

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 16

"Loving Discipline: The Insignia of Legitimacy"

(Hebrews 12:4-11)

Take some time to read slowly through Hebrews 12:4-11 a few times.

A PASSAGE TO PONDER*

"Have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says,

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child."

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their parents? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are not legitimate children at all . . . Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:5-8, 10).

* Notice the passage includes a quote from Proverbs 3:11-12.

AN OVERVIEW

Hardship: A Temptation to Lose Heart

Each of us has experienced hardship to one degree or another. Some have experienced very traumatic events where the suffering was acute. They feel their lives have been significantly shaped, either for good or ill, by suffering. Others may feel that they have not experienced really severe hardships like those in the lives of people they know, or those faced by people in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, each of us has most likely faced a significant season of suffering or

will face one in the future. Our circumstances appear to conspire against us at times and place us under duress. The pressure may come from our work, our relationships, the economy and our finances, an enduring health problem, a sense of distance in our walk with the Lord, or an experience of rejection or outright persecution for our faith. Sometimes we seem to get it from all sides!

It is at times like these we can begin to wonder whether God is still with us. Has He forgotten us? In times of trial, the words of Psalm 13, a Psalm of David (who faced his share of hardship), can become the cry of our own hearts to God:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts,
 And every day have sorrow in my heart?
 How long will my enemy triumph over me?"
 (Psalm 13:1-2)

So where is God in our suffering? Has He forgotten us? It seems that the original hearers of this letter were wondering the same thing. The Hebrew Christians had faced significant hardship in the early days of their faith, when they maintained their faith in Christ, standing their ground, "in a great contest in the face of suffering" (Heb. 10:32). Sometimes they were persecuted directly for their faith in Jesus. At other times they supported those who were so treated and suffered for it. At that time, though they surely struggled, overall it seems they responded to their hardship with strong faith, even joy (Heb. 10:33-34).

Now they are undergoing a season of trial again, but are battling to understand where God is in it all. Just prior to our passage, the author has been exhorting them to fix their eyes on Jesus and remember his sufferings "so that they will not grow weary or lose heart" (Heb. 12:3). Soon after he quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, which includes the words, "do not make light of the Lord's discipline, *and do not lose heart when he rebukes you*" (italics added). They are struggling against sin (12:4), here referring to the sin of those who are oppressing them (Cf. 12:3). Though they have not yet suffered martyrdom (12:3), they are still facing the temptation to lose heart, to doubt their faith in Jesus.

When we face significant suffering in our lives, a question is often forced to the fore: What is God's character? We believe He is able to control our circumstance and direct it as He wills, so why would He allow us to know pain if He loves us? Is He unable to stop this? If He is able, but is deciding not to, can I still believe He cares for me? At all times, but especially in times of hardship, we need

to have the eyes of our hearts opened to see who God is so we can take heart. This is where the passage moves from here, onto an encouraging word about God.

A Word of Encouragement

The Hebrews have forgotten something that we too are prone to forget. They have "forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses [them] as children" of God in Proverbs 3:11-12. The author quotes this passage from the Greek translation of the OT almost verbatim. Its message is simple: that "the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child." Therefore, we should not make light of the meaning of our hardship or lose heart under it. There is no purposeless suffering in the lives of God's children. He allows suffering to come into our lives for as a means of His good work in our lives.

This changes everything. Instead of seeing our suffering as reason to doubt God's love for us, we are now freed to, "endure hardship as discipline," knowing that "God is treating [us] as his children" (12:7). Hardship does not mean that we have been abandoned by God. Quite the opposite! It means that we are dearly loved children. If we did not face the discipline of hardship, we would have reason to doubt whether our Father loved us. The author's discussion of human parenting helps us to grasp this truth, which may be a little hard to accept at first!

A Parallel Between God's Parenting And Ours

He reasons as follows (12:7-9): We know that children are disciplined by their parents. As a matter of fact, if a child is not disciplined by their parents, it shows that they are not cared for and not true children (they are "illegitimate", v. 8). Those of us who have been disciplined by our human parents respect them for it. So how much more should we submit to God, "the Father of our spirits," when He brings loving discipline into our lives? When our children are in need of correction, we would be unloving to spare them the minimal short term pain of loving discipline, and instead allow them to suffer the more devastating long term pain of going permanently off course or not being challenged to grow. It is amazing how children get angry when their parents do not set boundaries for them. They instinctively know that this is a sign of being unloved. How much more then should we expect God to allow circumstances to come into our lives, that are not good in and of themselves, but which serve His redemptive purpose in our lives? If He did not chasten and guide, we would have reason to doubt His love. But when we do experience suffering, we can know that He is sovereignly employing it to our growth and are freed to stand up under it and seek to understand what He is teaching us. His purposes are not only good, they are far better than we know.

Hardship for Holiness

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We learn the heart of God's purpose in the hardship of His children: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (12:10). We know it is painful, but we can also be assured that it, "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained for it" (12:11). The Lord does not delight in the suffering we face for its own sake (Cf. Lam. 3:33), but He employs it to an end that pleases Him indeed, our growth in the likeness of His Son. The fact that a Christian is suffering does not mean that God is punishing them for some secret sin in their lives. Hebrews tells us that Christ himself, "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8), and yet was without sin (Heb. 4:15). But we can be sure that when we suffer as God's children, He is doing a good work in us. That brings us hope to endure and continue looking to and trusting Him.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOUR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever undergone a time of suffering in your life that you can see in hindsight God really used to help you grow for the better? Would you like to share it with the group?
2. Read Psalm 13. Notice how David cries out to the Lord in desperation, wondering how long his trial will endure, but then affirms his trust in the unfailing love of God at the end of the Psalm. How do you think this informs how we care for those who are suffering? Do we simply tell them to pull up their boot straps? Or is there room for crying out in pain to God?
3. How does the passage inform how we are to raise our children? How is this similar or different to popular ideas of parenting in our culture today?
4. Do you have a story to share of when you were disciplined by your parents as a child and you can see now how it was for the better? What was your experience of it at the time? How do you view it now?
5. How do you think hardship serves to lead us on to greater holiness? What effect does it have on us that leads to our growth (Cf. Rom. 5:3-5)?
6. Is there a situation of suffering in your life now that you would like prayer for? Do you believe the message of this passage can at one and the same time, honour the pain you are feeling as significant while also giving hope?