

Final Paper

God's fatherly discipline as discussed in Hebrews 12

Edward Rowse

November 12, 2019

NT644: Hebrews (English Text)/NT744 Hebrews (Greek Text): OA

Professor: Dr. Shawn Craig Miles

In Romans 12:2 the Apostle Paul challenged us to “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” To conform, one simply needs to follow a pattern, as noted by Paul in the previous quote. To transform, a complete renewal is needed. To accomplish this renewal, Hebrews 12:10 posits that God disciplines His children: “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness.”

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate from scripture that God is a good Father who utilizes discipline to instigate the transformation of His children. While discipline is often painful, it ultimately brings about the good that God is seeking to develop in those who follow Him.

Bob Sorge calls God’s discipline “The forgotten doctrine” and defines it as being “the way God redemptively uses adverse circumstances to correct and discipline His children for their progress and maturity.”<sup>1</sup> However, discipline does not always come through adverse circumstances. Throughout Scripture, ‘discipline’ covers a wide range of meaning, for it can connote training (Eph 6:4), education (Deut. 8:5), reproof (Prov. 9:7), correction (Zeph. 3:2), warning (Is. 8:11), chastening (Prov. 3:11), and punishment (Hos. 10:10).<sup>2</sup>

In our primary text of Hebrews 12:4-13 the word translated as “discipline” is the Greek word “Paideia”. It refers to the whole training and education of children, which relates to the cultivation of mind and morals and employs for this purpose commands and

---

<sup>1</sup> Sorge, Bob. *The Chastening of the Lord: The Forgotten Doctrine*. (Kansas City: Oasis house, 2016), 15.

<sup>2</sup> T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, electronic ed.* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 1.

admonitions.<sup>3</sup> The writer of Hebrews makes two things clear regarding God’s discipline: it is motivated out of His Fatherly love<sup>4</sup> and it is for our ultimate good.<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 12:7 also states the obvious, “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.”

Scripture makes clear that God disciplines us, but must it always hurt? God states in Revelation 3:19, “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline.” Can a good God discipline, and must it always involve pain? To these questions, let us turn.

### Reconciling God’s discipline with God’s goodness

Isaiah 53:5 predicted, “The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him.” The Apostle Paul declared that we are “saved from God’s wrath through Christ.”<sup>6</sup> We Christians adhere to the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, which basically states that Jesus took our place.<sup>7</sup> So, it was our cross upon which Jesus hung. If, Jesus took our punishment, why are we disciplined? At first blush this question seems reasonable.

However, scripture testifies that God clearly punishes. Hebrews 12:29 uses the word “punish” in reference to one who has trampled the Son of God underfoot and treated His blood as an unholy thing. The Greek meaning of this word carries with it the aspect of vengeance and avenging.<sup>8</sup> Trample Jesus underfoot and God will avenge it, you will be punished. Punishment is a severe response to our most grievous sins. However, even in this, we must note that God does not delight in it. He wept over punishing Moab

---

<sup>3</sup> Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 473.

<sup>4</sup> Heb. 12:7, NIV.

<sup>5</sup> Heb. 12:10, NIV.

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 5:9, NIV.

<sup>7</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 579.

<sup>8</sup> Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*, 624.

in Jeremiah 48:31 and they were considered His enemies! Throughout the Old Testament prophets, God's message is fairly clear, "Though My judgments appear stern, I am suffering with you."<sup>9</sup>

Discipline is altogether different than punishment and we ought not confuse them. The goal of discipline is to produce a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.<sup>10</sup> Not all discipline is hard, even though it seems hard in the moment. When my children were little, we made them brush their teeth every morning and evening. This often resulted in a battle. One evening, our son revolted against our directive and blurted out, "Why? I didn't do anything wrong!" We explained to him that forcing him to brush his teeth is not a punishment, but it is a discipline that helps him to be healthy. We were not punishing him, yet he perceived our discipline in that way.

In our immaturity, we can also see God's discipline as a punishment and chafe at it. As we did with our son, God is a wise Father who stays the course with His children, despite our constant rebuttals. Can God be good and discipline? Arguably, God disciplines precisely because He is good. Our imperfect human fathers disciplined us and as adults we now respect them for it.<sup>11</sup> The Holy God is far greater in His treatment of us as His children. In summary, punishment is God's vengeful response to our rebellion. The goal of punishment is to ensure that we never repeat the offense. Jesus absorbed our ultimate punishment on the cross but if we choose to reject it, the full brunt of it will

---

<sup>9</sup> Yancey, Philip. *Disappointment with God: Three questions no one asks aloud* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1988), 95.

<sup>10</sup> Heb. 12:11, NIV.

<sup>11</sup> Heb. 12:9, NIV.

come tumbling down upon us. Discipline, however, is proactive. It is God working to bring us into maturity.

