

Hebrews 12:9-13 "Practical Help for Hard Times" **

Proposition: God's Word gives us practical help for hard times in Hebrews 12:9-13. In hard times we need to make two resolves.

I. In the hard times, resolve to think right (9-11).

A. God's discipline is part of growing up (9).

1. The right response is to submit.

2. The right response is to live.

B. God's discipline is for our good (10).

1. Here's what is true of earthly fathers.

· Their efforts are limited.

· They do what they think is best.

2. Here's what is true of our Heavenly Father.

· He always does what is best for us.

· He wants us to be like Him.

C. God's discipline will result in our gain (11).

1. It hurts now.

2. It will produce fruit later.

II. In the hard times, resolve to do right (12-13).

A. Stay in the race (12).

1. If you feel like quitting, don't!

2. Strength is available.

B. Stay on course (13).

1. Do whatever it takes to keep going.

2. Encourage your brothers to do the same.

The bottom line: When life gets hard, remember this...

1. The race won't last forever.

2. The finish line is coming.

3. Our Savior is there and waiting.

Recently I was driving our car at night on road I'd never traveled before. The road was quite hilly and somewhat curvy. To complicate things, there was fog. Not just a little bit of fog, but miles and miles of fog so thick that I felt like I was driving through a cloud. It was like my headlights were hitting a concrete wall they couldn't penetrate.

It's frustrating to drive when you can't see what's ahead of you. And I would have stopped except for something that kept me going—the reflectors on the road. No, the reflectors didn't remove the fog. Instead, they guided me through it. They let me know where the road was so that I could continue on my trip.

That's what God gives us in Hebrews 12, *reflectors* to guide us through the fog of hard times. When hard times come it's easy to get disoriented and confused. We're not sure where God is taking us. We can't see what's ahead. We can't see the end of the road.

"What's the purpose of this hardship?" we may wonder. Yes, God is doing something for our good—we know that—but what?

We need not wonder. Our good God doesn't want us to wander aimlessly in the fog. And He certainly doesn't want us to crash. That's why He gave us Hebrews 12.

In Hebrews 12:9-13, God gives us practical help for hard times, namely two pieces of counsel intended to guide us. Here we learn that in hard times we need to make two resolves. Here's the first.

I. In the hard times, resolve to think right (9-11).

We've come to the final message in a three-part series, "*When Life Gets Hard*," an exposition of Hebrews 12:1-13. In our first study, based on verses 1-3, we learned that if we know Jesus Christ as Savior, we are in a race, and that God calls us to run the race set before us with perseverance (1). We're to fix our eyes on Jesus and keep running.

But the race involves hardship, a lesson we learned last time in our examination of verses 4-8. It's not easy to live for Jesus Christ in this world. In fact, it's *hard*. But just because something is hard doesn't mean it's bad.

The truth is, God uses hard times to help us grow up as His children. Hardship is part of His *paideia*, the Greek term for "discipline" that appears throughout this section.

From God's perspective, discipline is a good thing. When God disciplines us, He's showing that He loves us by training us so we'll mature (5-6). He's also demonstrating that we are His children (7-8).

It's so vital that when hard times come, we *think right*. So often we don't. We misinterpret the data and miss out on the benefit of God's discipline process.

Lori Andersen, a professional animal trainer, tells the following story about a problem she had with training a pet of her own, "I was disturbed when my own dog developed a bad habit. Every time I hung my wash out on the clothesline, she would yank it down. Drastic action was called for. I put a white kitchen towel on the line and waited. Each time she pulled it off, I scolded her. After two weeks the towel was untouched. Then I hung out a large wash and left to do some errands. When I came home, my clean clothes were scattered all over the yard. On the line was the white kitchen towel."

Sometimes we're just as slow to miss the purpose of God's discipline, aren't we?

I left you last time with this question: "What's the ultimate reason God allows us to experience hardship?" In other words, what's the purpose of God's discipline? God tells us in verses 9-11. Three facts are true of God's discipline. Fact #1...

A. God's discipline is part of growing up (9). "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!"

The verse begins, "Moreover" ("Furthermore," in the KJV). It indicates that there's more we need to know besides what's been said in verses 4-8, namely this. God's discipline involves a definite purpose. God has an agenda in mind. As a loving Father, He's committed to helping His children grow up.

