

Enduring Hardship While Heeding Warnings

Hebrews 12:12-29¹

M. Scott Peck tells the following story.

A young man was reared on a farm. He vividly remembers a particular day in his life. He had been given the responsibility of raising a piglet. He had cared for it, feed it, groomed it. He had watched it grow from a squirmy, squealing, little pink thing into a large, snuffling porker. And he loved that pig. But the fateful day came. His father woke him up to say that this was the day that hogs were to be butchered. He looked up into the kind, but firm face of his father. No, there would be no reprieve. From the first day, he knew this day was coming. He went out to the pen with his dad. There, they stood, side-by-side. The father slowly took out the long knife he used for the task. The boy took hold of his father's pants leg. Then, he reached up and clutched his father's hand. In simple trust and childlike submission, he brought his father's hand down to his face. Then he kissed the hand that held knife. "As you see best, Dad."

[M. Scott Peck, paraphrased]

What would bring us as sons and daughters of a holy and loving Father to kiss the hand that wields his chastening rod? God's people need both the encouraging words of last week and the exhorting, warning words of this text. If we believe these things, then we will not only bend our backs, but also our hearts to the wise and good disciplines of our heavenly Father.

The word "therefore" begins our section today. These powerful exhortations and sober warnings are the consequence of the encouraging and hope-giving truths in verses 3-16.

Your suffering assures you of the love of God, "Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (v.6).

Your suffering confirms your relationship with God, "God deals with you as sons" (v.7).

Your suffering is designed for your good, "He disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness" (v.10).

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God is ruling over the lives of His people. The persecution and sickness and hardship you endure are part of God's sovereign design for your good and your holiness. Therefore, be strengthened by this truth. Run with God in pursuing the holiness He designs, receive His grace and do not trade the hard pain of God's disciplines for the soft pleasures of the world's delights.

Now our author has packed these New Covenant church responsibilities with Old Testament texts. Seeing what he is expounding and applying will be important as we move through these paragraphs.

Our Responsibilities (v.12-14)

Since the fatherly love of God designs your pain for your good and holiness, therefore what are our immediate responsibilities? I see these as actions that flow from attitudes.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Avoid Being Permanently Disabled (v.12-13)

We have the responsibility to:

We must strengthen our grip.

The word here is literally, "hanging down". It may refer to the physical posture of exhaustion. It may also refer to the spiritual problem of relaxation. Enduring hardship is not a passive thing. We don't simply go to our easy chairs and sit back until the hardship passes. Get a grip, our author says. Don't passively wait; actively endure.

This exhortation comes from Isaiah 35:3-6. Listen to what Isaiah says here.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart,
"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the

tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

This is what the author is expounding on. We have anxious, fearful people during the disciplines of God. So, we strengthen people by counsel, by speaking to them. We say things like, "Be strong. Don't be afraid." And then we remind them of the personal purposes and plans of God. He is coming as "our God". When He comes, He will bring both judgment and reward. Thus, all things will be put to rights. And when we say these words to ourselves and to others, we are strengthened by grace to bear pain for the sake of the gain even if it means to the glorious return of the Lord.

Also, one other use of this phrase appears in the Bible and it is a significant warning for us. In Job 4:3-6, Eliphaz confronts Job as someone who had strengthened others through words exhorting them to faith in God. But now, that hardship and suffering have touched his life, he is dismayed. Are then the words that he has used for others, not real for himself? Brothers and sisters, we need to be careful to not only strengthen others in their difficulties, but also ourselves in our own trials.

We must straighten our path.

This allusion to Proverbs 4:25-27 shows that we are to walk straight on the path. God has laid out before us the way of His will during hardship. Let us keep our eyes on His will and that path. Let us walk on it, not deviating from it at all. Then in the chastening hardships our loving Father brings, we will avoid the evil that lurks just off the path of submission and obedience.

Why should we do this? Because we want to avoid being permanently disabled by our hardships (Piper) This can happen. Some of you are in grave danger of this. You are not keeping your spiritual grip strong and you are limping around all over the road of God's will and soon you are going to be spiritually or emotionally crippled for life. We have a responsibility, during hardship and discipline, to avoid becoming crippled by it.

