

"The Second Arrow: How to Tell Yourself a Better Story About Suffering"- Hebrews 12

Christmas Eve Service

Series Slide

When most of the world thinks about the year 2020, we think "That was an awful year." What the world collectively experienced in the onset of an unstoppable pandemic- coupled with a divisive US election, and racial injustice and tension... there was no one who was untouched. In fact- the effects of the year 2020 have still not left us and probably never will. 2020 changed life as we know it...and for the most part, we think of that as bad.

At the end of last year, Author Mark Manson reached out to his list of email subscribers and asked them "What have been your biggest lessons of 2020?"

<https://markmanson.net/life-lessons-from-2020>

He received 1,273 replies from dozens of different countries, from men and women as young as 15 and as old as 84.

From the emails, Mark noticed some commonalities, so he grouped all the similar emails together and 10 common themes emerged.

Here are 10 things his readers learned from their experience of 2020.

You Only Really Know Who You Are When Everything Is Taken From You

- When people had their daily routines of job and recreation...and all the relationships that go with those things... taken from them, many people realized things about themselves they had never slowed down to notice. Introverts realized they really liked people. Extroverts realized they didn't need to constantly be ON and they could actually be alone.
- On the other hand, people finally slowed down enough to see the shadow in their life they had been avoiding.

- As one reader put it, “I have spent years running from addressing depressive and anxious symptoms. When there were no social distractions or trips to plan, there was nowhere to hide from myself.”

A Crisis Doesn't Change People; It Amplifies Who They Already Are

- One reader commented that the pandemic brought out “the factory default settings” of everyone. The paranoid became more paranoid. The needy became more needy. The anxious became more anxious and the optimistic became more optimistic.

The Little Things Are the Most Important

- As one reader put it, “This year has taught me that ritual is the antidote to chaos. Small rituals, when practiced daily, give a sense of order to the mind.”

Most Things Are Both Good and Bad at the Same Time

- Our judgments on things that are bad tend to be very short-term and emotionally driven. This is especially true in [the age of social media](#), where the slightest amount of hurt, offense, or setback is perceived as some great oppression.
- Dozens of readers emailed me with stories about losing their jobs, their houses, their relationships, and even losing family members to COVID. In most of these emails, the people, while extremely upset and hurt, also noted silver linings to their suffering. It brought their families closer. It gave them a chance to reconnect with their kids. It gave them a way out of a destructive marriage. It gave them an opportunity to rethink what they wanted to do with their lives. It showed them who really loved them for who they were and who didn't.

We Consistently Underestimate Our Resilience and Adaptability

- I've learned that I'm much stronger than I thought. I have been able to maintain love and happiness, through a pandemic, political insanity, cancer, job changes, and whatever the world throws at me.

Fear Is Dangerous

- *"Fear changes our perspective more than we realize. Fear basically forces us to not think. We humans usually have assumptions about everything, so the fear usually forces us to believe in those assumptions without much thinking. The solution which I found is to have the courage to accept even the worst of things which could happen."*
- in other words- imagine a worse case scenario. Face your fears head on. The alternative is much worse.

You Have No Excuse to Not Be Who You Want to Be

- "What have I learned from 2020? That we do what we do. That there's little point saying, 'When I'm rich I'm gonna...' or 'When I retire I'm gonna...' Because you won't. If you're not doing it now, you won't do it then. I always kidded myself that if I were locked up for years, I'd get scarily fit and read all the great books of history. Instead, in lockdown, I got fat (well, fatter) and read no more top-notch literature this year than any other year."- Steve

Back to Series Slide

This was not a Christian author polling a church crowd. In fact, I can't even say the title of Mark Manson's best-selling book from up here without a censoring beep. Mark Manson, nor the contributors to his survey, are TRYING to convince anyone that there is a God or that you should believe in Jesus.

Yet all of them are affirming something the Bible puts forward. That there is a hidden value in suffering- if you have eyes to see it and the heart to engage it.

Mark and his blog followers are observing the world and the human experience in it and saying- "Change and growth- maturity...doesn't come from avoiding suffering...it comes from processing it the right way."

Not only do the authors of the Scripture agree with this...they were saying it long before 2020.

People have been trying to understand how to deal with suffering for a VERY LONG TIME.

In fact, even predating Christianity by a few hundred years, is the Buddhist metaphor of the 2 arrows.

Here's the way it goes.

Imagine walking through a forest. And then you are hit by an arrow. Its an actual arrow. And it actually poses a threat to your physical well-being. So you have it removed. You have the wound stitched up. And physically- you're ok.

That's just when the second arrow hits you. But this is not an actual physical arrow. It's hidden. Its mental, emotional, spiritual.

The second arrow is the story you tell yourself about the first arrow.

- I deserve this. I can't believe I brought this on myself.
- Who did this to me? I'm going to find out and never rest until I make them pay.
- I don't deserve this! Why does this stuff always happen to me? How could God allow this to happen to me?
- I hate myself for being in the woods at the wrong time- I should have never been out here.
- If only I wouldn't have gotten adventurous and gone for a hike.. None of this would have ever happened.