To illustrate the truth, the author invites us to think of our earthly fathers. Three things are true. First, we all had human fathers. Secondly, our human fathers disciplined us. And thirdly, we respected them for it.

Granted, there are exceptions. There is the problem of the absentee dad, but this is the way it's supposed to be and usually is. Our dads disciplined us and we respected them as a result.

Some parents don't discipline because they want their child to "like" them. But a parent who fails to give discipline will fail to receive respect.

We gave them "reverence," as the KJV puts it. Maybe we didn't say "thanks" at the time, but the act of discipline instilled a sense of reverence in us for our parents. Indeed, a child who doesn't learn how to respect authority at home will be totally unprepared to go out into life as an adult. So when our dads discipline us, we respect them.

If that's true with our earthly fathers, how much more should it be true with our heavenly Father. The text refers to God as "the Father of our spirits," to contrast our physical (or earthly) fathers with our spiritual (or heavenly) Father.

God disciplines His children. In fact, if God doesn't discipline you it means you are not His child (8). God wants us to mature, to grow up, so He disciplines us.

How should we respond to His discipline? Verse 9 tells us. The right response involves two activities.

1. *The right response is to submit.* The Greek verb is *hupotagesometha*. It's a military term that means "to put under" or "to be subject to."

When an army private receives an order he doesn't like, he doesn't barge into the sergeant's office and say, "I'm not going to do it! I've got a better idea!" No way. He knows his place. In terms of rank, he's "under" the sergeant, so he submits to his decision.

How should we respond when God does something we don't understand? The right response is to submit to His authority. After all, if we respected our dads when they did things we didn't understand, how much more should we submit to our wise heavenly Father!

That seems obvious, doesn't it? But wait. There's a common mentality these days that goes like this: "If God does something you don't understand (like taking your spouse or your health) and you're angry about it, it's okay. You've got a right to be angry. Anger is part of the 'healing' process. So tell God you're angry! He can handle it. Tell Him you don't like what He did. He'll understand."

Is that true? Is it okay to be angry with God? Someone may say, "Yes, it's okay. Anger is part of the 'Grief Process.' It's one of the steps in the recovery process."

Says who? That notion doesn't come from the infallible Word of God but from the studies of fallible human beings.

The objection follows, "But studies have shown that people go through a phase of anger towards God when they experience a significant loss."

I'm not saying people don't respond in anger. A lot do. The question is this. Is that an *appropriate* response?

And by the way, be careful about governing your life by the "studies" of sinful men. Is it valid to examine how 1,000 people responded to hard times (most of them unregenerate), and then categorize their responses and call it normative? In other words, just because 876 out of 1,000 people do something, should their actions be held up as a standard of behavior for Christians? I think not.

We have an infallible, superior standard. It's the Bible. And the Bible is written by the God who made us and who knows what's best for us. How does He say we should respond when hard things happen? By telling Him we don't like it? No. By submitting to Him and His plan. "Those who know your name will *trust* in You; for You, Lord," have never forsaken those who seek You (Ps 9:10)." There's a second activity...

2. *The right response is to live.* Notice verse 9 again, "How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits *and live*."

What's the alternative to living? It's not just physical death. For some, it's shutting down. For others, it's becoming cynical, skeptical, and callused. That's what happens to some people when life gets hard.

It's been said, "Trials make us better." That's not true all the time. Yes, trials can make us better, but they can also make us *bitter*.

A friend I graduated with from High School lost his 8 year old son in a tragic farming accident last year. It was a terrible loss. In response to similar trials, other parents have shut down and stopped living. But not John and Lanay.

In fact, the day of the funeral visitation they stood by the casket for hours and shared the hope of Christ with those who came. And in the weeks and months that followed, they did the same with countless others.

You say, "How can a person become *better* instead of *bitter* when trials hit?" By doing what John and Lanay did, and that is, by doing what Hebrews 12 calls us to do: submit and live. Submit your life to your wise, heavenly Father. And then keep living for Him knowing that God's discipline is part of growing up. Fact #2...

B. God's discipline is for our good (10). "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

You'll notice the continuing contrast between earthly fathers and our heavenly Father in verse 10. When it comes to discipline there is a difference.

