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Bridgeway Church
Hebrews #37

The Lord Disciplines the Ones He Loves
Hebrews 12:3-11

There are several things that I would love to be able to tell you, but I can't. My commitment to the inspiration and authority of the Bible won't allow it. For example, I would like to be able to say that you need not ever again be concerned about or pray for your unsaved family members or friends because there is no such thing as hell or eternal condemnation. I would love to be able to tell you that, but I can't.

I would love to be able to tell you that you can let down your spiritual guard because this figure whom the Bible calls Satan doesn't actually exist. Neither do demons. It's all make-believe. It has no basis in reality, so you need not be vigilant to guard your heart or be alert to the power of certain temptations. I would love to be able to tell you that, but I can't.

The list of what I'd love to be able to tell you could go on almost without end, but let me come straight to the point of our passage for today. I would love to be able to tell you that if you choose to become a Christian you will never again have to worry about pain or suffering or financial hardship. It would make my job so much easier and your lives a lot more fun. I would love to be able to tell you that Christianity is a pain-free frolic down some yellow-brick road to unending prosperity. But my commitment to the inspiration and authority of the Bible won't allow it.

Of course, there are plenty of preachers and teachers who will tell you such things anyway, either because they want you to follow them and fill the seats in their churches or because they want your money. Some will tell you such things in order to guarantee sufficient donations to keep their television or radio program on the air. Or, worse still, they will tell you that because they are cowards, and are afraid to stand without flinching on the truth of the Bible, God's inspired and inerrant Word.

So I'm just letting you know that if you want to be told that living for Jesus holds forth the potential for ease and comfort and opulence, there is no shortage of preachers and teachers who will be only too happy to oblige you. They live for the opportunity to tickle your ears with promises of no physical pain and no suffering for those who have enough faith.

The appeal of this false gospel is self-evident. Who wouldn't want the best of everything with no discomfort, no disabilities, no physical or emotional distress of any kind? After all, we're not masochists! I'm not at all shocked that the health and wealth gospel has

such a vast and enthusiastic following. When people crave prosperity you can rest assured they'll flock like geese to the side of whoever it is that's making the offer.

It really doesn't surprise me, therefore, that people should continue to ask: ***"If God loves me like you say, why do I hurt?"*** You yourself may be a bit confused by this, wondering why this all-powerful and all-loving God doesn't seem to care more about your pain, your problems, your trials and tribulations.

The reason is that ***sometimes love hurts***. I don't mean that it hurts because we love someone who fails to love us back. I'm talking about God's love. ***Sometimes, because God is love, you will hurt***.

I know this may sound out of sync with things I've said before, but it isn't. I'm not backing down or reversing my course on what I've repeatedly affirmed to you from this platform, namely, that God's love ushers you into the experience of indescribable joy and peace and freedom and satisfaction. But on occasion we hurt and weep and are perplexed precisely ***because*** God is love.

Someone once said that ***the primary task of a pastor is to prepare his people to suffer well***. I agree. You really don't need my help or the help of anyone else to prosper. That's easy. But when times are tough and your body hurts and your bank account is dwindling and people betray you and your dreams are shattered and your children rebel and God seems distant, that's when I most need to speak truth into your heart lest you become bitter and resentful and angry and perhaps even fall into unbelief.

As you can clearly see, Hebrews 12:3-11 is all about suffering and hardship and persecution and discipline, and my goal is to help you understand God's motivation and purpose for orchestrating your life to include such unpleasant experiences and what you must do so you don't lose confidence in his goodness and his love for you.

Evidently there were quite a few Jewish Christians in the first century who themselves couldn't make sense of their own suffering. Although they were well-taught and intimately familiar with the Old Testament scriptures, ***these believers had forgotten what Solomon had said about suffering in Proverbs 3:11-12***. So the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds them here in chapter twelve, verses 3-11.

This passage of Scripture always seems to provoke discussion and debate. Sometimes it raises more questions than I have answers in response. But the bottom line is this: ***How will you and I respond to suffering? What will be its effect in our lives?***

When Suffering is Inflicted by Sinners

The first thing we learn here is that not all suffering is the result of *your* sin, but is often caused by the sin of *others*. That appears to be the case here in vv. 3-4. Our author calls on his readers to think about Jesus. He encourages them to reflect on the fact that although he was sinless and perfect, he endured incredible hostility from those who hated him.

Now, why does he say this? The most likely answer is that these Christian men and women were themselves starting to suffer at the hands of non-Christians. We know this to be true from what he said earlier in Hebrews 10:32-34.

