

“OUR HOPE: JESUS ENDORSES DISCIPLINE”

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Hebrews 12:3-29

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; ⁵and 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 reprov- ed by Him; ⁶for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.

⁷It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, 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? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.

¹¹All 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. ¹²Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

¹⁵See 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; ¹⁶that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For 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.

¹⁸For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which

sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them.

²⁰*For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.”* ²¹*And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”*

²²*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,* ²³*to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,* ²⁴*and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*

²⁵*See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.* ²⁶*And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.”* ²⁷*And this expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.*

²⁸*Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;* ²⁹*for our God is a consuming fire.*

It was Christmas. The toy department in the big city store was clogged with parents and kids. One little boy was creating a problem for everyone, particularly his mother. He would climb on a trike or wagon and charge down the aisle, bumping into other people. His mother, who had completely lost control of him, trotted alongside saying, “Now, darling, don’t do that. Come along now. It’s time for us to leave.” The youngster paid no heed.

The department head became sufficiently frustrated, went over and said, “Madam, it appears you are having a bit of trouble with your boy. We have a child psychologist on our staff. Would you mind if I invited him to come over and offer some help?” The harried woman replied, “Anything, sir, anything!” The child psychologist was called. “I want my boy to go home, but he won’t leave,” the mother explained. The man thought a moment, then said, “I believe I can help.” He

approached the boy, who was about to get into a kiddie car, leaned over and whispered something in the youngster's ear. The kid looked startled, ran to his mother, grabbed her hand and said, “Come on, Mom, let's go.” In amazement she said, “Stay right here for a moment. I've got to talk to that man.” “Sir,” she asked, “what on earth did you say to my boy? I've been trying to get him to leave for an hour. I've begged, cajoled, bribed, without success. You come down, whisper a few words in his ear, and he's ready to leave. What on earth did you say to him?” “Why, Madam, it's very simple,” the child psychologist explained, “I just leaned over and said, ‘Listen here, you little brat, if you don't get out of here, I'm going to set your britches on fire!’”

This homey anecdote illustrates a grave truth about our time. In our eagerness for freedom and spontaneity, we have forgotten that discipline is indispensable to proper development. We are suffering from an anemic, saccharin-pale concept of love, when, in fact, love is anything but an easy sentiment.

At the core of tough love is the awareness that there is no strength of character or achievement without discipline. Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without struggle, pain and sacrifice. Everything we have of value is cradled in a discipline that hurts. And, despite our sophistication, we never seem to outgrow the need for such discipline. As someone wisely observed, “Every man is as lazy as he dares to be.”

Tough love is hard for most of us. We're too insecure. Too immature. We want and need to be loved too much. Fortunately for us, God is neither insecure nor immature. Among many things, He is security with a capital “S.” Maturity with a capital “M.” While He wants our love and has gone to great lengths to gain it, look at Calvary, God is unwilling to pay too great a price for our love. Whenever necessary, whether we like it or not, He chastens us.

C. S. Lewis spoke with keen insight when he said, “God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain. It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹

Now, it's important to distinguish between tough love and the wrath of God. Whenever anyone meets Christ at Calvary, God's wrath toward that person, because of his sin, is dealt with once for all. No Christian shall ever be subjected to the wrath of God. But the disciplines of the heavenly Father toward us saved sinners are for purification, not condemnation.

The word “chasten” springs from two French words. “Castus,” meaning “pure,” and “agere,” meaning “to drive.” To chasten someone is to be driven by a desire to make that person pure. It is this driving concern which causes God to chasten us, His children.

Those New Testament references to severe and sudden acts of God in dealing with His children are not outbursts of His wrath. They are indications of His righteous indignation expressed in tough love. God cares deeply for the spiritual health and growth of His children. He will not stand idly by while we remain weak and ineffective when, through discipline, He can make us pure and strong.