1. *Here's what is true of earthly fathers.* The text mentions two characteristics.

- Their efforts are limited. They disciplined us "for a little while" (literally, "for a few days"). The days of youth rush by.

We don't have our children with us for long, do we? That means we only have a little while to discipline them and prepare them for life.

Dads and moms, let that sink in. We have one shot to discipline our children. True, we can model all our lives, but there's one brief period of time in which we can shape their character directly. Yes, when it comes to earthly fathers, their efforts are limited.

- They do what they think is best. "According to their pleasure," is how the Greek text reads.

That's how dads discipline—and as a dad I can speak from experience. Dads aren't perfect. They do the best they can with what they have. I don't know of a dad who brought a child into the world with this intent, "My goal is to ruin this child's life."

No, as verse 10 indicates, our earthly fathers did their best—but the phrase implies they made mistakes along the way. Not so our heavenly Father!

2. *Here's what is true of our Heavenly Father.* Two things characterize His discipline...

- He always does what is best for us. "But God disciplines us for *our good*." The Greek word *sumpheron* signifies "profit." God doesn't discipline us based on personal whims. And there's no hit or miss with God. He has our *profit*, our good in mind.

And not just some of the time either. He always does what's best for us. Always. When life is pleasant—always. When life is hard—always.

That's why the psalmist could say this in Psalm 119:67, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word." And in verse 71, "It was *good* for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

At times it may not seem like God has our good on mind, but that's because we can't see the whole picture like He can. What is "the good" that God intends to accomplish through His discipline? You'll find the answer at the end of verse 10.

· He wants us to be like Him. Notice the purpose clause, "But God disciplines us for our good, *that* we may share in His holiness."

That is God's goal for us, and it's an amazing goal. The text says He wants us to "partake of" [*metabein*, the word can even be translated "eat" in certain contexts] his holiness.

What does that mean? God's most basic attribute is His holiness. To be holy means to be distinct and set apart. God is holy. He is in a class all by Himself. But He wants us to share in His holiness. He wants us to be *holy* like He is.

But wait. How can we be holy? We are sinners, aren't we? Yes, we are. We are sinners by nature and by choice. So how can we share in God's holiness?

There's only one way. We can't make ourselves holy. No matter how many religious deeds we accomplish, we're still sinners. Only God can make a sinner holy.

And how does God do that? The answer is Jesus Christ. He died and rose again so that sinners like us could be holy.

Listen to Colossians 1:21-22, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death *to present you holy in his sight*, without blemish and free from accusation."

Christ died in order to make sinners holy. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21)."

You see, God's purpose in this world is to form a people who will reflect His likeness, who will be *like His Son*.

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the *likeness of His son*, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29)."

That's God's goal for us. Ephesians 4:24 says that we have been "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Colossians 3:10 puts it this way, "And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

The question is, do we want what God wants? Do you want God to accomplish His goal in your life, or do you prefer your own agenda? The key to handling hardship is to live in light of God's goal. Which brings us to fact #3...

C. God's discipline will result in our gain (11). "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After

the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness.

"Why did you suffer this pain in silence?" the saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

Sadly, a lot of Christians are like this king. They endure pain, but they misunderstand its purpose.

This is key. *Everything* God does in our lives contributes to the goal He has for us. Everything. Nothing just "happens." When hardship enters our lives, it's not because God is on vacation. It's just the opposite. God is at work. He's disciplining us for our good in order to accomplish His goal.

Does that mean His discipline is pleasant? No. In fact, verse 11 gives us two more insights into God's discipline.

1. *It hurts now.* "No discipline seems pleasant at the time." When I was ten I asked my parents if I could have a 4-H calf, and they agreed. So in November we obtained "Boog," a 400-pound black Angus steer. It was exciting... *at first.*

But then the newness wore off. It wasn't fun to feed and water Boog every morning and every evening. It wasn't fun to clean out his pen. It was *work*. Yet my parents insisted that I take care of my animal.

Were they being mean? No. They were teaching me *discipline*.

No discipline seems pleasant in the present. But it's amazing what a difference a little time makes. It may hurt now, but...

