

Main Idea: The Lord gives practical help for hurting pilgrims in Hebrews 12:9-13. The help comes in the form of two responsibilities He identifies.

- I. The hurting pilgrim must 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. The hurting pilgrim must 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.

Take It to Heart: Three guarantees to lean on...

1. The race won’t last forever.
2. The finish line is coming.
3. Our Savior is there and waiting.

### *Scripture Reading: Romans 5:1-8*

Back in 2009 Chuck Colson had this to say on his radio program, *BreakPoint*.<sup>2</sup>

Why did the Pilgrims really come to America? Most of us think we know the answer: They came seeking **religious freedom**. Well, yes, they did, in part. But they also came because their **teenagers** were giving them fits.

This forgotten aspect of Pilgrim lore is a wonderful lesson for us this Thanksgiving -- especially for Christian parents.

The story begins in 1608, a time when the Church of England was the established state church. Christians who objected to aspects of the official church were called **Separatists**, and they were often **thrown into prison** for worshipping in their own way.

Determined to worship as they saw fit, a group of these Separatists escaped to Holland in the spring of 1608, including 17-year-old **William Bradford**, who was to pen a famous journal of their adventures. But after a dozen years of living among the Dutch, these Separatists were becoming desperate: It was proving difficult to make a living in Holland. As Bradford recounts in his journal, many of them found it difficult to endure the "great and continual labors" and were getting old before their time. Fellow Separatists still in England, observing their backbreaking trials, actually preferred prison in England to liberty in Holland.

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\*\*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.

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier development of this passage, see the Hebrews series preached at WBC in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Colson, November 02, 2009; <http://www.breakpoint.org/the-center/columns/colson-files/13278-the-real-reason-they-came-to-america>

Most lamentable of all, Bradford writes, many of their **children were losing their faith**. They were influenced by the "great licentiousness of youth in that countrie" and were being drawn away by evil examples. Some of these kids were even leaving their families and living dissolute lives, Bradford records, "to the great greefe of their parents and dishonor of God."

It seemed clear to the Separatists that they needed to seek religious freedom in a land that not only offered an easier living, but also would not corrupt their children. After much prayer, they began to plan their historic journey to America.

The story of the Pilgrims illustrates the fact that parents have always had to contend with cultural influences tempting their children away from faithful obedience to God. In the seventeenth century, those temptations likely took the form of saloons and prostitutes.

Today's kids are surrounded by a culture that celebrates recreational sex, drug use, and total rebellion against God's laws.

Now, we don't have the luxury of packing up our kids and moving to another country -- assuming we could find one free of temptations. Still, we have to do everything we can to keep the corrosive forces of American culture from eating away at the character of our youth. We can do that by limiting their exposure to immoral films, music, videos games, and television programs when they're young. And then, when they're older, we need to help them understand the worldview implicit in these products. We must teach them that **the culture war** is a cosmic struggle between the Christian worldview and the various secular and spiritual worldviews arrayed against it.

This Thanksgiving, when your kids are devouring their pumpkin pie, point out that the Pilgrims did not come to America just to find religious freedom: They already had that in Holland. The Pilgrims embarked on that dangerous journey to an unexplored continent for another important reason, as well.

They came **for the sake of their kids**.

A good parent loves his or her children. And takes concrete steps to show it.

God is the perfect parent, and He certainly loves His children. And He shows it.

How? By giving us things we enjoy, yes. And by taking steps to remove from our lives things that will destroy us.

The reality is that God the Father, like the pilgrims, sometimes demonstrates His love for His children by sending into their lives difficult, even painful circumstances which He intends to achieve a very beneficial outcome for them.

One time I was driving our car at night on a 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. Rather, the reflectors guided me through the fog, letting me know where the road was so that I could continue on my trip.

That, in essence, is what we see our loving God doing for us in Hebrews 12. He's giving us *reflectors* to guide us through the fog of hard times. When hard times come, when we're *hurting*, it's easy to get disoriented. 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.

But our loving Father 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.

The Lord gives practical help for hurting pilgrims in Hebrews 12:9-13. The help comes in the form of two pieces of counsel. When we find ourselves hurting we need to *think right* and *do right*.

#### I. The hurting pilgrim must resolve to think right (9-11).

That's a major lesson we've been learning in this series, *Pilgrims in Progress*. We've looked at the biblical pilgrims in Hebrews 11, those men and women who lived by faith and walked through life as pilgrims heading for a better country.

In the first verses of Hebrews 12, the writer exhorts us to think of ourselves as runners in a race. We are to run the race set before us with perseverance (1), and fix our eyes on Jesus who finished His race by enduring the cross.

But this is no powder puff race, as we were reminded last time in verses 4-8. It's not easy to live for Jesus Christ in this world. In fact, it's *hard*. But hardship is part of our Father's *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 full benefit God intends for us through the 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."<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes we're just as slow to miss the purpose of God's discipline, aren't we? I left you last time with an assignment. You were to answer the question, "What's the ultimate reason God allows us to experience hardship?"

We're given the answer in verses 9-11, where we learn three things about God's discipline.

**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 we were told in verses 4-8, namely that 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 kids to like them. But a parent who fails to give discipline will eventually fail to receive respect.

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<sup>3</sup> Lori Andersen, *Reader's Digest*

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 us it means we 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, 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 heavenly Father.

That seems obvious, doesn’t it? But wait. There’s a common perspective these days that says, “If God does something you don’t understand (like taking your spouse or your health or your retirement), then you’ve got a right to be angry about it. Anger is part of the healing process. So you should tell God you’re angry. Tell Him you don’t like what He did. He’ll understand.”

