

Adoption

Discipline

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Hebrew 12:5-13

Now turn with me, if you have a Bible with you, to the twelfth chapter of Hebrews. We have been studying together over the last number of weeks the wonderful doctrine of Adoption: *that God in His mercy and grace brings us into union and fellowship with Jesus Christ, justifies us by faith alone in Christ alone, and constitutes us, His children and members of His household and family.*

And we've been looking at various aspects of that truth. It's been a bit like, I hope, looking at a diamond and watching the light reflect from the various facets of that diamond. We've concentrated our thoughts on what the doctrine of adoption means in terms of God as our Father, what it means in terms of having Jesus as our elder brother, what it means to have the Holy Spirit, as Paul refers to Him in Romans 8, as "the spirit of adoption."

And now we're looking at some other aspects of the truth of adoption, and tonight I want us to consider the issue of Discipline: that the Father disciplines His children. And there are various places that we could go to in the New Testament, but nowhere clearer, I think, than Hebrews chapter 12. And I want us to read together from verse 1, and we'll read down to verse 13. Before we do so, let's ask the Holy Spirit for His illumination on these words of Scripture. Let's pray together.

Holy Spirit, we ask of You this evening again—Comforter, Strengthener, Paraclete, Revealer of the of glory of Christ, Inspirer of Scripture, the One who regenerates and quickens our souls, who indwells us, and You have made our hearts Your home and temple. Cause now this word which we are about to read, a word that You caused to be inspired, cause it to be made clear to us. Bless us as we read it. Write its truths upon our hearts. Minister to us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; 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; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 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? For they disciplines us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 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. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

If you still have Hebrews open before you, and I trust that you do—if you turn to the very final section of Hebrews, verse 22, you'll get a glimpse, a little hint, as to what the book of Hebrews is all about. The writer appeals; he says, "I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation," or in some versions, "encouragement." The book of Hebrews is a word of exhortation. Many commentators of late have begun to surmise that the book of Hebrews is actually a sermon. It's a long sermon but it's a sermon, maybe a collection of sermons. Certainly there is a sermonic character to the way that the writer of Hebrews puts this together and his chief concern throughout the book of Hebrews is perseverance, endurance, stick-ability. I think you Americans say, "keeping on going, like Duracell batteries when all the others have stopped." Christians keep on going; they keep on going in the face of trial and in the face of affliction and in the face of difficulties. Our text seems to have, as it were, its focus in verse 7 when it exhorts. And in the words, in the rendition of the New International Version for a second, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons." That's what it's about.

On the walls of many a gymnasium—and you understand I picked this up from somewhere. I do not know this from first hand experience—but on the walls of many a gymnasium are the words, "No pain, no gain." Actually, I didn't need to go to a gymnasium to learn that because that very phrase occurs in Charles

Hodges' *Systematic Theology*. No pain, no gain. And in a way, it summarizes what the book of Hebrews is actually saying: that in order to gain you have, first of all, to pass through and endure pain.

Malcolm Muggeridge, converted as he was to Christianity in his later life after being an atheist for all of his life, and one who had given much of his time to writing vehemently against Christianity, says (he wrote this about ten years ago), "As an old man, looking back on one's life, it's one of the things that strikes me most forcibly, that the only thing that's taught one anything is suffering." Not success, not happiness, not anything like that—the only thing that really teaches one what life's about is suffering, affliction. Well, that's what the writer of Hebrews is talking about, he wants to put in a context the issue of suffering and trial and affliction in the lives of God's children. Let me make four assertions from our text tonight.

I. Discipline is necessary.

First of all, that discipline is necessary, discipline is necessary. The writer of Hebrews is giving to us an exhortation. "Suffer this word of exhortation," he says. He's telling us that the chief thing that we need to remember is that we need to keep going; we need to persevere; we need to endure; and we need to endure in the face of temptations to stop, when all around us we are faced with afflictions that would call upon us to stop. When life gets hard, when life gets difficult, when questions arise—the kind of questions that have a reason, perhaps, in your own life: Why is this happening to me? I'm a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I attempt to follow Him. I own Him as my Lord and Savior, my Prophet, Priest, and King but these trials have come into my life; these difficulties have come into my life. The writer is taking us back to first things, to elementary things. He says in verse 5, "you have forgotten the exhortation." He's writing to a group of professing believers for whom trial and affliction was causing a problem. He's writing to Christians who are beginning to question what God is doing in their lives, and not only to question what God is doing in their lives, but to draw inferences about their own standing in relationship to God because they find themselves in difficulty. So he has to take them back to the very beginning. He has to remind them of the ABC's. "You've forgotten something."

