

Hebrews 12:5-15

Gaining the Benefit of Divine Chastisement

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth... v. 6

When you think of Moses, or David, or Paul in the New Testament – it's not hard to list a number of things that they have in common:

- They are all great men of the Bible. Their lives stand out as examples for the people of God.
- They are all authors of some of the books of the Bible – Moses wrote the Pentateuch; David – many of the Psalms; Paul – much of the New Testament.
- Their experience of God was very rich – Moses called up to the mount of God where his face shone when he beheld the glory of God; David – knew God intimately, as the Psalms indicate to us; Paul – saw the glory of Christ on the Damascus road and was taken up to the third heaven later in his experience of Christ.

These things make these men stand out as outstanding examples who are to be emulated and whose experiences are to be coveted by every true Christian. And yet these things are not what I have in mind this morning when I think of these 3 men. There is yet one other thing that they have in common that is very often overlooked and is something that we'd just as soon pass over when it comes to coveting their experience and emulating their character.

The thing I'm referring to is divine chastisement. All 3 of these men were the recipients of divine chastisement.

- Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land. He was punished or chastised by God for his failure to honor God at the waters of Meribah.
- David was approached by the prophet Gad and was told to choose his punishment for his sin of numbering the people.
- Paul was given a thorn in the flesh – a messenger of Satan to buffet him. And though he sought the Lord 3 times to remove that thorn, the Lord would not heed Paul's request.

All 3 of these great men of the Bible were the recipients of divine chastisement. And as we learn from the passage we've read this morning – this is not unusual for them, nor is it unusual for any child of God. On the contrary it's something we can and should expect of God. *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.* Do you see how universal this spiritual discipline is? It's not something that applies only to the great men of the Bible – nor is it something that only applies to those that belong to the Lord but their behavior is such that they're among the worst of those that name the name of Christ.

The text makes it so plain that divine chastisement applies to every true child of God – to the point that if you can honestly say that you’re an exception to it then you have cause to wonder whether or not you’re really a Christian {**cf. Heb. 12:8**}.

The fact that every true child of God has been and will be a recipient of divine chastisement means that it’s a subject that needs to be rightly understood. And it is a subject that receives quite a bit of attention in the Bible. It’s the message of the 73rd Psalm. It’s the subject of the book of Job. You find Paul addressing the issue in Romans 5 and Romans 8. You find him addressing the issue again in 1Cor. 11 where he points out that because of their careless attitude toward the Lord’s supper many Christians were weak and sickly and some even died. It’s in 2Cor. 12 that Paul makes reference to his own chastisement and describes his thorn in the flesh. And in Rev. 3:19 Christ, in His dealings with the seven churches issues a statement that could apply to them all when He says: *As many as I love I rebuke and chasten.*

You begin to see, then, that it is quite an extensive subject throughout the Bible. And as I said a moment ago – it’s a subject that needs to be rightly understood by the Christian. The passage we have read this morning makes that plain. *Ye have forgotten* the author writes in v. 5; *ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children (sons) My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.*

Doesn’t this text make it clear that if we don’t rightly understand the Lord’s dealings with us then we’ll be tempted to read the Lord’s purpose wrong and as a result we’ll despise how the Lord is dealing with us or we’ll cave in and faint when the Lord chastises us.

You see divine chastisement doesn’t function automatically. Becoming the recipient of a beating, as it were, doesn’t in and of itself promote holiness in our lives. That’s something we need to know as Christians – it’s also something we need to appreciate as parents who seek to chastise our children. Chastisement doesn’t function automatically. In the case of children we need to pray that the Lord will make our discipline effectual. And as Christians and parents also – we need to appreciate that the benefit of chastisement reaches us through our understanding.

In other words – we need to contemplate God’s dealings with us when those dealings become harsh. And we need to understand what God is doing and what He is definitely not doing when we become the beneficiaries of divine chastisement. And so I’d like to address that subject this morning. And I’d like to address it with a definite aim – that aim being that we may learn to gain the benefit of divine chastisement.

Gaining the Benefit of Divine Chastisement

That’s my theme. And in the moments that remain I want you to consider with me how we gain the benefit of Divine Chastisement.

Consider with me first of all that if we would gain that benefit:

I. We Must Avoid the Wrong Response to Divine Chastisement -

My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord – v. 5

This is the first wrong response – to despise the chastening of the Lord. The word *despise* means literally *to care little for; to regard lightly; to make small account*. There are times, you see, that the Lord brings things upon us in order to get our attention. It might be a financial setback; It might be a health related issue; It might be a failure of some kind – the Lord allowing you to fall flat on your face, as it were. It might take the form of persecution or it might simply be the removal of the Lord's presence.

The worst thing we can do in any negative circumstance of life is to adopt a sort of fatalistic attitude through which we become oblivious to the things that happen to us. We fail, in other words, to pursue wisdom. We adopt the same attitude that the world adopts which is to simply try to ignore the providence of God knocking on the door of our lives in order to issue a wakeup call or to move us to examine ourselves.

