

BE (i'm) PERFECT

GOING DEEPER DISCUSSION GUIDE MARCH 10, 2018

Discussion Guide

TAKE THE BED OF NAILS NOT THE BED OF ROSES

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: WHEN I HURT, I _____. COULD YOU ELABORATE?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- DISCUSS THE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF HEBREWS. DISCUSS THIS CONGREGATION'S EXPERIENCE WITH SUFFERING.
- READ HEBREWS 12.1-13 ALOUD. PAUSE. READ THE TEXT ONCE MORE.
- WHAT INVITATIONS DOES THE AUTHOR EXTEND TO HIS READERS REGARDING THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING? SEEK TO FIND AS MANY AS POSSIBLE.
- IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, ARE HIS INVITATIONS SIMILAR

OR DISSIMILAR TO THOSE TYPICALLY EXTENDED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING? COULD YOU ELABORATE?

- DO YOU FEEL IT IS REALISTIC TO EXPECT ONE TO EMBRACE SUFFERING AS A LOVING GIFT FROM GOD? COULD YOU ELABORATE?
- WHAT MIGHT BE REQUIRED FOR ONE TO MAKE A RESPONSE LIKE THAT THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS DESCRIBES?
- WHAT MIGHT BE A LOVING WAY TO ENCOURAGE OURSELVES TO CONSIDER THIS RESPONSE? OTHERS?
- AS A GROUP, CONSIDER TALKING ABOUT WHERE LIFE HURTS FOR EACH PERSON AND WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE TO RESPOND TO THIS HURT BY WELCOMING IT AS A LOVING GIFT FROM GOD? CLOSE WITH PRAYERS FOR ONE ANOTHER AND FOR GOD'S GRACE.

CONTEXT, BACKGROUND, AND COMMENTARY

CONTEXT OF HEBREWS

THE LETTER OF HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN BY AN ANONYMOUS AUTHOR SOMETIME IN THE SECOND-HALF OF THE FIRST-CENTURY. THE WRITING OF THE AUTHOR DISPLAYS A THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF ANCIENT RHETORICAL TRAINING MAKING HIM ONE OF THE MORE HIGHLY EDUCATED AUTHORS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT. HE ALSO POSSESSES A DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES. TOGETHER, THESE FACTORS SEEM TO POINT TO AN AUTHOR WHO IS JEWISH BY BIRTH BUT RAISED IN A HELLENISTIC SETTING SUCH AS ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT. IT IS LIKELY THAT HE WROTE SOMETIME BEFORE 70 A.D., BECAUSE

HE DOES NOT MENTION THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM, TO AN AUDIENCE OF SECOND-GENERATION CHRISTIANS (HEBREWS 2.3). THE PHYSICAL LOCATION OF THE CONGREGATION TO WHICH HE WROTE IS A MATTER OF SOME DEBATE, BUT ROME IS THE MOST LIKELY CANDIDATE (HEBREWS 13.24). THIS CONJECTURE IS SUPPORTED HISTORICALLY BY THE EARLIEST QUOTATION OF HEBREWS BEING FOUND IN THE FIRST LETTER OF CLEMENT OF ROME.