It's one of the things that you discover when you turn 50, that you forget things, simple things: names, addresses, telephone numbers. It's a distressing part of life. Some of you know this all too well. But it's also true in the Christian life. You can never get tired of the gospel. Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love, because we can never get enough of that. We constantly need to be taken back to that: to the cross, to the atoning work of Christ, to the ABC's of Christianity. "You've forgotten something," the writer is saying.

I still find myself shocked when God sends certain things into my life. I'm still

perplexed as to why He doesn't answer some of my prayers. I have a prayer that I've prayed for thirty years and He hasn't answered it yet, and I am perplexed by it. I will be candid with you; I will be honest with you tonight. There are times when I begin to think to myself, "Well, I wouldn't do that to my children." What kind of God is He that He doesn't hear the cries of His children; He doesn't answer the prayers of His children? I wouldn't deal with my children like that. That's how sinful your heart can become and my heart becomes. I still find it troublesome that in the lives of some of the sweetest saints that I know, terrible, terrible trial comes; devastating trial comes.

And the writer takes them back, and do you notice what he does in Hebrews 12? And if you've got a version of Hebrews 12 in which verses 5 and 6, or at least the second half of verse 5 and verse 6, is indented, you see straight away that what he's actually doing is quoting—he's quoting the Bible; he's quoting Proverbs chapter 3. Isn't that interesting? It's a fundamental thing, of course. It's not Einstein. This isn't rocket science here. He's saying to these Christians who are troubled because they find themselves in affliction: the very fact that they are in affliction brings them more affliction. It troubles their mind; it troubles their thoughts about God and about themselves. And what does he do? He takes them back to the Bible. He takes them back to the word of God. He takes them back to Proverbs chapter 3, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, and do not be weary when reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." 'You know this Scripture!' he's saying to them.

Many of these folk addressed in the letter to the Hebrews were converted Jews: that's what we think. The vast majority of them were Judeo-Christians: they had been Jews, and they had been converted into Christianity, and they knew their Old Testament; they knew the book of Proverbs. Many of them knew this verse. They had learned it from childhood; they had heard it quoted often, over and over. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him, for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines." Now, you've forgotten that haven't you? The writer seems to see something in the background here which on the face of it seems a little strange to us. He distinguishes between legitimate children and illegitimate children. And I think it's difficult for us to enter altogether into the background that he's drawing from, but the idea that he's conveying is simply this: that a father won't waste his time on disciplining illegitimate children because they will never inherit—Not in the first century, they wouldn't inherit; they would have been regarded as embarrassing. And the very fact that the father takes time and trouble to discipline this particular young child is evidence in itself that this young child is not illegitimate but legitimate. That's the background. In other words, that the correction itself is seen as evidence that they are children.

Now I was reading the other day, John Perkins, from Jackson Mississippi, his extraordinary book, *Let Justice Roll Down*. Many of you, I know, have read it.

That book is a biographical, autobiographical statement about his life growing up. And he talks about the time when his father as a young teenager—actually maybe he wasn't even a teenager. I think he was only eight or nine years old, and his father walks out of the home. And he was only to see his father, I think, a couple of times after that. And he describes the day that his father walked out of the home, and he describes how he ran after him, and how his father turned and came back to him, and in John Perkins' word, "whooped him." His aunt then came and got the little boy and took him back to the house. And this is what Perkins says, "I cried all the way back to the house, but I know that even when he punished me for following him that afternoon, he was admitting we had some sort of relationship." I shake my head too. In that severely distorted portrayal of a family, and it is a severely distorted portrayal of a family, there's a little glimpse that at least the father is disciplining this child because he is his child. That's the point. Even in that distorted picture there was evidence of paternity.

Now it's natural, isn't it, to suppose that affliction and trial is actually evidence that God doesn't care? We might suppose that. It would be a fairly natural thing to assume that the fact that we find ourselves in trouble is evidence that God doesn't care. We're often tempted to think that. If we're honest about it tonight we've probably thought that on many an occasion. And the writer of Hebrews is saying, 'The very fact that you are being disciplined, the very fact that you find yourselves in trouble is not evidence that God doesn't care, but on the contrary it is evidence that God is your Father and He loves you and He's concerned about you.' He's writing to a people who were facing persecution from Jewish quarters because they had become Christians. And many of them were tempted to think that the smart move would be to go back to Judaism again, to go back to the synagogue, to throw everything aside. And he's saying to them, 'No! Endure this trial; endure this suffering, because it's evidence. Do you see that there is a relationship here between you and your Father? Suffering is to be expected. Discipline is to be expected. Discipline is necessary in the Christian life; it is to be valued and prized. Everyone who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution,' Paul says.

