

Text: Hebrews 12:11

Theme: Welcome to Training Camp

August 21, 2016

Two years ago as I made my journey to Peru, I took the 5 am shuttle from my hotel to the airport. The shuttle driver, being the conversational type, asked, "So, where are you going?" The other two guys in the shuttle with me said, "Boot Camp. Up at 5 am every morning, to bed at midnight only to do it all over again the next day." Most of us don't have a clue as to the rigor of basic training. However, today's text speaks about training, and what we gain as we say in our hearts, "Welcome to Training Camp."

I. Within our imperfect world, training camp is a necessary reality for God's people.

A. But why does training camp appear so painful? 1. It appears painful because we are out of shape. How many of you have gone out for some rigorous sport? Those first days of practice, you think you're going to die, that the coach's goal is to kill you, right? In the spiritual realm, it's no different. We're out of practice, out of spiritual shape. O, we may think we're in fine shape, but our spiritual Coach knows better. God's training camp frequently appears painful because we're not in shape spiritually, and not where we need to be, but merely where we think we need to be.

2. Training camp appears painful because we lack a routine. If you get up early three mornings in a row and go running, interrupt your good intentions for a week and then go running the next two days, how will you feel? Routines are critical for keeping in shape. Spiritually, the same is true. We need a time with God routine, a time for worship routine. We might think God should reward us for good effort, but good effort isn't what God is looking for in us. He wants us to follow every moment, over the mountain tops and through the challenging valleys. Because that routine is challenging to maintain, training camp with God often appears only painful.

3. It appears painful because we're not focused on the finish line. You've seen it; maybe you've experienced it first-hand. A runner crosses the last hurdle stumbling to the ground in pain. As all the other runners race by, he gets back on his feet and the crowd cheers him on as he makes his way to the finish line. That's a finish line focused runner. In our faith-life, God says, "Focus on the crown, on the finish line. When you fall down, get up. When you're in pain, keep moving. Keep your eyes on that finish line and keep moving until you cross the line!" How focused are we on that finish line? Focused enough to get up when we stumble, to keep moving instead of giving up?

B. As we move beyond the pain of training camp, what becomes our long-term gain? 1. In God's training camp, we gain a bond of friendship with Jesus. Can you image what it must have been like to be one of those disciples who walked with Jesus? Talk about an incredible friendship. As we endure God's training camp, He says to us, "Welcome to My family. I have chosen you, not because you impressed Me in spring training, but because I love you. I invite you to walk with Me, to bring any and every concern to Me. I will always listen and always remain your best friend even in those moments when you turn your back or disown Me as your friend!"

2. In His training camp, we gain the privilege of forgiveness. What's the most important aspect of the Christian faith, of life itself? What matters more than anything else? In one word, it's forgiveness. Without it, guilt would destroy us, our

mistakes would cripple us and despair would overwhelm us until we couldn't function. Fortunately for us, forgiveness isn't something we earn or apply for like a bank loan. Jesus says, "Because of the cross, I offer you forgiveness. Not some, not part, not most, but every event in your past and every event that will occur in the future. Accept the privilege I offer you, the privilege of forgiveness."

3. In His training camp, we obtain an invitation through the narrow door. In our Gospel, we're reminded of the wide and narrow doors. Many will attempt to enter through the wide door, but only those who enter through the narrow door, who enter by invitation, who enter by acknowledging the faith Christ worked in their hearts, only they will experience the joys of heaven. As member of His training camp, we've been offered the most precious invitation, the invitation to the crown of life. Consider it a great privilege, a great honor because it's surely both as we consider what we have been offered and invited to enjoy in His training camp.

4. In His training camp, we become recipients of God's grace, love, mercy, and care. Suppose Jesus walked up to you this morning and asked, "Why should I love you? Why should I care for you?" How would you respond? We'd surely try to answer His questions, but, no matter what answer we offered, we would still fall short. God should have turned His back on us years ago. He should have said, "Why should I care for you since you care so little for Me?" But God isn't like us. Instead of giving us what we deserve, He lavishes us with His love, mercy, and compassion. Daily, we see the evidence. Daily God does the unthinkable for the undeserving.

5. In His training camp, we gain the ability to endure. Maybe it hasn't happened to all of you, but some of you have been there. You've gone through an intense medical crisis. Days, weeks, months of the unknown have exhausted you beyond what you thought possible. Today, you look back on that event and you say, "I don't know how I ever got through that. At the time, I didn't think I would make it." That's evidence of God's endurance in action. But whether you have been there or not, our Coach says, "You can endure more than you think because I have placed within you an ability to endure that exceeds that of any person outside of My family!"

6. In His training camp, we gain the guarantee of the crown of life. If you walked through the grocery store, how many product guarantees could you find? We're bombarded with so many that they mean almost nothing. Yet, our God steps onto the scene and says, "I guarantee you the crown of eternal life." Do you believe it? You and I, we didn't earn it; it's not based on our performance, on us being good people who do good things. Based on Christ and Christ alone, the Father says to you today, "By faith, I guarantee that you will receive the crown of life. No strings attached. As part of My training camp, I offer you the only priceless gift in the world!"

7. Whether you attend boot camp or not, God says to you each and every morning that you remain on this side of heaven, "Welcome to training camp. Next stop? Eternity in My presence!" Amen.