

them a life that is suitable to their flesh and to allow them to destroy their lives pursuing ungodliness. When you suffer as a Christian you can have this assurance ringing in your ears, “God is treating me as a son!”

Closer Communion with Christ

As we are disciplined we think of Christ, something we might rarely do if things always went well. When we experience trials it becomes perfectly natural to meditate on the faithfulness and compassion of Jesus (Heb. 12:3).

Deeper Experience of Joy

Young children are happy when things go well and sad when they go ill; that’s superficial joy. Through discipline we are trained to experience deep joy even in pain (James 1:2).

Stronger Resolve for Holiness

Hebrews 12:10 says that believers are disciplined “that we might share in his holiness.” Through God’s discipline Christians “strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Heb. 12:12) and press on in holiness.

Deeper Yearning for Heaven

If we were not disciplined we would be content with our present circumstances. Tragically we would then miss the wonder of anticipating heaven.

God disciplines us as sons to make us more like his Son to prepare us to live in his family forever. This grand reality doesn’t take away the pain of life but it does encourage us with the knowledge that pain is a servant to God’s perfect purpose.

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THRIVING UNDER GOD’S DISCIPLINE:

TRADING TEMPORARY PAIN FOR ETERNAL GAIN

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

None of us need to be told that our lives are sometimes painful. We struggle with feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. We experience the frustration of physical pain and failure. We know what it’s like to be let down, looked down upon, misunderstood and mistreated.

Our hurt is real. But the amazing reality is that if we suffer while trusting in Jesus then our story is similar to those listed in Hebrews 11. In fact, the letter to the Hebrews was written for believers who were tempted to give up due to their struggles. They (like us today) desperately needed to know that God disciplines those he loves for their good and his glory (Heb. 12:3-11). The first half of Hebrews 12 is an invitation to trade temporary pain for eternal gain.

To grow through life’s pain we must know three things: What God’s

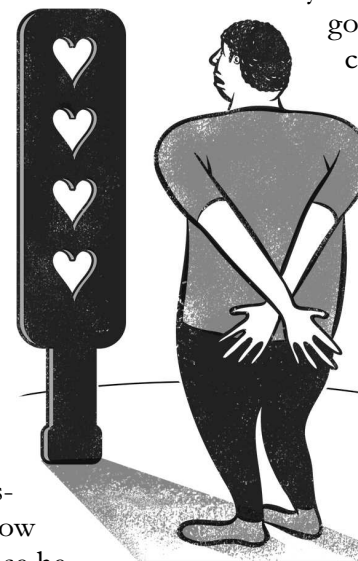
discipline is, how to respond to it and what it produces.

Definition of Discipline

God’s discipline of his children is his comprehensive training plan for our maturity. He works *all things* for the good of those whom he has called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). God has promised to sanctify his people; to not leave them in their natural immaturity. He carries out this promise by disciplining us.

A Positive Plan

The Bible stresses that although God’s discipline is painful, the plan is positive. When we hear “discipline” we often think of fear, anger and punishment. The word for discipline in Hebrews 12 means “to train a child.” True training is not limited to rebuke and chastisement but includes encouragement, teaching and gentle correction.



God disciplines us by teaching us how to stay on the path of godliness (formative discipline) as well as by lovingly correcting us when we stray from that path (corrective discipline). God's discipline is varied but it is always good.

A Pressing Plan

God's discipline is also a pressing plan; we *need* him to train us. People hire personal trainers to get in shape because they know, on their own, they lack the expertise and will-power to make it happen. So it is with us and God. We lack the wisdom and motivation to discipline ourselves. If it wasn't for God's persevering discipline we would not only become lazy in our quest for godliness, we would quit the effort altogether. As much as we don't always want God's discipline, we need it.

A Perfect Plan

Finally, God's discipline is a perfect plan. Hebrews 12 contrasts God's discipline with that of human parents. God's discipline excels that of human parents in all areas including severity, consistency, attitude, motive and duration. Parents sometimes discipline too hard, sometimes too soft; God knows just how hard to press. Parents sometimes fail to act due to laziness, discouragement or naivety; God never misses an opportunity to mature us. Parents sometimes discipline in anger; God always chastens in love. Parents sometimes discipline out of embarrassment; God's discipline always flows from his righteous commitment to our good. Finally, parents discipline

for a short time to prepare us for adulthood; God trains us our whole lives in preparation for eternity.

Whatever our preconceptions of chastening may be, the Bible insists that God's discipline of his children is his positive, perfect and pressing training plan for our maturity.

Details of Discipline

All discipline *is* positive and believers regularly *experience* discipline that even feels positive. Christians rejoice as God informs and transforms their mind through regular Bible teaching. We are grateful when he helps us to defeat previously besetting sins. We are thankful that as God grants us faithfulness in small things he gives us opportunities with greater things.

But, while all discipline *is* positive, not all discipline *feels* positive but painful. One of the lessons in Hebrews 12 is that we should not be surprised by pain; it's essential to training.

Painful Experiences

Sometimes God disciplines us through painful experiences. We face opposition from friend and foe; from the righteous and the wicked. God is teaching us that he alone is faithful. We bump up against limitations whether regular inabilities, unique physical or emotional disabilities or frustrated plans. God is teaching us that our strength is perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). God's children sometimes enter into times of painful backsliding. God allows us to know the pain of unbelief to increase our love for grace. Through no fault of our own the Lord sometimes clouds

his face from us so we cry out for his presence. And we have all experienced what can only be described as personal tragedies. When our world turns upside down we eventually more clearly see the constancy of God.

Painful Emotions or Attitudes

Loneliness and sadness are opportunities for us to cry out to God (Psa. 73:25,26; 86:3) and ask questions. Fear can be used to treat our self-confidence. Extreme boredom may be God's way of exposing our puny vision for life. Painful conviction of sin urges repentance (Psa. 32:4). Conversely, callousness to sin teaches us the attitude that lands people in hell.

The point is, as Absalom finally got Joab's attention by setting fire to his grain field (2 Sam. 14:28-31), God often reaches us through pain.

Demands of Discipline

John Calvin advises us that we only experience God's discipline as *paternal* when we respond to it as *sons*. How do we respond to God's discipline as sons and daughters?

Trusting Submission (Heb. 12:9)

Such a response of love requires trust. Do we really believe that God makes no mistakes? Theologically we would say "yes." Experientially we might wonder. But faith trusts that not a hair can fall from our heads apart from the will of God. Faith is convinced that each pain God sends our way has written on it, "For your good."

Through trusting submission we resist grumbling against providence. We resist angry and vengeful re-

sponses toward others. We resist living according to the feelings that painful experiences can evoke, fixing our eyes instead, on God's goal.

Loving Gratitude

There is nothing like hearing your son say, "I love you" after you have discipline him. Such a response is essential to growing through discipline. It reveals that we have learned to say with Job: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

Prayerful Reflection

But submitting to discipline is not stoicism. When we feel the unpleasant pressures of God's providence we need to ask, "What might God be teaching me? Likewise we should ask God, "Why is this happening?" Similar questions are asked by God's children over twenty times in the Psalms.

Destination of Discipline

In a word, discipline produces maturity. Through discipline God gets our attention and breaks us out of our sense of self-sufficiency. God sends us challenges to strengthen our faith. With maturity comes a greater awareness about ourselves, our sin and our Savior.

Greater Assurance of God's Love

God's discipline convinces us that "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov. 13:24; cf. 22:15; 23:13ff.) and "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (Rev. 3:19). God loves his children too much to give