The New Testament speaks of two forms of discipline: gentle discipline and severe discipline. The gentle way is that purging which follows a confession of sins. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us [make us pure] from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). The severe way is through physical weakness and, in extreme cases, premature death. *“For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep (have died)”* (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The scripture is also clear that we need never be subjected to this second or severe way if we will hasten to employ the first or gentle way. If we face up to the fact of our sin, call it by its right name, confess and turn away from it, God will forgive us and impart to us the purity of Christ. That's tender love. It is spoken of in the first two verses of Hebrews 12 where, with great empathy for our struggle, we are told to lay aside every weight. To run with patience and endurance. To resist the ever-present temptation to quit before the race is over. And, to do so by

faith in the bare word of God and the character of Christ who has run the race before us.

But, if we won't respond to tender love by voluntarily laying aside those things which encumber us, God loves us enough to exercise the tougher fiber of His love. God dares to discipline, and He does so just because He loves.

Tough Love

As our author will explain, training through discipline is never fun (12:11). There's a strong temptation to feel sorry for one's self. To develop a “Why me?” attitude. To wallow around in the slough of self-pity. So, he begins his discussion of tough love with this admonition: *“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart”* (12:3).

The best antidote for self-pity is to remember Jesus and what He went through. This will help you keep things in perspective. However heavy a burden you're having to bear, it is not nearly so sharp or serious as that which our Savior bore. *“He came to His own [home] and those who were His own did not receive Him”* (John 1:11). *“Though innocent, He was numbered with the transgressors”* (Isaiah 53:12). *“He endured the cross, despising the shame”* (12:2), and sought no relief.

On the other hand, we who elect to follow Him often want instant answers to all our problems. We look for swift, easy escape from all tension, trial and tears. We want the power of His resurrection without the fellowship of His suffering. But that isn't possible. The Christian life was never meant to be a picnic. It's bound to be rough. It was rough for Jesus. It will be rough for you. *“The disciple is not above his Teacher”* (Matthew 10:24).

After all, the writer of Hebrews declares, the very fact God bothers to discipline you is evidence of His love. *“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 reprov- ed 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” (12:5-8).

But this stirring statement is not God’s final word on pain or suffering. As Charles R. Erdman says, “We must not conclude that God is the author of evil, nor that pain is always punishment, that suffering is a proof of sin.”² To do so would be to reach very cruel and quite erroneous conclusions. Christ suffered and He was without sin. I suspect we should have to be God to get all the right answers regarding suffering. One thing is clear, however; God does not ordain everything He allows. But, if we will let Him, He will use what He allows to fulfill what He ordains.

God ordained that I should be a minister of the gospel. God did not ordain that my mother should die of cancer at the age of 56. However, God has used what He allowed, her premature death, to fulfill what He ordained: that I might be a more effective, caring, compassionate pastor. As a result of having witnessed the long, difficult death of my mother, I have been able to enter with great empathy into the agony and pain of those who lose their loved ones. God does not ordain everything He allows. But, if we will let Him, He will use what He allows to fulfill what He ordains.

All suffering is not a result or a proof of sin. But all suffering can be used by God for our profit if we take the right attitude toward it. God wants to operate through our personal situations and circumstances to train us for more effective service. He does so because we belong to Him. Hebrews 12:5-8 and other passages (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28) should reassure and fortify us. They indicate that disciplines of one sort or another are evidence of our sonship. We belong to God. He cares what happens to us.

To put it another way, discipline is the opposite of indifference. It is a mark of true caring. A

precocious six-year-old grasped that truth. She and her sister were staying with us some years ago following the separation of her parents. To help them feel a part of our family, they were encouraged to call me Uncle John.

One day their mother explained the six-year-old was quite distressed because I hadn't given her any spankings. Actually, there had been no need to discipline her because she had been a model child. But she was anxious nonetheless and conveyed this to her mother, who passed it on to me. “Do you suppose Uncle John will spank me once in awhile, Mommy, just so I'll know he really cares?”

Love does not make discipline unnecessary. To the contrary, love and discipline are Siamese twins. If you are left without discipline, the writer of Hebrews says, you should really be concerned. A Christian's greatest problem is having no problem!

