

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 44 May 22, 2022 God's Discipline

Hebrews 12:3-11

## Introduction

We are all familiar with the concept of discipline. We have experienced it in our homes from our parents, perhaps even at the hands of an older sibling, or in school, in sports – as a member of team with a coach, perhaps in military service, in learning to drive or fly, at work, self-discipline as we strive to improve our skills and abilities in some endeavour, in numerous other ways with someone in authority over us, or even as parents on the delivery end of discipline. Although our immediate perception of discipline is likely negative, discipline is ultimately not always negative. It carries positive implications as well, because as a result of it, we learn something and/or are made better for the future.

Even in its negative aspects, discipline is not pain, suffering or inconvenience in and of itself. The word 'discipline' implies a purpose for these things being brought into our lives, and the Bible is clear here in Hebrews 12, and elsewhere, that discipline is brought into our lives by God, in whatever form it takes in our lives. It is not bad luck or an accident – it has a divine purpose, as we will see below. It is good to remember that God's discipline is not punishment, and it is not His wrath ( Rom. 8:1; I Thess. 5:9 ) – rather, we should consider it as training. So a question immediately arises here. How do we know which is which? Since Christians do experience pain and suffering in our lives, some of it severe and long-lasting, it is expected as part of the 'cross-bearing' we are expected to experience per Christ. We are told to 'take up our cross daily and follow Him', which is surely talking about some measure of intentional discipline we willingly place upon ourselves, isn't it?

If our pain is a result of persecution, I Peter 4:12-19 advises us to endure suffering that comes on us to test us – we are not to be surprised by it – but instead are to rejoice; and if we are insulted for the name of Christ ( v. 14 ), we are blessed, or ( v.16 ), if we suffer as a Christian, we are to glorify God. These things are not disciplinary because we are not in need of discipline if we are being faithful. But note v. 15 – suffering as a result of sin, which brings consequences upon us, this could be a sort of discipline and could also be the temporal outcome of sinning. Verse 19 is the key verse here in I Peter 4. "*Suffering according to God's will*" is trusting in Him to carry us through a fiery trial or to use discipline to bring us to a better result in our belief, and we do so while doing good.

In fact, our 'good' response to the various trials or persecutions we encounter are meant to glorify God, but also, in the language of Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, note Matt. 5:43-45 – "*so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.*" This concept of sonship under discipline comes up here in our text in Heb. 12:5,6 & 7 as well as its being the underlying theme of the whole passage.

A.W. Tozer comments;

“Chastisement is an act of God; cross carrying an act of the Christian. When God in love lays the rod to the back of His children, He does not ask permission. Chastisement for the believer is not voluntary except in the sense that he chooses the will of God with the knowledge that the will of God includes chastisement. “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” ( Hebrews 12:7 ).<sup>1</sup>

As we go through this passage, we will strive to assess what the discipline being described is and what it accomplishes, why and how.

## Our Fight Against Sin vs Jesus’ Fight Against Sin vv. 3-4

These verses, following , as they do, verses 1-2, are using what Jesus did on our behalf to instruct us that we have gone nowhere near the extreme experience of what Jesus suffered in order to live out our Christian lives. Paul and Barnabus’ comment in Acts 14:22 tells us we should expect trouble on our way to God’s kingdom if we are faithful.

Note Heb. 12:3 – The word ‘consider’ is a very strong Greek word which conveys the meaning, “think hard about this,” since Christ endured what He endured, *“for the joy set before Him,” “such hostility against Himself,”* so that *“you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”* In what? Verse 4 answers that question – *“In your struggle against sin...”*

The A.H. knows that believers, especially when faced with difficulties and prolonged trials, the best of us can experience spiritual darkness or depression. “We are to remember that beyond the cross there lies a crown; it was so for our Lord, and so it will be for us.”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s comments in Romans 8:18 offer his exhortation to encourage us in a similar way. The glory to be revealed to us is a parallel to the joy set before Christ in verse 2.

How do we “consider intently” Jesus and what He did? By examining His Word of course. As the 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus on resurrection day, think back to how Jesus had shared with them, *“In all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself,”* they respond, *“Did not our hearts burn within us while He opened to us the Scriptures?”* ( Luke 24:27,32 ). The discouragement these 2 felt vanished when Jesus revealed to them the connection between the reason for their sadness – His death and burial – to what the Scriptures had predicted and how it had been fulfilled to the letter, including His resurrection, the part they had missed.

