

## Hebrews 12:4-8 "God's Perspective on Hard Times" \*\*

Proposition: When life gets hard, we tend to forget two truths that Hebrews 12:4-13 develops for us.

I. From the human perspective, it could be worse (4).

A. Our Savior shed His blood.

B. Many believers have shed their blood, too.

II. From the divine perspective, God is doing something for our good (5-13).

A. He's doing what He said He would do (5a).

1. When hard times come, we're prone to forget God's Word.

2. We're prone to live by how we feel instead of what we know.

B. He's training us (5b-6).

1. The process involves discipline.

2. The process involves rebuke.

3. The process involves pain.

4. The process is an expression of His love.

C. He's demonstrating that we are His children (7-8).

1. If God disciplines you, then you are His child.

2. If God doesn't, then you are not.

D. He's accomplishing His goal for us (9-13).

Implications: When life gets hard...

1. Look back.

2. Look up.

3. Look ahead.

Life gets hard at times. I mean *really* hard. Hardships come in all shapes and sizes. Health failure. Job challenges. Interpersonal struggles. Dashed dreams. Family disappointments. And more.

It's easy to get discouraged in hard times. We can become disillusioned about life and feel like giving up.

In one sense, the *hardness* of life is the inevitable consequence of living in a sin-cursed world. Our bodies wear out. People sin against us. We reap the consequences of our own sinful choices.

But for the follower of Christ, the challenge goes deeper. It's not just that life is hard. The *Christian* life is hard. It's not easy to be a Christian in a non-Christian world. It's not popular to walk the narrow road while the majority applauds the luxury of the broad road.

There's no getting around the fact that biblical Christianity is *radical*. To assert that Jesus Christ is Lord is life-changing. A true Christian doesn't merely "tack Jesus on" to his life. He surrenders his life to Jesus. He doesn't profess Jesus as *one* option amongst many, but as the *only* way to reach God. He doesn't believe that Jesus' death on the Cross was an accident, but was the fulfillment of God's predetermined, eternal purpose for redeeming unworthy sinners. And He doesn't believe that Jesus stayed in His tomb, but that He rose from the dead, and offers eternal life to those—and *only* to those—who give their allegiance to Him.

That is *radical*. And it's also offensive to a world of people who believe that man is basically good, can reach God on his own merit, and doesn't need a Savior.

So it's not just that life gets hard, but living the Christian life gets hard, so hard in fact some will have second thoughts.

Just like a group of people did in the first century. Apparently, they were Jewish converts. When they heard about Jesus the Messiah, they were thrilled and professed allegiance to Him.

But life got hard, *real* hard. Some "friends" put pressure on them to go back to their old ways, or at least to tone-down their new ways by mixing in some of their old beliefs.

The converts began to waiver. Some of them considered throwing in the towel. It was just too hard to keep going. They needed encouragement.

And so the book of Hebrews was written. By whom? We don't know. According to one tradition, Paul wrote the letter, but that can't be substantiated. What can be is that some of the recipients were about ready to quit.

It wasn't that they hadn't tried. In Hebrews 10:32-34 the writer reflected on the early days following their conversion, "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."

That was *then*, but as time passed the hard times didn't go away. And some of the converts began to lose heart. They began to contemplate quitting. They needed a word of encouragement, and they needed it big time!

Last week we began a mini-series entitled, *When Life Gets Hard*, a study of the first thirteen verses of Hebrews 12.

How can you help someone who's overwhelmed with life? Here's what Hebrews does. It puts the spotlight on *Christ*. The key to confidence is knowing the truth about Christ. Why should we believe in Christ no matter what the cost? It's because of Christ's superiority, as the first segment of Hebrews tells us.

If you searched the entire universe, you would find no one like Jesus. No one. Jesus Christ is the greatest person that ever walked on this planet. He is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being," as Hebrews 1:3 puts it. What's more, He did the most incredible thing. He became a man in order to die and save sinners like us (2:14-15).

