

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. Over the past three weeks, we looked at the three main areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today. Three weeks ago, we looked at Judah’s injustice, their mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. Two weeks ago, we looked at their empty worship, their performative religion. And last week, we looked at their idolatry, specifically the ways they were trusting in other nations for their protection and security instead of putting their trust in God.

Today, I want to look at the Fatherly discipline of God towards His people. You could say that this is the overarching theme behind the whole prophetic genre in the Old Testament. God is a loving Father who disciplines His children towards holiness and maturity. And when His children are going in a direction that is bad for them or for others, He brings His loving, corrective discipline into their lives as a warning that they would be wise to reverse course. He did it with the Israelites in the Old Testament, He did it with the church in the New Testament, and He still does it today in our lives. So let’s take a look at what Isaiah, and the Bible, have to say about the Fatherly discipline of God.

One passage that sums it up well is:

Isaiah 48:8–10 - You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ears have not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth. ⁹ For my own name’s sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to destroy you completely. ¹⁰ See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

What do we see in this passage? God is angry at the stubbornness of His people, their unwillingness to listen and obey what would bring them life, their rebellion against Him and His good will for them. But He resists destroying them completely, instead testing and refining them in the furnace of affliction so that they might be purified, leaving their sin and stubbornness behind and returning to praise and obey Him.

In Isaiah's time, God called them out for the ways they were oppressing the poor, for their idolatry and lack of trust in Him, and for their performative, empty worship. He warned them again and again that if they persisted in their rebellion, He would bring His discipline upon them, specifically in the form of enemy nations.

Isaiah 10:5–6 - “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! ⁶I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets.”

In Isaiah's time, God used a pagan nation, Assyria, to punish the Israelites, so that they might recognize their sin and repent. But because they would not, God would ultimately send the Israelites into exile in Babylon, where they would be chastened, turn back to God, and eventually be restored to their land.

Now, not all suffering should be interpreted as God's discipline. If you were abused as a child, or mistreated at work, it is likely just the result of another person's sinful choice. And sometimes we suffer because of our own sinful or unwise choices. But there are times when it is right to see our suffering and the challenges or consequences we are experiencing as God's loving Fatherly discipline.

Because just as God used external means to discipline His rebellious children out of their injustice, empty worship, and idolatry, God still exercises His good, loving, Fatherly discipline in our lives today. One great passage about this is Hebrews 12, which follows the list of Old Testament people of faith in Hebrews 11:

Hebrews 12:1–12 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is

treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

Three things about the Fatherly discipline of God.

1) It will take discipline to follow God

In this passage, the Christian life is likened to a race:

Hebrews 12:1–3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In the first few verses, the author of Hebrews encourages us to throw off everything that hinders, especially any sin that entangles us, and to run with perseverance, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. And notice the words: hinders, entangles, perseverance, endured, opposition, weary, lose heart. These are words that evoke struggle and the need for perseverance and discipline. Following God is like a race, or any other goal, and it will take discipline to persevere and finish well.

Following God is not natural. It will not be easy. It's not something our flesh wants to do. If you're anything like me, there is an ongoing battle that rages between the part of you that desire to follow God, to be the best version of yourself, and the part of that wants to do your own thing and resists any and all accountability. Listen to how Paul put it:

Romans 7:15–25 - I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law

is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—**this I keep on doing**. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is **subject to death**? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Thank God that we are saved by the grace of God through Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and not by our own work. But now that we are saved, this race, this way of life, will demand discipline. Sin is natural. Holiness is not. You will need accountability. You will need to be confronted. You will need to be challenged. You will need to be held to a higher standard. There are disciplines or practices such as prayer, Bible reading, community, service, silence, service, Sabbath, fasting that are designed by God to move us towards Christlikeness.

It will take discipline to follow God. **Think about what happens in the gym as you train or work out.** You feel like you're getting weaker, but you're really getting stronger. In the same way, when you go through trials, you feel like you're getting weaker, but you're really getting stronger. Exercise stresses the body, and without that stress, you will be flabby and die young. Stress is necessary for us to grow. Marriage is a stress. Having children is a stress. Being in a church community is a stress. Taking positions of leadership is stress. Stepping out and taking risks induces stress. You do not realize how self-centered you are until you get married. You don't realize how much fear or pride you have until you get into a position of leadership. His discipline brings out the worst in you. Suffering and stress reveals the ugliest parts of you. Suffering humbles us, removes self-regard and pride, showing how fragile we are. If you are a believer, then you are in God's gym. He is training us in righteousness, killing our sinfulness and self-centeredness, replacing it with His holiness, training us to depend upon Him and live for Him.

1 Timothy 4:7–8 - Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

It will take discipline to follow God.

2) God's desire is our holiness, not worldly happiness

Hebrews 12:9-10 - Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews likens God's discipline to fatherly discipline. If my concern is the good of my child, there will be consequences. It's not payback, but disciplinary suffering. If my children are hurting each other, they will be punished, because I do not want them to grow up to be bullies and thugs, but to love and forgive each other and to use their words to settle disputes. If my child lies, I want to bring consequences into his life so that he does not become a liar and manipulator. You are a child. God will bring consequences into your life when you are living in ways that ultimately are detrimental to you and others. Do children typically understand discipline or think it is fair? No. In the same way, you are a child. You may say "I can not understand why God would allow this." You don't understand the good reason, but that doesn't mean there isn't one.