Verse 4 continues on to point out a rhetorical fact. They had not struggled against sin so desperately that they had shed their blood as a result. This is certainly a reference

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Radical Cross*, Wingspread Publishing, 2005, pp 35-36

<sup>2</sup> Richard Phillips, *Hebrews*, pg. 537

to Jesus' bloody death, but could also be a reference to Luke 22:44 – Jesus in Gethsemane, Luke being the only gospel writer to refer to this point.

It is intriguing that the author describes their lives as a struggle against sin. The temptation in the life of the believer we are all so familiar with is the temptation to yield to sin, which Christ never did. It's tempting to give in to peer pressure ( per Ken's recent study on "The Fear of Man" ) and thus avoid persecution. So far, these recipients of the letter had not suffered martyrdom. According to Heb. 10:32-34, they had experienced serious persecution, but it had not yet progressed to fatal persecution.

## Sons ( & Daughters ) and Discipline

### vv. 5-6

Divine discipline comes into people's lives as a result of straying away from the path that follows Christ. Our obedience or lack of it is the point. If we are God's beloved children, He will not allow us to keep going in a direction that takes us permanently away from Him. So He uses troubles and sometimes deep or critical suffering to bring us back in line. One parable that stands out for teaching us this very idea is the Parable of the Prodigal Son ( Luke 15:11-32 ). The wandering son was brought to the point of shame and realization of his foolishness and sin, and this caused him to repent and seek to humbly restore his relationship with his father.

Charles Quarles also makes a good point in explaining this sort of episode in this quote regarding another parable, the Parable of the Two Sons in Matt. 12:50 & 21:31; "Matthew referred to doing the will of the Father on two other occasions. In 12:50 Jesus taught that "whoever does the will of My father in heaven, that person is My brother and sister and mother." Obedience to the Father demonstrates a person's identity as His son or daughter. Matt. 21:31 used the phrase in the interpretation of the parable of the two sons: "Which of the two did the father's will? The chief priests and elders correctly replied that the one who did the father's will was the one who obeyed his command to work in the vineyard despite his previous protest."<sup>3</sup>

Richard Phillips bolsters this with his comments and citations on Heb. 12:5; "How easy it is for us to think we are out of God's favor when circumstances turn against us; indeed, there is nothing more perilous in trials to conclude that God has forgotten or betrayed us. Therefore, verse 5 begins by making a statement that probably is intended as a question; "Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?" This refers to Proverbs 3:11-12, which says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." Understanding this, the reader should not lose heart when God rebukes them through affliction. The assumption bound up with the message of these verses is that when Christians experience trials it is not because God

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Quarles, Sermon on the Mount, B & H, 2011, pp. 333-334

is unable to protect them. God can preserve us from every trial. He is sovereign over every aspect of our lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Phillips then cites Andrew Murray;

“In every trial, small or great; first of all and at once recognize God’s hand in it. Say at once: “My Father has allowed this to come; I welcome it from Him; my first care is to glorify Him in it; He will make it a blessing. We may be sure of this; let us by faith rejoice in it.”<sup>5</sup>

And J.C. Ryle;

“By affliction He teaches us many precious lessons, which, without it we should never learn. By affliction he shows us our emptiness and weakness, draws us to the throne of grace, purifies our affections, weans us from the world, makes us long for heaven. In the resurrection morning we shall all say, “It is good for me that I was afflicted.” [ Ps. 119:71,75 ]. We shall thank God for every storm.”<sup>6</sup>

And J.I. Packer;

“This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort or another – it is to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast...God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore, He takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Himself.”<sup>7</sup>

Hebrews 12:5-6 is a direct citation of Proverbs 3:11-12, and Job 5:17 shares a similar sentiment, as does Revelation 3:19 and Psalms 89:30-34, foreseeing Christ’s ‘offspring’ as being those who may violate God’s laws, whom God will then punish temporally, but *“he will not remove from him [ them ] my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness.”* ( v. 33, and v. 34 is also very important. )

These 2 verses in Hebrews ( and the whole section to v. 11 ) are extremely important, because they describe how God works in our lives as believers, to, as Romans 8:29 tells us *“conform us to the image of His Son.”* His intention is to make us more like Christ, so He is talking here about our sanctification. Re-read Heb. 12:5-6 - Don’t regard discipline lightly and do not be weary when reprov’d by God, as the following verses explain – God has a very critical purpose in the things He puts us through. He is working in us *“both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* ( Phil. 2:13 ).