THE AUTHOR APPEARS TO BE FAMILIAR WITH THE CONGREGATION, AND IS CONCERNED WITH THEIR PRESENT ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO A TIME OF HARDSHIP AND PERSECUTION (HEBREWS 13.19). THE AUTHOR HAS KNOWLEDGE OF THIS CONGREGATION FROM AN EARLIER PERIOD, ITS MATURITY AND POSITIVE RESPONSE UNDER HARDSHIP. IN THIS PERIOD OF TROUBLE, THEY CONTINUED TO SERVE OTHERS WELL IN THE FACE OF INSULTS AND LOSS OF PROPERTY (HEBREWS 6.10; 10.32-34). HOWEVER, A SECOND ROUND OF PERSECUTION HAS BEFALLEN THIS CONGREGATION. THIS TIME, THE AUTHOR VIEWS THE RESPONSE OF THE CONGREGANTS AS ONE OF FALLING AWAY (HEBREWS 3.12) AND DRIFTING (HEBREWS 2.1) TO THE POINT OF APOSTATIZING (HEBREWS 6.4-6) OR ABANDONING THE CONGREGATION (HEBREWS 10.25). HE PORTRAYS THE PRESENT CONGREGATION AS SPIRITUALLY IMMATURE AND DULL (HEBREWS 5.11-14), AND HIS LETTER IS INTENDED TO CORRECT THESE ISSUES. HIS CORRECTION COMES IN THE FORM OF A SERMON BASED UPON PSALM 95.7-11, A PASSAGE WHICH FOCUSES UPON THE REBELLION OF ISRAEL AT THE WATERS OF MERIBAH. LIKE ALL ANCIENT LITERATURE, HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN TO BE READ ALOUD, A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF THE AUTHOR. HOWEVER, HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN IN A HOMILETICAL RATHER THAN EPISTOLARY OR CONVERSATIONAL STYLE; THAT IS, THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN TO BE HEARD AS A SERMON, A CORRECTIVE ONE AT THAT (HEBREWS 13.22). THE HOMILETICAL SKILL AND POWER OF THIS AUTHOR COME THROUGH WHEN WE READ THE BOOK ALOUD RATHER THAN SILENTLY. WE DO NOT KNOW THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THE PERSECUTION THE CONGREGATION IS EXPERIENCING, BUT THE AUTHOR ENCOURAGES THEM TO MOVE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE WITH A WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT EVEN MARTYRDOM BECAUSE THE EXPERIENCE OF HARDSHIP IS PART OF THE FAITH JOURNEY WHICH IMITATES THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND MAKES ONE HOLY (HEBREWS 11.32-12.13). SOME DIVISION SEEMS TO HAVE ARISEN IN THE CONGREGATION AS WELL AS BITTERNESS AND RESENTMENT IN RESPONSE TO

THIS PERIOD OF SUFFERING. THEREFORE, THE AUTHOR URGES THE MENDING OF RELATIONSHIPS, SUBMISSION TO LEADERSHIP, AND THE LOVING SERVICE OF THE COMMUNITY (HEBREWS 12.14-17; 13.1-19).

THE TEXT

HEBREWS 12.1-13: *HARDSHIP AND HOLINESS*

HEBREWS 12 BEGINS WITH A DISCUSSION DETAILING GOD'S PURPOSES FOR HARDSHIP IN THE LIFE OF BELIEVERS, BUT THE ROOTS OF THIS DISCUSSION ARE FOUND IN THE CONCLUDING VERSES OF THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER. CHAPTER 11 IS A SWEEPING SURVEY OF THE LIVES OF PEOPLE OF GREAT FAITH. STARTING WITH ABEL, THE AUTHOR MOVES THROUGHOUT HISTORY DETAILING THE FAITHFUL ACTIONS OF PEOPLE OF GOD. IN VERSE 32, THE AUTHOR BEGINS TO PICK UP SPEED, RHETORICALLY, CHOOSING TO FOCUS MORE AND MORE ON THOSE WHOSE FAITHFULNESS WAS DISPLAYED IN THEIR WILLINGNESS TO FACE AND EXPERIENCE DEATH FOR THEIR FAITH IN GOD.

FINISHING HIS SURVEY, THE AUTHOR THEN PORTRAYS THOSE WHOM HE HAS JUST DESCRIBED AS SITTING AS AN AUDIENCE IN A GREAT ARENA WATCHING THE FAITH JOURNEY OF THE PRESENT BELIEVERS TO WHOM HE IS WRITING AS IF THEY WERE CONTESTANTS IN A PHYSICAL CONTEST. THE AUTHOR DESCRIBES THEIR FAITH JOURNEY AS A RACE AND ENCOURAGES THE BELIEVERS TO CAST OFF ALL THAT WOULD HOLD THEM BACK SO THAT THEY MIGHT RUN WELL. HE DOES NOT DESCRIBE ALL THAT HE HAS IN MIND, BUT HE DOES INCLUDE SIN AS ONE OF THE HINDRANCES TO RUNNING WELL. THE VERB HE USES FOR THROWING OFF CAN MEAN TO SHED WEIGHT, AS IN SHEDDING EXCESS FAT. THEREFORE, HE MAY HAVE THE IDEA OF TRAINING IN HIS MIND WITH THIS STATEMENT. IF SO, THEN HIS POINT MAY BE FOCUSING ON THE PROCESS OF MATURING AND TRANSFORMING WHICH THE PRESENT CONGREGATION IS STRUGGLING WITH (HEBREWS 5.11-14). IN HIS MIND, THIS CONGREGATION IS NOT GROWING NOR ARE THEY TAKING SERIOUSLY THEIR MATURITY ON THE FAITH JOURNEY WHICH IS NOW HINDERING THEIR ABILITY TO RUN WELL ON THE JOURNEY OF FAITH.

