

Accepting Divine Discipline

Hebrews 12:4-13

1. Introduction

- **Adversity in resilience literature**

At a very basic level resilience research explodes the idea that the good life is a trouble free life. It rather suggests that those with a history of some lifetime adversity reported better mental health and well-being outcomes than people whose lives have been trouble free. Resilience is built in a context of stress. Furthermore the Bible recognises that whatever suffering we endure, God can use it for good. What people need is not a stress-free life, but a faith-framework to treat stress well; to use it as a stimulus for growth, rather than buckling under it. In short adversity can lead to strength if we reframe expectations and reactions and change the way we think about pain or hurt

From repeated research studies, Russ Moxley from the Centre for Creative Leadership became convinced that the most important element of marketplace leadership training concerns how people learn through hardships. Lessons learned were in four categories – self-knowledge; sensitivity and compassion to others; the limits of personal control over circumstances and flexibility. However hardship, affliction and suffering are often given little space in most spiritual formation books. Only in the classic The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis are afflictions a regular topic. Yet growth towards Christian maturity often results from them. Indeed the Bible demonstrates that hardships are a common way that God uses to develop us spiritually. For example Paul writes in Romans 5 –

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

It is not therefore surprising that in a qualitative resilience research project Christian ministers have discovered that coping with hardships in ministry was part of God's plan about who they were becoming. It also meant gaining a deeper personal understanding of God's grace and facilitating much spiritual growth. In the context of our reading from Hebrews 12 divine discipline is a necessary feature of Christian pilgrimage.

- **The Hebrew 12 context**

In that regard the writer recognises that believers are to some extent engaged in the same struggle as Jesus, although there is a qualitative and quantitative difference between the sufferings experienced. He observes in verse 4 –

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

He has just made the point that the endurance of Jesus offers a model when tempted to become weary and disheartened. He then suggests they had forgotten the biblical concept of disciplinary sufferings. In the context he is referring to actual sufferings inflicted by those who are hostile to God, which become 'disciplinary' when God makes them a means for spiritual maturity. Moreover whenever we experience unpleasantness, pain and hardship because we are Christians they are tokens of the Father's love. As one commentator put it -

What adversaries are doing to you out of sinful hostility, God is doing out of fatherly discipline.

- **Discipline defined**

However before we look further at this text we need to ask whether 'divine discipline' is a contradiction in terms? It depends on what is meant by the word *discipline*. If the concept is only looked at through the lens of punishment there may be a problem. However the Greek word has a reference to training through education or chastening. In short, discipline is education by prevention or correction. In the Hebrews

context this is designed to correct sinful behaviour, to prevent us from developing sinful practices, and to educate us about the sinfulness of sin, as opposed to the delights of holiness. It is therefore either dealing with sin that has already affected the believer's life or sin that might possibly affect the believer's life.

The writer therefore gives at least three reasons for accepting *the discipline of the Lord*.

2. Remember God's Word (verses 5-6)

He begins with a question to remind them of Scripture which they may have forgotten or not given adequate attention to (see 2:1) but is a 'word of encouragement' from Proverbs 3:11-12 which drives the point home to members of God's family. According to this text there are three different reactions -

- **Some are indifferent (verse 5a)**

One reaction is the nonchalant, apathetic, unconcerned reaction which regards God's discipline *lightly*. Through afflictions, trials, and suffering, the Father lovingly applies the needed remedy to uproot sin in our lives, to steer us away from sin, or to build barriers against sin in our lives. The question is how will we respond? Do

we face such times by covering our ears and not hearing the gentle voice of God speaking through affliction? Or will we investigate what God might be doing in our lives through afflictions? In particular do we ask Him to reveal any sin that might be rooted in our lives?

- **Others are overwhelmed or lose heart (verse 5b)**

Others lose courage. They are overwhelmed, frustrated and weary. Weighed down by troubles they become despondent and feel God has forsaken them. Some even react in dismay that he should dare discipline them. They get weak-kneed or frustrated with God.

They ask why of all people are they the ones that need it. It never dawns on them to ask what is God trying to teach or make them through this experience. They also fail to remember that God has promised not to test us too harshly and also to give us sufficient grace.

- **We are to rejoice in God's love for us**

On the other hand we should rather rejoice because *the Lord disciplines those whom he loves*. Those who are not loved are not tested (e.g. school pupils whose work is never marked). St Jerome once said a paradoxical but true thing –

The greatest anger of all is when God is no longer angry with us when we sin

Sharing the sufferings of Christ and experiencing the discipline of God shows that we are much loved members of his family. The Lord's correction verifies our acceptance as his sons and daughters.

