

A Father's Discipline
Hebrews 12:4–11
June 16, 2024

I scheduled most of Hebrews *last* summer. And when I did, I knew a few things would line up in particular ways. For example, when the phrase from Hebrews 5:7—“in the days of His flesh” — lined up with dates in December, I knew that would be an apropos emphasis that time of year. Or when the focus on Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews 9 and His exaltation in Hebrews 10 lined up with Good Friday and the Easter season, I knew that would be timely as well.

I didn't force any of that. But when I divided up the texts and it lined up like it did, I didn't miss the connection. However, when I put together the preaching sections a year ago, I did *not* notice that we'd be considering *this* particular passage on the discipline of a father on *this* particular day. But I'm glad we are. Why? I trust this sermon will explain.

But, first, in contrast to the *many* unfavorable depictions of fatherhood—or even manhood—in the broader culture, let me point us to a healthy picture of a father. It's in a book I've mentioned before, Marilyn Roberson's *Gilead*. The book is written from the perspective of an aging father, one who had children later than he'd hoped. In fact, it was quite late in his life. So, believing he's going to die before his 7-year-old son can hear—or even understand—everything he wants him to know, the father writes his son a long, quasi stream-of-consciousness letter.

That's the book. And it captures the father and child relationship masterfully. At one point, that father writes his son, “I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me.”¹ Children need fathers to communicate those kinds of things. However, it's not *only* affection he communicates, he also gives something else children need: counsel based on perspective. As an example, the father writes, “Adulthood is a wonderful thing, and brief. You must be sure to enjoy it while it lasts.”² That's a perspective no 7-year-old I've ever known has. Elsewhere—with a similar *learned* perspective—he tells his son about suffering, writing, among other things, “Strange are the uses of adversity.”³ He points his son to purpose, even in the midst of difficulty. Finally, it's not just “this moment” counsel that father gives. Assuming his son will read this long letter after he's breathed his last, he writes of hope, “While you read this, I am imperishable, somehow more alive than I've ever been.”⁴

Yet the main reason I'm mentioning all this today is a quote that captures an important aspect of our passage in Hebrews 12. That father not only tells his son about purpose in suffering, he also tells him about the effects of it, “The worst eventualities can have great value as experience. And often enough, when we think we are protecting ourselves, we are struggling against our rescuer.” He has the gall to claim that the challenges we face do something *beyond* causing us to lose sleep. He asserts that they're accomplishing something else, even rescuing us from something else that harms us.

That's the kind of wisdom—a learned perspective—that a father might pass down to a child. He would do so in order to prepare him or her for life. We might call it instruction, or training. And it is an application of what Hebrews 12 says about suffering. First, that suffering has a purpose. And that purpose has been designed by Someone that cares for us. Note first,

¹ Marilyn Roberson, *Gilead*, 52.

² Roberson, 166.

³ Roberson, 95.

⁴ Roberson, 53.

1. The Reminder of Discipline (vv. 4-5)

Last week David helped us think through the pivotal passage in verses 1–3. In many ways verse 3 encapsulates the entire argument of Hebrews: **Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** Or, in the way we’ve been saying it, the author of Hebrews continually holds forth Christ—**Consider Him**—so that *they* might hold fast—**not grow weary.**

With that in mind, with *Him* in mind, we pick up in verse 4: **You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.** It might sound as if the author is minimizing their suffering. He isn’t. But he *is* putting it in context. Their striving against sin had not, *yet* at least, involved martyrdom.⁵ Unlike the One they had *just* been instructed to fix their eyes upon, their blood had *not* been shed. Verse 4 picks up on what was just said, serving as something of a transition statement aiming to put *their* sufferings in context.

Further, for more of that, verse 4 tells us the nature of the conflict they faced. What they endured was a **striving against sin.** *That* was the enemy they battled. It wasn’t bad luck or “the blowing winds of culture.” Sin was why their property had been seized. Sin—or sinners *affected* by sin—was why they’d been maligned and imprisoned. Though verse 4 makes plain that they’d resisted it—at least to a point—sin was what they were striving against.

From outside them, sin warred *against* them. It’s also true that sin warred *within* them.⁶ The temptation to fall away was sin’s striving too. So, whether that day they strove against sin *without* or sin *within*, or most likely both, it was far from pleasant. They were in danger of drifting. Maybe they wondered, “Is it worth it, all this difficulty, this **great conflict of sufferings** (Heb. 10:32)?” Maybe they also wondered, “Why is this happening like this? What’s the point?”

If so, verse 5 *begins* an answer: **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.”** Throughout this book, the author’s quoted from Old Testament text after Old Testament text. But this genre has been noted much less frequently. To help the believers sort through their suffering, he turns to the Jewish book of wisdom, quoting Proverbs 3.

Before we look too closely at that verse, maybe it’s helpful to note that others have struggled to live out the Christian life *in part* because they’ve forgotten that which God said. That’s what verse 5 asserts. And I’m not bringing it up to excuse them. I bring it up so that we don’t think we’re alone, or that we’re the first. So, we might ask ourselves questions about the particular slice of suffering we’re enduring now. We might ask ourselves particular questions about our striving against sin. So that, once we’re *there*, sitting amongst those answers, we might ask a follow-up question, “Has God said anything about this? Have I momentarily forgotten something He’s clearly revealed?”

