

Enduring Hardship While Receiving Discipline

Hebrews 12:1-11³²

Discipline is hard. Self-discipline is a struggle for many. Diets, exercise, regular routines, vigilance over sins – these all require that we impose some level of regular structure on our natural tendency towards irregular, self-pleasing chaos.

But then there is the discipline imposed on us by others. The boss who requires us to be at the office at a certain time. The spouse who expects to serve and receive a meal at a certain time. Parents who mete out consequences when expectations and demands are not met.

Both of these fit in the word, “discipline”. Then there is the carefully thought through, lovingly implemented instruction, correction and consequences that we associate with parenting and child-rearing. This is the God-ordained “how-to” that shapes hearts through teaching, commands, consequences and corporal punishment. Biblical discipline then involves a path to follow and pain when the path is not followed. There is a sense of safe rest when children stay on the path. There is also trouble and pain when children get off the path.

The Bible places a great deal of the pain and hardship that God’s people experience in this category of *discipline*. Those who received this book had to know how they were going to think about some of the hardness and hardships of their lives so that they would respond to them in a way that was pleasing to the Lord.

One writer has commented, “The book of Hebrews is a very mature and sober book when it comes to the pain and stress of Christian living and the endurance that it takes to run the race and fight the fight and finish well. It's not a book that people (especially teenagers and strong young adults) gravitate toward - unless they have suffered and struggle for some explanation of how that relates to God. In other words, the more easy and pain-free your life has been, the less you will cherish the kind of spirituality taught in this book. And the more you have suffered, the more you will cling to the precious teachings of this book - if you are willing to believe them.” (Piper)

That is a big *if*. There are many people, even many preachers, who simply do not believe what this chapter teaches. It's not a little feel-good chapter about how to make the best of your troubles - or even about how God makes the best of your troubles. It is a massive statement about the gracious sovereignty of God over the evil that befalls his people. And the big IF is: will you believe this? Will you accept the mystery of God's providence in the pain of your life, and be trained by it (as verse 11 says) for the sake of good and peace and holiness and righteousness and life? Or will you kick against this chapter and demand in the season of suffering that God give a greater account of Himself than he does in this chapter?

Our Pattern for our Enduring

(v.2-3)

Our author begins by causing us to think deeply about Jesus.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the

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race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

This is always the best place to begin in our hardships. Fix your eyes on Jesus and consider Him. What is it then that this does for us?

I believe that there are two kinds of hardship in view here. Our suffering hardship comes in two primary categories.

The Hardship of Sacrifice

(v.2)

There is a kind of hardship that is related to the cross. It is the kind of hardship that comes as we take up our cross. It is the suffering that comes when we hear the call and heed the summons to come and die. We look at the gain and the glory and weigh it against the pain and hardness and the suffering and we choose the course that leads through dark valleys.

The Hardship from Sinners

(v.3)

There is a kind of hardship that comes from sinner's opposition. In their case, it was the pressure of sinful men. They were being plundered and pressured and threatened. The hardship came because of the hostile will of sinful men. There was almost unimaginable stress. And some of you know this. You know for your faith you are sometimes ridiculed and mocked and teased. And sometimes for the sake of holiness you are openly opposed. Some of this is at work. Some of it is at home. And someday, it may come from mob violence or government.

Our Problems in Hardship

(v.3b-5a)

Sometimes when you read the stories of suffering saints from the past, it is easy to have a rosy picture of it. We think they faced the hardships of sacrifice and sinners with amazing calm and grace. But that was not so with the saints in Hebrews and rarely is it so with us.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

The hardships that they were experiencing were dangerous because of how they were beginning to respond to them. Our author here points us to three real perils to Christians in difficulty.

We Become Discouraged

(v.3b)

There is a great danger in the midst of hardship that comes by sacrifice or from sinners. That is that we grow weary and lose heart and fail in our souls. It is normal for Christians to have experiences of stress and suffering that threaten their faith and presses too hard, or lasts too long and feels almost intolerable. But, losing heart is a great spiritual danger. To be fainthearted here is literally "to become loosed-souled." We've seen how trouble is hard for small-souled people. Now we see how trouble shakes loose-souled people. And these

Christians were in that danger, as are many of you. The hardship we are going through is accompanied by discouragement and depression. When experiencing these affections, we tend to quit. Discouragement and depression are like constant companions. Why is this such a danger to us?

We Lose Perspective

(v.4)

The point here is that things are bad, but not as bad as they could be. There is hostility and trouble and stress and suffering, but evidently no martyrs yet. We know from Hebrews 10:34 that some had been imprisoned and some had been plundered. But it is not yet martyrdom, though that could come. The stress level here is huge. How do you sleep at night when being a Christian may result in mob violence?