The other day I stopped by a business office in our town and ran into a young man whom I hadn't seen for months. I told him I'd missed him and asked how it was between him and God. “Not good,” he said. “But, oddly enough, it doesn't bother me. I've come to a kind of peace about it all.” As he spoke, a chill went down my spine. We are to be pitied most when we can sin and feel comfortable about it. It either means God has given up on us, or we were never His in the first place.

God doesn't discipline the devil's kids. He chastens His own. Discipline is God's method of training us for more effective service. Of preparing us for more strenuous tests to come. Of proving His love. When we see this, we will not only thank Him, we will worship Him with “*reverence and awe*” (12:28). Discipline implies love on the part of the discipliner (12:6). Don't rebel against it. Or drop out under it. Accept it. Grow strong through it. God only chastens His own.

Our author also explains there is nothing cruel or capricious about God's discipline. Human

parents sometimes goof in raising their kids. They do what they think is right and it turns out to be wrong. *“They disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them”*(12:10a). On occasion they err in both method and purpose.

God never goofs, the writer of Hebrews says. He works in the right way for the right purpose. *“He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness”* (12: 10b). Though hard to endure, the end result makes God’s discipline worthwhile. *“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”* (12:11).

T.H. Robinson is correct in his observation that “no healthy person enjoys pain. It wouldn’t be pain if he did. But a person may be induced to tolerate it, even welcome it, if he knows it will result to his advantage.”³

For most of us, regular physical exercise is a bummer. It’s boring and difficult. We hate it, though we persist in it, because it feels so good when we’re done! The real reward comes, however, when those toughened muscles, lungs and heart are called upon to meet a sudden crisis and are equal to the challenge. Then the pain and boredom of discipline give way to the joy and satisfaction of achievement.

To pursue the illustration a bit further, when you get involved in a program of calisthenics and begin to work out regularly, the old tired cells within your body break down, die, and are sloughed off. But, if you properly nourish your body, those old dead cells are replaced by new, vital, stronger. larger, living cells. There must be a breakdown of the old before the new can come. It is this end result which makes the exercise program worthwhile.

So, too, with the disciplines of God. They are never fun when we’re going through them. The good Lord doesn’t want you to screw on a smile and run around shouting “Hallelujah, it hurts.” But when, through discipline of one kind or another, you begin to enjoy the *“peaceful fruit of*

righteousness” (12:11), then, though you can never say, “Hallelujah, it hurts,” you can say, “Hallelujah, it helps!” You are able to join the Psalmist in his bold affirmation:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray,

But now I keep Thy word.

It is good for me that I was afflicted,

That I may learn Thy statutes.” (Psalm 119:67,71).

No discipline is enjoyable while it is occurring, but afterwards there is “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*.” I love that phrase. It is so true to life. Oh, there’s a kind of excitement and electricity about the early stages of the sinful life. But only for a season. Before long we literally become sick and tired of sinning. We are increasingly repelled and wearied by it all. As one young person said after he had experimented briefly with the drug scene, “It just wasn’t worth the hassle!”

That can never be said about “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*.” It is worth the discipline involved to be able to look in the mirror and like what you see. To pillow your head at night knowing you are right with God, yourself and others. Feeling clean clear through is experiencing “*the peace of God that passes understanding*” (Philippians 4:7, KJV). And, though sin is slow to relinquish its hold on us, every taste of “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*” awakens our desire for more, and strengthens our resolve to turn from sin toward God’s way.

Having discussed God’s willingness to resort to tough love when needed, our author returns to the firm but gentler appeal of tender love. “*Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble*” (12:12). Here he reverts to the language of the coliseum used earlier (12:1,2). We are to run with patience and perseverance, doing so for two reasons: one personal, the other corporate.

As we have already seen, some of those first-century Jesus folk had run out of gas. They were so low spiritually they had to reach up to touch bottom. They were discouraged. About to toss in

the towel. Their enthusiasm and interest was on the wane. Their commitment had grown thin. Those of more sturdy spiritual stock were instructed to hang tough for their own sake, to personally reach the goal, but also for the sake of their weaker, more weary fellows. We must do the same. “*Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble*” is a phrase to encourage flagging spirits. To deter potential dropouts.