They had. Verse 5 says they’d forgotten Proverbs 3, which told them long before, **My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him.**

Is the author of this book saying that the Lord *Himself* is involved with all this that they’re facing? To understand this, we need to be careful in defining what he means by “discipline.” Outside of Hebrews 12, this word is only used in two other places.⁷ The first is appropriate for our purposes today: **Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline (*paideia*) and instruction of the Lord** (Eph. 6:4). The second occurrence is in another verse you know, 2 Timothy 3:16: **All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training (*paideia*) in righteousness.**

⁵ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, 365.

⁶ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 382.

⁷ Παιδεία (*paideia*). You might recognize this word, as it’s commonly referenced in discussions on Christian education.

Those uses of the word, the word itself, and the context of Hebrews should lead us to the conclusion that this “discipline” is not always, nor necessarily, punitive. The emphasis instead seems to be upon correction and instruction.⁸ Meaning, that our striving against sin is *part* of what God uses to train us—to *grow* us—in righteousness. As we endure it, as we fight against it, God is doing something. 2 Timothy 3 said He trains us via Scripture. But He does this as we apply Scripture in this or that circumstance, as we war against sin, trusting what might be unseen amidst the difficulty of what’s right in front of us.

We mentioned one of John Newton’s hymns Wednesday night, “I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow.” I encourage you to go read it. I won’t quote it all this morning, but I will the final stanza, which comes from the perspective of the One training us: “These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou may find thy all in Me.”⁹ John Newton’s not the only one that thought this way. It’s also how Paul interpreted his affliction to the church at Corinth: **For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead** (2 Cor. 1:8–9).

Paul said—the Spirit of God inspired him to write—that there was purpose in his sufferings. And, according to the author of Hebrews, that’s not *merely* New Testament. It had been told us in Proverbs 3. Like them, we’ve just forgotten it. We, like them, need the reminder.

By the way, what precisely had they forgotten? Verse 5 says they’d forgotten an exhortation. Proverbs 3 was intended, *not* to weary those that read it, but to be an encouragement to them.¹⁰ How might that be so?

2. The Relationship of Discipline (vv. 6–9)

Of course, discouragement would be the expected reaction to this kind of discipline *if* this discipline signified the Lord’s anger.¹¹ But that’s *not* what verse 6 says, nor what Proverbs 3 had said before: **For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines.**

We might struggle to believe this because this discipline, correction or instruction from the Lord, is not always pleasant. Verse 11 will make clear that **all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful.** No one necessarily *wants* to learn this or that lesson the way this or that lesson often *has* to be learned. We can admit that. But if we’re going to think about this rightly, and biblically, we can’t admit *that* without *also* believing that it’s evidence of the Lord’s love.

It’s not hard to imagine the opposite. The teenager given *zero* instruction, no lines to color in, living outside any semblance of authority, the one undisciplined and un-taught by his or her father or mother will one day find out that to some degree he or she was the teenager unloved.

Is that an appropriate illustration? It’s precisely that which is depicted in these verses. Verse 6 goes on to describe the one the Lord loves through discipline: **and He scourges every son whom He receives.** He *receives* them. How? As a son. The son He receives he *also* scourges. It’s both.

Verse 7 continues this emphasis: **God deals with you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?** This *isn’t* saying that all fathers discipline perfectly. That’s not the case. Ephesians 6 instructed fathers not to exasperate or provoke their children. If Paul

⁸ Schreiner, 383.

⁹ John Newton, “I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow”

¹⁰ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, 647.

¹¹ Schreiner, 383.

wrote the command, it *must* have been possible for fathers to fall short in their discipline. Verse 10 will hint as well at earthly father's limitations in this area, **they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them.** So, in asking, **what son is there whom his father does not discipline** it is *not* saying every human father does this flawlessly. You know better. However, it *is* saying that discipline—understood as being *more* than merely punishment, including instruction, education, guidance, and correction—is part and parcel of the relationship between father and son.

In other words, what it means to be a son is to be trained by a father.¹² This would've been heightened in that era when sons would've often followed in their father's vocational footsteps. My dad's a carpenter. So am I. I watched him. I walked beside him. I learned from him. In that context, with training, correction, and discipline being the warp and woof of the relationship, verse 8 says: **But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.**

Wednesday night we continued our discussion on the Spirit of God. We began that study a few weeks back by considering the personhood of the Spirit. He's not an "it" or a "force"; He's a Person. Why is that so meaningful? Because it means He's able to relate to us in *that* way, as a person relates to us. Further, we considered the truth the He's not just *any* person; instead, He's deity. Meaning, that *as* He relates to us personally, as a Person, He does so as God Himself. And then, this past Wednesday Chris talked to us about Him—the Person of the Spirit—sanctifying us, making us holy. And when you put all that together, the phrase that grabbed me was a phrase he used, describing it all as "transformation through relationship."

That's another angle on what's going on here. The image is key. We're not disciplined by just anyone. We're disciplined by a father. Further, we're disciplined by *our* Father, which means we're His children. It's "transformation through relationship." That's what verse 9 points to:

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?

