

The Father's Discipline

Our New Testament reading is Hebrews 12:4-11. Last Sunday we looked at the first three verses of this chapter, "The Race of Faith," and today we'll note words of encouragement to a congregation of new believers who are facing increasing persecution. Remarkably, this writing pastor exhorts them to think of their difficult circumstances ultimately as discipline from their heavenly Father. Follow as I read:

⁴ In your struggle 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 children—

*"My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts."*

⁷ Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸ If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹ Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

When we read Scripture we naturally see it through the lens of our culture and experience. And when we see references to God as our heavenly Father we tend to impose on God the picture we have of our earthly father, whether for good or ill. Those of us who have had good fathers are able to understand and benefit from pictures in Scripture like we see today. Although my father wasn't perfect (and whose father was?), I benefitted from his discipline.

My parents exercised discipline the old fashioned way. My younger brother will tell you that he owed his gentler upbringing to me. When I misbehaved, which was frequently, my mother would cut a twig off a tree in our yard, and spank me with a switch on my posterior. My brother said when he was old enough to be spanked, all the trees in our yard had died off because our mother had stripped them bare for switches she cut for me. Although he was exaggerating, I agree that my parents were more lenient with him. Nancy and I used a different approach to parental discipline than did our parents, and

my two children are no doubt doing a better job of parenting their children than we did ours.

But you may not have been privileged to have wise and loving parents, and so it's difficult for you to think of God as a loving Father, who is disciplining you for your good. So, by God's grace and guidance, try to think of God as the kind of parent you wish you could have had. God is indeed the perfect heavenly Father, and his discipline is always appropriate and for our good.

The word for discipline used throughout our text means literally "child correction by instruction," i.e. educational correction. The purpose of this kind of discipline is to prepare children for life which is responsible and productive. Our text tells us that God, who is the heavenly Father of all who relate to him through faith in Jesus Christ, is the perfect parent who knows how to discipline us to prepare us for life here and now and throughout eternity.

But even though the heavenly Father is the perfect parent, we won't like his discipline any more than we enjoyed the discipline of our earthly parents. We live in a world that is controlled by a system against the kingdom of God, one that attacks us in the arena of conflict, which is the fallen world, the downward pull of the sinful flesh, and the devil himself. God's discipline is to aid us in this conflict, to enable us to be victorious in life's struggles.

God is our Creator, but also in Christ is our Redeemer, who is transforming us by his Spirit into the people he has created us to be. His purpose is to prepare us, not only to live triumphantly in this earthly pilgrimage, but also to prepare us for eternal glory in the New Heaven and Earth. He directs and corrects us through our life experiences, and also through his direction from the word, which we receive through the reading, study, preaching and application of its truth. The word of God, our Scriptures, are inspired by God for our good, and by the truth of the word we're warned and instructed.

But like is the case with most children, we don't hear or heed the word of God as we should, and so God will use other means to get us back on the right path. Sometimes God allows painful experiences and difficult circumstances to get our attention and cause us to bring our lives back into line with his will and purposes.

This doesn't mean, however, that all the ill and suffering, tragedy and disappointments we experience are his will for us. We live in a fallen world, and the devil has a leash that allows him to create havoc and all sorts of grief and suffering in the world. We know, and Scripture is quite insistent in the fact that bad things happen to good people, and to some of God's very best people. All we can say is that, whatever suffering we endure, God loves us and is with us and can transform evil, even horrendous situations that result in our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28).

Pastor Kent Hughes says that Scripture gives three types of discipline for God's children. In King David's life we see God's *corrective discipline* that followed his egregious sin with Bathsheba, which resulted in his repentance (Ps. 51), obedience (Ps. 119:67) and insight into God's word (Ps. 119:71). With the Apostle Paul we see God's *preventive discipline*, with this unknown thorn in his flesh that kept Paul from the sin of pride in his unusual spiritual revelations (2 Cor. 12:7). And with Job, we see God's *educational discipline*, how an already godly man grew in his understanding of God through his horrific suffering (Job 42). Although my sin hasn't been as notorious or flagrant and God's discipline in my life hasn't been as severe, I can say I've experienced the same types of discipline in my life, and likely you have too.

Whatever measures God uses to discipline us, the truth is, we don't like it (11). We're not what someone termed, "pious masochists." Our text has a quotation from Proverbs (3:11f), saying we shouldn't be discouraged by God's discipline, but realize that he disciplines us because he loves us, just as a good parent; in God's case, the perfect Parent. Back in verse three of our chapter the writer reminds us of the ineffable suffering of Jesus, who understands and experiences our suffering alongside of us.

Suffering, especially for our faith, is relatively unknown by most Christians in North America today. As Pastor Hughes also said, most Christians today don't know enough of God's word regarding trials, persecution and suffering to "survive a skinned knee." Another pastor (AW Tozer) lamented the condition of many churches due to the preaching of a "painless Christianity," that ignores what the Bible says about the necessity of discipline and the inevitability of real suffering. Yet another states we're like no other generation of Christians, thinking of God as an indulgent heavenly Grandfather, whose only interest is in seeing after our instant gratification and sparing of discomfort, especially of real suffering. We seem clueless about a God of holiness who seeks to wean us from our childish addiction to this fallen world's pleasures that are detrimental to our spiritual health.