And so for twelve chapters, the writer to the Hebrews exalted Christ. Then came the call for response in chapter 12. In light of Christ's supremacy, we have two responsibilities—we must run and remember—as we saw last time in verses 1-3. Let's run with perseverance the race set before us (1). And let's remember Christ who endured such opposition from sinful men (3).

When life gets hard, this is what the Christian must do. Keep running, and keep remembering. If you do, you won't "lose heart," as verse 3 concludes.

But there's something else involved in helping people who are overwhelmed in life. They need an *exhortation*, as verses 1-3 provide. But they also need an *explanation*, and that's what verses 4-13 contribute.

Suffering isn't quite so bad if we can see it as meaningful. We want to know, "What's the purpose of this hardship I'm facing?" We need an explanation, and that's what God's Word offers us next. When life gets hard, we tend to forget two truths presented in Hebrews 12:4-13.

I. From the human perspective, it could be worse (4).

Listen to verse 1, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

That's an interesting perspective. The writer acknowledges his readers' struggle, "In *your struggle* against sin." The literal reading in the Greek text is, "In your struggle against *the* sin." I think he's referring to back to verse 1, to "the sin that so easily entangles."

*The sin* is the sin of unbelief. That's the real enemy, not just the pressures from the outside, but the one from within, the sin of *unbelief*, the tendency to want to quit believing and living for God.

The struggle was real, but there's something that hadn't happened yet. What was it? You haven't "resisted unto blood," as the KJV puts it. In other words, yes, things may be tough, but you're still living! You haven't died yet. You haven't shed your blood yet, have you?

The point is, it could be worse. Indeed, it *was* worse for some other individuals. Who? First of all, for our Savior. We haven't shed our blood yet, but He did.

A. Our Savior shed His blood. Verse 2, "Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame."

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood; Sealed my pardon with His blood. Hallalujah! What a Savior!*

Jesus shed His blood for us. But He's not alone.

B. Many believers have shed their blood, too. In fact, some of the "cloud of witnesses" mentioned in 12:1, did just that. We're told what happened to them in 11:36-38, "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground."

When you ponder what others have endured, it forces us to look at our struggles a little differently, doesn't it?

But it's not just that others *shed* their blood. The fact is, some Christians *are shedding* their blood even while I speak. It's true.

Consider the following: "In the country of Sudan Christians are enslaved. In Iran they are assassinated. In Cuba they imprisoned. In China they are beaten to death.

"In more than sixty countries worldwide, Christians are harassed, abused, arrested, tortured, or executed specifically because of their faith. 200,000,000 Christians throughout the world live in daily fear of secret police, vigilantes, or state repression and discrimination.

"These are not wild rumors. Nor are these simply Christians who, like so many others, suffer from war or tyranny. Hundreds of millions of Christians are suffering simply because of what they believe."

Those words are taken from the book, *Their Blood Cries Out*, by Paul Marshall. It's a fact. All Christians face hardship in life of one sort or another, but some Christians are dying for their faith at this very moment. And that fact puts the problems we face in a different light.

Listen carefully to Marshall's opening words in his chapter entitled, "American Christians: Peace at Any Price":

"It is Sunday morning in Sudan, in China, in Nepal, in Iran, in Cuba. As the sun rises, millions of Christians awaken to the grim awareness that they are about to face another exhausting week—a week that will be marred by fear, hatred, and violence.

"Some dress themselves quickly and make their way across their villages to attend worship services. They glance around cautiously from time to time, wondering if anyone is watching. Intent as they are on gathering together with other believers, they know full well that they may pay dearly for doing so.

"Others arise with the dawn, assemble their poorly-fed children inside shabby homes, and those that have them read quietly from well-worn Bibles that remain carefully hidden during the week. They pray for their daily bread and for the courage to carry on.