This ever-increasing mistreatment at the hands of the unbelieving culture had caused some of them to “grow weary” and “fainthearted” (v. 3). They were exhausted from bearing up under such pressure. Their hearts were increasingly faint from the persecution and slander and ridicule they experienced. That’s normal, by the way. When you are the constant object of scorn and rejection and injustice from non-Christians you may find yourself wondering if it’s worth it to follow Jesus. It would be all too easy to just quit, to put your Christian witness on mute, just so you can survive. So our author points them (and us) to Jesus.

Of course, they hadn’t suffered as badly as they could have. Look at v. 4. This is a somewhat strange text. It stirs me to ask a question: ***Why would your determination not to sin put your life at risk?*** To struggle against sin is to fight the power of temptation. This we can understand. But why would resisting temptation put you in jeopardy and expose you to persecution and possible martyrdom? The best answer I can come up with is that the particular sin or sins in view are the demands of the world that you deny Jesus. “Recant your faith! Deny Christ or you will die!” Or perhaps your commitment to live a godly life and not conform to the values of this world sets you up for mistreatment. In any case, no one yet in their community had been martyred for their faith. But some had come close. And this entire letter is written to remind them that no matter what they stand to lose because of their testimony, even their own lives, Jesus is better.

There is an important theological lesson here that we must not skip over. Although the hostility and the pain and suffering come from non-believers, from the non-Christian society, ***God is ultimately the one in charge***. I don’t think he wants us to understand that God is standing aloof and off to the side, watching as his children are mistreated, only then to ride in on a white horse after all has been done and do what he can to make the best of a bad situation.

The way he connects vv. 3-4 with what follows in vv. 5-11 appears to suggest that ***whereas the enemies of the faith are causing you to suffer because they want to destroy you, God is causing you to suffer because he wants to discipline you. This is the discipline of training, not judgment.***

This is similar to what happened with Joseph in Genesis 50. Joseph's brothers were terrified that after Jacob had died Joseph would seek vengeance on them for selling him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph responded by saying: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph suffered greatly at the hands of his brothers, but God orchestrated it to prepare and train Joseph for his eventual rise to power in Egypt and to use him to make provision for the people of Israel when famine struck the land.

The Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh was inflicted by a "messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7) but was clearly designed by God to purify his heart and keep him from falling into excessive pride. Satan asked permission to "sift" Peter like wheat in prompting him to deny Jesus three times, but God intended it to equip and train Peter in the reality of repentance so that he might be better prepared to minister to the other disciples (Luke 22:31-32).

What we must come to understand is that God, as a loving Father, rules sovereignly and supremely over all of our circumstances, both good and bad, both pleasant and painful, to train, discipline, and equip us to be better prepared both to trust him and honor him in all things.

If you do not embrace this truth, if you do not yield to God's sovereign but always loving purposes in your life, you will eventually become bitter and resentful and find that your heart is constantly putting God in the witness chair to be prosecuted by your accusatory questions. So will you believe it? Will you trust God with your life, even when it is unbearably painful and confusing?

Not all Discipline is Punitive

As we turn our attention to vv. 5-11 people always ask this question: ***"Is the discipline and reproof and chastisement described here a response of God to our sin?"*** The answer is: Sometimes. But sometimes not. ***There are forms of divine discipline we experience that have nothing directly to do with some sin we may have committed.*** In other words, ***not all discipline is punitive.*** Much is educational or is designed to train us for godly living and to think rightly.

Consider a couple of examples of the sort of discipline that isn't a judgment for sin.

Why do you think Navy Seal Team 6 is so efficient and skilled to accomplish the difficult tasks assigned to them? It is because they have been trained beyond what is ordinary. They are forced to suffer hardship to create team unity. They endure physical pain and other forms of deprivation in order to equip them to face anything the enemy may throw their way. They confront unique challenges in order to hone their judgment and refine their thinking and quicken their mental and physical reflexes.

Or consider the many things you as parents require of your children that they find burdensome, boring, and often physically and emotionally difficult. You do this to instruct them. You do it to teach them the value of a dollar. You push them into awkward circumstances and require that they fulfill certain chores around the house and insist that they devote extra time to their studies in order to train them and correct false thinking. You aren't punishing them for sins committed. You are disciplining them to grow up and mature and be prepared for what life will throw at them in later years. As a parent you know that if they are never confronted by difficult situations that demand self-denial and discipline, "if there are never any sustained pressures to cope with, if there are never any long-term strategies where the child must stick with an educational process, or an apprenticeship, or the practice of a skill, for many years in order to advance, there will never be any maturity of character" (J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, 215).