As much as we don't like it, God gives us his discipline. We, through the work of Christ on the cross in our behalf, are spared God's wrath. We're not suffering for our sins, which are forgiven through Christ, but are experiencing God's discipline, always for our good. As earthly parents and grandparents, even our best efforts to discipline are imperfect and often inadequate. But God overrules our weakness and inadequacy, and by his grace we're able to provide essential discipline. But God is a perfect parent.

In our text (11), the word for training is "gumnazo," from which we get our English word "gymnasium." God our Father is also our trainer, whose desire is to condition us to become more like his Son, Jesus. When I watched those Olympic athletes perform, I marveled to think about the strenuous and lengthy training involved in the gymnasium or on the athletic field.

This past week the newscast showed the father of a little leaguer who was pitching in a world series game, walk to the pitcher's mound to encourage his son to strike out one more batter before he would be replaced by a relief pitcher in the following inning:

Little League coach Joel Jensen tells son Isaiah Jensen he loves him. "Hey, I just came out to tell you how much I love you, as a Dad and a player, ok?" Daddy beamed. He then told his son how "awesome" he was doing but no matter what the next batter he faced was going to be his last one. (You Tube).

It was fun to see the boy strike out the next batter, after receiving this word of encouragement from a loving father. This was a child who was disciplined in the right way, by a Father who trained his son in baseball discipline and also with a loving heart, who wanted the best for his child. This is how our text encourages us to think of our heavenly Father, who, when seeing us in trouble comes alongside us to assure us of his care and inspires us to finish our "inning" as his champions. We're reminded that the training, coaching and discipline he's given us and his presence with us is all we need to finish well.

Surely the Father's design is that we benefit from his discipline, assuring us first of all that we're his beloved children. All humankind shares in this arena of common suffering, yet we as his children see the hand of a loving Father even in our suffering and trials. Our text refers the Father's discipline as assurance of the Father's ownership, whereas we're prone to allow difficulties and suffering to cause us to doubt the Father's love (8). The writer makes this point to his congregation that well understood that an illegitimate child in a Roman household had no share in the father's inheritance, and not even assurance of his love and care. But we, the writer emphasizes, are God's dearly loved children, who are assured of his love, care and provisions.

As dearly loved children of God, we are recipients of his loving and wise discipline, and he is at work to make us whole and spiritually healthy through his word (John 15). When we hear, heed and obey his word, we're often spared the correction that God gives with stricter, more painful measures. Even as the suffering of Christ on the cross brought our redemption from sin, death and hell, so our suffering has meaning and purpose in the kingdom of God.

As children of God, we're able to understand our difficulties as God's discipline, realizing that we enjoy the assurance that God works through everything for our good (Rom. 8:28), although it's at times difficult, if not impossible, to rejoice in the midst of pain and grief. The psalmist testified that his difficulties had become the Father's discipline when he worshiped and gained perspective (Ps. 119, 67, 71). The Apostle

Paul learned to trust that God's grace was enough for him (2 Cor. 12:7ff), and Job experienced God in a new, personal way of deepened intimacy with God (Job 42).

Some of you may remember the story of Terry Waite, "the British hostage released at the end of 1991 after nearly five years of solitary confinement in Lebanon, chained to the wall of his room for almost twenty-four hours daily. In an interview he said: 'I have been determined in captivity, and still am determined, to convert this experience into something that will be useful and good for other people. I think that's the way to approach suffering. It seems to me that Christianity doesn't in any way lessen suffering. What it does is enable you to take it, to face it, to work through it, and eventually to convert it'" (quoted by JI Packer).

When we can look at trials and difficulties this way, we're learning to submit to the Father's discipline and are learning to "give thanks in all circumstances," trusting that "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for (us)" (1 Thess. 5:18). And our text tells us that if we respected and submitted to our earthly parents' discipline, how much more should we submit to the heavenly Father's discipline, to the One who is perfectly wise, loving and knows more about us and what we need than does any earthly parent.

I recall walking across my college campus with the dean of students, whom I greatly respected, and as we chatted, the thought came to my mind that my parents did an OK job in rearing me, especially considering the challenges they had with me. All around there were fellow students who were rebelling against their strict upbringing by indulging in behavior that was against their parental teaching and training. But this new sense of gratitude kept me from rebelling, allowing me to see they had a method in their discipline and actually were doing what was best for me, even though I didn't see it at the time.

In a previous pastorate, one of our members was being prepped for serious surgery, and at her bedside I asked her if I could lead in prayer. She asked me, "Pastor, what are you going to pray?" Being a bit taken aback, I said, "I'll pray for God to work through the surgeon, and that his work will bring about your help and healing. What do you think I should pray for?" I asked. She replied, "Pray that this experience won't be wasted on me." She understood that God had a bigger purpose for her than for physical healing. The heavenly Father was going to teach her something and do something that would result in eternal good, teaching her a lesson about his loving purpose for her life.

God, may your discipline not be wasted on us.