"Still others encounter the first day of the week in the darkness of their prison cells. Prayer is on their lips, too, as they look forward to further interrogation, torture, and perhaps eventually execution.

"Meanwhile, in America, a somewhat different scene unfolds. From a glass cathedral in Southern California to a Pentecostal tabernacle in the Deep South; from a high-tech mega-church in Chicago to an Episcopal chapel on the East Coast, a glorious message is declared. Worshipers in air-conditioned buildings, at ease in upholstered pews, eagerly receive the Good News.

"Encouraging words are offered in myriad sermons, dramatic presentations, and testimonials. The message is televised, recorded in countless books and on audiotapes. It is sung in anthems, cried out in rock tunes, and chanted in gospel choruses. It is expressed with tearful promises, with witty anecdotes, or with pop-psych platitudes. The promise is one of peace."

Please don't miss the little word "yet" in verse 4. "You have not *yet* resisted to the point of shedding your blood." What does that imply? Though it hasn't happened yet, it *may*.

Beloved, we need to open our eyes. Our Savior shed His blood. And furthermore, many of His people are doing the same at this very moment. We tend to forget that. When life gets hard, we tend to forget what verse 4 compels us to remember. It could be worse.

There's a second truth we tend to forget when life gets hard. The first word of explanation looked at hardship from the human perspective—it could be worse. The second looks at it from the divine perspective.

## II. From the divine perspective, God is doing something for our good (5-13).

In fact, God is doing four things for us in hardship that contribute to the ultimate good. We'll look at the first three today, mention the fourth, and develop it next time.

Let this truth sink in. When life gets hard, God is doing something for our good. It may not feel like it, but He is. First of all...

A. He's doing what He said He would do (5a). Verse 5 begins, "And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons." Then the writer quotes from Proverbs 3:11-12.

The book of Proverbs is wisdom literature. It tells us how to be wise in life. Interesting, much of the material in Proverbs is actually a conversation between a father and his son.

In Proverbs 3, the father prepared his son for something inevitable in life. He told him about the *Lord's discipline*.

But the writer of Hebrews says, "You've forgotten that word." That's interesting. This New Testament writer

expected his readers to know the Old Testament. But they'd forgotten at least part of it, namely Proverbs 3.

Please realize that not all who hear or read God's Word give attention to it. That's especially true when hard times come. Which leads to a couple of observations...

1. *When hard times come, we're prone to forget God's Word.* "You have forgotten," he says. What had they forgotten? A truth from God's Word, a vital truth. In this case, it was a word of "encouragement" [or "exhortation"—*paraklaseos* is the Greek term].

What they needed was encouragement. But what they'd forgotten was the very thing that could give encouragement, God's Word. When hard times come we're so prone to forget God's Word. What's more...

2. *We're prone to live by how we feel instead of what we know.* If we do that, we're in big trouble. Why? Because when hard times come, we'll *feel* like bailing out.

The following was taken from the diary of John Wesley. . .

Sunday, A.M., May 5 Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.  
Sunday, P.M., May 5 Preached in St. John's. Deacons said "Get out and stay out."  
Sunday, A.M., May 12 Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.  
Sunday, A.M., May 19 Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.  
Sunday, P.M., May 19 Preached on street. Kicked off street.  
Sunday, A.M., May 26 Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.  
Sunday, A.M., June 2 Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.  
Sunday, P.M., June 2 Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

Suppose Wesley only preached when he *felt* like it. He would have missed out—and so would those hearers on June 2!

God doesn't want us to miss out. He wants us to know that even in the hard times He's doing something for our good. In fact, when He allows hardship, He's simply doing what He said He'd do back in Proverbs 3, namely activity #2...

B. He's training us (5b-6). Here's the quotation from Proverbs 3: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Different people respond differently to the hardship God allows into their lives. Some people accept it in a rather stoic sense. "Whatever will be will be," they say. Some people indulge in self-pity. Still others just try to get through it, and hope it doesn't last too long. Barclay quotes a famous Roman who said, "I will let nothing interrupt my life."

