

3. The writer reminded his readers of something they all knew to be true: Every father who is *truly* a father to his children disciplines them. And though all fall short in their understanding and implementation, fathers who genuinely love their children strive to nurture them with a view to their maturity and flourishing as human beings. This is an imprecise and messy enterprise, and one that is never free of difficulty, pain, sorrow and regret. And not just in terms of correcting wrong behavior, but in the very nature of discipline itself and the work it seeks to accomplish. Again, discipline is the wholistic training of children (through instruction, correction, practical demands, etc.), with the purposeful intent of fully preparing them for their adult life. Historically, the *father* determined this future life, and his discipline aimed to direct all of the dimensions of his children's day-to-day existence toward the realization of that goal.

This understanding, then, is key to the writer's insistence that *all* discipline seems painful at the time (12:11). He wasn't talking about corporal punishment, or even correction more generally. Rather, he was identifying the fact that discipline, *as discipline*, is inherently distressing and painful. *And the reason is that it is concerned is with an outcome that transcends the immediate.* Discipline isn't at all interested in present interests or desires; certainly not the child's, but also not the father's. It is wholly concerned with the *future* – a future that isn't fully discerned by the one being disciplined, and that is remote from, and often contrary to, his own present concerns. In this way, discipline strips the “disciple” of his own agenda and sense of himself, and so takes from him the delight of pursuing his own course and ends.

In the moment, all genuine discipline is distressing, for it won't allow its subject to “be himself” – to be who he believes himself to be. Quite the opposite, properly administered discipline compels the child (disciple) to reconceive himself according to a vision that yet lies in the future. *It instructs its subject in the truth of who he actually is, and continually reinforces that truth, even as it strives to bring to full realization the vision it holds out.*

Thus the answer to the distress of discipline is to embrace its vision and goal. If a child will embrace the identity that his father's discipline has in view, he will find himself no longer at cross-purposes with the destiny ordained for him. In the case of God's children, they will find themselves being true to *themselves*, because they are embracing the destiny for which their Father created them, namely their full conformity to Him (12:10) through sharing in the life and likeness of His true Image-Son. Thus Jesus' warning to His disciples: “*Whoever would preserve his life (as he conceives it) will lose it; but whoever loses his life (as he conceives it) for My sake, will find it (his authentic life).*”

Instinct says that the remedy for discipline's sting is to eliminate it. But the true remedy is to embrace its good outcome – *to bring the future into the present*, even as Jesus salved Calvary's agony by embracing the triumph and joy to come from it (12:2). This is how the unique Son responded to His Father's discipline, and so should all of the sons. The goal of His discipline is His children's consummate good: the “righteousness” that is their full conformity to their identity and role as image-sons. Whatever their present distress, their destiny is *peace* (12:11) – the peace that is perfect harmony with their God, themselves, and His creation; the peace that flows from the True Son (John 14:27).

- a. The writer reminded his readers that they were to perceive their hardship and affliction as God's discipline. They were suffering because of their faithfulness to Messiah Jesus, but His Father – who was now their Father – was working in and through their suffering to nurture their growth, unto the goal that they should become sons fully conformed to the unique Son. Thus the proper response to their present tribulation was to fix their minds on its future glorious fruit. *The same faithfulness that was causing their suffering was the answer to it.* They were suffering because of Jesus, and they needed to keep their eyes fixed on Him.

This, then, is the lens for interpreting the exhortation in verses 12-13. The writer continued to use athletic imagery, drawing on his previous depiction of the ordeal of faith as a strenuous athletic contest (12:1-2). This is how the imagery works: It requires all of one's energy and effort to persevere in a long and arduous foot race, and the ordeal will invariably leave the athlete weary and sore, even to the point of feeling unable to continue on. If he is to complete his race, then, the runner must "strengthen weary hands and weak knees" and be especially careful to avoid uneven and rocky terrain – *terrain he might easily navigate as a fresh runner, but that poses a real danger to him in his weary and weakened condition.*

So it is with the "race" of faith. It, too, is a long and arduous ordeal that wears out those who persevere in it and leaves them exhausted, battered and bruised. In order to continue to the end – especially as the race gets further along, these "runners" also need discipline and fortitude to muster strength in their weakened condition and watch closely the path they follow. Otherwise, they, too, will find their race jeopardized with a "lame limb" being "put out of joint." This, then, is the context for understanding the writer's charges in verses 14-17, which simply flesh out in practical terms the metaphorical language of verses 12-13.

- b. The first charge is two-fold, and is the most general (12:14). It concerns both arenas of faithfulness, namely one's relationship with *others* and with *oneself*. With respect to others, the writer exhorted his readers to "*pursue peace with all men.*" Two things about this are important to note:

*First*, this charge encompasses all that is involved in rightly relating to other people. For *peace* doesn't denote the absence of open conflict, but the state of harmony between individuals that God intends for all relationships within His creation. (This is the biblical concept of *shalom*.) Thus peace has to do with one's attitude, orientation and intent more than one's conduct; it is the fruit of love.

*Second*, this is a universal obligation. These Hebrews were to pursue peace *with all people*, even those who were opposing and persecuting them. If their suffering was indeed their Father's wise and loving discipline, it was working toward their full maturity as sons. And growth as a son is growth in one's likeness to the Father, so that their suffering should find them becoming more like Him in their thinking and attitude toward men. Embracing their affliction as discipline would lead these sons to become peacemakers like their Father (Matthew 5:9, 43-48).