THE AUTHOR ENCOURAGES THE BELIEVERS TO ENGAGE IN THEIR PROCESS OF TRAINING AND THEN RUN THEIR RACE BY LOOKING TO JESUS AS THE ONE WHO HAD RUN BEFORE THEM AND THE ONE WHO WOULD PERFECT THEIR RUNNING; THAT IS, JESUS IS BOTH THE EXAMPLE OF FAITH AND THE ONE WHO ENABLES ONE

TO LIVE INTO HIS EXAMPLE. ON HIS OWN JOURNEY OF FAITH, JESUS ENDURED THE CROSS FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF THESE TWO STATEMENTS IS AN ALLUSION TO JESUS' OBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF THE FATHER (HEBREWS 5.7-10) TO GO TO THE CROSS. RATHER THAN ALLOWING THE EXPERIENCE OF THIS BASEST FORM OF PUNISHMENT TO DISSUADE HIM, JESUS ACCEPTED THE WILL OF THE FATHER WHICH INCLUDED HIS SUFFERING AND DEATH. THE RESULT OF CHOOSING TO MOVE THROUGH THIS EXPERIENCE OF INTENDED SUFFERING WAS VICTORY WITH JESUS TAKING HIS SEAT AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER. WITH THIS PICTURE IN MIND, THE AUTHOR THEN REMINDS THE BELIEVERS TO CONSIDER WELL THIS PART OF JESUS' LIFE, HOW HE HAD ENDURED SO MUCH AT THE HANDS OF SINFUL PEOPLE.

WITH THIS PART OF JESUS' LIFE BEFORE THEM, THE AUTHOR THEN NOTES THAT THE BELIEVERS HAVE NOT YET SUFFERED AS MUCH AS JESUS HAD. THEY HAD SUFFERED, BUT THEY HAD NOT YET HAD TO FACE MARTYRDOM LIKE JESUS OR THOSE WHO HAD GONE BEFORE THEM (HEBREWS 11.32-40). BY ENCOURAGING THEM TO ENDURE THEIR PRESENT EXPERIENCE OF HARDSHIP IN LIGHT OF THE LIFE OF JESUS HE IMPLIES THAT THEIR SUFFERING IS PART OF GOD'S WILL FOR THEIR LIFE, A WILL WHICH IF OBEYED WILL LEAD TO VICTORY. HE MAKES THIS ALLUSION PLAIN IN THE FOLLOWING VERSES WHERE HE QUOTES PROVERBS 3.11-12. THESE VERSES SPEAK TO THE LOVING PURPOSE OF GOD'S CORRECTIVE ACTIONS IN THE LIVES OF HIS PEOPLE. DRAWING MORE UPON THE IDEA OF LOVING ACTION RATHER THAN PUNISHMENT FROM THESE VERSES, THE AUTHOR THEN URGES THE BELIEVERS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR PRESENT EXPERIENCE AS DISCIPLINE, LOVING CORRECTIVE ACTION FROM GOD. HE REASONS THAT TRUE CHILDREN SHOULD EXPECT SUCH ACTIONS FROM THEIR FATHERS, AND ONE IS NOT A CHILD IF HE DOES NOT RECEIVE SUCH FORMATIVE ACTIONS FROM HIS FATHER. IN HIS MIND, THE PRESENT EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING HAS BEEN SENT OR ALLOWED BY GOD AS AN ACT OF LOVE MEANT TO SHAPE THEM. THIS SHAPING IS MEANT TO LEAD THE CONGREGATION TO HOLINESS; THAT IS, GOD IS BRINGING ABOUT THE MATURITY THEY DESPERATELY NEED. HE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT THIS SUFFERING IS NOT PLEASANT IN THE PRESENT, BUT IN TIME, IT WILL LEAD TO RIGHTEOUSNESS, PEACE, AND HEALING IN THE LIVES OF THE BELIEVERS IF THEY WILL ENDURE IT.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

