

Hebrews 12:4-8 “Two Things the Pilgrim Must Remember”^{** 1}

Main Idea: When life gets hard, there are two things the pilgrim must remember according to Hebrews 12:4-13.

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

- I. The pilgrim must remember that it could be worse (4).
 - A. Our Savior shed His blood.
 - B. Many believers have shed their blood, too.
- II. The pilgrim must remember that 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).

Make It Personal: When my pilgrimage becomes hard I need to...

1. Look back.
2. Look up.
3. Look ahead.

Scripture Reading: James 1:2-8

Why does God allow His children to face hardship? Hardship, of course, comes in all sorts of packages, and God’s children are not immune.

This evening we’ll be discussing one of the most sobering scenes in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. It takes place when Christian and his traveling companion Faithful arrive at a place called Vanity Fair. You wouldn’t think of a place called *Vanity Fair* as a source of hardship, but it ended up being one of the most trying for the pilgrims.

Bunyan writes:

Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is "Vanity"; and at the town there is a fair kept, called "Vanity Fair"; it is kept all the year long. It bears the name of Vanity Fair, because the town where 'tis kept is lighter than vanity; and also because all that is there sold, or that comes thither is vanity.

As the story goes, Christian and Faithful had to go through Vanity Fair to reach the Celestial City. But as soon as they entered, the townspeople began to stir against them, for three reasons. One, they dressed differently. Two, they talked differently. And three, they didn’t buy the merchandise of Vanity Fair; and when asked to do so, put their fingers in their ears and cried aloud, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity.”

So the townspeople apprehended the pilgrims, then interrogated them and asked where they came from, where they were going, and why they wore such unusual clothing.

Here’s their response:

^{**}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 For an earlier development of this passage, see the Hebrews series preached at WBC in 2009.

The men told them that they were pilgrims and strangers in the world; and that they were going to their own country, which was the heavenly Jerusalem ; and that they had given none occasion to the men of the town, nor yet to the merchandisers, thus to abuse them, and to let them in their journey. Except it was, for that when one asked them what they would buy, they said they would buy the truth. But they that were appointed to examine them did not believe them to be any other than lunatics and mad, or else such as came to put all things into a confusion in the fair. Therefore they took them and beat them, and besmeared them with dirt; and then put them into the cage, that they might be made a spectacle to all the men of the fair. There, therefore, they lay for some time, and were made the objects of any man's sport, or malice, or revenge; the great one of the fair laughing still at all that befell them.²

In the end they took Faithful to court, mercilessly tortured him, and then killed him. But of course, this was *not* the end for Faithful, for Bunyan adds one more scene.

Now I saw that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses waiting for FAITHFUL, who – so soon as his adversaries had dispatched him – was taken up into it, and straightway was carried up through the clouds, with sound of trumpet, the nearest way to the Celestial Gate.

This is message number six in our series, “Pilgrims in Progress.” We’ve looked carefully at the examples of biblical pilgrims in Hebrews 11 and now we’re considering the counsel the Spirit of God directed the writer of Hebrews to give in chapter 12 to some first century pilgrims who were wavering. They were struggling, in part, because they had a faulty view (like we’re prone to have) of hardship.

Here’s today’s message in a nutshell. When life gets hard, there are two things the pilgrim must remember according to Hebrews 12:4-13. One looks at hardship from the human perspective, the other from the divine perspective.

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.

For twelve chapters the writer to the Hebrews has exalted Christ. Now he issues the call for response in chapter 12. In light of Christ’s supremacy, we have two responsibilities—we must run and we must remember—as we saw last time in verses 1-3. Let’s keep running with perseverance the race set before us (1). And let’s keep remembering the One who endured such opposition from sinful men to redeem us (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.

² http://www.covenantofgrace.com/pilgrims_progress_vanity_fair.htm

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

Here's truth number one. Looking at hardship from the human perspective...

I. The pilgrim must remember that 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. Starting with 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 on the basis of childlike faith in Him, we've been forgiven by God. But our Savior is not alone.

B. Many believers have shed their blood, too. In fact, some of the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in verse 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 we 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."³

Again, 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. The pilgrim must remember that 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, the Lord willing.

³ Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, pp. 149-50.

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.

Brothers and sisters, when hard times come, if we're not careful, we'll neglect what could make a tremendous difference, the truths of God's Word.

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.

E.g.--

God 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."⁴

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.

⁴ William Barclay, p. 177.

“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 remain 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.

I loved to play basketball growing up. I’d play the game year-round. But I didn’t particularly care for November, and that’s because the first game of our season didn’t occur until the *end* of November. Which 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 floor for a loose ball. Yes, pre-season practice was hard.

But I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Why not? Because I wanted to be the best basketball player I could be, and I knew that required training. In fact, understanding the purpose of the hardship is what kept us going.

So chew on this thought. Just because something is *hard* doesn't mean it's *bad*. Suffering is hard. 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. Remember, He *endured* the cross. That is, He saw beyond the cross and for the joy set before Him chose to remain on 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 passive 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. Did you know that even Jesus Christ, the perfect Son, endured discipline? Though not in corrective sense of the word, of course, but He did. 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."

Leave a child to himself and he 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 he or she 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 giving evidence that the claim is false.

God will not stand idly by while His children walk in sin.

This is serious business. If I am someone who deliberately disobeys God's Word 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've been thinking about God's incredible love this morning, and how He shows His kids He loves them. But I need to talk for a moment to those who are *not* God's children, because they don't know Christ.

If that's you, I want you to know we're so thankful you are here. And there's another attribute of God you need to think about today. It is 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 Law, acts of treason that He must and will judge.

And He has already revealed what the just sentence will be. If you die in your sins, you will be banished forever from the One you refused to honor in your life and suffer eternal torment in a place the Bible calls the lake of fire. That's what you deserve, and so do I, because God is just.

But once you grasp His justice, you're ready to hear about His love. The Bible says that 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 in the place of guilty sinners, took their punishment, was buried, and then on the third day defeated death.

My friend, if you will repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ today, 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.

Make It Personal: When my pilgrimage becomes hard I need to...look three places.

1. *Look back.* That's what verse 2 compels the pilgrim 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 the hardships you're facing right now 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.