

Christian Growth

Week 10: God's Discipline as a Means of Grace

General observations

“Discipline” refers to God’s working through adversity in our lives to promote spiritual growth and maturity.

Heb. 12:11* All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

God’s discipline is both *reactive* (correcting sinful attitudes and behaviors) and *proactive* (training us for greater effectiveness). We will focus primarily on God’s proactive discipline.

While we are to *initiate* the other 3 means of grace (Word; prayer; fellowship), God initiates His discipline in our lives and we are to *respond* properly.

This is the means of grace that everyone needs—but that nobody wants! It is very counter-cultural because we value comfort and have no positive category for suffering. Many American Christians never grow beyond a primitive level because they do not understand or refuse to embrace God’s discipline.¹

The relationship between God’s discipline & God’s grace

As with all of the means of grace, it is important that we understand how God’s discipline is related to and flows from the grace we receive through Jesus’ death on the cross.

The suffering that comes into our lives is *never* God’s retribution/punishment for our sins, because God’s wrath for all of our sins has been forever satisfied through the cross. Because of this, God relates to us entirely on the basis of His love.

1 Jn. 2:2 He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

“Propitiation” means “the satisfaction of wrath.” God satisfied the demands of His retributive justice for our sins by pouring out His wrath on Jesus.

The cross proves that God’s loving wisdom and power can work even through wrongful suffering accomplish his redemptive ends. God worked through the most terrible suffering and injustice to bring the greatest good to us. If he did this through Jesus’ greater suffering, he can certainly do this through our lesser sufferings.

Rom. 5:3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope . . .

Rom. 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

¹ Many Christian books address this subject, including Watchman Nee, *The Release of the Spirit* and Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy and Pain*.

“ . . . every hardship in my life is allowed by God only because it serves His . . . purposes in me . . . The good news about my trials is that God is forcing them to bow to His . . . purposes and do good to me by improving my character and making me more conformed to the image of Christ. Preaching the gospel to myself each day provides a lens through which I can view my trials in this way and see the true cause for rejoicing that exists in them. I can then embrace my trials as friends and allow them to do God’s good work in me.”²

This is why the Bible employs different biblical metaphors to emphasize that God’s discipline is redemptive and constructive:

God is the Vinedresser, pruning excess vegetation to promote fruitfulness.

Jn. 15:1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

God is the Parent, initiating proactive and reactive discipline to form the family likeness and uphold the family reputation.

Heb 12: 5 you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

God is the Doctor, healing lameness and restoring health.

Heb. 12:12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

God is the Goldsmith, exposing and burning away dross to purify our faith and build character so that Jesus’ reflection is seen through us.

1 Pet. 1:6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

² Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians* (Focus Publishing, 2008), pp. 31,32.

Four core convictions

Once we see how God's discipline is connected to His grace (see above), we need to build four core convictions. Without these convictions, we will chafe under and/or reject God's discipline:

CONVICTION #1: The purpose of our lives is to glorify God (which includes serving others), not to serve, glorify, or preserve ourselves.

This is the point of each of the four metaphors above:

The fruit is for the *Vinedresser*.

The child is to uphold the *family* name.

We are healed so we can run the race *God* has set before us.

We want our purified faith to reflect *Jesus'* face.

On the basis of His grace, God calls on us to give our lives to Him for His purposes.

This is an initial decision, which must then be reaffirmed day-by-day and situation-by-situation.

Rom. 12:1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

“Presenting myself to God implies a recognition that I am altogether His. This giving of myself is a definite thing, just as definite as (receiving Christ). There must be a day when I pass out of my own hands into His, and from that day forward I belong to him and no longer to myself . . . If we give ourselves unreservedly to God, many adjustments may have to be made: in family, or business, or relationships, or in the matter of our personal views . . . His finger will touch, point by point, everything that is not of Him, and He will say 'That must go.' Are you willing? . . . It is always foolish to resist His will, but it is a blessed thing to just hand ourselves over to Him and let Him have His way with us . . . My giving of myself to him must be an initial fundamental act. Then, day by day, I must go on giving (myself) to Him, not finding fault with His use of me, but accepting with praise even what the flesh finds hard. That way (leads to) true enrichment. . . I do not consecrate myself to be a missionary or a preacher; I consecrate myself to God to do His will where I am, be it in school, office or kitchen or wherever He may, in His wisdom, send me. Whatever He ordains for me is sure to be the very best, for nothing but good can come to those who are wholly His.”³

CONVICTION #2: Our service to God will lead us into various kinds of sufferings.

God promises to work through these sufferings to make our service more fruitful.

Jn. 12:24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.

³ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Christian Literature Crusade, 1961), pp. 72,75.