II. Discipline is painful.

Discipline is necessary but, secondly, discipline is painful. Ah, yes, it's painful. He says in verse 11, "For the moment all discipline seems"—not to be joyful but—"to be sorrowful." That's right. It's sorrowful. I dare say if I were to take a straw pole of the, I don't know, couple of hundred people that are here tonight, many of you are just at that point: sorrowful, your hearts are heavy, your knees are feeble, your hands are hanging down, barely able to put one step in front of another, weighed down by sorrows and difficulties. If that's now where you are, rejoice my friend, because many of your brothers and sisters are just there—that life is hard and life is difficult. "Endure hardship," verse 7, in some translations.

Notice the word that is used in verse 6, “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He *scourges*...” Now the word *scourge*, of course, is “to whip.” It’s not suggesting that that’s how we deal with our children, but that’s, that’s the word that is being used. It’s painful, extraordinarily painful. Sometimes this discipline comes when we read the Scriptures. Sometimes when we read our Bibles in the morning or in the evening, and we read the word of God and it comes across our minds and hearts and our conscience, and it’s painful. And God shows us for what we are. And the word has a way of rebuking us, and we feel something of its pain, and we feel something of the cords cutting into our flesh and blood and bones. Do you recall, do you recall how Peter would write in his first epistle in chapter 5 in verse 13, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God”? “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.” Isn’t that a graphic expression, “the mighty hand of God”? He’s talking about trials; he’s talking about afflictions. He’s talking about those sudden providences that can come into our lives that can take the feet from underneath us. And it’s like, Peter says, “the mighty hand of God.”

I think Peter was thinking about that time in the courtyard, you remember, when he denied the Lord; and that marvelous way in which Luke describes that Jesus saw him, wherever Jesus was as He was being handed from Annas to Caiaphas, across that courtyard the eyes of Jesus caught hold of the eyes of Peter, and I think it was like a mighty hand coming down upon him and pressing him down to the ground so that he would lie prostrate before his God and Father in heaven. And I wonder, my friend, if that’s how you feel tonight, in the providence of God as though His hand was upon you and pressing you down. Or sickness...pain can be our teacher. Pain can be our teacher. One of the Puritans said that, “The life of God’s children is like a bell, and the harder you hit it, the better it sounds.” William Bridge said, “The sins of God’s people are like bird’s nests, as long as the leaves are in the tree you don’t see them, but when winter comes and the leaves fall to the ground, the nests are seen clearly.” That’s true. I have a mockingbird nest in a tree just outside my house. I never knew it was there until last winter when all the leaves fell. It had been there all summer. Our cat knew because every time the cat went out the front door this mockingbird would come and dive bomb just inches above the cat’s head, as mockingbirds do. But I never knew there was a nest there, not until all the leaves fell down. George Whitefield once said that, “God puts burrs or thorns in our bed, lest we should fall asleep like the disciples at Gethsemane, rather than watch and pray.” Lest we fall asleep...lest we fall asleep God sends painful, hard trials to keep you awake. He sends a winter, not this warm, humid air—and some of you are struggling with keeping your eyes open—but a cold, north wind blowing through the sanctuary of our souls to keep us awake. Isn’t that the testimony of the Psalmist in Psalm 119, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your word.” Sometimes to our shame, sometimes to our shame, we only come to realize the posity of what we are when trial strikes.

Trials can have...discipline can have a tremendous effect on your life. I

remember I was six years old, that's a while ago now, and in primary school. I remember, with two other boys going up to the window of a classroom. This dear, dear old lady, at least she appeared to be old to me then—she probably wasn't, but, you know, as a six year old she appeared to be very old—and making faces through the window at her. And then, within what appeared to be a millisecond she had come out of that classroom, and I felt her hand at the back of my neck. We were dragged into that classroom, and we had to write on the chalkboard 100 times, “Manners maketh men.” That was 44-45 years ago, and I remember it as though it were yesterday. I can still see her face of horror because she had her back turned to us when we made these gestures, you understand, but she turned and then suddenly I saw her, looking straight at me. I remember that discipline as though it was yesterday. I still feel the shame of it. Discipline is painful.