The allusion here is to boxing in the Greek games. The bare-fisted fighting of their day often drew blood. He is also using the illustration to point us back to Jesus who did resist sin even to shedding of blood. He may be pointing to the cross; it is more likely he is pointing to Gethsemane. Jesus sweated great drops of blood as He aligned his own will with the will of His Father and choose to endure the suffering and shame of the cross for the joyous reward that was laid out before Him. He did so because of the "joy set before Him." He chose present suffering in the light of future reward.

So we will lose heart and become discouraged when we lose our sense of perspective. We allow the pain of the present to overwhelm our sense of the big picture and the long term. That is why this book is filled with magnifying Christ. That is why chapter 11 with its faithful men and women enduring hardship.

We Forget Scripture

(v.5a)

Why do we lose heart and lose perspective and become overwhelmed by the stress of our situation and the suffering of our hardships? Because we have forgotten the truths and exhortations and encouragement that come to us in the Word. We see our author telling them that they are risking losing heart and perspective because they have forgotten a very simple but profound text in Proverbs 3:11-12. This text in Proverbs is nested between trusting the Lord in all our ways (3:5-8), honoring the Lord with all our wealth (3:9-10) and finding wisdom as a chief end of life (3:13ff). So the chastening hand of God requires trust, obedience and leads to wisdom.

Listen to me loved ones; the Scriptures are more than just a theological textbook or a therapeutic sourcebook. They are the very truths of God shaping our hearts, renewing our minds, motivating our wills and directing our conduct. These people were not finding help and solace and direction from the Word. So the hardships came to them and threatened them and shook them to the foundations.

So I think it is fair to say that the believers in this passage are under tremendous stress; they are enduring some form of hostility; they are wrestling with great sorrow and are in danger of growing weary of the battle and losing heart. These chapters and this whole book is written to keep that from happening.

Now go back and notice how it is actually written. We are to give careful consideration to Christ *in order that* we do not grow weary or fainthearted. We must train our souls to pay attention to and to think much about the Lord Jesus with the aim of encouragement and endurance. I will come to the Lord, listen to Him in the Word, think on Him through meditation, commune with Him through prayer and receive grace to be strong and large souled. While

this grace may come to us through the loving, encouraging, admonishing ministry of people, all of that must point us to Christ, His promises, purposes and power.

So this grace gives us endurance – it fixes the soul on Christ so that we receive power and gain perspective.

Our Perspective on Hardship

(v.5-11)

The Bible gives us an analogy and a reality on our hardships. The suffering we are experiencing is to be endured like a father's discipline.

⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

It Is God's Discipline

In other words, what adversaries do to you out of sinful hostility, God is doing out of fatherly discipline. One preacher put it this way:

I see in this passage the precious teaching that God reigns over the hazards of our circumstances and over the health of our bodies and over the hostility of our adversaries and he designs all of life ultimately as a loving father's discipline. (Piper)

Now this is very difficult for many. It is somewhat easy to see how God controls circumstances and nature so that He can use them as discipline. I catch a cold in the midst of basking in Bible Conference accolades to remind me that I am lowly and needy. God can control disease and car breakdowns and broken house pipes to bring those kinds of pressures to bear helping us get rid of weights and sins.

But, what about people? Does God control the hostility of sinners against us so that we will be tested over sin? That is exactly what verses 3-4 are saying. The hostility of sinners and the hardships of life are both equally under the sovereign control of God. The cold germs and the horrid server at breakfast are both under God's control, bringing testing and discipline as He sees fit and as He deems necessary.

Many people simply refuse to believe this. But, all through the Bible, and most clearly in the New Testament, evil men are controlled by God to bring both pain and good to His people. Thus, the Egyptian Pharaoh of Moses' day, the Babylonian ruler of Habakkuk, the Roman Pilate of Jesus' trial and according to Peter in Acts 2:23 "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The author is here helping people to endure by teaching them to believe that God is behind everything. This corresponds with Romans 8:28 where God is working all things together for our good.

And you need to embrace this truth as well. I have drawn much strength, encouragement and hope in the midst of two very dark periods in my life. Then, God was at work to chasten and to refine me through the open hostility of people in my life. While it was painful and hard, this truth sustained so that by faith and hopefully, with all glory to Jesus, I was enabled to respond with grace and poise.

So, whether it is the hardship of suffering or the hostility of sinners, all discipline is being designed and determined by God. He is crafting it so that it is exactly suited to help you lay aside weights and sins and to enable you to run with endurance the race He has set before you. O, brothers and sisters, believe this in an obeying way!

It Reveals Relationship

(v.7-8)

Understand this: hardship and discipline reveal, not conceal relationship. The hardships that come from the loving disciplines of our heavenly Father assure us that we are truly His sons. Discipline is for all. It is how we know that we are loved. Every son and daughter the Father receives is disciplined by the skillful hand guided by the loving, holy heart of God. Every child of God receives chastening. Every one of you.

