

Responding Obediently to the Father's Discipline

By Jay Wegter

What do you do when God ‘catches you in His net’? You know what a cargo net is for your vehicle—it confines things in a space so that they can’t move around at will. What a perfect illustration that is of what God does from time to time in the lives of His children. During seasons of trial and affliction, both Job and David used that imagery of *being caught in God’s net* (Job 19:6; Ps 66:10-11). In those periods of distressing trials, the Lord ordains circumstances in your life that appear to contradict His promises and care in your hour of need. It is as if He has placed your natural strengths in the crosshairs of His rifle of providence. You feel squeezed, even ignored, as if God has left you to twist in the wind. You may feel abandoned—a victim of your circumstances. Or like a sailor seeking to guide his little craft to port who finds that the wind and the tide oppose his progress.

In our longing to understand our situation, if we merely discern the surface of things, it may appear that God is against us. But that is the nature of affliction; He has placed you in His net and you cannot extract yourself. Your ability to control things has evaporated. Your natural areas of strength and cleverness are thwarted and can’t be relied upon for a solution. What do you do then? Do you instinctively devise ways to escape the net? Figuratively speaking, do you look for a utility knife to cut your way out? Do you muster the strength to flee from your Heavenly Father’s ‘classroom’?

God’s ways are not our ways. In His love for His people and His interest in their sanctification, He sends situations which make us feel confined, unable to deliver ourselves. And if we give in to murmuring, impetuosity, and defiance, we find the tightness of the net to be even more constricting. The more we struggle by cursing our circumstances, and by yielding to doubt and suspicion, the more uncomfortable the net becomes.

Here is the problem regarding one’s instinctive response when under trial, the doubting saint blames his suffering and affliction upon his boss, his acquaintances, the devil—but does not attribute the providence in his life to the hand of God! No wonder the believer is not thinking in terms of how to respond obediently under God’s discipline. For the troubled saint has not honored his God by acknowledging that all his times and ways are in the hand of God Almighty who is the God of providence (Ps 31:15; 119:168).

How desperately God’s perspective is needed. For, the Christian has a race to run; a course to complete as a faithful witness. A trusting obedient response to God’s discipline is required to please the Lord and run the race with endurance. Our text, **Hebrews 12:1-17** identifies the potential pitfalls which accompany the suffering associated with the Father’s discipline, as well as the responses the Lord requires of us. As a growing believer no doubt you have discovered amidst your trials and

afflictions that the faith-based obedience which Scripture calls for is the exact opposite of our natural tendencies. Consequently, it is this present author's opinion that every genuine Christian ought to frequently visit and meditate upon Hebrews chapter twelve in order to present to God a heart of trust and obedience.

I. Christ is our example of running a triumphant race (vv. 1-3).

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Heb 12:1-3).

This cloud of witnesses who has gone before us testifies to the fact that God is faithful, and that the faith He grants will carry each believer safely through all his sufferings. This race is not a sprint, but a long-distance race of obedience 'in the same direction'. To run this race effectively, you must take up your cross and deny yourself. Unmortified sin seeks to slow your pace, to push you off course, even to block your path to the finish line. Endurance is required—but stamina is the opposite of how you will feel sometimes. Under the disciplining hand of your Heavenly Father, you'll be tempted to slacken your pace, to retire for a while, and even to comfort yourself in the cesspool of the world's carnal pleasures.

But, looking unto Jesus and considering Him is the true source of courage, resolve, patience, and perseverance (v. 2). Looking unto Jesus is the opposite of self-pity amidst your afflictions. Christ is both Savior and example—He must be first your Redeemer before He can be your example. In other words, you must know Him as personal Savior who is your righteousness, and who has purchased your pardon by His blood—then we can answer His call as a Christ-learner.

Our Lord is the supreme example of triumph in the face of maximum opposition. He always kept His eye on the prize—namely the glory of God in His exaltation, the salvation of His people, and the majesty of His position at the right hand of the Father as our great interceding High Priest.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are, yet* without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

The temptations during our difficulties are real—they can show up as weariness in following the Lord and losing heart. That sinking spirit is often manifested by no longer diligently mortifying temptation and sin. But as our text states, we are to fill our minds with the victory Christ has won (vv. 2-3)—you’re going to run in the direction upon which your mind and heart are focused. Consider what Christ endured on our behalf—the bitterness and cruelty of His enemies who took pleasure in contradicting Him. The spiritual duty of looking unto Jesus shores up our faith against losing heart, against quitting, and against collapse.

II. Through chastisement, the Father trains His children to run the race with endurance (vv. 4-11).

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb 12:4-11).

Scripture sets forth eternal truths around which our lives must be shaped. We navigate by the stars even though we won’t reach them in this life. So also, we navigate by the ideals of Scripture even though we won’t fully reach them until glory. Thankfully the Word of God is utterly realistic in describing the ordeal involved in running the race. For it is plainly evident that believers have a contest with sin in themselves. Fleshly lusts wage war against the soul (1 Pet 2:11). The inclination of sin is toward doubt and distrust, especially when circumstances are dark and appear to be against us. The failure of the Israelites in the wilderness is example enough of how disastrous it is to walk by sight, and not by faith (1Cor 10:1-13; 2 Cor 5:6-10; Heb 3:7-4:3).

If the believer under testing lapses in his diligence, and in his watchfulness against sin it can affect his meditation on Scripture, causing him to hear God’s voice in the Word less and less. The child of God must be careful not to despise or

reject the Father's discipline. The Father's chastisements are marks of His love for His children. His chastening is the effect of His love, and not His penalty for sin. This work of discipline is corrective and instructive, not punitive. He disciplines us to take away sin and to increase grace and holiness. I think of the severe trials that Job, Abraham, Jacob, and David experienced. They reached periods of utter discouragement, but not unbelief. The preciousness of their faith will be displayed for all eternity as more precious than gold which is perishable (1 Pet 1:6-7).