Hold on. Is it ever okay to be angry with God? Someone may say, “Yes, it’s okay. Everybody knows that anger is part of the ‘grief process.’ It’s one of the steps you have to go through to experience healing.”

Friends, that notion doesn’t come from the infallible Word of God but rather 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. Does that mean it is an *appropriate* response?

And by the way, let’s be careful about governing our lives by the “studies” conducted by fallible human beings. Is it valid to examine how 1,000 people (most of them unregenerate) responded to significant losses in life, and then categorize their responses and call them 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 God’s children? Indeed not, for there’s a better way.

Brothers and sisters, we have an infallible standard. It’s the Bible, and the Bible is written by the One 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’re angry with Him?

Psalm 9:10 gives the answer. “Those who know your name will *trust* in You; for You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek You.”

And that (trusting God) leads to this...

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 and coasting through life. For others, it's becoming cynical and callused. That's what happens to some people when life gets hard.

It's been said, "Trials make us better." But that's not true all the time. Trials *can* make us better, but they can also make a person *bitter*.

You say, "How can a person benefit from the hardship?" 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.

At this point I need to clarify something. This passage is providing counsel for folks who are God's children and thus know that God is their Father. But that's not true of everyone.

Let me speak for a moment to the person who *doesn't* know Jesus Christ as Savior and therefore is not God's child. First I want you to know that we're so glad you are here! You are welcome at this church as we open God's Word together. But please realize that just coming to our services will not make you God's child. If you want to become God's child, you must be born again.

You say, "How does that happen?"

The new birth is a miracle and John 1:12-13 tells us how it occurs, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

To be born again, you must experience the regenerating work of the Spirit of God and respond by receiving Jesus Christ as your Savior. You must believe in Christ's name. And by the supernatural work of God's Spirit, you will become God's child and God will be your Father.

So God's discipline is part of growing up. Secondly...

**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 big 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. Furthermore...

- They do what they think is best. "According to their pleasure," is the literal rendering in the Greek text.

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 in mind, "My goal is to ruin this child's life."

No, as verse 10 indicates, our earthly fathers did their best—yet 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 holy *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.”

That’s God’s agenda for us. The question is, is it *ours*? Do we really want what God wants for us? Do we want God to accomplish His goal in our lives? The key to handling hardship well is to live in light of God’s goal.

**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, sort of stoically, but they don't grasp 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 haul the manure 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.* And no discipline seems pleasant in the present. But it's amazing what a difference a little time makes. Though it hurts now...

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."<sup>4</sup>

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.

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 here."

"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 said, "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."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Moffatt, taken from Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 81.

So let's ask ourselves. Are we listening to what God is saying? Are we enduring His discipline or are we truly being trained by it? Are we cooperating with Him as He seeks to mature us into the likeness of His Son?

Perhaps you're hurting right now. How are you responding? May I encourage you to make this resolve today? Resolve to *think right*. Think about what you are experiencing from God's perspective. He says His discipline is part of growing up. It's for our good. And it will result in our gain.

So we need to *think right*.

Let me give you a practical assignment. Write Hebrews 12:10-11 on a 3x5 card and read it out loud as you begin your day. Before the trials of the day hit you, start thinking about the purpose of those trials, thank the Lord for that purpose, and then throughout the day resolve to *think right*.

## II. The hurting pilgrim must 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 verse 12 gives us the first, "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees."

You'll notice that the writer has returned to the athletic metaphor he began this section with in back in verse 1. There he commanded us to *run the race*. Now, in essence, he's telling us...

**A. Stay in the race (12).** It's a call for bold, aggressive action. Passivity won't cut it when life gets hard. 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, right? Your heavy arms and weak knees are indicators that you're getting tired. If those limbs go completely limp, your race is done. You need strength and you need it right now.

That's what the first readers of this letter were experiencing. They were tired and wanting to stop. Perhaps you can relate, and if so, take to heart the command in verse 2 which, in essence, tells us two things.

1. *If you feel like quitting, don't!* Don't stop running, my fellow pilgrims! "But how can I when I feel so weak?" you ask. You can because...

2. *Strength is available.* That's the implication of verse 12. What God commands He enables. That's what we're told in 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; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'"

Where does the strength come from? *Your God will come*, says Isaiah. *He will come to save you.*

And He has come! In the person of Jesus Christ we have a Savior who gives strength to the weary. But to experience His strength, we must utilize the means by which He gives us His strength, such as through reading and meditating on His Word, through prayer, and through fellowship with His people.

We must think right, and we must *do right*. For the Christian, doing right means we need to stay in the race. It also means that we need to...

**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 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.

Brothers and sisters, our Bible-belt community is full of people who say they are Christians, yet they don't participate in a church. That means they're not running the race marked out for them by their Father, for they've cut themselves off from the Body of Christ. How can you run a race without a body? Know any folks like that? Will you love them enough this week to pray fervently for them, and then go to them, and urge them to get back in the race? Will you help them strengthen their feeble arms and weak knees?

Then again, perhaps you're in church today, but you're not really in the church. Church for you is merely a place you go. Your Heavenly Father has birthed you into His family, but you've been taking His family seriously. You're not serving in it as He intends. You're not giving to support its ministries as He has enabled you to. You're not running in the race.

And because your Father loves you, He has been using the hardness of life to bring this reality to your attention. Will you submit to His good agenda today? Will you, by His grace, resolve to *think right* and *do right*?

Take It to Heart: Three guarantees to lean on...

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