Prize Being Able to See God (v.14)

The second responsibility is to follow after peace and holiness. The word "pursue" is good. It is the idea of going hard after. So are we going hard after peace and holiness in hardship? Isn't it easy when

things are hard to begin picking fights and rubbing people the wrong way and being overly sensitive?

Look at it this way. God has designed your discipline so that when it has run its course it produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness. But we, in this midst of that carefully designed and orchestrated hardship must be cultivating the very harvest it is supposed to produce.

Why should we go hard after holiness? Because we value seeing God both in our present circumstances and in our future goals. Without holiness, no one sees God. We don't talk much about holiness anymore. It simply tells us that we really do not value and treasure God as our reward. I have been asking myself this question: Do I so want to see God that I will go hard after peace and holiness?

Our Risks (v.15-17)

During hardships, we are exposed to great risks. Our author underscores three of them for us. He warns us of their danger. Loved ones, these are nothing to be casual about as though they do not really matter. Christians being disciplined in the transforming design of our loving Father are at-risk in these three areas.

¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

But first we need to look carefully at a word in the text. It is translated, "See to it..." The word here is the verb meaning *to observe, to oversee, to give attention to, to be careful of*. We must constantly be on the alert lest these things happen in our lives. These three phrases are parallel. There are three separate but related risks. What is needed then is vigilance.

So we have got to be paying close attention, both to ourselves and to others. If we do not, the risks hidden within our hardships will lead to ruin. It begins with careful self-observation. But Hebrews has taught us that holiness is a community project. So, are we paying careful attention lest the following develop?

Resisting the Grace of God (v.15)

Our first risk is that in some way we will miss or fail or come short or actively resist the grace of God. Now on the surface, that might not appear to be such a big deal.

We think like that because we have failed to understand the role of grace. One of the central aspects of grace is that it is an enabling power. Grace is the power to desire and do God's will. It is the spiritual electricity that energizes the human heart, will and body. It comes to us through the wires we call the *means of grace*: things like prayer, Bible study, fellowship, worship and so on.

Grace is the power of God in our salvation and in our transformation. There would be some among the Hebrews for whom resisting and coming short of the grace of God means that they never actually were saved. And there were others who were coming short of the grace of God to power their transformation.

The effect was that they cut themselves off (unplugged themselves) from the very spiritual energy that would bring good and peace and righteousness out of suffering. While being chastened to be holy they short-circuited the process by missing or resisting the grace of God.

All of us have done this. Hardship and discipline come and we turn away from the very things through which God sends His enabling power to endure. Are you coming short of the grace of God?

Allowing Bitterness to Grow (v.15)

How easy it is to become bitter! God brings hardship and difficulty and suffering all designed to refine and purify and strengthen and sanctify us and we become bitter. We harbor in our hearts anger against those through whom the hardship comes. We lay awake at night mulling over it and thinking about it. We imagine conversations and actions. Soon its tentacles grow deep into our very beings, mapping itself in our actions and attitudes and sometimes on our very faces.

But the author is using the phrase here pointing us to Deuteronomy 29:18. If we are going to really understand bitterness as the author is thinking of it, we need to look back to the text he is thinking of.

¹⁸ Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and

serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,

Moses here challenges the Israelites with their responsibility to be vigilant over one another's lives. They were to be vigilant for a poisonous root of unbelief that bore the fruit of presumption. The people of God are ever vulnerable to hearing of the gracious kindness of God and not taking seriously their sins. That unbelief, when subjected to the chastening hand of God, turns into bitterness.

Bitterness is particularly dangerous to disciplined saints because:

It disturbs...

– It causes trouble. Bitterness is often the root feeding the flower of dissension and dissatisfaction. It pollutes the spiritual atmosphere and poisons Relationships.

It defiles...

Bitterness has a defiling and staining effect on saints. Bitterness is contagious. It wants to multiply its misery and spread its stain. Bitterness not rooted out will affect the whole person. You will see it in the countenance and in the conduct. It will sharpen the tongue and shorten the temper. And ongoing bitterness can defile and poison a church.

The solution to bitterness? Grace enabled forgiveness. Love driven reconciliation. Going hard after peace and holiness for the sake of seeing God. Take control of your thoughts. Stop mulling over both your real and imagined slights. Take advantage of the grace God is giving you right during your hardship to rejoice and not be bitter.

