeks to encourage his readers to press on in two broad ways:
 - **first**, by pointing to **Jesus' example** - how he lived and responded to the hardships and shame of sinful world - and the Cross itself (vs.1-4);
 - **second**, by exploring **how God disciplines** us to help us grow and develop (vs.5-11).
- We'll explore each in turn.

Jesus' Example (vs. 1-4)

- Back in the mid-80's it was more of a "thing-to-do" than it seems to be now:
 - when I was at school at Anniesland Cross in Glasgow, I used to see them most days - **joggers!**
 - it was the heyday of the Glasgow marathon; folk out training
 - articles in the Glasgow Herald about how to train, how to build up to the big day, what to eat, everything!
- It was real hard work:
 - people put in a lot of effort, gave up comfort... **just to run 26 odd miles round the centre of Glasgow!**
- All so that they could **cross that finishing line** - keeping fit, raising money, etc - but **mostly so could have that sense of achievement**, get the T-shirt!
- The imagery here in Hebrews 12:1-4 is that of the arena:
 - of the athlete preparing for competition, taking part in that competition
 - cloud of witnesses - **the OT heroes of the faith from chapter 11** - like the crowd, watching
 - **we are pictured down on the floor of the arena**, preparing to run the race marked out for us
 - **the endurance race of living faithfully for Christ throughout our lives**
- Greek athletes shed all that hindered:
 - we are encouraged to do the same
 - **to deliberately and consciously put aside sin...**
- Whether they are...
 - sins of **behaviour** - theft, adultery, murder, violence, lies;
 - sins of **attitude** - idolatry, greed, lack of respect (mother & father, etc);
 - sins of **omission** - laziness, carelessness of feelings, of not demonstrating Christ's love.
- We all have some skeletons in the closet:
 - some things we know to be wrong but refuse to confront
- **If we serious about wanting to run this race we need, like marathon runners, to be serious in the way we take our preparation!**
- Down on the arena floor with us, though, is Jesus.
 - he is there as our example, as our pace-setter
 - note how its the human Jesus, the man who lived and walked this earth, indeed who faced the Cross, that is named
 - the emphasis is there rather than on divine aspects of his title as **Christ**
 - in other words, he understands, he's down here in the arena with us!
- He's faced worse than anything we could ever face:
 - the pressure of people's **expectations**, the pressure of **popularity**, the pressure of

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unpopularity, the pressure of family rejection, the pressure of mis-understanding by those closest to him, and finally the pressure of an injustice: trial, torture and horrendously painful execution despite his innocence of any crime

- The writer to the Hebrews says - **fix your eyes on him** - look at how he endured - look at the way he did it - **follow his example!**
- And what is the heart of his example?
 - *"who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* (v.2)
- In the light of the eternal joy and peace and warmth and glory of God's presence, of his place at God's right hand, of the love he had for his Father and for doing and expressing that loving will...
 - in light of all of that, Jesus was able to endure the cross, was able to bear its shame!
- Author points to Jesus - who himself endured by setting his eyes on God
- Its a tough world we live in - its tough living for God - Jesus came and ran with endurance his race down here in this grubby, dirty, muddy, sin-filled world.
 - we too need to fix our eyes on him as we live, day to day

God's Discipline (vs. 5-11)

- Second way in which the writer seeks to encourage his readers to keep going is **by exploring how God discipline's us for our good.**
- He touches on three aspects:
 - God's Discipline shows his Delight
 - God's Discipline is Dependable
 - God's Discipline is Dynamic!
- Explore each in turn!

God's Discipline shows his Delight

- vs. 5-8: *"And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."*
- Real love is hard love - real love makes hard choices, and doesn't always please the loved one.
 - Christmas - advertising on the telly - those with children will perhaps already be feeling the pressure of **"I'd like XXX for Christmas!"**
 - we want to give generously to show our love - but we also know that indiscriminate giving, a careless giving in to demands, is not always for the best
 - we may know that the desire for that most expensive toy has more to do with an advertisers skill, and sows the seeds of greed in later life
 - to help **them** resist the insidiousness of greed later **we have to resist it for them now** - and pay the price in complaints, no doubt!
- With teenagers the discipline may be of a different form:
 - expected behaviour, times back, whatever
 - but the discipline is for the same purpose, **not merely to control but to train-up**
 - granting them the experience of responsibility so they can increasingly exercise it for themselves...
- All told, **discipline is a mark of true love**
 - a love that will not settle for second best - is determined to love that person despite the complaints, despite the hassle
- Can you imagine what it must be like to have parents who set absolutely no

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boundaries - do what you like, it doesn't bother me!

