

How does God's Word & sacrificial giving grow my faith?

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Brian R. Wipf

I ran track when I was in HS. I loved track meets (getting out of school early, meeting girls, competing), but I hated track practice. And practice was every day; there was more pain than gain. Coach would always make us run more than we did at our meets; I didn't run 2 milers at track meets, but he made me run them in practice. Coach would make us run up big hills over and over again; there's no competition like that at track meets. He'd make us sprint for 100 meters, then jog 100 meters; then spring 100 meters.

And the whole time there was coach "encouraging us." "Why are you running so slow, Wipf? Faster! Don't quit!" He conceived of these cruel tricks; he'd watch over you as much as he could to make sure you put in your practice. Why? Why would he do that?

After I decided to go to seminary, I began reading... a lot. There's not a lot of reading when you study engineering; that's one reason why I liked it. But with a new vision and passion, I began reading all the time. I'd read the scriptures, I read books about apologetics (how to defend the Christian faith). I'd read books about the Bible because I wanted to learn as much as I could. Some were big; others were little. But unlike track, nobody was making me do it. I just did it. Why? Why did I voluntarily give up time, energy, focus, watching TV, playing basketball to read these books that had nothing to do with engineering?

Training. In both cases, I was being trained. My track coach wanted to make me faster; he was trying to improve my endurance and my explosiveness. The hill workout trained me to lift my knees higher. He was training me. In college, I was training my mind. I was beginning to think about new things in new ways. The different authors, the new titles were giving me new food for thought. I was training myself.

For track, I needed someone else to push me. I wouldn't have pushed myself. If it wasn't for my track coach, I'd coast; I wouldn't give it my 100%. He made me do things that I never would have put myself through. In college, I had a level of self-discipline; and my drive to learn fueled my training. But in both cases, I wouldn't have been the runner or the seminary student I was without training.

1 Tim. 4:7-8 says, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather, train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Do you see the command there? Train yourself, Christian! I can hear my track coach during practice: "Wipf! don't get distracted by the girls. Train! Train for the meet tomorrow. Get ready. There's a prize to be won!" Paul says, "Timothy, don't get distracted by silly, foolish myths and conversations. Train yourself for godliness. There's a reward, Timothy. Seek the reward in this life and in the next. Train for it."

Did you know you need training in your Christian life? Did you know that unless you train for godliness you won't be godly? Just like you'd never show up for a track meet, a piano recital, an archery contest and expect to win without training, neither will you succeed in faith without training. Did you know you need God to be like my HS track coach; forcing you to do things that you wish you didn't have to do? Making you uncomfortable on purpose because he knows the fruit of your training will reap the crown of life? Did you know God is doing that for you?

I believe God is using the *Reaching Beyond* campaign to train you. Our third goal reads like this: *That the faith of FBCers would grow in God as our provider for this campaign and beyond through his Word and sacrificial giving resulting in permanent life-change*. Last week we learned from the Word of God that our Lord is indeed a provider. He provides in his way and in his time always for the good of his children.

But God grows us in that faith through means. Just like I used the means of books to get ready for seminary; just like I used the means of running to prepare for track meets, God uses means to train us and change us. Here's what I mean by that: God doesn't sprinkle pixie dust on you for you to be more like Jesus. You can't download godliness with a click of your mouse. You do not automatically grow in your faith just because. I fear some have been thinking that for decades. You've been a Christian for 10 years, 25 years, maybe even 40 years, but you're still a lot like you were when you first got saved. You were angry then; you're still angry now. You were proud then, you're still proud now. You looked down on others; you still do. Sadly, not a lot has changed. Part of the reason for that is because you've rejected God's training regiment. Every time God has implemented his training plan in your life you've fought against it and rejected it.

Well, this campaign is a chance for you to be trained. We believe that God plans on using his Word and sacrificial giving to grow your faith. His Word... sacrificial giving. These are the two tools we believe God wants to use to train us. Let me show you how from the scriptures.

First, turn to 2 Tim. 3:16-17 (READ). This is a verse we should all know really well; we should all memorize this verse. Our Awana kids do; if we think it's important for them then it should also be important to us. Let's start at the beginning.

All Scripture, Paul says, is breathed out by God. That's where we get the word "inspired;" some of your translations say that. All scripture is inspired by God, breathed out by God. Even though human authors penned the words of scripture in their language, in their style, with their own personality, God is behind those words as if God himself breathed them out; it's as if he spoke and wrote them. They are his words.