### Reasons for Discipline

As previously demonstrated, we have done ourselves a disservice by associating discipline with punishment. In the Greek world, the term translated “discipline” was the most basic term for education.<sup>12</sup> The root of the Greek word for discipline is the word “pais”, which means “child”.<sup>13</sup> Discipline does not necessarily imply that something was done wrong. In fact, Hebrews 12:10 tells us that God disciplines us so that we can actually share in His holiness. So in this regard, God’s reason for discipline is the formation of our character and not as a response to our wrongdoing.

There is another reason why God disciplines: purification. This appears to be the thrust behind Peter’s words in 1 Peter 4:1-2, “...he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” While the word itself is not always used, purification is the concept behind such scriptural word pictures as a refiner’s fire and pruning. The writer of Psalm 66:10 claimed that God had “refined us like silver.” God spoke in Isaiah 1:25 stating that He would “thoroughly purge away your dross.” In His final discourse, Jesus told His disciples, “every branch that does bear fruit He trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful.”<sup>14</sup> So the reward for being a fruitful disciple is pruning implying that at

---

<sup>12</sup> Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 662.

<sup>13</sup> Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*, 473.

<sup>14</sup> Jn. 15:2, NIV.

times discipline could be God's response to what we're doing correctly. One of the objectives of discipline is purification to make one even more fruitful.

For a third reason of discipline, we return to the subject of punishment. Psalm 99:8 says, "O Lord our God, You answered them; You were to Israel a forgiving God, though You punished their misdeeds." Here we see God's punishment of misdeeds juxtaposed with His forgiveness. He forgives and punishes. In Psalm 103:10, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities." The implication is that while He graciously reduces it, we still receive punishment for our sin. The psalm continues by speaking of God's fatherly compassion towards His children.

When we limit our view of God's discipline by defining it as punishment, we miss the full breadth of what His discipline means. His discipline is not always punishment, yet in certain circumstances it is. When punishment is necessary, God metes it out with compassion. This raises another question, by what means does God discipline us? The writer of Hebrews specified hardship<sup>15</sup> but does God utilize other methods?

### Vehicles for Discipline

In addition to hardships and adverse circumstances as already mentioned, God also speaks to His children as a means of discipline. In Deuteronomy 4:36 we read, "From heaven He made you hear His voice to discipline you." We actually see an example of God speaking a correction to Balaam in Numbers 22:33. In addition to God's spoken word, we also have God's written Word, 2 Timothy 3:16 claims that written Scripture is useful for rebuking, correcting and training.

---

<sup>15</sup> Heb. 12:7, NIV.

Additionally, Israel's forty year period of desert wandering is referenced in Deuteronomy 11:2 as a disciplinary measure. In this text God tells a generation of Israelites poised to enter the Promised Land, "Remember that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the Lord your God." This generation was finishing the wilderness experience and their children would only know life in the Promised Land. God challenged these parents to make certain that the next generation learned from the discipline they endured.

Further, exile is a disciplinary tool. Jeremiah 32:31-33 implies that there are degrees of discipline leading up to exile. God speaks to His people, He teaches them again and again, and if they do not respond to His discipline, they are sent into exile. In Hosea 10:10 God indicates that He would bring other nations against His own people and "put them in bonds for their double sin". And lastly, in Revelation 2:5 Jesus warns the Church in Ephesus that if they do not repent He will come and "remove your lampstand from its place."

We see that God utilizes a variety of methods and means to bring discipline to His people. Some of them are less extreme than others. The sound of God's voice, for example, while awesome, is certainly not too painful. However, hardships, exile, the attack of enemies, forty years in a wilderness, would all be considered quite painful and even extreme. And what would it practically look like for the Church in Ephesus to lose their lampstand? Earlier in Revelation John is told that the "lampstands are the seven churches".<sup>16</sup> So a removal of the lampstand in Ephesus would be the actual removal of that church and her witness to that city.

---

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 1:20, NIV.

What does ‘discipline’ mean for the original Hebrews readers?

Having laid a foundation for why God would discipline and even some of the means by which God brings discipline, let us now turn specifically to our primary text of Hebrews 12. Why would the author of Hebrews bring this challenge to the readers? Craig Keener suggests that although it is debated, many believe that the audience of Hebrews was predominantly Jewish and they were under pressure to give up their Christian distinctive.<sup>17</sup> James Thompson says that the consensus of many modern commentaries is that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were tempted to return to Judaism.<sup>18</sup> Although Thompson does a good job of debunking that particular theory, he demonstrates that this letter has a Hebrew audience and they are troubled.<sup>19</sup>

In Hebrews 4:11, the author admonishes the readers to avoid the pitfall of the Israelites who died in the wilderness due to unbelief and “make every effort to enter that rest.” Continuing in Hebrews 10:26-31 the author graphically depicts the punishment that falls upon one who “deliberately keeps on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” After listing the inspirational heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 who did not give up despite the odds stacked against them, the writer challenges the reader in Hebrews 12:7 to “endure hardship as discipline.”

Although the Roman government conducted no comprehensive persecution designed to crush Christianity before the one promulgated by the emperor Decius in AD

---

<sup>17</sup> Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary*, 637-638.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, James W. *Commentaries on the New Testament: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Commentaries on the New Testament: Hebrews*, 10.

