

Hebrews 12:4-8 "Responding to the Lord's Loving Discipline" **

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

Key: We need to look at life's hardships through the lens of God's unfailing love.

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.

I hurt my daughter last week, and I did it on purpose. It's true. I actually inflicted pain that brought my second-born to the verge of tears. By the way, before you call 911, you need to know what my daughter knows, and that's the fact that I hurt her because I love her.

As many of you know, Katie had shoulder surgery a week and a half ago and she's now in the healing

process. *Process* is the key word, and a vital part of the healing process are the exercises three times a day. That's where it happened.

"I can't raise my arm again," Katie told me as she completed her fourth arm bend. "It hurts too much and I want to quit."

"No," I responded. "You remember the doctor's instructions. He said you need to do *ten* arm bends at a time. Let's keep going. Six more. You can do it."

She looked into my eyes, grimaced, and kept going with the arm bends until she finished the required task. She and I both knew that the pain was necessary for the desired gain.

How does God show His children that He loves them? He does it in lots of ways. When He gives us good health, a job we enjoy, peace in our family, fulfilling friendships, He's demonstrating His love for us, isn't He? He gives those good things to us because He loves us. After all, He gave the *best* thing to us as a demonstration of His love. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.*

Now answer this. What about when God brings into our lives the *loss* of health, or the *loss* of a job, or when He allows us to experience the *loss* of peace in our family, or the *loss* of fulfillment in our friendships? God is sovereign, right? He could do something about those losses, couldn't He? He could prevent them from happening in the first place, or once allowed He could intervene and restore those losses. So what is our sovereign God communicating to us when He allows us to experience hardship, and when, in spite of our request to stop the pain He says, "No, not yet. I want you to keep going and keep enduring."?

The fact is, what God is communicating to us when He sends us pain is the very same truth He's demonstrating when He fills our lives with gain. He's showing us *that He loves us*.

You say, "Sounds like double talk to me. Can you support that biblically?" Yes, from Proverbs 3:12 which is quoted in Hebrews 12:6: "The Lord disciplines those He loves."

Ponder that incredible statement. What does the Lord do? He disciplines, that is, He administers pain for a purpose. And who does He discipline? Those He loves. The pain He inflicts is intended to be a tangible expression of His love.

Let me give you a statement to think about, and then we'll develop it in light of this morning's text...

Key: We need to look at life's hardships through the lens of God's unfailing love.

Typically, that's not the conclusion we draw. When life gets hard, our natural response is to question God's love for us, not affirm it. By faith, however, we need to interpret the painful circumstance from the starting point of this reality, "God loves me. He's already given His Son for me, so I can be sure that whatever else He sends into my life is ultimately an expression of His love for me."

Hebrews 12 can help us develop that perspective. That's because when life gets hard, we tend to forget two truths that Hebrews 12:4-13 develops for us, as we'll explore this week and next, the Lord willing.

As we've been seeing in our current series, the book of Hebrews puts the spotlight on *Christ*. The key to trusting God in hard times is knowing the truth about Christ. 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 comes 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, here's the first of two truths we tend to forget.

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 our 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.

Their struggle was real, but here's something that hadn't happened yet. 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 and through faith in Him we've been forgiven. But He's not alone.

B. Many believers have shed their blood, too. In fact, some of the "great 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 are 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."[\[1\]](#)

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 "yet" 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 the hardship, and these four things, each which demonstrate His love for us, contribute to our ultimate good. We'll look at the first three today, mention the fourth and develop it next time.

It's vital that we affirm this. 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," the writer of Hebrews says. What had his readers 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], a word that could put courage in them.

That's what they desperately needed, encouragement. Yet what they'd forgotten was the very thing that could give them this encouragement.

Beloved, when hard times come, if we're not careful, we'll neglect the truths of God's Word. Here's another tendency...

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

The following was taken from the diary of the great eighteenth century preacher, 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 had 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...

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. "Why me?!" they moan, as if they alone are suffering in the world. Still others just try to get through it, and hope it doesn't last too long. Like the famous Roman, cited by Barclay, who said, "I will let nothing interrupt my life."^[2]

The question is, 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, the God-Man who died for us, as our Savior and Lord. But growth in God's family 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 *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 means 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 does. At times He reproves 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 our Heavenly Father will 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. You say, "I don't get it. Why would God do that?" The answer?

4. *The process is an expression of His love.*

In the ancient world, a Roman father possessed absolute authority. When a child was born, the father decided whether to keep or discard the baby. Then 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 unpredictable 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.

Proper 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.

Think about it. Just because something is *hard* doesn't mean it's *bad*. Is suffering *hard*? It sure is. But is it bad? No. Hebrews says that God is doing something for our good. You see, when God allows hardship in our lives, He's merely doing what He said He'd do. He's training us as an expression of His love for us. But that's not all...

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 verse 2 says that Jesus did. He *endured* the cross. He saw beyond the cross and for the joy set before Him endured the cross. That's what we're supposed to do, as verse 1 exhorts, to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

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? Our 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" anyway. It may get results, but it's not *paideia*.

Other dads are permissive. They fail to take action. For whatever 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 typically grows up to be self-centered. But God won't allow that to happen with His children. Look again at verse 8, "If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not

true sons." This is pretty pointed stuff and it leads to two inevitable conclusions.

1. *If God disciplines you, then you are His child.* But 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 and 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, *loving* 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 His child persists in sin, God may well take that child out of this world prematurely.

That's 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 His child 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. The fact is, 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 His 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 your sin and return to Him to live for His glory.

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 the writer of Hebrews explains next in verses 9-13.

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?" We'll discuss it next time.

We began today by asking the question, "How does God show His children that He loves them?" Since you may not be God's child, let me talk with you for a moment. There's another attribute of God you need to think about today, namely His justice. God is just and must punish sin in His world. He created you and desires and deserves your absolute obedience to His commands. Have you ever told a lie, or coveted your neighbor's car, or spoke an unkind word to someone? These are violations of His Word, acts of treason that He must and will judge. If you die in your sins, you will be punished for your sins forever in the lake of fire. That's what you and I deserve because God is just.

Now, you're ready to hear about His love. God demonstrated His love for you by giving His Son. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)." "But God demonstrated His love for us in this, that while we were

yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8)."

Christ died for sinners and then defeated death on the third day. If you will repent and believe in Him, God will forgive you of your sins and give you the gift of life eternal. God will become your Father, and you will become His child!

And oh how He loves His children! He loves them enough to discipline them. So...

Implications: When life gets hard...we as His children need to do three things.

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 what He endured.

2. *Look up.* Look to your Father in heaven. Look at your hardship from His perspective. He is doing something for your good. He's treating you as a son.

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.*

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, pp. 149-50.

[2] William Barclay, p. 177.