How should the Christian view hardship? According to Hebrews 12 we must view it as part of God's training process. That's right. God is training us. He's preparing us for something.

We're born into His family at a moment in time, the moment we receive Christ as Savior and Lord. But growth is a process, a life-long process. God wants His children to grow. And God knows how to grow His children. He uses a process.

"What's involved in this training process?" you ask. The writer mentions four ingredients in verses 5-6.

1. *The process involves discipline.* "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline." The word "discipline" appears nine times in the English text of verses 5-11 [translated "chastening" in the KJV]. The Greek term is *paideia*, a word translated elsewhere in the New Testament as "nurture" (Eph 6:4) and "instruction" (2 Tim 3:17).

When we use the word "discipline," we typically think of it in the negative, punitive sense. "That child needs to be disciplined!" the frustrated mother says to her husband. But though the word *paideia* includes corrective measures, it's bigger in scope. It involves the overall education process, of which chastening is a necessary part, but only a part.

You see, God is not a "permissive" parent. He doesn't let his "kids" grow up on their own. He disciplines them. That is, He brings things into their lives especially designed to help them mature.

God doesn't want us to be pampered babies. He wants us to be mature adult sons and daughters who reflect well on His family name. And in the growth process, He uses *discipline*. That's not all...

2. *The process involves rebuke.* Notice the next imperative in verse 5, "And do not lose heart when he rebukes you." Did you know that God rebukes His children? He reproveth them. He shows them when they get off course, and then how to get back on course.

Jerome once said, "The greatest anger of all is when God is no longer angry with us when we sin." By that He meant that the worst thing that could ever happen to us would be for God to ignore us and let us go our own way.

But He'll never do that with His children. He rebukes us for our own good. When that happens we must not "lose heart" [or "faint," as the KJV says].

3. *The process involves pain.* Verse 6, "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he *punishes* everyone he accepts as a son." Punishment is part of loving discipline. God "punishes" His sons ["scourge" in the KJV]. The same term appears in John 19:1, there referring to the scourging of Christ by Pilate.

There's no getting around this. God's training process involves pain.

4. *The process is an expression of His love.* In the ancient world, the Roman father possessed absolute authority. When a child was born, the father decided whether to keep or discard it. Literally. Throughout the child's life, the father could punish it as he saw fit. Under Roman law, a father could even execute his son, though this was rarely done.

I'm so thankful that the Lord is not like an predictable human father. "The Lord disciplines those he *loves*." Don't miss that. When a parent says, "I love my child too much to discipline her," that statement indicates the parent doesn't understand biblical love or discipline.

Discipline is an expression of love. Does that mean it's pleasant? No way. But is it vital? Absolutely. It's part of the training process.

My favorite sport in school was basketball. I loved to play the game year-round. But I didn't particularly care for November, and here's why. The first game of our season didn't occur until the end of November. That meant we practiced for weeks without playing an actual game.

Those pre-season practices were *hard*. I remember the blisters on my feet. For about a two-week period, my leg muscles were so sore I could hardly walk the steps at school. I even recall a trip one time to get some stitches for a cut above the eye, the consequence of diving on the hardwood floor for a loose ball. Yes, pre-

season practice was hard.

Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Why not? Because I wanted to be a good basketball player, and I knew that required preparation. In fact, understanding the purpose of the hardship is what kept me going.

Now follow me. Just because something is *hard* doesn't mean it's *bad*. Is suffering *hard*? It sure is. But is it bad? No. God is doing something for our good. You see, when God allows hardship in our lives, first of all, He's merely doing what He said He'd do. Secondly, He's training us. But that's not all. Thirdly...

C. He's demonstrating that we are His children (7-8). "Endure hardship as discipline." Stop there for a moment.

How do we endure hardship? We endure when we do what Jesus did—we "run with perseverance the race marked out for us (1)." We endure hardship when we refuse to run and quit.

