

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD

(12:4–11)

Those to whom Hebrews was addressed had experienced many trials (10:32–34) and were on the verge of quitting. In the text for this lesson, the writer was trying to give them a more godly way of looking at their troubles. First, he noted that their problems were nothing compared to what Jesus had undergone (v. 4). Second, he quoted from the Old Testament (vv. 5, 6; see Job 5:17; Proverbs 3:11, 12) to remind them of an important principle: God disciplines those whom He loves. In this lesson, we will discuss the discipline of the Lord. This is not an easy subject, but it is one worth pursuing because of the insights it can give. We will examine the Scriptures to try to determine *what* the discipline of the Lord is, *why* God disciplines us, and *how* we should respond to God's discipline.

WHAT IS IT?

In 12:4–11, we see earthly fathers compared to the heavenly Father. In some ways, the discipline administered by earthly fathers is similar to that administered by God. In other ways, it is strikingly different.

Earthly Fathers

In both the Old and New Testaments, fathers are admonished to discipline their children (Proverbs 13:1; 19:18; Ephesians 6:4). The word translated "discipline" (παιδεία, *paideia*), a verb form of the word for "child" (παῖς, *pais*), means "to train children." It refers to training that is both "gracious and firm"¹—whatever is needed

¹W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 97.

to train a child to be what he should be.

Basically, there are two kinds of discipline: preventive and corrective. The purpose of preventive discipline is (as the term indicates) to prevent a child from doing wrong. It includes teaching and warning. It can include giving a child tasks to do and making sure that he completes them to the best of his ability. (I think of my father as he tried to help me grow up to be a man; he made sure I always had meaningful work to do and gave me increasingly difficult tasks as I became older and stronger.)

Corrective discipline is administered after a child has done wrong. It can include reproof, letting a child suffer the consequences of his actions, and punishment. (Yes, I also had my share of corrective discipline as I was growing up.)

The Heavenly Father

The discipline of the Lord includes both preventive and corrective elements. Jewish Christians would be aware of a striking example of this truth: the experiences of their forefathers in the wilderness. When the Israelites saw God's power at Mount Sinai, that was intended as preventive discipline (see Deuteronomy 4:36). The forty years in the wilderness served as corrective discipline (see Deuteronomy 8:2–5).² Both types of discipline were intended for the Israelites' good.

Much of God's preventive and corrective discipline comes through His Word (see Proverbs 6:23). God's inspired Word tells us what is right and what is wrong. It warns us of the consequences of doing wrong. In His Word, God assigns us responsibilities that can help us to grow

²Also note Deuteronomy 11:2, 5.

and mature. When we fail, the Word reproveth us. As a rule, we suffer the consequences when we fail to obey.

The specific discipline referred to here evidently involves difficulties the original readers were undergoing—troubles which made them “sorrowful” (v. 11). This would have included problems they had encountered since becoming Christians. It specifically included persecution (v. 4a). Someone might ask, “Are you saying that God sends persecution to discipline us?” No, but sometimes God *allows* us to experience hardship as part of our discipline.³ (I told you this was a difficult subject!)

I must add this thought: When something bad happens to us, there is much we cannot know. If it is not a natural consequence of our own actions, we cannot know whether God or Satan instigated it, or whether it is simply the result of living in a sin-damaged world. If God is involved in some way, we cannot be sure of His intentions (Isaiah 55:8, 9)—other than to know that He intends all things for our ultimate good.

Nevertheless, there are several truths we *can* know. We can know that whatever comes our way, God can make good come from it (Romans 8:28). We can know that with God’s help, we can get through it (Hebrews 13:5b, 6).⁴ The message for us is that we can know that God has allowed this in our lives because He *loves* us.

WHY DOES GOD DISCIPLINE US?

What is the purpose of discipline? Some have trouble dealing with the concept that God disciplines us because they believe that God’s role in their lives is to give them whatever they want. I have heard people try to justify their ungodly lives by saying, “But God wants me to be *happy!*”

Earthly Fathers

Most earthly fathers want their children to be happy—but good fathers want much more than that for their children. They want them to be good people, to grow up to be mature and responsible adults. Christian fathers want their

children to become faithful Christian men and women. A father who fails to discipline his children indicates that he does not care what they become. He may say that he loves them, but he does not love them as he should.

Verses 7 and 8 indicate that a first-century father would generally take the time to discipline a son, while he did not bother disciplining an illegitimate child. In that day, as a rule, only a legitimate child could be an heir, the one to whom the father would leave his estate. It was important to the father that his legitimate heir grow up to be an adult worthy of this trust.