Will you give up your bitterness? Bitterness, like all sins, is pleasurable. It has a sense of "rightness" to it. You can allow it to germinate and soon it will grow into a habit. Then it will entwine itself in your character so that you hug it to yourself and refuse to let it go. Will you take the cross and cut sharply and uproot deeply any beginning sprig of bitterness? Will you seek the grace of God to become a better, not a bitter person?

Trading for the Immediate and Present (v.16-17)

Though these risks and dangers that we are warned about are parallel, they are also progressive. Resisting the grace of God may lead to bitterness and end in moral and spiritual failure. Look at how this

condition is described. It is described as being sexually impure. It is described as being unhallowed or debased. It is like Esau who traded away his birthright, that is his spiritual and material inheritance for a bowl of bean soup.

Now don't make a mistake about Esau. Esau, on the surface, looked like a good man. He worked hard, was a good hunter, led his family and loved his father. He would have seemed to be an ideal neighbor. But in his heart, he had all the potential to become immoral and godless.

Why are we liable to become immoral or godless like Esau? Because of an underlying problem that hardship tends to uncover. We do not value the eternal and too often are too willing to trade its blessings for the immediate and present. What God is doing in the design of His loving discipline is for the long term. Some of it will not yield a full harvest of righteousness whose fruit looks like peace for years to come.

Think with me for a moment. Look at what is at stake. His spiritual inheritance is at risk. Yet the choice does not feel like something that important. He is famished and here is food at a price. Yet, what happened cannot be undone and thus, the dire consequences. Thus we must hear and heed. Sometimes what might appear to be small trades and inconsequential compromises may lead to spiritual ruin.

So let me ask straight away: In your hardship and suffering in discipline, are you watching carefully lest you become like Esau, lest you fall into immorality and godlessness and trade the blessings of your eternal heritage for the passing pleasures of sin?

Why is this danger so great? Look at what happened to Esau. He could find no way to change the consequences² even though he sought it with tears. His early trade led to unchangeable consequences. Once his father had given the birthright to Jacob, there was no way to undo what was done. Esau was sorry about the consequences, but not about the cause.

Now these are hard words. And for many of you this will require an adjustment in your theology. But I refuse to soften the impact, even for me in my own life. Loved ones, it is possible to keep resisting the grace of God and keep allowing bitterness to grow and keep trading away

² The word "repent" here does not mean to change one's heart but to change the situation or consequences.

the eternal blessings for present pleasures until we cross a line, and we cannot find a way back. We must submit to the Father of lights and *live*. This is a very sober warning. And yes, if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. But the consequences of our failures may so pile up that God will not and does not undo them. May God in His mercy preserve us from such a fate.

Loved ones; watch over yourselves and others to see that no one keeps on resisting God's enabling grace or allows bitterness to grow or keeps on trading away eternal blessings for present pleasures. Some need to repent now lest you come to a place where tears will be shed over a life unusable for God.

Our Reasons (v.18-24)

We are deeply motivated to respond to discipline in God's way by our New Covenant privileges. Though we are surrounded by great dangers and grave warnings, we are supported by gracious and glorious truths. Verse 18 ought to begin with the word "for". So, the following truths will motivate us during hardship and suffering to be glad and to welcome discipline and to watch carefully over our lives. These motivations arise out of the great New Covenant theology foundation upon which this book rests.

We Do Not Come to Mt. Sinai (v.18-21)

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."

²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

As New Covenant believers we are not hearing the voice and thundering and threatening of God through the Law. Even the way the Law was given was calculated to inspire awe and fear and fright. Those who heard those words begged that they might stop because they understood that what was being commanded was beyond them. The Holiness of the Mount and its Law was so great and so distant that animals could not come near without penalty and even Moses trembled with fear.

Therefore, the disciplines of hardship and suffering are not to come to us in such a way and with such an attitude that we fearfully stop our ears at God's voice in the Word. God's disciplining hand does not come to us from Mt. Sinai and the Law. We are not to be motivated by Law in our peace and holiness.

We Do Come to Mt. Zion (v.22-24)

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In contrast, we come to Mt. Zion. The hill of Calvary brings us to the mountain of God's heavenly dwelling and all the wonders and blessings and powerful motivations of New Covenant privileges. We endure hardship longing for heaven and home.