If we are without the disciplining hand of God then we are illegitimate or more frankly, bastards. We are pretending what is not so. We are not true sons of heaven, only lost sons of earth. Will you believe this? Will you look carefully in your life and trace out with joy the disciplining hardships God has brought to you and controls for you and assures you through them that you are His?

It Requires Submission

(v.9)

If you think that the hardship itself can bring discouragement and depression, what do you think would be the effect of resisting the loving chastening of our great God?

If we respect our earthly father's correction, what should be the response to our heavenly Father's chastening? There is an assumption being made here. Our author assumes that you know what it means to respect those correcting and chastening and disciplining you because you have personal and practical experience of it. It causes me to pause and wonder if so much of our lack of submission to the discipline of God and the disciplines of the faith is because we know so little of personal and practical discipline.

But there is another point here that might be easy to miss. Those who submit with reverence to the discipline of God, live. The New Testament is filled with the idea that God will make His people holy. True believers who resist the chastening hardships of the Father may well be taken on home. Witness Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts as well as the abusers of the Lord's Table at Corinth. So let us not treat this lightly as though the only thing at stake is a little emotional distress. It is a serious thing to fall into the hands of a living God.

So, my beloved, do not resist the chastening of God. Submit to it. Endure it with a sense of joy in the future. Bow down your heart when it wants to chafe under the hand of God. Bend your will to the holy will of God. The hardships gladly submitted to will profit us so much more.

Listen to these strange, startling and soul stirring words penned many years ago by Thomas Brooks in his *The Mute Christian under the Rod*.

Why must Christians be mute and silent under the greatest afflictions, the saddest providences, and the sharpest trials...? I answer: That they may the better hear and understand the voice of the rod. That they may distinguish themselves from the world.

That they may be [like] Christ their Head, who was dumb and silent under His sorest trials: "*He was oppressed, and He was afflicted; yet He opened not His mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter...*"

And yet, Christians, it is mercy, it is rich mercy, that every affliction is not an execution, that every correction is not a condemnation. The more your afflictions are increased, the more your heart shall be raised heavenward... Afflictions are a golden key by which the Lord opens the rich treasure of His Word to the souls of His people.

It is For Our Good

(v.10-11)

Here is the reason that we ought to submit to the Father of lights whose hand is chastening us – it is for our good, our holiness.

¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

How does he argue for this?

First, by contrast to the discipline we received from earthly fathers. They, whom we are to respect, disciplined for a short time and as best they could. The clear intent here is to show that earthly fathers, even when correcting and chastening children, are very limited in what they do and how long they can do it. But not so with God. He not only knows perfectly what is good for us, but also what He is aiming for. The ultimate aim, that is, our holiness, shapes the “good for us”. We could possibly say here that God is perfectly designing His chastening to be good for our holiness.

Second, by comparison to the cultivating and harvesting of fruit by a skilled farmer. He starts by asserting what all of us know in our hearts but don’t like to admit. The pain of chastening is worth the gain it brings. All discipline is by design supposed to be painful. But it is also supposed to cultivate and yield righteousness. The peace that comes from becoming holy sons and daughters is what is pleasant. What it takes to produce it may not be, but what it produces is.

Third, by asserting the value of its process. Notice how he says this: “those trained by it.” We talk about discipline and call it child training. This is so very important. The wise and good discipline of a sovereign God benefits those who are submissive to it, profit from it and are therefore trained by it. It seems to me that there is an implication here that there may be true sons and daughters who are not trained by God’s chastening because they resist it and thus it does not produce what God intends.

So be the kind of son and daughter who looks up into the face of your loving Father who is affirming your relationship with you, exhibiting his wisdom to you and is training you in holiness through the hardships He directs to you. Be the kind of person who believes by faith that this pain is bringing great gain. Believe by faith that He is chastening for your good and His glory.

Reflect and Respond

WHAT IS GOD WORKING ON IN YOUR LIFE NOW? Some of you are experiencing a season of blessing. Others of you are experiencing a season of hardship. God is behind both of these for your good and His glory. Do not become weary. Do not become small souled. Do not forget what the Bible tells you. Endure as under the discipline of God.

HOW IS HE BRINGING CHASTENING TO YOU? Your life will almost certainly not have the same details as in this text. But you will suffer hardship and hostility. God may bring illness or financial distress, family struggles or opposition, personal difficulties or spiritual dryness. Whatever it is in your life, you must see it, welcome it and be changed by it.

HOW ARE RESPONDING TO THAT DISCIPLINE? Will we rejoice in that we are assured that we are His children? We should find real rest in knowing that His hand is showing His love even in the hardship.

WILL RIGHTEOUSNESS OR REBELLION BE ITS FRUIT? Will we "be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" Or will we rebel against the father of spirits, and die? Will we trust him? If we submit to this sovereign, loving, fatherly care, we will not "grow weary and lose heart," but we will keep the faith, fight the good fight, and finish our course, and die well, and glorify our Father in heaven.

Look to Jesus
Consider Him who endured for you.