Note the phrase "be subject to." There's a sense in which we can *attempt*—inwardly or outwardly—to wiggle our way out of the discipline of the Lord. I'm not saying we can be successful in that, but we can certainly try. However, as you might recall, to endure means to remain under. And that's in line with the command given us in verse 7: **It is for discipline that you endure.** Though it sounds like a purpose clause, it is instructive.¹³ In fact, it is a terse imperative, telling us *how* we're to think about this "remaining under" suffering. It might be translated: "as discipline, endure."¹⁴ In other words, knowing what they faced was intended to train them—seeing it as discipline—they were to submit to, remain under, that which the Father designed: **shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?**

They were to see discipline in *this* context, as training, as instruction.¹⁵ And they were to see it with *this* imagery: relationally. This is what fathers do for sons they love.

3. The Reward of Discipline (vv. 10–11)

Maybe that relational imagery just isn't compelling to you, especially on a Sunday in the middle of June. While we could detail this morning the sacrifice and love of many fathers, we could just as

¹² Schreiner, 385.

¹³ The form of the word could be either indicative or imperative, Harris, 367. In context it is more likely an imperative, Schreiner, 384.

¹⁴ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 623.

¹⁵ Harris, 367.

easily talk about a negative history. You don't have categories for gratitude in this line of thinking. In fact, it's a hindrance.

Hear verse 10's beginning again: **For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them.** Most fathers would admit they've set goals for their children that were wrongheaded. Sometimes those goals were more about *us*—our past failures, or our present insecurities—than they are about the good of the child. Further, even when we've aimed a child in a good direction, the ways we've attempted to instruct them along the way have often been flawed. We've aimed at things not always for their good. And we've corrected incorrectly. That's just being honest. Maybe we didn't set out to do those things. But that's part of being a father who is also a sinner. We often do as it *seems* best to us.

That's how verse 10 begins. Now hear verse 10 in its fullness: **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.** When we talk about the discipline of the Lord the way we have in this sermon, we're declaring our belief in the sovereignty of God. We're convinced He brings things into our life that intend to shape us. He's not *reacting* to circumstances. Instead, He's ordaining, ordering, and designing them.

But it's not only His sovereignty we confess, we're also confessing sovereign *goodness*. What others mean for evil, He means for good (Gen. 50). And in the language of Hebrews 12, though earthly fathers discipline as it seems best to them, **He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.**

This is the purpose of the discipline. It's also discipline's reward. It's what His discipline leads to. We understand that it's the one that practices the scales that ends being able to play Rachmaninoff. We understand that it's the one that studies the vocab that ends up speaking the language. We understand that it's the one that trains at the gym that ends up winning the race.

So, seeing it as discipline—as *His* training, for our good—we endure. Why? Because in every single moment of your life—in every disappointment, in every relationship, in every trial, in every triumph—God, your Father, has committed Himself to transforming His broken people into the image of His perfect Son.

He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. This fits the context too, of course. In verses 1–3 they were instructed to run the race before them. *Here* they are continuing to be commanded to endure to the end, seeing remaining under suffering as *part* of the process the Lord has for them. And what are they to do as they press on in endurance? They're to fix their eyes on Jesus. And what will *He* do? Perfect their faith.

Verse 11 continues to describe the end—the goal or reward—of this discipline: **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.** So, though discipline *now* is more sorrowful than it is joyful, this is the joy set before us. He disciplines us so that we might share His holiness. His discipline yields fruit. It's fruit described as peaceful. It's fruit described as righteous.

So, as our Father, He continues to address us, **My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him.** It's an exhortation, intended to encourage. Let us not forget it.

Conclusion

Wednesday night we'll begin reading through a book by David Powlison. A few years back I read a chapter he wrote called, "What If Your Father Didn't Love You?" In that chapter he responds to those implying that a good earthly father is *necessary* to fully grasp the beauty of a relationship with a

heavenly Father. Or, to say it negatively, and even *more* wrongly, a poor earthly father actually *prevents* us from grasping the beauty of, living in the reality of, and enjoying life as a child of God.

To respond to that false notion, he first says this: “None of the words God uses to describe himself have wonderful experiential correlates”¹⁶ For example, we regularly call God “king.” We might ask: How many *good* kings have sat on the throne of human history? Powlison asks, “To whom do you look for examples of what God the king is like?” Do we necessarily project Saul or Nebuchadnezzar’s flaws on *that* image? “King” isn’t the only example of this, of course. Even the noble profession of shepherd has had its share of shady characters. Does that mean you can’t understand Psalm 23?

None of the words or images God uses have perfect examples in our less than perfect experience. Does that keep us from grasping, glorying in, or enjoying them? Powlison answers, “the very experience of disappointment and distorted images can make you long to know the *real* King, Shepherd, and Father.”¹⁷

May that be so today. He deals with you as a Father. But not as it *seems* best to Him. He disciplines us for our good, *always* and in every instance. Because His character isn’t up for debate: those whom He disciplines, He loves.

¹⁶ David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 173.

¹⁷ Powlison, 175.