HOW DOES ONE BECOME LIKE JESUS? I WAS TAUGHT THE PATH TO BECOMING LIKE JESUS WENT STRAIGHT THROUGH MY WILL. I HAD BEEN FREED FROM MY SIN. THEREFORE, IF I LOVED JESUS, I WOULD STRIVE TO BECOME LIKE HIM. THE ONLY PROBLEM WITH THIS WAS I NEVER HAD ENOUGH WILL-POWER TO STRIVE HARD ENOUGH. I COULD NOT GET MY ACT TOGETHER. NO ONE EVER TOLD ME I DIDN'T HAVE TO. I SPENT YEARS TRYING TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF THE GRACE I HAD RECEIVED FROM GOD WHEN I COULD HAVE BEEN RELYING ON THE GRACE STILL BEING GIVEN TO ME BY GOD TO BECOME LIKE JESUS. NO ONE TOLD ME THE JOURNEY OF SALVATION WAS ALL GRACE, BUT NOW THAT I KNOW, I AM LEARNING TO LIVE RELIANT UPON GOD'S GRACE. THIS MEANS I WORK NOT TO BE LIKE JESUS BUT TO BE OPEN TO GOD'S GRACE. ONE OF THE WAYS I AM COMING TO UNDERSTAND THIS OPENING TO TAKE PLACE IS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING. LIKE MOST PEOPLE, I AM PAIN-AVERSE. I CAN'T THINK OF A FORM OF PAIN I LIKE. NO PAIN IS JUST FINE WITH ME. LIKE MOST, I HAVE SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE DOING EVERYTHING I CAN TO AVOID PAIN. PAIN SEEMED TO BE BAD, TO SAY THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG AND GETTING WORSE IN LIFE. THEN I HIT MY MID-30'S AND I BEGAN TO EXPERIENCE SEVERE BOUTS OF DEPRESSION, LONG DARK WINTERS OF THE SOUL FOR WHICH THERE DID NOT SEEM TO BE ANY RELIEF. THEN IN THE SPACE OF 18 MONTHS MY FAMILY WAS HIT WITH CATASTROPHIC FINANCIAL LOSS WHEN A BUILDING DEFECT NEARLY CAUSED THE TOTAL COLLAPSE OF OUR HOME AND THREE BACK SURGERIES WHICH TOOK MY WIFE OUT OF COMMISSION AND MADE ME DAD, MOM, MAID, TAXI DRIVER, COOK, AND EVERYTHING ELSE FOR ALMOST 2 YEARS. HOWEVER, BEFORE THE DUST OF THE BACK SURGERIES OR THE REPAIR CREWS HAD SETTLED, I WAS STRUCK WITH MYSTERIOUS FLU-LIKE SYMPTOMS WHICH PROGRESSED IN INTENSITY AND WERE ACCOMPANIED BY A RAPID DETERIORATION IN MY MOBILITY. MONTHS LATER, I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH AN EXTREMELY RARE AUTO-INFLAMMATORY CONDITION CALLED STILLS DISEASE, A DISEASE WHICH NOW DICTATES MUCH MORE OF MY LIFE THAN I WOULD LIKE TO ADMIT. NEEDLESS TO SAY, THE PAST 10 YEARS HAVE BEEN ONE, LONG EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING ON A NUMBER OF FRONTS. SOMETIMES, I AM AMAZED I AM STILL STANDING. MOSTLY, I AM AMAZED AT WHO I HAVE BECOME.

THROUGH IT ALL, I HAVE HAD NO ESCAPE HATCH FROM MY SUFFERING. LIFE JUST HURTS, AND WITH MY STILLS WILL LIKELY ALWAYS HURT. VERY EARLY ON, I WAS FACED WITH A CHOICE

OF HOW TO APPROACH MY SUFFERING. I COULD GET MAD AND FIGHT IT OR I COULD SURRENDER TO IT; THAT IS, I COULD LET IT DO WHAT IT WAS GOING TO DO TO ME. AS A PERSON OF FAITH, THIS CHOICE WAS FRAMED AS I COULD GET MAD AT GOD AND FIGHT HIM, OR I COULD SURRENDER TO HIM. AS THE ONE WHO WAS SOVEREIGN, CERTAINLY HE HAD A PURPOSE. I COULD GO ALONG OR RESIST IT. I CHOSE TO SURRENDER, NOT PERFECTLY, BUT SURRENDER NEVERTHELESS. WHAT HAS FOLLOWED HAS NOT BEEN ONE GREAT STORY OF VICTORY, BUT IT HAS BEEN A STORY OF HEALING. OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, AS MY WORLD AND BODY HAVE FALLEN APART, GOD HAS BEEN ABOUT THE PROCESS OF KNITTING MY HEART TOGETHER, A HEART DEEPLY WOUNDED AND SCARRED BY LIFE. MY PAIN HAS BEEN GOD'S SCALPEL AND MY SUFFERING, HIS MEDICINE. I CAN'T SAY I LIKE EITHER, BUT I AM THANKFUL FOR THE RESULT. SOMETIMES I AM TEMPTED TO THINK I HAVE HAD MORE THAN I CAN BEAR. OTHER TIMES I JUST WANT TO GIVE UP AND SLIP INTO FATALISM. I QUESTION. I POUT. I EVEN HAVE HAD MY SHARE OF "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!?!!" MOMENTS WITH GOD. IN THE END, HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING. HE IS DOING A GOOD, RESTORING WORK IN ME.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

