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GOD'S LOVING DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 12:4-6

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Hebrews Lesson 45

God's Loving Discipline Hebrews 12:4-6

We've all seen it happen: a new believer, filled with joy, joins the church. At first, all is well and everyone rejoices in this person's salvation. But then a trial hits. It may be an illness, the loss of a job, or a relational problem, often with someone in the church. The person starts missing church and dodging those who try to contact him. Soon, he goes back to the world, bitter against Christians and against God.

What happened? There may be many factors involved, but a major cause of his spiritual failure was that he did not understand or respond properly to God's discipline. If he never repents and submits to God, he may be one of those represented by the seed sown on the rocky soil (Luke 8:13). At first they "receive the word with joy." But, they "have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away."

The subject of God's loving discipline of His children is one of the most practical truths in the Bible for you to understand and apply. If you do not understand it, you will not persevere when trials hit, as they certainly will. As we've seen, the author of Hebrews is trying to prepare his readers to endure by faith what seems to be a looming persecution. They have already "endured a great conflict of sufferings," which included public reproach, imprisonment, and the unlawful seizure of their property (10:32-34).

But, they still had need of endurance (10:36). After exhorting them to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (12:1), by fixing their eyes on Jesus and His suffering, he now explains the process of God's loving discipline of His children. The section runs through 12:11, but for sake of time we must only deal with 12:4-6.

To endure the Christian struggle against evil, we must understand what Scripture teaches about God's loving discipline.

1. The Christian life is an intense life or death struggle against the forces of evil (12:4).

The author shifts his metaphor from the marathon (12:1-3) to the wrestling or boxing match in the arena. We get our English word *antagonist* from the Greek word translated *striving against*. In ancient times, they did not have padded boxing gloves, such as boxers use today. Even with such gloves, boxers often inflict serious blows that result in profuse bleeding, and sometimes in the death of their opponent. You would not want to get in the ring unless you were prepared to fight against a powerful enemy that was determined to bring you down.

When the author says that the Hebrews had not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood, he meant that none of them had as yet become martyrs. He says this against the backdrop of Jesus, who shed His blood on the cross. The implication is that they may be facing that ultimate test shortly. But whether they literally died for their faith or not, the imagery is clear: the Christian life is an intense life or death struggle against powerful forces of evil that could result in martyrdom. The author personifies sin as our opponent. It opposes us in two ways:

A. Sometimes the enemy is the evil in the world, opposed to the people of God.

The author has just chronicled some of the terrible things that happened to God's Old Testament saints: mockings, scourgings, chains, imprisonment, being stoned, sawn in two, and put to death with the sword (11:35-37). All of these things happened because evil men hated those who lived and proclaimed God's righteousness. As John (3:20) explained, "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, for fear that his deeds will be exposed." If you live in obedience to God, your life reflects the light of Christ onto others' sinful lives. You will not be Mr. or Ms. Popular! Jesus plainly warned (John 15:19), "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you."

B. Sometimes the enemy is the evil in me, opposed to the holiness of God.

Paul explained (Gal. 5:17), "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposi-

tion to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." Peter exhorts us, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). Even though we become a new creation through faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), the powerful sinful desires of the flesh are not eradicated. The Hebrews were especially in danger of the sin of turning away from faith in Christ in the face of persecution. We all face that temptation, along with other sinful desires. But the point is, the Christian life is not a Sunday School picnic! It is an intense conflict with the forces of evil, both without and within.

- C. My responsibility is to resist and strive against any source of evil, even if it means shedding my blood.

Jesus plainly stated that the call to salvation is a call to lose your life: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). Remember, taking up your cross did not mean wearing a piece of jewelry. The man who took up his cross was on the way to execution. So Jesus was warning us up front that the call to follow Him was a call to engage in combat that at the very least meant putting to death our sinful flesh. It could also entail suffering even unto a martyr's death.

The idea of resisting and striving against sin to the point of shedding blood clearly refutes the teaching that "if you're striving, you're not trusting." This teaching says that any effort on your part is your flesh. Life in the Spirit is a matter of passively letting go and letting God. Obviously we must trust God and do battle in His strength, but at the same time it is *we* who must resist and strive (Titus 2:12). There is no room for laziness or passivity in the conflict. Israel had to trust God, but also they had to go into battle and fight against the enemy. So we must trust God but also resist and strive against sin. You can't strive passively!

- D. To endure the struggle against evil, put your trial in perspective.

The author is saying, "In light of those who were stoned, sawn in two, and put to death with the sword, along with the Lord Jesus, who was crucified, your situation could be much worse than

it is! It may come to shedding your blood, but at this point, you're not there. If you abandon faith in Christ under your present trials, what will you do when the blood starts flowing?"

There is a practical lesson for us in this. Unless you are being horribly tortured and are facing execution for your faith, you can always find those who have it much more difficult than you do. If they endured in worse circumstances, then you can endure in your circumstances.