Title Slide- "The Second Arrow: How to Tell Yourself a Better Story About Suffering"- Hebrews 12

The second arrow is the story we tell ourselves about the first arrow. And ultimately, its much more painful than the first arrow...and often it's a slow

burn- it poisons you for years and years. And that poison seeps into all your other relationships.

Today in Hebrews 12- my aim is to bring out something very practical for you. Exactly HOW do you tell yourself a better story as you go through suffering- in a way that's not cheap or laced with Pollyanna-ish positivity- but that has real depth- and truth to it.

Hebrews 12

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,

2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won't grow weary and give up. 4 In struggling against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons:

My son, do not take the Lord's discipline lightly

or lose heart when you are reproved by him,

6 for the Lord disciplines the one he loves

and punishes every son he receives.

7 Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline — which all receive — then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had human fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn't we submit even

more to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but he does it for our benefit, so that we can share his holiness. 11 No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

12 Therefore, strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed instead.

14 Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness — without it no one will see the Lord. 15 Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many. 16 And make sure that there isn't any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for a single meal. 17 For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, even though he sought it with tears, because he didn't find any opportunity for repentance.

18 For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, 19 to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, 20 for they could not bear what was commanded: If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned. 21 The appearance was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear. 22 Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, 23 to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel.

25 See to it that you do not reject the one who speaks. For if they did not escape when they rejected him who warned them on earth,

even less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven. 26 His voice shook the earth at that time, but now he has promised, Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens. 27 This expression, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what is not shaken might remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire

Transition: Ok, today I'm really into points...but not your average points. So hang with me, these are shorter than normal....but they are legion. This is what you do to take out the 2nd arrow. To replace the lies you tell yourself about your suffering with the truth.

1) Listen to the Cloud, not the crowd.

- Remember last week we went through Hebrews 11.
- For this suffering and confused church- the author was recounting the history of people who had endured difficulty before them. And through their faith in God- in taking God at his word and taking action on based on his promises- they overcame that suffering.
- He didn't just tell the stories of the winners- he told the story of the losers too.
- The people who survived the Lions Den, and walked out of the fiery furnace...and the people who hid destitute in caves- the mothers who children were tortured and killed right in front of them...simply for following YHWH.

• 12:1

- That's where he comes in and says- SINCE WE HAVE SUCH A LARGE CLOUD OF WITNESSES...let us lay aside every sin and hindrance and run with endurance.
- Do you know there are 2 things that shape your response to unexpected suffering in your life.

- The first is the story you're living in.
- We are storied- meaning-making creatures.
- God created our minds to make sense of the events that happen to us and around us.
- And those stories are shaped by someone.
- They can be shaped by the words of an abusive parent- that tells you that you're worthless and deserve punishment...from everybody.
- The story you believe can be shaped by corporations- who see you as a commodity to sell to. A consumer. And you can believe that life is really about making yourself as comfortable as you can. And if you don't have that life- you're just \$119.95 or \$2,749.99 or one Disney Plus or HBO Max subscription away from the life of comfort you deserve.
- That's the crowd.
- The Crowd says you should be happy.
- Here's the thing.
- The Cloud of witnesses agrees. You should be happy.
- But the Cloud of Witnesses is honest about how you get there. Suffering is real. And you can't buy your way out of it.
- Its not about sorting out what you do and don't deserve. Its not about seeking revenge on the person you want to blame.
- The Cloud says- "You are deeply loved by a God who has committed himself to you. He has not left you in your suffering. So don't leave him in your suffering. Instead- find his presence. Recount the stories of his faithfulness to his children... and put yourself in that story....and learn from it.

Back to 1)

- That brings us to the other thing that shapes how you respond in suffering.

- The other way, is what you have repetitively trained for.
- Remember the person who said the little rituals meant a lot during Covid, because they grounded you.
- What have your habits set you up for?
- Navy SEALS, Athletes- they train day after day after day- doing the same little things before they are in battle, before they are in a game...so that they're minds and bodies automatically react...almost without thinking. They develop instinct through habit.
- So- what habits help you to connect to the cloud of witnesses?
- Read the Bible. Read Church history. Pray consistently. Sit and silence and meditate on what the Scripture says. Regularly sit across from people that you know and that know you and listen to their stories of God's presence in their suffering.
- Get out of your current moment...turn off the TV. Cut off the video game. And build habits that help you listen to the Cloud of Witnesses.
- (and listen- this is coming from a guy who just got to the final battle with Ravenbeak on Metroid Dread- so I'm not telling you I'm against video games. I'm just telling you what I do on my- I mean my kids- Nintendo Switch- is not going to prepare me the death of one my children. Mario is not in the cloud of witnesses).

Transition: which brings us to the next point in v 1

2) Cut Sin & Shiny Things that detour you from the Kingdom of God.