I can bear the discipline of my loving Father as long as I reflect and think and long for the heavenly city, the joyous assembly of a myriad of angels, the saints assembled in heaven. I can endure hardship and pursue peace and holiness and watch carefully over my life when I know that grace and glory mean coming to God the judge, and to Jesus my mediator and the blood whose word speaks forgiveness and reconciliation and hope.

So, if they do come to present New Covenant realities and not to past Old Covenant shadows, then they certainly may not return to those Old Covenant shadows. There is no refuge in those things. In the midst discipline, its pain and hardship, we need to come to the gracious speaking of the New Covenant, not to the threatening thundering of the Old.

In the midst of hardship, you do not come to Mt. Sinai to hear hard and difficult and threatening words. You come to Mt. Zion to hear of the grace of God and access to God. Verses 22-24 become present, on-going realities in prayer and fellowship. You can come privately alone. But the verb is plural, so we can come *together*.

Our Responses (v.25-28)

So how do we respond to this great truth?

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,

Attentively Listen to God Speaking (v.25-27)

“See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks.” Do you see this? When we do not listen to God and hear Him and heed Him we are refusing Him. We are rejecting Him.

Now the great question then is this: if those who refused to listen to God speaking on earth had no avenue of escape, what about us who are hearing God speak from heaven? God’s voice is so immeasurably powerful that Mt. Sinai quaked when He spoke. How much more should we listen to the One whose voice will shake heaven and earth. That great shaking will sift all creation so that which is eternal and lasting and of God will remain.

So when we are enduring the hardship and suffering of the loving discipline of God, we had better be listening to God.

Acceptably Worship and Serve God (v.28)

The grand conclusion is in this marvelous verse. I am going to briefly touch on it now and then unpack it as the foundation for chapter 13.

Our first response is profound gratitude for the privilege of living in the New Covenant Kingdom. The first and the old have passed away. Mt. Sinai has been satisfied. Mt. Zion is open. The Kingdom is beginning to unfold. The gospel is bringing in all God’s people and the Lord is ruling over them. This kingdom cannot and will not be shaken. So while our external circumstances are difficult and the kingdoms of this world seem to hold sway, let us be grateful for our Redeemer and Ruler whose fatherly love and awesome holiness is safely bringing every child home.

Our second response is to worship and serve this great and glad and glorious God who is giving us an eternal and unshakable kingdom.

We should serve Him with reverence and awe because our God is a consuming fire. He is a hot, refining blaze whose furnace of affliction and discipline is the environment in which we worship and serve.

When we are enduring the hardship and suffering of the loving discipline of God, we need to be worshipping and serving with gratitude.

We come full circle in Hebrews. Chapter one opened with the variegated speaking of God in the Old Covenant now localized and finalized in His Son. So, we must pay attention (2:1). Now, God does not speak threatening words from Sinai, but gracious words from Zion where we do not come to Moses, but we come to Jesus. So we had better pay attention to this speaking from heaven One.

Reflect and Respond

Let's conclude with these challenges.

Enduring chastening is a community project. We must watch over one another, help one another, encourage one another and ensure that God's grace is effective in our lives. Chastening is for the individual in the midst of community.

Are you truly living as a New Covenant Christian? Does your relationship with God based on coming to Mt Sinai or to Mt. Zion? O that our meditating and praying would consciously be a coming to the grand New Covenant privileges of a heavenly place, perfected saints, worshipping angels and to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Mediator.

In the midst of loving discipline that feels painful *are you listening to God in His Word?* The thundering exhortation rings through all of Hebrews – pay attention to God in His Word. He is still speaking and you must be still listening. If you do not, you will be in enormous danger.

Do all you can, through the Word, through your talking together, through engagement in worship, through holy meditation to fuel a high view of God and thus burn with awe and reverence before Him. Not the fleshly reverence of gloom, and candles and stained glass – but the Holy Spirit taught reverence of a humble, faith obedience.

Let us rise up to worship and serve our holy and loving Father with appropriate reverence and spiritual fear. Let us be filled with gratitude for the gospel, the grace and the glorious rule and reign of Christ now in

His church, His kingdom. With gratitude and serving hearts, go and proclaim the gospel of the glory of our Ruler and Redeemer.