Consider just a few passages which describe how God uses suffering in the life of believers to train us in righteousness – James 1:2-4; Romans 8:18-25; 2 Cor. 4:7-18; 12:7-10; Rom. 5:3-5.

While our Hebrews verses do not challenge us to accept the Lord’s discipline ‘with joy,’ vv. 5-6 do call on us to see it as useful and necessary. It reveals our relationship as God’s children **to us**. It tells us that God’s concern is for our character more than for our comfort and with our continued transformation to be more like Christ. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 542

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, citing Andrew Murray, p. 543

<sup>6</sup> IBID -citing J.C. Ryle

<sup>7</sup> IBID – citing J.I. Packer

James 1 passage above, the way we find joy in our trials is to recognize that they have been designed by God for great gain and ultimate joy!<sup>8</sup>

We need to be thankful for verses like Heb. 12:5-6. We will not be thankful if we think that the pain of the experiences ( and each person's experiences may be very different ) will never amount to any good. IOW – they are without purpose. If we think it's all pointless, how could it be a basis for joy or for giving thanks to God for it? These verses are a way to help us see that God is involved directly in our trials and tribulations – they are not accidental, and coincidentally, according to Romans 8:1, and I Thess. 5:9, they are not given to us in God's wrath or condemnation, but rather as teaching tools to guide us.

Notice that this discipline comes to (v. 6) *“the one he [ God ] loves,”* and *“every son whom he receives.”* This is confirmation for us, if we experience chastisement, that we are His beloved children, and not what v. 8 says as a corollary.

## Discipline Helps Us to Endure

### vv. 7-10

Eric Alexander makes a very pertinent comment here;

“True love does not deny faithfulness in its discipline and correction; it expresses it there. It is the ‘true son’ whom the father chastises ( Heb. 12:7,8 ). God brings his children under discipline precisely because he loves them.

God's disciplining of our lives does not mean that he is forsaking his covenant. It means that he is exercising his covenant love in order to bring the blessings of his covenant to us. Therefore, he will not refrain from exercising discipline on us, bringing us under the weight of his hand in order that we might ultimately enter into the benefits of his covenant. That means that God disciplines – whatever that may be in our lives – are never arbitrary or pointless. They are part of the faithful administration of his covenant.

God's faithfulness is designed to be both an encouragement and a challenge to us. There will be times in our lives when the reality of God's faithfulness will be clouded for us, as it was for the psalmist [ Ps. 89 ]. Our faith will be tried, and we will be baffled by circumstances. Cherished plans will have been thwarted. Friends will have failed us, and Satan will have oppressed us. When this happens it is easy to conclude that God has revoked his covenant, forgotten his promises and abandoned his faithfulness. But when we are tempted to say that, we need to feed our souls on the truths of vv. 33 & 34 [ Ps. 89 ].”<sup>9</sup>

Verse 7 – the ESV is here a bit obscure. The main verb, *“endure”* could be either imperative or indicative – the ESV renders it as an indicative, but the passage context makes it more likely it should be read as imperative. It is better rendered in the HCSB, NIV, NET, and NRSV this way. *“Endure suffering as discipline.”* Thus, the readers are being exhorted to endure ( cf. vv. 1-3 ) to the end, not being commended for

<sup>8</sup> Bruce ware, God's Greater Glory, Crossway, 2004, p. 173

<sup>9</sup> Eric J. Alexander, Our Great God and Saviour, Banner of Truth, 2010, p. 54

enduring. “They are commanded to endure to the end, recognizing that endurance is a discipline that entails hardship and suffering.”<sup>10</sup>

Verse 8 – In fact, this discipline, through which we endure, is proof that we are in God’s family! Note how the A.H. in the next 2 verses explains how this works. If we do not experience discipline ( and sometimes this is more apparent to others who are experiencing deep trouble that we are not suffering as they are ), then the very real possibility is that we are not God’s child! The phrase, “*in which all have participated*” means that it is common for believers to experience it, so one not experiencing that discipline stands out as an anomaly, and it means they are illegitimate children, and not true children of God. Discipline comes from a father, out of His love for His own.