I don't know if you've noticed, but when God speaks good things happen! God spoke and the world was created; God spoke and the dry bones lived again; Ps. 19 says the Lord speaks and the deer gives birth. There is no power like the power of God's words. Do you know why? Because the Holy Spirit is the one who moves and acts when God the father speaks the words of Christ. Vs. 16 and 17 tell us the good that comes from God's word. We're taught by them. God's words teach. God's words reprove; reprove has a focus on rebuking that which is false. The scriptures also correct, meaning it corrects wrong behavior. And then finally, it trains in righteousness. There it is; in black and white. God's words train us.

I'm wondering: are you submitting to the training power of God's Word through this *Reaching Beyond* campaign? Because you don't have to, right? I remember getting the instructions from my track coach after school. Go run 2.3 miles; 3.6... go run this hill 10 times. But coach wasn't there all the time. You could cut corners. You could shave a half mile off the 2.3 miler by running behind Shopko. Rather than running the hills 10 times, you could run them 6. And you could sabotage your training other ways, too. I could have started smoking; I could have eaten a box of ho-hos after every practice.

You can sabotage God's training for you, too. You can ignore the teaching, can't you? You can grumble and complain about the subject matter. You can question the motives of the preacher. You can say, "Yeah, I know this already," like there's no room for you to grow. Don't sabotage your training.

Thankfully, I know most of you are here because you want to grow, you want to be trained in godliness. You've rightly believe that God wants to use this experience to train all of us through his word. And it's working! You are being trained that all the abundance God has given you is for his kingdom work; and you and I are to give to God's work through the church in the measure in which God has given to us. You are being trained that our unity and love for each other is a non-negotiable. You're being trained that whatever you give in this life for the kingdom of God will come back to you 100 times more. You're being trained on what it means to know and believe God will provide in his time and in his way. All through this word because that's what God told us would happen. His word is training you; it's equipping you to accomplish the good works he has prepared for you to do.

We also get trained by our sacrificial giving. Look at this equation: sacrifice = voluntary suffering. What do I mean by that? You can suffer two ways, voluntarily or involuntarily. Involuntary suffering is hardship and sacrifice thrust upon you by the circumstances of life. Getting into a car accident; having a barn fire; identity theft; a heart attack. You have no choice; you just have to go through it. And by going through it you experience loss and are forced to make sacrifices.

Choosing suffering (sacrificing) is different in that you willfully decide to take a loss. If you get into a car accident, you're going to experience losses. Loss of health; the loss of time

going to rehab; the loss of money covering expenses. Maybe a loss of a sense of security as you realize you're more vulnerable than you thought. And that's thrust upon you. And God uses those experiences to train you. But when you willfully decide to give to the orphans and widows home, when you become a nursery worker, a youth volunteer, you experience loss, too. You choose to give up time, money, body; you choose to give up things your flesh (your body) wants; you choose to care about the kids you serve in Awana (truly caring is a sacrifice, isn't it?... its easy ignoring; it's hard to engage and to feel). That's why I say sacrifice is voluntary suffering. You are choosing to go without.

And that suffering (both voluntary and involuntary), that crucible, trains us. God uses suffering and sacrifice to shape our lives around the kingdom purposes and ways of God. Remember last week when we studied Abraham ready to sacrifice Isaac? He was going to do it; he was going to obey God's word. And then God stopped him. He said in vs. 12 (Gen. 22:12), "... 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'" What does that mean? God didn't know before? Did God learn something new? The God who declares the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), the God who's understanding and knowledge knows no end (Ps. 147:5); the God who knows us before he even forms us (Jere. 1), what does it mean when it says "now God knows?" God always knows. God is stepping into the story and he's serving Abraham's faith (he's serving your faith and mine); God always knew what Abraham would do. But guess what: Now Abraham knows. Now Abraham knows he really does fear God. He thought he did; now he knows he does.

That's what suffering and sacrifice do. Suffering and sacrifice is God's way of training us and showing us what's true in here and what's true of God. Turn with me to Romans 5 (READ vs. 1-5). I want us to focus on that chain that leads to more hope. Paul says, "suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Look how this works. Suffering toughens us up. When we go through suffering, when we make sacrifices, we tighten the belt, we get serious about our faith, our wrong ideas and false beliefs about God and life are exposed, we kill our pride by the grace of God and begin seeing what really matters in life. Suffering and sacrifice train us to endure just like choosing to run a 5 miler helps us endure.