So, my point simply is that God often times leads us into painful situations and orchestrates our lives and imposes upon us difficult circumstances, physical discomfort, financial pressure, and other such hardships to help us grow up in Christ. ***And these are not expressions of his anger but of his love!*** So let's take note of three things our author says about divine discipline.

Pain is often the Proof of Sonship

As I said a moment ago, the pain of divine discipline is the proof of your Father's passionate love for you, not his anger. That bears repeating.

This runs so counter to the mind of modern man that you may need to hear it repeatedly, then pause and let it slowly sink in. Contrary to what many child psychologists and not a few theologians have argued, "discipline is the mark not of a harsh and heartless father but of a father who is deeply and lovingly concerned for the well-being of his son" (Philip Hughes, 528). Of course, I'm not suggesting for a moment that discipline can never go too far. Sadly, there are some overbearing and cruel-hearted parents whose discipline of their children crosses the line into abuse, and for that there is no excuse.

This is why the question, “If I am God’s child, why does he allow me to suffer?” is absurd and inappropriate. It is *because* you are his child, dear and precious to his heart, that he cleanses and trains and educates and refines you with various trials. The Apostle Peter put it this way: ***“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ”*** (1 Peter 1:6-7). So once again, it isn’t for lack of love that we are frequently left to struggle and fall and suffer both physical and spiritual injury. Sometimes love requires it.

Before we go any further, perhaps it would be wise of me to state my position on a closely related and controversial subject.

Here at Bridgeway we believe in divine healing. I believe that God’s love for us can be expressed in his decision to grant bodily healing, either in part or in whole, of both organic and functional physical maladies. Whether or not God chooses to heal us rests on his decision, not our demands.

Here at Bridgeway we pray regularly for the sick. We lay hands on those who are afflicted, we anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord, and we ask that God’s healing touch restore them to full and robust health. We have seen several people miraculously healed as a result. We have seen others die. But we will continue to pray both expectantly and submissively, because that is what God tells us to do (James 5:13-18).

I also believe that physical suffering and pain can serve a redemptive and sanctifying purpose in our lives. The lessons we learn in times of discomfort are many. Malcolm Muggeridge went so far as to say that virtually everything that truly enhanced and enlightened his existence came during times of affliction. He believed that “if it were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo-jumbo, as Aldous Huxley envisaged in *Brave New World*, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endured” (*A Twentieth Century Testimony* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978], p. 35).

So how should you and I respond to physical ills? If God is sovereign over them, should we simply knuckle under and accept them? Without intending to be simplistic, let me suggest these steps.

If you are sick, ask the Lord to reveal to you if it is due to some sin in your life. If it is, confess and repent. Then pray that he would heal you. If it is not due to some specific transgression, still pray for healing. If he restores your health, give him all the praise and honor. If he does not, continue to pray until such time as he either heals you or tells you to stop praying! ***At all times, regardless of God’s decision, submit to his loving and sovereign will and learn the lessons of life that he is attempting to teach.***

To live without any discipline imposed by God may at first strike you as attractive until you realize that it serves only to reveal that you are still a spiritual orphan. **If** you are God's child, you **will** receive his discipline. **If** God loves you, chastening is inevitable.

A friend of mine, whom I'll call Steve, commented one day on how harsh and strict his father had been when Steve and his sister were growing up. That in itself didn't bother him so much as did the fact that his best friend seemed always to get away with murder! When their two families would vacation together, Steve and his sister would consistently suffer consequences for their youthful misadventures, while their equally guilty friend was virtually ignored by his father.

At the time, Steve was envious of his friend. He has since come to see that his own father's firm discipline was born not of cruelty but of concern for Steve's character. What appeared then to be the ideal parent was in fact the tragic expression of loveless and indifferent neglect.

I wouldn't say this if it weren't for the fact that the author of Hebrews says it. So here goes. To go through life pain-free, devoid of discipline, is to be a **spiritual bastard** (cf. v. 8). A life free of hardship signals that you are no child of God. **Rejoice, therefore, in your distress, for it proves you have a Father who cares enough to chasten.**

Only God Disciplines Perfectly

The second thing for us to note is that only God's discipline is always pure and perfect. It isn't always understandable, but it never misses the mark.

Let me illustrate this point by saying something about my now-legendary disdain and distaste for squash. My dad, who figured prominently in last week's sermon, was the best and closest friend I ever had. We had a very special and unique relationship that I cherish to this day, even though he died and went to be with the Lord 32 years ago.