But we are not only to run with patience and endurance. We must also lay aside every weight and be on guard against besetting sin. “*Make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint*” (12:13). Our calling is to persevere for our own sake and for the sake of others. We must walk carefully for the same dual purpose.

We are to be aware of our own peculiar areas of vulnerability and to shun those people, places and practices most likely to “*beset us.*” Following the hand-eye severance principle (Matthew 5:29, 30), we must deal forthrightly with that to which we are most susceptible. We are to go to the root of our problem. Cut it off. Dig it out. For our own sake and for the sake of others.

Our author’s reference to “*the limb which is (lame)*” (12:13) is another invitation to think Hebrew. He is drawing a word picture of those faltering between Jesus and Jesus-plus. Unless these limping Christians find spiritual healing they may soon be so disabled as to drop out of the race permanently, with serious loss of present blessing and future reward. “*See to it that no one comes short (fails)*” (12:15). With tough love, help each other to hang tough. “*Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no man will see the Lord*” (12:14).

Many have been bothered by this last statement, as stated in the Authorized Version: “*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*” But its true meaning becomes clear when we realize that the same word translated “*holiness*” here is translated “*sanctify*” elsewhere in the book of Hebrews. To be sanctified is “to be put to the proper use.” That becomes possible when, by faith, you acknowledge God was in Christ and Christ is in you.

As that marvelous truth settles in, you know who you are and what you are. Knowing those two things, you also know how you are to be used. You know your talent, training, time and treasure are not to be used exclusively, or even primarily, for your own personal profit, but for God’s purposes. When you know how you are to be used, your priorities begin to change. Your values clarify. Your witness takes on the sound of certainty. Your life bears the mark of eternity.

You are being to the world what Christ would be if He were here Himself. And that’s holiness! Holiness of the highest order. Of a most practical kind. The holiness which enables you to see God more clearly, but, better yet, enables others to see God more clearly in you!

In and through all this, our author holds before us the grim specter of lost blessing and reward. Look after each other so no one fails to enjoy God’s best blessings (12:15a). Support, help and, if necessary, correct each other to avoid the tragic cost of bitterness and flippancy (12: 15b).

Bitterness is always wrong. Always. Without exception. No matter how justified. Bitterness is a contagious disease which, in its more virulent forms, can be spiritually fatal. The same must be said for its viral twin, flippancy. It actually ruined Esau. This man who came to stand for things earthy and sensual looked upon his birthright with such flippant disdain that he sold it for a single meal (Genesis 25:28-34).

That birthright was very important. It had to do with God’s promise to Abraham and the blessing his seed had been blessed to be. Esau was part of Abraham’s seed. When he treated this promise of God lightly, he was saying, in effect, what God offers to do in, to, for and through us merits little more than a shrug. This flippancy deprived Esau forever from blessing on earth and reward in heaven. The reference to “*no immoral or godless person like Esau*” (12:16) is not to physical adultery, but to spiritual whoredom, the worshiping of other gods than Jehovah.

Later, Esau had some second thoughts. He tried to gain back the paternal blessing (Genesis 27:1-38), but it was impossible. “*He found no place for repentance*” (12:17). This does not mean

Esau was barred forever from the forgiveness of God. It simply means that there are certain choices which cannot be undone. Certain consequences even God cannot, will not, change.

William Barclay gives a simple, but pointed, illustration. If a boy loses his purity or a girl her virginity, nothing can ever bring it back. Nothing can change the physical fact. The choice was made. The consequence stands. God can and will forgive. And, in His eyes, moral innocence will be restored. But God Himself cannot turn back the clock, unmake the choice and undo the consequence. Something has happened which can never be undone.⁴

Esau “*found no place for repentance*” (12:17). Isaac, his father, could not restore the blessing taken from one son and given to another. The birthright was lost, “*though he sought for it with tears*” (12:17). But notice: Esau did not lose his sonship. That’s important. He lost his birthright. He forfeited the opportunity to receive a blessing and be a blessing through the proper exercise of that birthright. But Esau was still his father’s boy.