In their worst spiritual condition the Israelites failed to take to heart the harsh dealings of God with them. We have a vivid example of this kind of thing in Amos 4 {**cf. Amos 4:6-11**}.

In Isaiah 1 we find the same thing. *Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more.*

These are examples of despising the chastening of the Lord. The people of God try to harden their hearts to the things that are designed by God to draw them back. Yet very often in their pride and arrogance the people of God maintain their innocence rather than examine their hearts and make amendments to their lives. We can become too proud to think that we need any amendments to our lives. We may try to compare ourselves to those that are lost and steeped in vile sin and we reason that they're the ones that ought to examine their lives in the midst of their hardships. But me examine my life? I'm so much better than others. Surely there's no need for me to think that God may be dealing with me in order to get my attention with the aim of improving my life! This is exactly how the Israelites reasoned in Old Testament times. And in this fashion we, in our day, despise the chastening of the Lord.

In this condition we not only fail to gain the benefit of divine chastisement, but we actually go from bad to worse. If you would gain the benefit, therefore, you must avoid the kind of hardness of heart that keeps you from responding to harsh providences the way you should.

Now in v. 5 of Heb. 12 we are told not only that we should not despise the chastening of the Lord but we're also told that we should not faint when we're rebuked of Him. In a sense the word faint represents the other extreme of despising the Lord's chastening. In the one instance the Christian hardens his heart to the Lord's dealings. In the other instance he

caves in to despair under those dealings. You might equate him to an immature child who pouts and grumbles when he's punished and thinks that his parents are not treating him fairly. He may be willing to acknowledge some wrong doing but he thinks that the Lord's dealings are totally disproportional to the magnitude of his crimes.

You find an example of this in Psalm 73. In that Psalm the psalmist complains that the sinners of the world have it easier than the people of God. *For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked* – he writes. He then goes on to complain how the wicked never seem to suffer hardship. The wicked have more than heart could wish. They sin with impunity. Nothing happens to them when they sin.

The psalmist, by way of contrast, is plagued and chastened every morning (v. 14). And by fainting under God's discipline he reaches the premature conclusion in v. 13 that he has cleansed his heart in vain. *It's not worth it being a Christian* – that's what he's saying in effect. It's so much easier in life to be a sinner than a Christian.

In the context or setting of Heb. 12 this is exactly what the Hebrew Christians were facing. They were being sorely chastised by way of persecution from the unbelieving Jews. Life had become hard. Life would be so much easier by renouncing Christ and going back to apostate Judaism. The load was too heavy to bear and in their weakness they felt themselves caving in to despair.

We'll see a little later that this is really a very short sighted and immature response to the dealings of the Lord. For now let me say simply that this is one more thing that must be avoided if we're going to gain the benefit of divine chastisement. We're not to despise the chastening of the Lord – nor are we to faint under that chastening.

Despising that chastisement or fainting under it can lead to the third thing to be avoided which is also the worst thing to fall prey to.

Look at what v. 15 says – *Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.* Falling prey to bitterness is like being shut up in prison. You become surrounded by concrete walls and nothing can reach you. No exhortation effects you. No reminders of Christ's love reach your heart.

And that bitterness functions like a filter through which everything enters before it reaches your mind. You adopt a martyrs complex that says *everybody hates me. Nobody understands me. Everything is against me.* I preached a message on this text in Heb. 12:15 some time ago and I pointed out then that this word *trouble* is the same word we sometimes see translated by the word *vex*. It's used most often in connection with a demon possessed man who is vexed by the devil.

A man that is swallowed up in bitterness may give you the impression through his hardness that he is demon possessed. It can certainly be said of such a man what a distressed father said of his son who was possessed with a demon that Christ's disciples were not able to cast out. He said in Lk. 9:39 *And, lo, a spirit taketh him, and he suddenly*

crieth out; and it teareth him that he foameth again, and bruising him hardly departeth from him. That's true of bitterness – it tears and bruises and hardly departs from those who become infected by it.

We see, then, some of the things that must be avoided if we're going to gain the benefit of divine chastisement. We must avoid despising the Lord's chastening; We must avoid fainting under the Lord's chastening and we must avoid being swallowed up by bitterness under the Lord's chastening hand.

This is our subject negatively considered. Would you consider with me next that if we're to gain the benefit of divine chastisement:

II. We Must Practice the Right Response to It –

The first thing we must consider under this heading is the manner of our response to divine chastisement. Verse 5 tells us *ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children.* The word *children* could be translated and is translated in every other English version by the word *sons*.

I said a moment ago that to respond to divine chastisement by fainting under it is to respond the way an immature child responds to discipline. *It isn't right; It isn't fair; Poor me – I'm being persecuted for no reason.*

When the word of exhortation speaks to us as sons – the lesson you can draw from that is that we're being addressed not as little immature children – but as mature sons. In other words when you find yourself undergoing divine chastisement you're to grow up, as it were, and take it as a mature son and not respond like an immature spoiled brat.

I like the way the Amplified version puts it in v. 5 – *And have you completely forgotten the divine word of appeal and encouragement in which you are reasoned with and addressed as sons?*

I have found even as an adult in this world that there are times in the realm of life that I need to be corrected and I need to be rebuked. I have also found that these times are not so hard to bear if I can perceive a constructive purpose behind them.