As they were to pursue peace with other people, these Hebrews were also to pursue their own *holiness*, for both are essential qualities of their Father. Faithfulness as sons is manifest in peacemaking, but also in personal holiness. This connection between faith/faithfulness and holiness is critically important, especially because so many Christians equate holiness with upright conduct. Indeed, the passage itself could *seem* to support this perspective, as the writer followed his exhortation to holiness with warnings about bitterness, ungodliness and immorality (12:15-17). But interpreting him this way is to miss his point.

Holiness expresses itself *practically* (1 Thessalonians 4:1-7), but the scriptural concept is essentially *ontological*: It speaks to what a thing *is*, not what it does. Hence the “holy” articles of the sanctuary could not be touched or even looked at by anyone other than the chosen priests, and yet they were inanimate objects (Numbers 4:1-20). Their holiness referred to their *consecration*; Yahweh had set them apart to Himself and devoted them to a particular function in His worship, and thus they were excluded from any and all “common” contact or usage. So it is with God’s children: They, too, are set apart to Him, and not just as entities devoted to His worship and service; they are the very *place* of His worship and service. *Together, God’s “holy ones” form His new, everlasting sanctuary* (ref. Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-10; cf. also 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19).

And so, when the Hebrews writer exhorted his readers to pursue holiness, he was calling them to fully embrace and live out their new identity as *sons*: people who have become God’s children as He has taken them up into His own life through union with His unique Son by His Spirit (Colossians 3:1-4; cf. John 14:1-23). Thus Christians “pursue holiness” when they discipline themselves to live according to the truth of their sonship. Indeed, this is the very essence of what it means to *live by faith* – to be “faithful” (cf. Romans 1:1-4; 2 Corinthians 6:1-7:1).

Pursuing holiness in this way won’t deliver a person from difficulty and suffering; quite the contrary, it will increase one’s suffering because faithfulness involves contradiction, which introduces a new dimension of hostility, opposition and affliction. Nevertheless, living into one’s sonship grants the blessing of *peace*, even in the fiercest opposition and suffering. This is because the life of sonship is life in union and communion with the Son who embodies and alone imparts true peace and rest (John 14:27, 16:25-33; also Luke 1:67-79; Romans 8:5-14).

The life of holiness, then, is the life of faith, and faith draws the future into the present; *it gives substance to what is hoped for, and makes visible what is unseen* (11:1). Faith enables God’s children to own their sonship in the present, but according to its glorious destiny, not what appears in their present experience (cf. 1 John 3:1-3; Philippians 3:1-4:7; Colossians 3:1-11). All who pursue holiness in this way, embracing their ordeal of faith as the Father’s discipline, will find their distress fade into the background and the righteousness and peace appointed for them flooding their hearts and minds (12:11). And this will enable them to “be at peace with all men,” even those who oppose them (12:14; cf. Romans 12:17-21).

- c. The writer followed up his exhortation in verse 14 with a general warning about “coming short of the grace of God,” which he then exemplified in terms of *bitterness*, *ungodliness* and *immorality* (12:15-17). Again, it’s important that these concepts be treated in context in order to not miss the writer’s meaning. These Hebrews were in danger of coming short of God’s grace, but primarily because their struggle of faith was distracting them, wearing them down, and weakening their resolve. It’s clear, then, that the writer was warning his readers against *apostasy*: wandering away from their faith in Jesus such that they ultimately exclude themselves from the grace of God that is revealed and made effectual in Him (cf. 2:1-4, 3:1-4:11, 6:1-6; cf. also 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 and Galatians 5:1-7).

The author described this “coming short” in three particulars, *bitterness* being the first (12:15). His expression literally refers to the root of a plant that produces a bitter or poisonous fruit, which provides a poignantly appropriate image. For his concern was the human disposition that begins as subtle, inward resentment and continues to grow until it breaks out in overt and consuming bitterness that poisons everyone it touches. Many things can lead to such bitterness, but perhaps nothing so much as unjust suffering. And all the more so when the person is suffering for his faith and finds no relief from the Lord. Such was the case with these Hebrews, and the corrective to any root of bitterness was to remind themselves that their Father wasn’t unconcerned with their plight of suffering, but was rewarding their faithfulness by nurturing their sonship through it.

The writer treated the next two particulars – *ungodliness* and *immorality* – as a pair, and used the example of Esau to clarify his meaning (12:16-17). And what Esau’s example shows is that he was using these terms to describe two essential aspects of *idolatry*: the universal human quality of self-centeredness in perspective, judgment, interest, and concern. In Esau’s case, he was flippantly willing to give away his birthright – his status of primogeniture within God’s covenant household – for a single meal. That act seemed insignificant to Esau at the time, but it determined his future as a son of the covenant. Later, when he sought Isaac’s covenant blessing, there was none to give him, though he pled for it with angry tears. Yes, his brother Jacob had schemed and deceived their father to obtain his covenant blessing, but it was Esau’s dismissive disregard for his covenant status – his *godlessness* – that took it from him (Genesis 27:30-40).

But the same fleshly self-concern that moved Esau to forfeit his birthright provoked his anguish and tears. For all his pleading, there was no true penitence (“he found no place of repentance”), just a man utterly preoccupied with himself. And when he found himself stripped of his blessing, Esau didn’t condemn himself for his careless self-indulgence. No, his anger burned against his brother, and he resolved to murder Jacob after their father Isaac died and the time of mourning had passed (Genesis 27:41). This was Esau’s *immorality* ( *pornos* as spiritual harlotry) and it points to the Hebrews writer’s concern. It wasn’t that he feared his readers might kill someone, but their sense of injustice and desire to alleviate their pain could find them falling prey to the same profane passions that drove Esau.