Then, through our endurance and perseverance, our character begins to change. We stop being so superficial. We become more understanding towards others. We become more patient than we ever thought possible. We pray more. We look to be more helpful because we know what it's like to go through the valley of the shadow of death. That's God changing us on the inside. He's turning us more into the image of Jesus through the sacrifice and suffering.

Finally, when we see and observe that our character, the inside of us, is changing, we begin to hope even more. We begin saying, "God's grace really works; God really is living inside of me. I've never been this patient before. I used to sin all the time when.... I have

love for people that I've never had before." We begin to know experientially that God has indeed poured his love into our hearts. We know it's true from the scriptures; but now we know it's true because it's happening to us.

That's what suffering and sacrifice produces in us. It produces endurance, that endurance produces character, and that character produces even more hope. That's how we can say with Paul, "We even rejoice in our sufferings and sacrifices."

Friends, I didn't know how I could be so glad to give so much to my church. Like many of you, Korby and I are planning to give more to our church than we've ever done before. We could do a lot with the money we're going to give. It's changing our plans. We won't be able to buy stuff, we won't be able to go places that we might have been able to purchase and visit otherwise. We are dipping into nest-egg money trusting God with the unknowns of our future. But we're happy to give even though there's nervousness; we're happy to endure this voluntary suffering (giving up earthly treasure). And this change in character through sacrifice is giving us a picture of what's going on inside of me. It's laying bare our hearts. And we can say, "God is working... even in us." And that gives us even more hope in God.

The chance to give sacrificially is training us; it's God's way of producing faith and it's his way of giving us a glimpse inside our hearts. What glimpse are you getting? What are you seeing about you through this opportunity to sacrifice? What is this time of sacrifice telling you about your faith in God? About your trust in him? Is it saying, "Wow, I really am committed to unity," or not because you've been stirring the rumor mill. Is this time of sacrifice saying, "I really do love and care about the kingdom work of God more than luxurious vacations" or "I really care about having fun on the lake." Is this time of sacrifice saying, "God, I will trust you in retirement and not my insurance policies and bank accounts" or is it revealing that you are struggling to believe that God will indeed provide in your retirement?

I'm convinced that the legacy of *Reaching Beyond* is two fold. On the one hand, more space will mean we have the opportunity to minister to more people. More people will hear God's word, worship him and grow in faith. If you doubt that, just ask yourself this question, "How many people, how many children would not know Christ and his word if the faithful attenders and members of FBC failed to add on our most current addition? Imagine an FBC facility without the Awana room, without the fireside room. Imagine FBC without the offices, without the bathrooms, without a kitchen on the main floor. Imagine a sanctuary without the risers in the back, without the space to stream in video to the Awana room. It's obvious: more space has meant more opportunity to minister to more people. The same thing will happen as we faithfully pursue our missionary mandate through *Reaching Beyond*.

But also, the legacy will be found in us. Permanent life-change. Friends, if we submit to God's training we will be more prayerful, more trusting, more unified, more committed to his kingdom, more sacrificial. He is doing a good work through us and he is doing a good work in us. I'm not sure which one is more amazing. But I will rejoice in both.

Small Group Questions
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- Read 1 Tim. 4:7-8.
- Pastor Brian said in the sermon, “Did you know you need training in your Christian life? Did you know that unless you train for godliness you won’t be godly?” Do you believe that to be true?
- Why does Paul say we should train ourselves for godliness in the 1 Tim. 4 passage?
- What’s hard about training? Why doesn’t training come “natural?”
- Read 2 Tim. 3:16-17. Do you think you can be “equipped for every good work” without the training that comes from God’s word? How does your answer impact your view of God’s word?
- How is God training you lately through his word? And what ways are you tempted to sabotage his training plan for you?
- Pastor Brian said sacrifice is voluntary suffering. Do you agree with that? What might be a better way to describe or define “sacrifice?” What’s the heart of sacrifice?
- How does sacrifice and suffering train us? Read Romans 5:1-5 if it would prove helpful.
- Pastor Brian asked in the sermon, “What are you seeing about you through this opportunity to sacrifice? What is this time of sacrifice telling you about your faith in God?” What are some of your answers to those questions?
- What are some examples of sacrifice you’ve made for God’s kingdom that may have been hard, but you have not regretted? Why haven’t you regretted the sacrifice?
- What changes would you like to pray for so you are readier to receive God’s training in your life? Pray for those together as a group.