THE JOURNEY OF FAITH IS ONE OF OPENING NOT PERFORMING. WE NEED GOD'S GRACE TO BECOME LIKE JESUS, TO LIVE THE LIFE WE WERE ALWAYS INTENDED TO LIVE. ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MEANS WE HAVE FOR OPENING OUR LIVES TO GOD IS FOUND IN THE WELCOMING OF OUR PAIN, SUFFERING, AND SORROW. FOR A PAIN-AVERSE CULTURE, TO WELCOME PAIN AND SUFFERING IN ANY SHAPE SEEMS COUNTER-INTUITIVE. WE HAVE EVEN DEVELOPED ENTIRE THEOLOGIES WHICH EXPLAIN AWAY THE NEED FOR PAIN AND SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES. HOWEVER, TO DO SO IGNORES THE VERY THING WHICH WE CLAIM STANDS AT THE CENTER OF OUR SALVATION JOURNEY, THE CROSS. THE CROSS BEARS WITNESS THAT GOD USES SUFFERING TO BRING ABOUT HEALING AND VICTORY. SOMETIMES HEALING REQUIRES WOUNDS BE PLACED IN OUR HANDS, OUR FEET, AND OUR SIDES. HOW AND WHY THIS WORKS IN THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD IS BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING. WHAT IT DOES IN US IS EASIER TO DESCRIBE. THE PRESENCE OF SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES, WHEN ACCEPTED, FORCES US TO RELY UPON THE GRACE OF GOD (2 CORINTHIANS 12.7-10). THE EXPERIENCE OF THIS GRACE SHAPES OUR CHARACTER (ROMANS 5.1-5), AND WE BECOME MORE HOLY, RIGHTEOUS, AND WHOLE (HEBREWS 12.4-13). IT DOES NOT MAKE SENSE TO ANY WHO HAVE NOT EXPERIENCED IT. TO EVERYONE WHO HAS WALKED THE

ROAD OF SUFFERING AND WELCOMED IT, THERE CAN BE NO OTHER EXPLANATION THAN GOD WAS FOUND ON THAT ROAD AND THEY WERE CHANGED, SO MUCH SO THAT MANY BEGIN TO THANK GOD FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING.

WELCOMING SUFFERING IS A VERY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, ONE WHICH CANNOT BE FORCED UPON SOMEONE. SAYING THINGS LIKE, "GOD HAS GREAT PURPOSES FOR YOUR PAIN" IS NEVER A GREAT WAY TO COMFORT SOMEONE WHO IS HURTING. PRESENCE, CO-MOURNING, AND MORE PRESENCE ARE BETTER WAYS TO MEET PEOPLE IN THEIR PAIN. HOWEVER, AT SOME POINT ON THE JOURNEY OF PAIN AND SORROW, WE MUST CHOOSE HOW WE ARE GOING TO RESPOND. WE CAN REMAIN A VICTIM OR WE CAN TAKE ACTION. IF WE TAKE ACTION, WE MUST CHOOSE WHETHER WE FIGHT AGAINST OUR PAIN OR WHETHER WE SURRENDER TO ITS WORK IN OUR LIVES, WILLINGLY. AS PEOPLE OF FAITH, THIS IS FRAMED AS FIGHTING GOD OR ACCEPTING HIS PURPOSES FOR OUR PAIN. THOSE WHO CHOOSE THE VICTIM ROUTE FIND ONLY PAIN AND DESPAIR. THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO FIGHT DISCOVER THEY ARE DASHING THEMSELVES AGAINST THE ROCKS. THOSE WHO WELCOME WHAT GOD HAS FOR THEM, WELCOME GRACE AND FIND GROWTH, AND OFTEN MUCH JOY IN THEIR PAIN.

THIS WEEK, CONSIDER WHERE IN LIFE IT IS THAT YOU HURT. ASK YOURSELF HOW YOU ARE RESPONDING TO THIS EXPERIENCE. WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE FOR YOU TO WELCOME THIS EXPERIENCE AS A MEANS OF GRACE? SPEAK HONESTLY AND OPENLY TO GOD ABOUT THIS, AND AWAIT HIS REPLY.



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