This idea of our sonship is an important element of our Christianity which cannot be downplayed. The Sonship of Christ is something that is touted as of critical importance in who He is in relation to His Father, and thus, to us. In the book of Hebrews, the concept of sonship is of prime importance – of Christ – Heb. 1:2,5,8; 3:6 and so on; and then, in Hebrews 12, it obviously applies to us as believers. Also note Heb. 2:10 – our sonship is as a result of Jesus’ work!

Leon Morris comments;

“God does not simply give His people the status of being saved, and leave it at that. Through all the troubles and trials of this mortal life He disciplines them. His loving hand sees to it that these difficulties are the means of forming their character and making them into the kind of people they ought to be.”<sup>11</sup>

In verse 9, the author draws a contrast between our earthly fathers and our heavenly father, and true to Hebrews’ tone and message, the heavenly is always superior to the earthly. The implication of earthly fathers’ inferiority is that they attempt ( even if imperfectly ) to discipline their children so that good will come of it. Jesus, in Matt. 7:7-11 pointed out similar contrasts between earthly fathers and the heavenly Father. Paul, in Romans 8:32, using an argument from the greater to the lesser, shows us that God, having provided the hardest thing ( providing His beloved Son to die on our behalf ) would not now hold back that which we need, something relatively easy for Him to do.

Verse 9b – “*Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?*” This emphasizes God’s superiority and sovereignty. If we are subject to it ( and as obedient believers, we must be ), then the result for us will be life, and life more abundant ( JN 10:10b ). This of course, assumes what v. 9b tells us, “*we respected them*” ( our earthly fathers ) for even their imperfect discipline.

And then verse 10 makes the contrast crystal clear. The discipline of our earthly parents, is, of course, flawed. They too, are sinners, susceptible to the dictates of their

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 384-385.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, The Cross in the New Testament, Eerdmans, 1965 / 1999, p. 303

fallen nature, but even so, they disciplined their children *“as it seemed best to them.”* It is limited in duration, *“for a short time”* – because it is restricted by the relatively few years parents have that sort of control over their children’s lives. They have limited time and only a partial vision of whether the discipline they mete out is (1) appropriate; (2) will be effective, and (3) is properly designed to remedy the issue.

By contrast, God’s knowledge is limitless, and His discipline does not suffer from a partial perspective. He knows exactly what we need to correct us, and thus, His discipline is always *“for our benefit and His glory.”* ( cf. Rom. 8:28 – a similar concept not necessarily tied to discipline ).

The benefit we receive is depicted in v. 10 as *“that we may share in his holiness.”* He is training us as believers so that we become more like Christ, more righteous ( experientially ), more holy... We must submit to His discipline and endure it. It is for our own good and for His glory!

## Discipline Helps Us to Share God’s Holiness and Righteousness v. 11

It seems that v. 11a starts of with what everyone knows, discipline is not pleasant as it is playing out in our lives. It seems *“painful”* and seems to be redundant – it does not just seem painful – it actually is, no matter what it consists of in a person’s life.

Verse 11b is the half of the verse that shows its temporal value to those who are dealing with it. *“Later”* the value of it becomes obvious. ( I would say usually, not in every single incidence of it ). *“...it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* The HCSB renders this part of the verse as *“the fruit of peace and righteousness.”* But the ESV here is likely more accurate as the original Greek has no ‘and’ in the text.<sup>12</sup> Righteousness is another way of describing holiness, and so what this is saying is that such a state of righteousness or holiness is peaceful – i.e., pleasing and satisfying.

So this whole section ( vv. 3-11 ) teaches us that God does not just save us and leave us on our own. Although His way to train us may seem counter-productive to us, we are taught that it is done in love and with the exact perfect effect God intends for His efforts to make us more like Christ!

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<sup>12</sup> Schreiner, p. 386