The shortcomings of earthly fathers are mentioned in verse 10. Even the best father can only discipline as seems best to him. He may want only good for his children; but being human and fallible, he will make mistakes. (I tried to be a good father, but I am aware of many mistakes I made—and I am sure I made others of which I am still unaware.) Of course, in spite of his limitations, a conscientious father still does his best to bring his children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

The Heavenly Father

Let us turn our attention to the Father who does not have our weaknesses. Why does God discipline us? Verses 7 through 11 suggest at least three reasons.

(1) He disciplines us because we are His children (v. 7). If He did not discipline us, that would indicate we are not His children (v. 8).⁵ As His children, we are the objects of His divine love (v. 6; see Proverbs 3:12; Revelation 3:19). Some believe trials and tribulations indicate that God is displeased with us,⁶ that He may even hate us. The Hebrew Christians needed to understand that the opposite is true: The discipline of the Lord is an expression of His *love*.

(2) He disciplines us “for our good” (v. 10). He disciplines us to make us *stronger* people. Through discipline, we develop endurance (v. 7). Again, He disciplines us to make us *better* people: “so . . . we may share His holiness”

⁵Just having problems is not proof we are God’s children; but the Scriptures say that Christians will face tribulations and persecutions (Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12).

⁶Job’s “friends” thought this was the case as far as Job was concerned. They kept telling him to confess his sin and all would be well.

³God allowed Satan to test Job (Job 1; 2).

⁴We are not alone in the troubles we encounter, for God limits our trials to those we can endure. He will always make a way for us to bear them (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

(v. 10), so we may have “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11)

(3) He wants us to have life (v. 9b)—abundant spiritual life here and eternal life hereafter (see John 10:10b). “We are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world” (1 Corinthians 11:32). God’s primary purpose in our lives is not to make us happy, but to prepare us for heaven.⁷

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

How should we respond to the discipline of the Lord? Let me rephrase that question: What should be our response when we experience that which is unwanted, undesirable, or unpleasant?⁸

Earthly Fathers

How does a child respond to the discipline of a loving father? Verse 9a notes that most children *respect* fathers who care enough to discipline them.⁹ The Old Testament taught children to listen to their fathers, to heed their instruction, and to profit from their discipline (see Proverbs 13:1; 19:20). If they did so, later in life they could look back and see the benefit of the discipline received (Hebrews 12:11b).

The Heavenly Father

If we respect earthly fathers, how much more should we respect the discipline of our loving heavenly Father (v. 9)? The writer did not tell his readers they had to enjoy their trials (v. 11a),¹⁰ but he did urge them to have a good attitude. He outlined the proper response to discipline in verse 5:

Do not forget what the Bible teaches about the discipline of the Lord (v. 5a). When trials threaten to overwhelm us, do not lose sight of the truths in this passage:

⁷God does want us to be happy—He does not want His children to experience miserable lives—but this is secondary to His primary purpose of making us stronger and better, to prepare us for heaven.

⁸Remember: When bad things happen to us, there is much we cannot know about them. Therefore we must consider our response to unhappy situations in general.

⁹There are exceptions, of course.

¹⁰James wrote, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2), but he was emphasizing the ultimate benefits of trials (vv. 3, 4). Hebrews notes that *at the moment* trials are not happy occasions.

1. God loves you.
2. Discipline can be proof of sonship.
3. All that happens can make us better people.

“Do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD” (v. 5b). Take it seriously. See what you can learn from it.

Above all, *do not “faint* when you are reprovved by Him” (v. 5c). Do not let problems be an excuse for quitting, but motivation for keeping on. The purpose of the letter was to encourage Christians to “endure.”

When we are disciplined, we can be submissive or stubborn. We can be humble or haughty. We can be filled with reverence or resentment. Hebrews challenges us to “be subject to the Father of spirits, and live” (v. 9b) and to be “trained [exercised] by it” so we might have “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

In teaching a recent class on Hebrews, Doug Martindale said, “When you have problems, do not throw up your hands and say, ‘Why did this happen to me?’ Rather, ask, ‘How can this make me a better person?’” He then said, “Whatever happens to me, I try to react in such a way that I come out stronger.”¹¹

NOTES FOR THE TEACHER

It was not the purpose of the writer of Hebrews to give a comprehensive discussion regarding trials that come into our lives. He said what he needed to say to establish that trouble was no reason to turn away from Christianity. If you want to do a more in-depth study on the subject of trials and temptations, consider Romans 5:3–5 and James 1:2–4. David Roper

¹¹Doug Martindale, class on Hebrews, Eastside church of Christ, Midwest City, Oklahoma, 2008.

SERMON NUGGET

THE SIN OF NEGLECT (2:1–4)

As Christians, we often sin not by deliberately disobeying the “thou shalt not’s” of the Word, but by neglecting to do what the Lord wants us to do. (A sermon on this topic could speak of specific things which Christians and non-Christians neglect to do.) Coy Roper