It is the duty of earthly fathers to discipline us (v. 9). But their discipline was often inconsistent, they could be too strict, or too indulgent. At times their discipline was merely according to their mood. But God Almighty's discipline is coming from His perfect love and wisdom. His discipline will accomplish a glorious end and goal, namely that His people will share in His holiness (v. 10). It is Puritan John Owen who said of this infinite blessing, "To share in His holiness is the greatest imaginable privilege, only matched by Christ's righteousness being ours by imputation."

Believers are to diligently keep their souls in faith and patience during suffering, trial, and affliction; not allowing weariness and despondency to drag them into a state of discouragement (fainting). A full resignation (reverential submission) to God's will during testing has the effect of causing such persons to 'live' (v. 9). By 'live' meaning increase in spiritual vigor unto eternal life. This is the peaceful fruit of righteousness (v. 11)—descriptive of the person whose trials have been softened by trust, and who's sufferings have promoted God's aim in them of patience, submission, heavenly-mindedness, and mortification of sin.

III. Exhortation to obedience in running the race (vv. 12-17).

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears (Heb 12:12-17).

Are you running the race with endurance, laying aside every sin, and looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of faith? Are you respecting your Heavenly Father's discipline? If so, then you are to assist your brothers and sisters in their race. For many are lagging, stumbling, hesitating, and sorely tempted to drop

out. We are required to look around in the Body of Christ to search for feeble knees, heartless brethren, slothful saints who are ‘fainting’ in running the race. Many possess a low level of hope and are despondent. We are to lift them up, exhort, comfort, encourage them, admonish them, pray with them. Model before them what straight paths look like amidst suffering. Entire ministries are needed to rescue the backslidden and recover wandering believers (vv. 12-13).

‘Healed’ in verse 13 means dealing with the lameness—the causes of lameness. Like a spiritual paramedic who has brought a patient to the E.R., the caring believer ought to come alongside his brother—engaging him in biblical self-confrontation. In other words, assisting him in self-diagnosis by means of the Word of God—helping him identify the blockages to his sanctification. We are to diligently watch over one another for their edification (Heb 3:13). This means exercising the kind of soul care that is willing to admonish (Rom 15:14).

Holiness is how we come to blessedness. It can be no other way, for God’s righteous character is the law of the universe (v. 14). “For they (our earthly fathers) disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness” (Heb 12:10). Holiness is not only preparation for blessedness and happiness, holiness is preparation for the sight of God—an experience reserved for the pure in heart (Mt 5:8). Those who are unholy in life and practice will be excluded from heaven. For ‘grace’ is salvation not only from the penalty of sin, but also from the rule of sin in the life (see Eph 5:1-4; Phil 3:18 19; Rev 21:8).

Times of trial and discipline are remarkably instructive but are also periods of greater risk. For unique temptations tend to accompany seasons of affliction. And there are sinful responses to testing which are harmful to the Christian’s walk. We live in an age of sexual permissiveness and moral revolution—sexual sin is treated as the normal, entitled, casual pursuit of happiness. During testing, believers will have to mortify sin with greater vigilance. Here is the reason why—during suffering, the experience of discomfort can distract from a careful watch upon the *eye gate*, the *ear gate*, and the *mind gate*.

Sloth, negligence, unbelief, and sinful habits of mind are never static, they grow covertly like a root that eventually emerges as a plant ready to reproduce itself. And such is the imagery of a root of bitterness that defiles many (v. 15). Churches must not tolerate attendees who are living in sexual sin or in a pattern of wrangling over words and sowing discord—Scripture describes them as despising and profaning sacred things (vv. 15-17). They can be restored, but what a common folly it is—men would like to have the blessing of mercy and glory (heaven), but like Esau, they reject the use of means—namely faith, repentance, and obedience.

CONCLUSION:

The discipline God sends upon His beloved children makes them choose.

It makes believers shed their double-mindedness and declare their true, functional treasure. There is no greater treasure than sharing His holiness (v.10). And if that is your actual treasure, then you will respect your Heavenly Father's discipline. For the outcome of His discipline is conformity to Christ (Rom 5:3-5; 8:28-30). As Paul states in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, "It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." If you could experience every legal pleasure in God's creation, from marital bliss, to colorful tropical isles, to joyful laughter with friends, to fellowship over sumptuous food, all of that would pale into insignificance compared to beholding the glory of the Lord while sharing His holiness.

Finally, let us examine ourselves—what are you designating as the Father's discipline in your life? Do you regard the things which rub you the wrong way to be the Father's child training? Does your definition of His discipline include your weakness, your losses, crosses—how about delays, disappointments, frustrations, misunderstandings, disillusionments, illnesses; do all of these qualify? We are to submit to the Father of spirits and live. His providence rules over all. In His all-wise hands He is able to make even the most puzzling and aggravating events of providence redound to your sanctification (Rom 8:28ff.).

My friends, so many of your brethren are quietly hurting, suffering in silence; they need your encouragement. There is a corporate responsibility that accompanies our obedient response to the Father's all-wise parenting. You are to draw near to your brethren in close friendships, and in hospitality. Keep a look out for those in the race who have shown that their hands are weak and their knees feeble (vv. 12-13). Exhort them to stick with Christ (Heb 3:12-15). Your Savior is calling you to build them up, console them with gospel promises (Jude 1:20-25). Help them identify patterns of unbelief and compromise so that they may return to a place of running the race after the pattern of their triumphant Savior.