

Introduction

A 'word of encouragement'. That's how the writer of Hebrews introduces his discussion of God's discipline. My aim is to show how God's discipline is encouraging; how it has the potential to transform our attitude to life and to hardship. We can begin each day with the thought that our Father in heaven has carefully tailored all the events of the coming day to shape us a little bit more into the image of His glorious Son.

The theme of God's discipline overlaps with the issue of suffering because suffering can be something God uses to shape us. The focus of this book, however, is on God's discipline in all its breadth. So it only deals with the issue of suffering as it touches upon the

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theme of God's discipline. Many other good books have been written to help us understand suffering, both from an apologetic and pastoral perspective.

Suffering can cause people to doubt God's care. But the writer of Hebrews says hardship is the *evidence* of God's fatherly care. God uses suffering to discipline His children. Hebrews 12:1-12 says:

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, 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. Consider 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. 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,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.'

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined — and everyone undergoes discipline — then you are not legitimate,

not true sons and daughters at all. 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! 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. 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.

Verse 5 says that through His word God addresses you as a father addresses his son. This is true of all of God's word. The Bible is a word to us from our heavenly Father. But the writer has a particular word in mind, Proverbs 3:11-12, which speaks of the way God disciplines those He loves. God is telling us that His discipline is a sign of His love. God chastens everyone He accepts as His son. John Calvin says: 'If no man, at least of prudence and sound judgement, can be found who does not correct his children since they cannot be led to real virtue without discipline, how much less will God, who is the best and wisest father, neglect so necessary a remedy?'¹

My friend Matt held his five-year-old daughter tightly and inflicted pain on her. I wept as I watched. What kind of father would do such a thing? The answer, as you might have anticipated, is that Matt's daughter Phoebe was ill and needed treatment. She had been diagnosed with a brain tumour and

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Hebrews and 1 & 2 Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston, (Edinburgh: St. Andrew's Press, 1963), p. 191.

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was undergoing chemotherapy. The day before, her weakened body had been gripped by fever. Matt was helping the nurses administer her medication. It was causing Phoebe great discomfort. But Matt persisted. Of course he did. This treatment was Phoebe's best chance of survival. His patience and persistence still brings tears to my eyes. Twenty-four hours later Phoebe turned the corner and began to improve (although her battle with cancer continues). Sometimes God our Father holds us tightly in His grip. And what He's doing brings us great discomfort. But far from being a sign of His indifference, it's a sign of His love. With great patience and persistence He is ridding us of the fever of our sin and unbelief.

God treats us in the same way that wise fathers treat their children (Heb. 12:7). 'Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you' (Deut. 8:5). Discipline is a sign that we are part of God's family.

Indeed, our discipline as God's children reflects His discipline of His natural Son, Jesus. This is how the description of God's discipline in Hebrews 12 begins: it begins with Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus, 'the pioneer and perfecter of faith' (v. 2). Christ is the 'perfecter' of faith because His own faith was 'perfected' through hardship and He becomes 'the pioneer of [our] salvation ... through what He suffered' (Heb. 2:10).² It was not that Jesus was imperfect in the sense of being sinful, but He was not equipped to be our mediator and priest until He had fully experienced

2. I owe this insight to my colleague, Tim Ward.

what it is to be human. So when God disciplines us He is treating us as He treated His Son and equipping us for the roles He has assigned to us. It's a sign we are His children, just as the Son is His child.

Every human father is flawed. And those flaws can affect how we view the discipline of our heavenly Father. You might have had a father who was often selfish, severe, distant or even cruel. So God's discipline makes you think of God as selfish, severe, distant or even cruel. But God's discipline is not selfish or arbitrary. It is carefully designed with your long-term good in mind. It's always an act of love designed to make you more like Jesus.

Or you might have had an indulgent father who rarely disciplined; perhaps your father was desperate to be liked by you. So God's discipline comes as a surprise. It makes God seem by contrast unloving and unlikeable. But actually indulgent parents do not equip their children well to face the world. Their desire to be liked trumps a commitment to the growth of their children. But your heavenly Father is not driven by a desire to be liked by you. Instead He's driven by His love for you. So He is resolutely committed to your growth. His aim is that you enjoy being conformed to the image of His Son. And He carefully, tenderly, lovingly crafts the circumstances of your life to that end.

But the discipline of God raises some important theological and practical questions:

- Does God punish His children?
- What does God's discipline involve?

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- Does discipline require a change of direction or repentance from a specific sin?
- Why does God discipline us?
- How should we respond to God's discipline?

But first we start with a story ...