249-51, strong opposition to Christianity existed from the beginning.<sup>20</sup> We are uncertain whether or not the readers of Hebrews were being physically persecuted or simply pressured. The strong exhortations that are laced throughout the letter to “not drift away”<sup>21</sup>, to “hold on to our courage”<sup>22</sup>, to “not throw away your confidence”<sup>23</sup>, etc. would all indicate they were under extreme pressure to let go of their faith in Christ.

Given this context, thinking of hardship as discipline, would be an encouragement. The troubles are explained not as a punishment for wrongdoing, but rather as a vehicle for developing their character. They are facing challenges because God loves them and is seeking their ultimate good. This exhortation in Hebrews is similar to James 1:2-3 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” According to Proverbs 23:14 the rod of discipline, “saves the soul from death”. So, while painful in the moment, we can be assured that discipline will lead to our ultimate good.

There is a hidden beauty within the lines of Hebrews 12:7-13 that must be mentioned here. If God is using adversity as discipline, then God is with us in our adversities. God is not standing afar off casting troubles upon us. He intimately shares in the most painful details of our lives and is using them to produce that harvest of righteousness spoken of in Hebrews 12:11. Vince Vitale notes that there is a depth of

---

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *Commentaries on the New Testament: Hebrews*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Heb. 2:1, NIV.

<sup>22</sup> Heb. 3:6, NIV.

<sup>23</sup> Heb. 10:35, NIV.

relationship that is possible only between people who have been through the worst together.<sup>24</sup> God our Father goes through the worst with us.

To take this one step further, Hebrews 2:11 speaks of Jesus as our Brother. In Hebrews 4:15 we are told that Jesus was “tempted in every way as we are” and in Hebrews 5:8 Jesus “learned obedience by what He suffered” as a son. As our elder Brother, Jesus fully identifies with us, even in our sufferings. He endured trials as discipline also. All sons require discipline, even the perfect ones. If Jesus, the perfect Son needed to learn obedience by what He suffered, how much more we as the imperfect sons and daughters. Jesus set the perfect example of a man who endured all the evils life could heap upon Him because He lived His life in full confidence of Him who is invisible.<sup>25</sup> In antiquity, the goal of a father’s discipline was to make the trueborn son a worthy heir.<sup>26</sup>

Hebrews 12:7 boldly declared that the hardships being faced by the readers were evidence that “God is treating you as sons.” Sharing in His holiness is part of our inheritance. This is not the “initial gift of holiness” that comes with our salvation. Rather, it is the goal for which God is preparing His children.<sup>27</sup> Hebrews 12:9 calls God “The Father of our spirits”. God is the Father of our spirits as our earthly fathers have fathered our flesh. Earthly fathers discipline, our Heavenly Father also disciplines. Our flesh and our spirit both require training and discipline.

---

<sup>24</sup> Zacharias, Ravi and Vince Vitale. *Why Suffering? Finding Meaning and Comfort when Life Doesn't Make Sense* (New York: Faith Words, 2014), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 631.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 358.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 359.

Conclusion:

What are we to make of this all? While we cannot know conclusively if all trouble is discipline from God, we can certainly say that not all of God's discipline is revealed as trouble. As we have demonstrated, at times God disciplines us by merely speaking to us. However, by admonishing us to endure hardship as discipline, the writer of Hebrews has elevated our adverse circumstances. This perspective gives purpose to something that could otherwise be very threatening to our faith. The way we perceive our troubles will partly determine what we can receive from them. Seeing trouble as discipline from the hand of a loving Father will keep resentment from forming, bring us to maturity and produce peace.<sup>28</sup>

This subject is intensely personal for me. Approximately five years ago, my wife kicked me out of our house and my young adult children all expressed ways in which I had been hurtful towards them over the years. The church that I pastored placed me on sabbatical as I walked through the most painful season of my entire life. Not knowing if my family, or ministry or life would ever be restored, I wrestled through a host of emotions. As I grieved and processed, the Voice of the Spirit kept repeating, "God disciplines His sons" to my heart. Oddly, this kept my heart encouraged. While dark times are not pleasant, there is nothing sweeter than knowing that God considers me His son and Jesus is "not ashamed"<sup>29</sup> of me as His brother.

---

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 361.

<sup>29</sup> Heb. 2:11, NIV.

The words of Psalm 119:67-68 bring us to a close, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your Word. You are good and what You do is good; teach me Your decrees.”

### Bibliography

Alexander, Desmond T. and Brian S. Rosner eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, electronic ed.* Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000.

Bruce, F.F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994.

Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament.* Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014.

Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.

Sorge, Bob. *The Chastening of the Lord: The Forgotten Doctrine.* Kansas City: Oasis House, 2016.

Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1974.

Thompson, James W. *Commentaries on the New Testament: Hebrews*. Grand  
Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2008.

Yancey, Philip. *Disappointment with God: Three questions no one asks aloud*.  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1988.

Zacharias, Ravi and Vince Vitale. *Why Suffering? Finding meaning and comfort  
When life doesn't make sense*. New York: Faith Words, 2014.