This passage does not teach a child of God can be saved and then lost. What it does solemnly warn against is the danger of repeating Esau’s mistake. Of taking a flippant attitude toward our spiritual birthright as Jesus persons. Of looking casually and carelessly upon God’s promise to bless us in order that we might be a blessing, thus suffering the subsequent loss of time, opportunity and reward which can never be retrieved.

Therefore, our author urges, use all the resources available in resisting the ever-present temptation to sell God and yourself short. Victory will come, he says, only when you make full and proper use of your Christian birthright. You have not been called to Mount Sinai, the place of gloom. “*You have come to Mount Zion*” (12:22a), the place of grace. “*And to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22b), that spiritual kingdom within each believer which Jesus characterized as the Kingdom of God.

“*And to myriads of angels*” (12:22c), those ministering spirits who, at God’s direction, are

everlastingly busy bringing aid and comfort to us as we run our race. Yes, angels are part of our spiritual inheritance. And “*to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven*” (12:23a), that amazing fellowship called the church. A fellowship which conquers the differences dividing us, the difficulties facing us, the despair assailing us.

Thank God, the church is part of our resource and birthright. “*And to God, the judge of all*” (12:23b), whose every godly asset and attribute is at the disposal of those who belong to Him. “*And to the spirits of righteous men made perfect*” (12:23c), another reference to that “*great cloud of witnesses*” who cheer us on and remind us it can be done because they did it.

“*And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant*” (12:24a), a new arrangement for living whereby everything God asks of us He gives to us in the person of Jesus. “*And to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel*” (12:24b). The blood of Abel cried out for vengeance and justly so (Genesis 4:10), but the blood of Jesus cries out for forgiveness and mercy (Luke 23:34).

All this is included in your spiritual birthright. It is yours, to help you run with patience, and resist the temptation to drop out. Reckon on all your resources. God is eager to aid if ask Him. A father watched his young son struggle to move a huge boulder which was in his way. The boy tugged and pulled, straining every muscle without success. Finally, the father walked over and said, “Son, why don’t you use all your resources?” In frustration the boy barked back, “Dad, how can you say that when I’m straining every muscle to budge this boulder? I am using all my resources!” “No, you aren’t,” his father replied quietly. “You haven’t asked me to help.”

Warning And Hope

The four final verses of chapter 12 contain a word of hope springing from tough love. The dominant note is one of assurance. The time will come when, through a single decisive act in history, God, who brought the material universe into being, will bring it to an end (12:26). But Jesus folk can rejoice and give thanks. We belong to a spiritual realm which cannot be shaken

(12:27,28). This is not to say Christians will escape the final shaking. But it is a promise we shall come through unscathed. We will survive. Why? Because, as we read in Romans 8:35-39, the one thing nothing can destroy is the relationship between ourselves and God.

Therefore, we should show our gratitude by our service offered with reverence and awe. “*For our God is a consuming fire*” (12:29). What a reason to rejoice! To give thanks and worship God with reverence and awe. We belong to a God who will resort to tough love when necessary. Who cares so deeply about us He cannot and will not stand idly by as we are made weak and ineffective by unpurged evil. So He subjects us to the refining fire.

Someone has wisely noted: fire will destroy what it cannot purify, and purify what it cannot destroy. The one thing which cannot be destroyed is the relationship between ourselves and God. Because our heavenly Father wants that relationship to be without spot and blemish, He submits it to the purifying fire of His love and light.

That fire is our hope! It means, my fellow sinner-saint, you will never come to God with an act of confession and repentance and turn away unforgiven. Nor will you turn away without having been made clean clear through by the consuming fire which purifies what it cannot destroy. God dares to discipline. He loves with a tough love. A love which insists upon destroying everything without and within which keeps us from being like Jesus, who one day will “*present (us) faultless (made pure by the consuming fire) before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy*” (Jude 1:24, KJV). Truly it begs to be said, hallelujah!

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1944), p. 81.
2. Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1934), p. 132.
3. Robinson, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 184.

4. Barclay, Letter to the Hebrews, p. 210.