2. *It will produce fruit later.* What kind of fruit? The text says, "Later on, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace."

That's what God wants to produce in us—righteousness and peace.

The word "peace" is interesting. Remember the context. The first century readers of this letter were facing persecution. Moffatt comments, "The writer might be throwing out a hint to his readers, that suffering was apt to render people irritable, impatient with one another's faults. The later record even of the martyrs, for example, shows that the very prospect of death did not always prevent Christians from quarreling in prison."

God wants to use hardship to produce righteousness and peace in our lives. That's the *gain* He intends for us.

But don't miss the final words of verse 11. Who will experience righteousness and peace? "Those who have been trained by it." Trained by what? By God's discipline.

If you don't go through the discipline, you won't enjoy the harvest. No training, no fruit.

A man, after 25 years with one company, was still doing the same old job and drawing the same salary. Finally he went to his boss and told him he felt he had been neglected. "After all," he said, "I've had a quarter of a century of experience."

"My dear fellow," sighed the boss. "You haven't had a quarter of a century of experience. You've had one experience for a quarter of a century."

It's one thing to experience God's discipline. It's another thing to be *trained* by it.

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis put it this way, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

The question is, are we listening to what God is saying? Are you? Perhaps you're facing hard times right now. How are you responding? May I encourage you to make this first resolve today. Resolve to *think right*. Look at the hardship from God's perspective. God's discipline is part of growing up. It's for our good. And it will result in our gain. So we need to *think right*. Then secondly...

II. In the hard times, resolve to do right (12-13).

Verse 12 begins, "Therefore." Now that we know God's purpose for hardship, we have a choice to make. We need to do something. But what? We need to make two decisions and here's the first.

A. Stay in the race (12). "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees." You'll notice that the writer returns to the athletic metaphor he began the section with in verse 1.

There he commanded us to *run the race*. And now he tells us to stay in the race. It's a call for bold, aggressive action. Passivity won't cut it. We need to do something.

"Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees," he says. What happens if you're running a race, and your arms get heavy and your knees feel weak? You know you're in trouble! You're getting tired. The words used here portray the limbs as becoming "limp" and useless.

That's how the readers of this letter were feeling. They were tired and wanted to stop. Perhaps you can relate. If so, take to heart the command in verse 2 which, in essence, says two things.

1. *If you feel like quitting, don't!* And two...

2. *Strength is available.* Listen to Isaiah 35:3-4, "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; you God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'"

Yes, we need to think right, but don't stop there. We also need to *do right*. For the Christian that means this. Stay in the race. It also means...

B. Stay on course (13). "Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed."

That's a quotation of Proverbs 4:26, a verse tucked away in a moral context. If you're going to keep running, you need to stay out of shaky situations. Or to put it another way, you need to stay in your running lane.

I see a couple of important implications here. First of all the verse is saying...

1. *Do whatever it takes to keep going.* Verse 1 told us to "throw off everything that hinders. And now verse 13 says to "make level paths for your feet." The point is, do whatever it takes to stay in the race and stay on course.

But I think there's something else here. I'm not convinced these commands are just for individuals. The "you" in the verse is plural. When he says to strengthen *your* feeble arms, and then to make level paths for *your* feet, who does he have in mind? He's talking to the church as a whole.

Let that sink in. Yes, as an individual you need to do whatever it takes to keep going. But that's not all. Secondly, this verse is saying...

2. *Encourage your brothers to do the same.* In other words, look around for others who are faltering. Lift up their arms, too. Make level paths for their feet, too. Why? So that "the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed."

Perhaps you're staying in the race and staying on course. Great! But do you know of any brothers in Christ who aren't? The church is supposed to be in the "lifting" business. We're supposed to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2).

When a limb doesn't function properly, what's needed is action. When that happens to the physical body, the doctor prescribes rehab. And when that happens to the Body of Christ, the Great Physician prescribes the same.

It's a tragedy to see a person who professes Christ standing on the sidelines. There's a race to be run! So if you see a brother who's no longer in the race and no longer on course, go after him for the glory of God.

The bottom line: When life gets hard, remember this...

Three simple truths...

1. *The race won't last forever.*
2. *The finish line is coming.*
3. *Our Savior is there and waiting.* Let's finish well.