E. The motivation for striving to the point of shedding blood is to consider the Savior who died for me.

The author has just said, "Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:3). Jesus did not deserve any suffering, much less death, in that He had no sin. By way of contrast, all of us deserve far more suffering than we actually receive, were God to repay us for every sin that we commit. So rather than complaining or shaking your fist at God for what you're suffering, consider Jesus, who suffered innocently on your behalf. Consider what you deserve, if God were to give you perfect justice. Endure by faith what God has allowed you to suffer, looking to Jesus.

Where do we gain the understanding that we need to endure God's loving discipline? The author goes on to show us that...

2. The Scriptures are given to us as God's children to enable us to endure the hardships of the struggle (12:5a).

The author continues, "and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons." Then he cites Proverbs 3:11-12, from the LXX. The text differs from the Hebrew, which translates the last phrase, "even as a father *corrects* the son in whom he delights." As I have explained before, the original Hebrew text did not have vowel points. Depending on which way you point the consonants, the verse can read "even as a father" or, "to cause sorrow to." The Greek translators of the Old Testament took it in the second way and used the word *scourging* (Georg Bertram, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel [Eerdmans], V:609). But the point here is that the author cites this Scripture and says that it is addressed directly to his readers as God's sons. Note:

- A. We cannot apply and live by Scripture unless we are God's children through the new birth.

The text is addressed to God's "sons" (or, "children"; the male gender is used because inheritance was passed on through sons; see 12:8). The Bible teaches that *none* are God's children by natural birth, but only by spiritual birth through faith in Christ (John 3:1-16). Paul wrote, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26). If you are not a child of God through faith in Christ, then you are not under God's loving discipline; you are under His wrath and judgment. So you must begin by believing in Christ as your Savior from God's judgment.

- B. We cannot apply and live by Scripture that we do not know or that we have forgotten.

Some versions translate the phrase as a rhetorical question, "Have you forgotten...?" But whether you have forgotten what Scripture teaches or never learned it in the first place, the result is the same: you will not apply it to your daily life. When trials hit, you will respond in accord with your background or personality, but you won't respond as the Bible tells you to respond.

- C. Scripture is God speaking to us as His children for our encouragement and correction.

He calls the verses from Proverbs an "exhortation." Sometimes, depending on the context, this same word is translated "encouragement." As Paul tells Timothy (2 Tim. 3:16-17), "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." "Reproof" is the noun form of the verb used in Hebrews 12:5. It means to convince of wrongdoing. Our author pulls this verse out of Proverbs 3 and says, "God addresses it *to you* as His sons." What Scripture says, God says personally to us! As you read the Bible, ask God to apply it to you personally in areas where you need reproof and correction, so that you will become adequate, equipped for every good work. Let's look at what these verses teach about God's discipline:

3. Scripture teaches that out of love, God disciplines all of His children (12:5b-6).

Note four things about God's discipline:

- A. To apply God's discipline properly, we must understand how it differs from His punishment.

God's punishment stems from His *wrath* against sin, whereas His discipline stems from His *love* for His children. Punishment is God acting as *Judge*; discipline is God acting as *Father*. The Greek word for *discipline* means *child-training*. Under punishment, the sinner pays for his sins. Under discipline, Christ paid for our sins. Punishment is God's demand for justice. Its aim is not to restore. Under discipline, justice is not in view, since Christ paid it. Rather, God intends to correct our faults and sins and to develop holiness in us.

Sometimes, God's discipline is directly related to a specific sin in His children. But at other times, it is not the consequence of a specific sin, but rather is to develop growth and maturity. While discipline does not necessarily remove the consequences of our sin—we still reap what we sow—God often tempers it with grace if we repent. If we do not repent, His discipline can be very severe (“scourging”), even to the point of physical death (1 Cor. 11:29-31). The sinning child of God may lose rewards, but he will not lose his salvation (1 Cor. 3:14-15).

- B. To apply God's discipline properly, we must not regard it lightly.

To regard God's discipline lightly means to shrug it off as fate or bad luck. It is to fail to see God's personal, providential care in *all* that happens to us, from the trivial to the significant. Nothing happens to us by chance. God controls every detail of our lives, down to the very hairs of our head being numbered. If a believer encounters a trial and responds with stoic fatalism, he is regarding God's discipline lightly. If he grits his teeth and endures it without seeing God's loving hand in it, he is regarding it lightly. If he does not take the trial to heart by prayerful self-examination, asking God to help him grow through it, he is regarding it lightly.

When the Sabeans and later the Chaldeans attacked Job's servants and murdered them and stole his flocks, Job didn't say, “Those wicked Sabeans and Chaldeans! I'll get them!” Lightning struck another group of his servants and flocks, killing all but one man. Job didn't say, “What bad luck!” When a tornado struck the

house where Job's ten children were, killing them all, Job didn't say, "That's the way it goes sometimes!" Rather, Job viewed the sinful actions of evil men and the impersonal forces of nature as coming from God Himself. Satan was the immediate cause, but Job said, "*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21; see also, 2:10).