His goal is our holiness. Holiness is to be set apart, to be morally pure, to be like Jesus. God's desire is that we would be holy; His goal is not our worldly happiness. That means that if your goal is worldly happiness, then you will not like God. The world tells you happiness comes from having more money; God tells you it will come through generosity and being content with what you have. The world tells you happiness comes from fame and the adulation of others; God tells you it comes from pleasing Him and not entrusting your identity or self-worth to others. The world tells you happiness comes from living a life of comfort and ease; God tells you that happiness comes from using the gifts and resources He has given you to make an eternal difference in the lives of others and in His kingdom. If your goal is worldly happiness, you will be at odds with God. But if your goal is godliness, holiness, to be like Jesus, to be the person that God created you to be, then you will trust God, even when you don't love or like what He is doing, because you know it will result in true, lasting, eternal happiness.

As Tim Keller put it, "If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder.

But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy.”

If you are living for anything other than God, if your goal is anything else, suffering will be that much more painful, because it is stealing from you the purpose of your life. Your looks, your reputation, your success, your relationships, your health.

Hebrews 12:11 - No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

It produces a harvest of righteousness. To be rightly related to God. To know Him and enjoy Him and become the person He created you to be. God is after your lasting joy, not your worldly happiness.

Hebrews 12:5-6 - And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Notice that God’s discipline comes from a place of love, in the same way that a loving parent will discipline their children. And the goal, he says, is that we may share in his holiness. God’s goal for our lives is not our worldly happiness but our holiness, our maturity, just as the goal of a parent is not to always make their child happy but to make them mature. As Paul writes:

1 Thessalonians 4:3–7 - It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

It is God’s will that you should be sanctified – made holy. Consider this great passage of Paul’s:

Romans 8:28–29 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Notice what God's goal is as He works for our good - His goal is to conform us to the image of His son. Once again, it is not our worldly happiness, but our holiness, which will result in true happiness. Our church's vision is to be a church where people are being **transformed by the gospel of Christ into His likeness**, who in turn bring the gospel of Christ into our community and world, calling others to be transformed by the gospel of Christ. We believe that God's goal for our life is to conform us to the image of His Son. He wants us to be like Jesus. He wants us to have His perfect peace, His eternal joy, His perfect love for God and for others. He wants us to love the world so much that we would give ourselves to save people. That is God's goal. The goal is to become people who have a joy and peace untouched by the world, who know we are loved, and love others freely, who do what is right, who live out of faith and courage and not out of fear and anxiety. To spend our lives devoted to those things that really matter eternally. What if God's goal for your life is not your worldly happiness, but your holiness? How does that change things? Your view of marriage? Your job? Your relationships? And suffering?

God's desire is your holiness, your lasting joy, not your worldly happiness.

3) Trust that God loves you and submit to His Fatherly discipline

God is for your joy, your eternal happiness, but that means that he is not concerned about your temporary, worldly happiness. Like a perfect loving Father, He will bring corrective discipline into your life, but it is not to destroy you, but to restore you, to purify you, to bring you to repentance and trust in Him. Will you trust Him?

Job 5:17–18 - “Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. ¹⁸ For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal.”

Proverbs 3:11–12 - My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, ¹² because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

John 15:2 - He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Revelation 3:19 - Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.

Trust that He loves you. Evaluate the suffering in your life and see if it is not God's corrective discipline that has been brought into your life as a consequence of your sin or to deliver you from the evils of this world. And if it is, then trust that He loves you, repent of your sin and submit yourself to His loving Fatherly will for you.

CS Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*, famously said, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Suffering can be used by God to wake us up and to discipline us towards holy lives, if we will let him. What is God saying to you through your pain?

Elisabeth Elliot, a prominent Christian writer and speaker in the 20th century, tells of visiting friends of hers in northern Wales who owned a sheep farm. She shared about how the sheep are vulnerable to being eaten to death by insects and parasites, and so once every year, the shepherd has to take his sheep to a huge vat of antiseptic and completely submerge his sheep. The farmer, in order to save his sheep from death, has to actually hold his sheep underwater in the antiseptic until they have been disinfected. As Elliot put it:

One by one John seized the animals. They would struggle to climb out the side and Mack the sheep dog would snarl and snap at their faces to force them back under. When they tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, John the farmer would catch them, spin them around, force them under again, holding them ears, eyes and nose submerged for a few seconds.

And as their lord and master was pushing their head under, drowning them at least as far as they could tell, their panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. What is god doing?

Reflecting on that experience, Elliot continued:

I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep I didn't have a hint of an explanation.

Sometimes, God will allow suffering into our lives as discipline in order to save us from our sin, so that it does not kill us. It may be painful at the time, but it is for your good, for your holiness, for your lasting happiness, to make us people of greater patience and compassion, or deeper character. It may be to save you from your apathy, your self-centeredness, your anger, your jealousy, your laziness. It may be to deliver you from trusting in the things of this world that can not save you and will not give you what your heart is looking for.

So why should you trust Him? Especially if you have not had good earthly examples of loving Fatherly discipline?

Hebrews 12:2-4 - Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴ In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Our strength and motivation comes from seeing Him who suffered for us. Yes, he is an example of suffering in the face of opposition. But He also suffered for the joy set before him. What was the joy set before him referred to in verse 2? He already had everything. The only thing He did not have was you.

Romans 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 8:31-32 - What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

When you understand that love, you will grow in your trust and find in Him the motivation to run the race and submit yourself to His Fatherly love and discipline, because your heart's desire is becoming more and more to know Him and be like Him.

Not all suffering comes from God. But when we come to Christ, he begins the work of sanctification, disciplining the sin out of us and making us more like Christ. It will feel like you are getting weaker, but you are actually getting stronger. So strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees and keep running.