There's a great difference, you see, between destructive criticism and constructive criticism. Destructive criticism accomplishes nothing but to tear a person down. I can remember working for a man in printing some time ago who never bothered to analyze why things went wrong and then adopt a constructive plan for correcting a worker who made the mistake. His response was to let his temper get the best of him and fly into a rage. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, may issue a rebuke but it will or it should be followed by constructive instruction that will prevent an error from recurring.

Now a mature man or a son knows how to distinguish between constructive criticism and destructive criticism. An immature child doesn't know how to make the distinction. He views all criticism as being destructive because it hurts his feelings and therefore criticism of any kind is cruel, unnecessary, and unfair. You can be sure that God's criticisms of His

children are always constructive. They are always right and they are always, therefore good. And if you find yourself forgetting that, then the simple lesson that is taught by verse 5 is that you need to grow up.

Lloyd-Jones in one of his sermons on this subject points out that the word *speakeeth* – the word of exhortation which *speakeeth* to you as sons – could be translated by the word *reasons*. The word of exhortation reasons with you. This again presupposes a level of maturity on the part of the Christian.

When the Lord deals with us in chastisement we are not to despise His dealings but we are to reason with Him in His dealings. This is the invitation that the Lord extends to His people in Isaiah 1. After describing their sinful condition and the hard times that have resulted from their sinful condition the Lord says to them in v. 18 *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*

The first positive response to the chastisement of the Lord, therefore, is that we suck in our pride, stand up as sons, face the truth of our errors, and face the Lord's dealings as mature Christians. In that maturity we reason with the Lord. We seek the reasons for his harsh dealings by examining our hearts and lives and coming clean with Christ.

I find it interesting that it is in connection with the trials of our faith that James says in the first chapter of his epistle – *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* Right before that promise we're told – *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

And if you don't understand the purpose behind your trials – you don't seem to understand God's dealings with you in connection with those trials then ask the Lord for wisdom – *if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.*

Now the difference between responding rightly to trials and responding wrongly to trials will depend on whether or not we interpret those trials correctly. A right response to trials, therefore, is the response of interpreting them in connection to our relationship to God through Christ.

The world, you see, hates Christ and hates God. When God deals with the world he deals in judgment. And in spite of that judgment the world continues to gnash its teeth at God, as it were. This has always amazed me in the book of Revelation. We have the record of God unleashing judgment on the world. And the world responds in anger to God and vents that anger on the Lord's people.

The Christian is not to view divine chastisement the way the world views divine judgment. Look at what v. 6 tells us – *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

We are to view God's dealings with us on the basis of his love. It is because he loves us that he corrects us. It is because we are sons that he disciplines us the way earthly fathers discipline their sons. So a right response to divine chastisement is to distinguish between God's dealings with us and his dealings with the world. *When we are judged* – Paul writes to the Corinthians *we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world* (1Cor. 11:32).

The matter of our condemnation has already been settled. It was settled by Christ when he bore it for us. There can be no condemnation to those who are joined to Christ because there has already been condemnation wrought upon Christ.

He redeemed us to himself in order that we might be conformed to his image. And this is what we have to understand about chastisement. It serves a purpose in our sanctification. God is preparing us for glory. God is moving us in the direction of holiness. We read later in chp. 12 that we are come to *mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, . And to an innumerable company of angles, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.*

God's dealings with us, then, are based upon where we've come from and how we got there and where we're going from here. There is much preparation needed in our lives to get us ready for glory. This is why God deals with us the way he does. And if you can but see that in Christ you're the object of God's love and in Christ you've been brought into the family of God – then there will be no way that you'll despise the chastening hand of God – on the contrary you'll thank God for it.

You'll confess as the Psalmist does in Ps. 119:71 *It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.* When you see, then, the purpose that divine chastisement meets in preparing you for glory you'll be enabled to take the long look – rather than the short look. It's when we become short-sighted that we despise the chastening of the Lord.

If you view the Lord's dealings right you'll see not only a purpose in preparing you for eternity – but you'll see a purpose in pruning you for fruitfulness while you serve the Lord in this world below. This is what Paul tells us in v. 11 – *Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous (that's why we can't be glued to the present) nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby.*

There are great benefits, then, to divine chastisement. We gain assurance of God's love when he deals with us as sons. We make progress in holiness when God chastises us for our sins. We learn to set our affections on things above when God chastises us for being too affectionate toward the things of this world.

We know that chastisement isn't fun. We know that it's very grievous. But we also know that God loves us and deals with us faithfully in mercy.

I wonder this morning – are you under the heavy hand of God? Are you the recipient of divine chastisement? If you're not, chances are you have been and you will be. It's part of God's dealings with all his redeemed ones. There are no exceptions. To take exception to it is to take exception to being a child of God.

I trust that you'll forget not the word of exhortation that comes to you as sons – *My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him. Why? For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

May God help us, then, to read his dealings with us a right – in order that we may gain the benefits of his dealings – even the benefit of divine chastisement.