- in other words, "I don't care about you - you aren't important enough to me bother seeking the best for you!"

- **Same with God - his discipline show his love.**
- How do you know God loves you when things aren't easy
 - often because he's discipling you, allowing you a context to grow and develop, not content to have you a mere babe, always demanding, always self-centred, always immature
 - he's not content with that second best but desires that you should grow
- **God's discipline shows his delight in you!**

Excursus: what is God's discipline?

- Not the simplistic "if I'm having trouble God is discipling me" (variant on punishing me!).
 - Matthew 5:45, Jesus' words: "[Your Father in heaven] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."
 - hardships at different times are the common experience of humanity, in varying degrees and of different types
 - no simple equation - being disciplined for this sin!
- Using a wider definition of discipline - **that whole context in which training and growth and development can occur** - the gymnasium of life!
- Writer to the Hebrew's point in 12:7 is "**endure the hardship you are suffering as an opportunity to grow - as a training ground - as a chance to develop in some aspect of your Christian character**".
 - **you are facing illness?** OK, not just get through it, but seek to grow - develop your patience, your prayerfulness, your peace in God's care!
 - **you are facing persecution?** OK, don't just seek to avoid the persecutor, but seek ways of demonstrating Jesus' love in the face of that persecution - prayerfully asking God for his strength and grace so to do!
 - **you are facing poverty?** OK, don't just seek employment or other provision, but to grow in dependence on God to provide, perhaps to remain faithful to his ways and standards in the face of temptations to seek an easier way.
- In other words, **choose to treat hardship as discipline**
 - and therefore as an opportunity to see God at work in your life - the very fact that he wants you to grow demonstrates his love!

God's Discipline is Dependable

- vs. 9-10: "**Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.**"
- Essentially, **God always wants the best for us, and we can rely on him to discipline us in that way.**
 - draws a contrast between human fathers who can be inconsistent, act out of anger to punish rather than out of love to discipline, who eventually stop discipling us (they die), etc
 - God on the other hand is utterly consistent, completely loving, eternally patient, and never gives up on us as bad job!
 - he also knows us intimately - he knows exactly what we can bear, he knows exactly what kind of challenges we will each respond to
- For instance, **I've got a competitive streak in me**
 - at Uni, a Prof once told me I'd never complete as much as I thought I would in my final year project - I wanted to show him - I responded to the challenge - I did it! - and learned a whole load in the process!
 - I don't know whether that Prof judged my character well, or simply reckoned I'd bitten off more than I could chew
 - but there were other people in my year whose confidence would have been

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shaken by a Prof saying something like that.

- God knows us - we can rely on his discipline being good for us, dependable!
- **God's discipline is dependable!**

God's Discipline is Dynamic

- v. 11: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."
- Hardship isn't nice - truism!
 - I don't remember particularly enjoy being told off, or made to redo things!
 - but, yes I do look back with a profound gratitude for the discipline that my parents exerted, for their training, the framework they provided me with for life
 - as a child I don't suppose I'd have understood, and certainly wouldn't have appreciated that discipline in advance!
- We have the advantage of being able (a little, at least) to see the value in advance
 - to see that such discipline will bear fruit, a harvest of righteousness and peace - a character increasingly like that is its Lord
- For Jesus himself was "**perfected through suffering**" (Heb 2:10)
 - given by God a context, training ground, an arena of hardship in which to show that character of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control
- **God's Discipline is dynamic! - it makes a difference!**

Summary:

- God's Discipline shows his Delight
- God's Discipline is Dependable
- God's Discipline is Dynamic!

Conclusion

- **Oscar Wilde: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."**
- The writer says "**Look up!**":
 - as Jesus looked up to the joy that was set before him, the joy of the presence of his heavenly Father...
 - so, when faced with discipline, he says to us: "**look up and ahead to what that discipline will produce - fruit of righteousness and peace!**"
- Look up, look at the stars - look at Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith - out of the gutter, out of the mud - into his wonderful face!
 - look away from the grindstone to the glory!
- "**Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.... Lift your eyes up and look about you... Then you will look and be radiant, then your heart will throb and swell with joy**" (Isaiah 60:1,4,5)!!!
- Isaiah had a vision of the glorious future that is ours as God's people:
 - **let us lift up our eyes, look to Jesus and all that he has in store for us**
 - **and follow him with joy and glad obedience!**