One thing about my father, to which my sister will also testify, is that he was a firm disciplinarian. Like most godly parents, prior to the moment of truth (and pain), he would say something like: "Sam, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." I never said so, but I distinctly remember thinking: "Whom does he think he's kidding?" Being the father of two daughters myself, I now know what he meant.

The author of Hebrews says that our fathers "disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (v. 10). My dad did what he thought was "best." But unlike God, his discipline wasn't perfect. If he were here he might want to argue that point, but I am convinced he erred on at least one occasion.

It happened one night during dinner. I couldn't have been more than six or seven years old. My mother had the audacity(!) to serve squash that night. Let me say it again: I hate squash. I detest and loathe squash. When God pronounced the curse on Adam, He said: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat squash all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field [again, squash, I'm sure]. By the sweat of your brow you will eat squash" (Genesis 3:17-19; author's paraphrase!).

I don't care how you fix it or in what other food you try to hide it, squash stinks. It is the curse of God that has befallen the earth for Adam's sin. We are all being punished.

Forgive me for repeating a story that I've told several times, but it is so stunning that it warrants constant repetition. It was around 30 years ago that Ann and I were invited to a dinner party at the home of some people from our church. I've always done my best to be a grateful guest, so when the host served squash that night I swallowed hard, sucked in my gut, asked God to forgive her, and ate the horrid stuff. After each bite, I quickly drank some iced tea, hoping to wash away the taste before it sent me into uncontrollable convulsions. But it didn't work. I couldn't figure it out, but no matter how much tea I drank, the taste of the squash only intensified.

My glass was soon empty. The host quickly retreated to the kitchen and returned with a pitcher of tea. I couldn't believe my eyes. There in the tea was a large slice . . . of squash! She was serving, of all things, *squash tea!* Never before nor since that fateful night have I heard of anyone serving squash tea! This is a true story, so I hope and pray that if the hostess from that evening is listening to this on our podcast, she won't mind my telling about the agony she unwittingly inflicted on me. On second thought, anyone who would put squash on a plate *and* in tea deserves to be embarrassed!

Getting back to the point, I refused to eat squash the night my mother served it. My dad tried to persuade me that it was most certainly in my best interests if I did. I refused. He took decisive and disciplinary action. Ouch! I have nothing but the highest regard and respect for my dad. But this time he blew it. To spank a child for refusing to eat squash is simply indefensible! Right?

Well, whatever you may think about squash, I can assure you that *our Heavenly Father never disciplines inappropriately. His chastisement of us is always perfect and just and timely. Though we may not always understand what he does, we can rest assured that he does it out of boundless love for his children.*

We need never wonder or worry about the intent behind our distress. God is always seeking our best. He is neither too harsh nor too lenient. His chastening touch is perfectly suited to the need of our souls. If we chafe under his mighty hand it is *our* fault, not his.

Profitable Pain

The third and final lesson to learn about God's chastening love is that ***although painful, it is always profitable***. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11).

In other words, pain hurts! But it's also helpful. God doesn't expect us to grit our teeth and deny that trials are troublesome. He knows the discomfort we feel in body and soul. He also knows that occasionally there simply is no other, or at least no better, way of cultivating holiness in the stubborn soil of our souls.

The next time you're hurting and tempted to question God's love for you, recall this verse. Remind yourself that the measure of true love is the pursuit of righteousness in the one loved. God permits us to hurt because he is passionately committed to making us holy. ***There is no love in providing comfort to someone in sin.***

I'm assuming that if you were suffering from a recurring pain in your head, you would seek the advice and assistance of your family physician. Suppose he suggested that a couple of aspirin would suffice to eliminate the pain, knowing that its cause was in fact a malignant tumor? Your outrage would be wholly justified.

But what if he responded by saying: "I wanted to tell you the truth but I knew how sad it would make you feel. I knew how painful it would be for you to undergo the required operation. I knew how much of an inconvenience and financial expense it would prove to be, so I thought it would be more loving if I wrote it off as just another headache."

My guess is that, notwithstanding his expression of love, you would be seriously tempted to sue for malpractice. If this doctor really cared for you he would have taken whatever steps necessary to preserve your life, even if those steps proved painful. Likewise, our Father often has to perform a little spiritual surgery to excise the tumor of immaturity and unbelief. It hurts, it's confusing, it's inconvenient, but above all else, it's loving.

So let me conclude by simply reminding you of this exhortation from Solomon, found in Proverbs 3, and cited here by our author:

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For ***the Lord disciplines the one he loves***, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb. 12:5b-6).