III. Discipline is for our good.

Thirdly, discipline is for our good. He says in verse 10, “For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them,” speaking of earthly fathers, “but He,” that is God, “disciplines us for our good.” And in verse 11, he talks about the “peaceable fruit of righteousness” that afterwards it yields. Discipline is for our good. Yes, all things work together for the good of those that love Him. Isn't that what Joseph said to his brothers when they had sold him into slavery and left him, actually for dead to begin with, then sold him into slavery? And Joseph had found himself in prison. And then in that extraordinary moment when he reveals himself to his brothers, many years later, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” God meant it for good. And verse 10 informs us what that good is: “For they,” earthly fathers, “disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He,” that is God, “disciplines us for our good that we may share His holiness.” That's why God disciplines us: because He wants to make us holy. He needs to mold us and shape us and fashion us after the image of Jesus Christ and there are many, many things that need to be cut off. Before we shine and sparkle like a diamond in glory there needs to be a lot of polishing first, a lot of polishing. You remember John Newton's great hymn, poem, “*A Prayer Answered by Crosses*”?

*I ask'd the Lord, that I might grow in faith, and love, and ev'ry grace,
Might more of his salvation know, and seek more earnestly his face.
2 'Twas he who taught me thus to pray, and he, I trust has answer'd pray'r;
But it has been in such a way, as almost drove me to despair.
3 I hop'd that in some favour'd hour, at once he'd answer my request:
And by his love's constraining pow'r, subdue my sins, and give me rest.
4 Instead of this. he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell assault my soul in ev'ry part.
5 Yea more, with his own hand he seem'd intent to aggravate my woe;
Cross'd all the fair designs I schem'd, blasted my gourds, and laid me low.
6 Lord, why is this, I trembling cry'd, wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
"'Tis in this way," the Lord reply'd, "I answer pray'r for grace and faith.*

*7 "These inward trials I employ, "From self and pride to set thee free;
"And break thy schemes of earthly joy, "That thou mayst seek thy all in
me."*

That's an extraordinary poem, isn't it? Isn't that your testimony? You ask God to draw you nearer to Himself, to make you more holy, to make you more like Jesus Christ, to be more devoted to Him. And what's the answer to that prayer? Trials, problems, difficulties, afflictions.

IV. Discipline can make us lose heart.

But there's a fourth thing I want us to see: that discipline can make us lose heart. Discipline can make us lose heart. Do you notice how he puts it in verse 5? Quoting from Proverbs 3, he talks about "fainting when you are reprov'd by Him." You see, that's, that's the temptation, isn't it? That when God sends trial—cancer, death, you lose your job, your children stray—there is the attendant and it invariably happens that you lose heart and you faint and you stumble and your hands hang down and your knees grow weary, the writer of Hebrews says.

So what do you do? What do you do when you find yourself in that position? Well, look at the opening verses of Hebrews 12. He talks about, first of all, "the great cloud of witnesses." Think about the great cloud of witnesses, that's the first thing, the men and women who endured to the very end. On Saturday morning, here in this sanctuary, we buried one who endured to the very end and passed through enormous affliction at the end. Let him be an encouragement to you to endure. Whatever trial you are passing through, he passed through trials at the end too. And let him be an encouragement. Let him be one of that great cloud of witnesses. Let him be that gallery of the faithful that you walk down the corridor and you look at this face and that face and you say, "God enabled them to persevere; He can do the same in me."

Look at what else he says in the opening verses. He says, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." Your knees are feeble; your hands are hanging down; you're tempted to faint; then look to Jesus, my friend. The Pioneer of our faith, the Trail Blazer, the One who goes before His people and leads the way and beacons us to follow in His train—look to Him; don't take your eyes off Him. That's the problem with some of you: you're looking to yourselves. You're looking to your native powers; you're looking to your native strength; or you're looking to your successes from the past; and that will never save you. Look to Jesus, my friends.

And notice what else it says, "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Yes, you and I, we need to take a wider view of things. This trial, this pain, this affliction—it's only for a moment. It's only for a moment. Do you

remember that word of Psalm 30? “Weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning.” And when you and I, my friends, have passed through that trial and affliction, on the other side, there is joy. There is joy: the joy of being in the undiluted presence of Christ in all of His glory. That’s the joy that lies beyond this affliction. And the writer of Hebrews is saying, ‘As sons of your heavenly Father, see the affliction through which you are now passing as the preparation for the glory that is to come.’ And don’t take your eye off that glory. May God bless His word to us.

Would you stand with me? And let’s pray, and I’ll pronounce the benediction. Please stand with me.

Our God and ever-blessed Father, thank You for this word of Scripture, how it encourages our hearts. Many of us here tonight find ourselves in affliction—things that we would long would not be there, things that we plead with You to take away, like a thorn in our flesh. We pray for grace tonight to be able to say that “it was good for us to be afflicted,” that we might be conformed more and more and more to the image of Your Son and our Savior. Have Your way with us, but do not forsake us. Uphold us and strengthen us every step of the way. And as we bear that cross, bear it with us, Lord Jesus, we pray, for it is to You that we look and to none other. Hear us, Lord, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Receive the Lord’s benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you

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