- This is the second part of v 1.
- If we have a cloud of witnesses, like we do...then we need to run like they do. With endurance. All the way to the end. All the way to death.
- Runners in a race in the first century- stripped down naked to compete. Because they didn't have runners gear- and Togas and sandals didn't exactly make for a swift run.

- **12:1**

- Sin
- Confession and repentance
- Hindrance-
 - Building a house, playing video games, watching TV, restoring an old car, taking vacations, following sports teams. – none of those things are sin, but it might be slowing you down- or detouring you.

- **12:16-17**

- Esau and the bitterness of trading the shiny thing- for the thing that endures

Transition: Here's the third thing to do.

3) Rehearse how Jesus is the Author and Finisher of your faith.

- **12:2**

- Author (Source)
- Faith must be based on something.
- Jesus is the SOURCE or author of our faith in that he is the DIRECT OBJECT of it.
- When you have faith in Jesus- its because you have witnessed something he has done.
- Lived a perfect life. Died a death in your place to move you from the identity of a sinner separated from God... to a forgiven and whole child of God.

- He is the Finisher of your faith...in that he doesn't leave anything for you to do to save yourself.
- From the Cross, Jesus says IT IS FINISHED.
- Which means there is nothing left for you to do to prove yourself to God as being worthy of his love. You can't bargain with God to let you into being a participant in the New Heavens and New Earth.

- That's why it says he "sat down" at the right hand of the throne of God. His work is finished. Everything else is details.

- **Back to 3)**

- You know what this does in suffering?
- Well, when I look at Jesus suffering for me- in my place- and that he did that by looking through the suffering to the JOY of reuniting heaven and earth- of Bringing his brothers and sisters into the family to the Father forever- it not only gives me confidence that my current suffering is temporary- I know God empathizes with me- he's hurt deeply too- as a human.
- And it gives me a pattern. Suffer well. Suffer with the joy that's coming in mind. And suffer to show someone else how to suffer well.
- Be motivated by joy- and by serving others as I suffer.

Transition: also...

4) Realize suffering isn't punishment- it's a loving Father making you better.

- One of the stories we often believe about suffering is that God is punishing us.
- But though God is not causing our suffering, he is using it to shape us.
- That's what discipline is.

- **12:11**

- Discipline is a parental act of love to shape the stories we tell ourselves He is shaping my character.
- Its like all those people realized. When God allows us to be stripped of the shiny things- even sometimes not just the shiny things- but people we love...there is a way we can hear him and know him and make him known that just can't be done when we feel like we are strong and in control and Godlike.

- In this you have to remember this is the GOD of ZION, not just Sinai.
- **12:22-24**
- Sinai- STAY AWAY. I'm too much for you to handle.
- Zion- the mountain of God.
- New Jerusalem (this is the GOTHAM CITY vision we talked about last week- all the sad things have come untrue)
- JOY- angels at a festive gathering
- ASSEMBLY of the children of God- FAMILY REUNION
- A JUDGE- who will make righteousness shine like the noonday sun
- JESUS- blood doesn't condemn like Abel's did to Cain when it hit the ground.
- Jesus' blood instead cries out for our innocent. Because on the cross he took our guilt on himself.
- When suffering happens- its not punishment. Its to experience the presence of your loving Father in the darkness (like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane)- so you develop an absolutely exquisite taste from the NEW JERUSALEM.
- As Paul says in 1 Cor 4- this light momentary bitter affliction is getting your tastebuds ready for the sweetness of Kingdom Come

5) Pursue the unshakeable- peace, holiness, intimacy, awe, and gratitude.

- **12:14 & 28-29**
- There is this talk at the end of this chapter of a Kingdom that cannot be shaken and God as a consuming fire.
- Here's what that means.
- Purifying.
- Seek the things that last eternally.
- PEACE with others- that is what NEW JERUSALEM will be like. Live like it now- ESPECIALLY in the midst of so much evil and suffering. You're a city on a hill. A light in the dark.

- HOLINESS- Represent what God is like to others. Be different. Like the Cloud, not the Crowd.
- And then Intimacy & Awe.
- This is the definition of worship.
- God is holy.
- Often compared to fire.
- You want to be close, but know you can't. But this is ZION. NOT Sinai. You have been cleansed. Washed. Adopted. Brought in. Died for. Given and inheritance. So you can dance with the fire in the fire. Like Shadrach Meshach and Abnego in the book of Daniel. You get thrown in the FIRE- and the Son of God is there with you.
- GOD doesn't diminish himself at all...he is still as holy and beautiful and other as he has ever been. But now- you can come close because he has MADE you holy through JESUS. SO worship. Intimacy and AWE.
- And finally...appropriate for this week...BE THANKFUL.
- Through suffering- live a life of gratitude.

Back 5)

There is no doubt you are going to be hit by arrows in the coming days, months, and years.

Here's the question for you to ponder. You probably have insurance- you might have money set aside for medical bills. You may be really prepared for the first arrow.

But if you haven't prepared for the second arrow- you'll fall for the shiny things. Repent and follow Jesus....the Kingdom of God is near.