I've found that when major trials hit, it's easier to see God's hand behind the events than when minor frustrations occur. So I'm more prone to regard lightly God's discipline in these many minor hassles that occur. For example, I'm late for an appointment and the traffic is worse than usual. Rather than seeing this as God lovingly giving me an opportunity to develop patience, I fume at the traffic jam. Or, I've got more to do than time to do it in, and I come down with a cold. Rather than seeing God's hand in this, I'm thinking, "Great! How am I going to get everything done?" It may be whiny kids or an insensitive comment from your mate. It may be car trouble or an irritating encounter with a pushy sales clerk. To grow in godliness, you must see *every* trial as God's loving discipline, specifically tailored to you as an opportunity to trust Him. Don't regard these trials lightly!

- C. To apply God's discipline properly, we must not faint when He improves us.

To faint under God's discipline is to grow weary of it and lose heart. To faint is to become depressed and hopeless, as if God has abandoned us. As the author goes on to show, our trials are actually *evidence that God loves us* and that we are His children. But the person who faints has lost sight of this. He is self-focused, absorbed with his trials to the extent that he can't see God's purpose and perspective. All that he can see is, in Jacob's words, "all these things are against me" (Gen. 42:36). But actually, God was working all these things *for* Jacob. Joseph's perspective when his brothers hated him and sold him into slavery was the godly view: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). Finally,

- D. To apply God's discipline properly, we must remember that He always treats with love, even when He must deal severely with us.

"For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines." You may ask, "Doesn't God love everyone?" The biblical answer is, "Not in the same way." To use an analogy, I love kids. I think that kids are wonderful. But the plain fact is, I love *my kids* more than I love other kids. God loves *His children* in a special way. One way that He manifests that love is to discipline us.

When my kids were younger, if we were at the mall and I saw someone else's kids misbehaving, I didn't discipline those kids. But if my kids misbehaved (which they did on *rare* occasions!), I disciplined them because I love them and I wanted them to learn to submit to proper authority. Sometimes I blew it because I disciplined my kids out of my irritation or anger. But God never makes a mistake as our heavenly Father. He *always* disciplines us in love, "for our good, so that we may share His holiness" (12:9).

Some of you had abusive fathers. You will have to work harder at trusting God's love when He disciplines you. Sometimes, as the word *scourging* indicates, His discipline can be very severe. But notice whom He scourges: "every son whom He receives." The Greek word for *receives* means to welcome or receive favorably. He does not scourge *some* sons, but *every* son whom He receives. This includes godly sons who walk closely with Him, as well as irresponsible sons who are immature in their faith.

But here is where we must exercise faith. When God brings severe discipline into your life, the devil will whisper to you, "So that's how your loving God treats you, huh?" If he can get you to doubt God's love or His sovereignty over your situation, he has succeeded in driving you away from your loving heavenly Father. Someone wisely said, "Do not interpret God's love by your circumstances. Rather, interpret your circumstances by God's love."

Think of Joseph, enslaved in a foreign land because of his treacherous brothers, imprisoned because he did the right thing in resisting the advances of a married woman. He could have bitterly doubted God's love and care, especially during the two years when the cupbearer forgot to mention his situation to Pharaoh. But by faith Joseph clung to the love of God and to His sovereign goodness over every circumstance. Joseph's trust and submission to God through his trials is an example for us of how to respond to God's loving discipline.

Conclusion

Elisabeth Elliot lost her first husband, Jim Elliot, to Auca Indian spears. She lost her second husband, Addison Leitch, to cancer. In an address to the Urbana Missions Conference (December, 1976), she told of being in Wales and watching a shepherd and his dog. The dog would herd the sheep up a ramp and into a tank of antiseptic where they had to be bathed. The sheep struggled to climb out, but the dog would snarl and snap in their faces to force them back in. Just as they were about to come up out of the tank, the shepherd used a wooden implement to grab the rams by the horns, fling them back into the tank, and hold them under the antiseptic again for a few seconds.

Mrs. Elliot asked the shepherd's wife if the sheep understood what was happening. She replied, "They haven't got a clue." Mrs. Elliot then said, "I've had some experiences in my life that have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams—I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And He didn't give a hint of explanation." But, she pointed out, we still must trust our Shepherd and obey Him, knowing that He has our best interests at heart.

As we'll see in our next study (12:9), our response to God's loving discipline must be reverently to submit, trusting Him as our loving, sovereign heavenly Father. To endure the struggle against evil, we must understand what Scripture teaches about God's loving discipline. Then, whether the trial is major or minor, we must submit to Him in faith, viewing His discipline as a sign of His love.

Discussion Questions

1. Someone has gone through a horrible trial and now doubts God's love. How would you counsel them?
2. What are some specific ways that we regard lightly the discipline of the Lord?
3. How can a person who is despondent regain hope? See Psalms 42 & 43.
4. How can a believer know whether a trial is related to some sin or if it is just for the purpose of growth in grace?

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