It's so easy to "shut down" in life and stop trusting the Lord. The writer says, "Don't do that. *Endure hardship as discipline.*" That is, don't lose sight of what God is doing through the hardship.

And just what is He doing? The text continues (7b-8), "God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."

That's an interesting question, "For what son is not disciplined by his father?" In our society the answer would be, "A lot of sons aren't!"

Some dads are abusive. But hitting a child when out of control isn't "discipline." It may get results, but it's not *paideia*.

Other dads are permissive. They fail to take action. For whatever the reason, they don't get involved in dealing with problems. They're like David of whom we're told this in 1 Kings 1:6, "[He] had never interfered with him [his son Adonijah] by asking, 'Why do you behave as you do?'"

Show me a "hands off" dad—a dad who lets his child do his own thing and fails to lovingly yet firmly deal with problems in his life—and I'll show you two things: one, a dad who's not loving his child as he should; and two, a child who's heading for trouble.

That's what Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."

All sons have to be disciplined. Even Christ, the perfect Son, endured discipline, though not in corrective sense of the word. Hebrews 5:8-9 explains this most mind-boggling truth, "Although he [Christ] was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect [complete, mature], he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

A child left to himself grows up to be a self-centered tyrant. But God won't allow that to happen with His children. Look at verse 8 again, "If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."

This is powerful stuff. Don't miss two inevitable conclusions.

1. *If God disciplines you, then you are His child.* On the other hand...

2. *If God doesn't, then you are not.* Rather, you are a *nothos* (that's the Greek word). In the first century, the term was used to describe one born of a slave or concubine. It depicted an illegitimate child.

You see, a father chastens only his sons, and the chastening is part of the evidence that they are his sons. A father doesn't spank his neighbor's children (no matter how much he may feel like doing so at times!). He has no legal right to do so. But he chastens his own children.

Know this. God disciplines His children. He will not allow one of His children to sin over and over. He will take action. He will chasten that child so that the child repents and gets rid of the sin. God loves His children too much to let them go their own way. And if a child of God persists in sin, God will eventually take that person out of this world prematurely.

You may recall that this is what happened in Corinth. Some church members became sick and some even died. Why? Because they refused to deal with sin in their lives, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11:32, "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."

Perhaps you're thinking, "But I know some people who never experience any chastening. When they disobey God's Word, they seem to get away with it. I thought you said God disciplined His children."

He does. He disciplines *His* children. But not everybody who claims to be saved is His child. In fact, if a person claims to be a Christian, yet lives like the world and apparently "gets away with it," that person is a counterfeit. God will not stand idly by while His children walk in sin.

This is serious business. If I am a person who disobeys God yet never experiences His chastening, I have no reason to think I'm God's child.

Make it personal. What happens when you sin? If you are God's child, you will feel the weight of God's displeasure. If at that point you refuse to deal with your sin, you will experience further chastening. God will take action—because He loves you—to get your attention, so you'll turn from sin and return to Him.

But if that's not happening in your life, you need to ask yourself, "Am I truly God's child?"

That sheds a whole, new light on hardship, doesn't it? When we face hard times, we need to see the loving hand of God in it. He's demonstrating that we are His children.

There's something else He's doing which we'll explore next time.

D. He's accomplishing His goal for us (9-13). What is the goal? That's your homework this week. Read verses 9-13 and answer this question, "What's the ultimate reason God allows us to experience hardship?" For now three implications...

#### Implications: When life gets hard...

1. *Look back.* That's what verse 2 compels us to do. Look to the Cross. It could be worse. It was for our Savior. Look back and remember.

2. *Look up.* Look to the Father in heaven. Look at the hardship from His perspective. God is doing something for our good. He's treating us as sons.

3. *Look ahead.* Look to the end of the race, to the finish line. And know this...

*It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Life's trials will seem so small when we see Him. One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrow will erase. So bravely run the race till we see Christ.*