3. Remember God's Care (verses 7-9)

This point is developed in the next three verses. Our hardships can bring us a far deeper experience of the love of God for his adopted children.

- **God treasures his children enough to discipline us (7-8)**

In disciplining us God is treating us as his daughters and sons. That is the reason we can *endure trials*. To take the words of Jesus, our loving heavenly Father is the vine grower who wields the pruning knife carefully and with skill so that the genuine branches bear more fruit (John 15:2). This preacher however uses the very human example of parents with children. Those of us who are parents will

train and discipline our progeny if we really love them. Ruth and I now have four adult sons whom we sought to raise in Christ and become responsible citizens. This involved teaching them about God and life, and especially setting limits fitting to each child when they were younger. We lovingly treasured our children enough not to give them everything they wanted and we sought to curb the natural rebellion of their hearts. Moreover in our day when appropriate it also meant using the rod of correction sparingly on the seat of learning! Times have changed in that regard and we now watch our adult children lovingly trying to patiently negotiate acceptable

behaviour with our small grandchildren when our instinct is to act differently.

God shows he treasures us by training and correcting us so we walk in his ways. Just as Jesus his only Son *learned obedience through what he suffered* (Hebrews 5:8), so through our sufferings we will also learn what we need to learn for our spiritual growth. As James says –

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

- ***We need to respect God for his loving discipline (9)***

I understand people may have had mixed experiences in their childhood and some may find it hard to respect their parents. Not everyone had the same secure loving experience as I had. In fact my respect for my parents has grown as I have aged and not least when I was trying to shape the lives of my own children by teaching them to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil. If however we submitted to our flawed human parents how much more should we yield to the *Father of spirits and live?* We need to be alert to what he might be saying in the pain, sufferings and difficulties we are experiencing and thoughtfully submit to the purpose of his painful correction.

4. Remember God's Purpose (verses 10-11)

While human parental discipline is sometimes imperfect, short-sighted and even at times unjust because it originates in and ends in anger, God's discipline is qualitatively different and is always purposeful for our good.

- ***He disciplines us for our good to share his holiness (10b)***

There is never one whit of bitterness, rancour, or hatred in divine discipline. There is never any ill intent. We ourselves may not have a clear picture of it and it may remain a mystery why it has happened, but at the end of the day we will need to trust what God

has said. In terms of yesterday's reading we exercise forward looking, hope-filled faith. The text is plain that the purpose of God's discipline is that *we might share his holiness*. This word is not common, but refers to God's holy character. The aim of divine discipline is to produce a God-like character in us. In short, every trial has purpose; every adversity purifies; every opposition and affliction affirms His love and desire to shape us ultimately into the image of His Son.

The Apostle Paul also reminds us that God in his providential sovereignty will use even our most painful experiences for our ultimate good –

We know that in all things God works together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

If we want to see God we must be holy, but without his discipline there is no holiness.

- ***He wants to see the peaceful fruit of righteousness in us (11)***

Training and correction is always unpleasant but produces results in due time. Just think for example about what an elite athlete has to endure in terms of running kilometres, lifting weights, following a rigorous diet and having a restricted social life while their contemporaries are having a good time. But it is the training which produces any success in the future. Likewise though painful,

God's training produces a harvest of spiritual fruit which is an occasion for joy. It is the same with God's correction which affects our desire or taste buds for sin. Many years ago parents would punish their children by making them drink castor oil, a foul, bitter tasting medicine. The thought of having to drink a big gulp of castor oil would put the skids on many a foray into sin! Correction makes sin bitter to us, so that we might turn from it and pursue Christlikeness.

All God's discipline seems painful yet to those who have been trained by *it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness*. It

produces inward peace and a life responsive to the will of God.

5. Conclusion

The final verses in this section encourage his hearers, including us, to have a renewed resolve to press on together in the Christian race to the finishing tape. Once again the picture of an athletic contest comes to the fore in language echoing Isaiah 35 and Proverbs 4:25-27 -

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The descriptive phrases (*drooping hands* and *weak knees*) evoke a picture of a person who is thoroughly discouraged. They describe those who have lost heart. Of course following the crucified Christ demands *heart* which is the repeated appeal in this section of the letter (3, 5). So sisters and brothers, let us in the power of the Spirit patiently accept God's discipline in our lives as we strengthen our resolve to pursue our pilgrimage to the ultimate place of healing in the heavenly City of God.

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