26 If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

Following Jesus involves walking through a process of death to spiritual fruitfulness. All who serve Jesus must walk through this process, but it is worth it to be honored by the Father!

2 Cor. 4:7-12** But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; 8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death works in us, but life in you.

- “Afflictions” refers to nagging negative circumstances, including interruptions.
- “Perplexity” refers to confusion about God’s direction, what he is doing in our lives, etc.
- “Persecution” refers to being pursued (by both human and demonic enemies) with evil intent.
- “Struck down” refers to unexpected disappointments in life, family, ministry, etc.

But God promises both to sustain us through these sufferings (the “but not’s” in vs. 8,9), and to mysteriously work through them to manifest his life to others (both Christians and non-Christians) so that He is glorified.

CONVICTION #3: We need God’s discipline throughout life. This is because His discipline teaches us to trust Him and saves us from being drawn back to self-centeredness (indolence; self-glorification; self-sufficiency; etc.). Paul, as a mature Christian worker, testifies to this.

2 Cor. 1:8,9 For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; 9 indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead . . .

Paul realized that his affliction was beyond his strength to cope with so that God could teach him to trust God more deeply.

2 Cor. 12:7-10 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with

insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul came to understand that God allowed and did not remove a chronic suffering so that he could be saved from self-exaltation and be entrusted with God's power. He then generalizes this lesson to other sufferings in his life.

“As we subject ourselves to the Word of God, the lordship of Christ, and the leading of the Spirit, the circumstances will combine to wean us from the old life of self-pleasing and to conform us to the image of Christ. Our Father loves us so well that He places us in positions of great difficulty and perplexity, withdraws some cherished object of love, places us to live and work with or among uncongenial people--all in order that we may despair of ourselves and learn to draw more on the resources which are for us in Christ. The process of Christ being formed in us usually progresses more rapidly in times of adversity than in prosperity. When all runs smoothly, we tend to forget our dependence on God, but in times of trouble we turn to Him and appropriate His grace and help. Some of the greatest saints have been those who have been tested most severely. Rightly received, the disciplines of life serve to reproduce in us the likeness of Christ.”⁴

“This is what all the work of grace aims at—an ever deeper knowledge of God, and an ever closer fellowship with him . . . How does God (accomplish) this purpose? Not by shielding us from assault by the world, the flesh, and the devil, nor by protecting us from burdensome and frustrating circumstances, nor by shielding us from troubles created by our own temperament . . . but rather by exposing us to all these things, so as to overwhelm us with a sense of inadequacy, and to drive us to cling to him more closely. This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort or another—it is to ensure that we shall hold him fast. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, and a sure refuge and help for the weak, is that God spends so much of his time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find, or follow, the right road. When we walk along a clear road feeling fine, and someone takes our arm to help us, as likely as not we shall impatiently shake him off; but when we are caught in rough country in the dark, with a storm getting up and our strength spent, and someone takes our arm to help us, we shall thankfully lean on him. And God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on him. Therefore he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in himself . . .”⁵

CONVICTION #4: Because God is sovereign and wise, *nothing* comes into our lives except that it passes first through His hands to be used for His good purpose, and God works through *everything* in our lives for the good of conforming us to Christ.

1 Cor. 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but

⁴ Oswald Sanders, *The Best That I Can Be* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1984), pp. 56,57.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 227.

with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

Temptations are one form of suffering that God sovereignly uses in His discipline.

Rom. 8:28,29 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son . . .

“All things” means literally all things! See the following context (vs. 35,36), which includes many painful trials.

- In Heb. 12, God’s discipline was through unjust persecution.
- God tested Job through satanically-originated “natural disasters.”
- God worked out his purpose through Joseph through the terrible abuse of his brothers, the lying of Potiphar’s wife, and the callous negligence of the cupbearer.

Remember that God’s discipline includes not just the big sufferings, but also the smaller day-to-day sufferings.

Various causes of suffering

We can distinguish between different “primary” causes of suffering:

- Some sufferings are the result of living in a fallen world.
- Some are the negative consequences of my own poor decisions.
- Some are from being mistreated unjustly because of our service for Christ.

In general, maturing Christians will suffer the same from a fallen world, less from their own wrong decisions, and more from Christ’s enemies.

But this is only a general principle, not a formula. Ultimately, we must trust that God in His sovereign wisdom is ordering our lives and working out His will through all of these things. Like a tapestry, in this life we often see only a confusing tangle of knots. In the next life, however (with occasional glimpses in this life), we will see the picture of Christ that God was weaving.

“We should not be . . . too taken aback when unexpected and upsetting and discouraging things happen to us now. What do they mean? Why, simply that God in his wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and is dealing with us accordingly. Perhaps he means to strengthen us in patience, good humor, compassion, humility, or meekness, by giving us some extra practice in exercising these graces under specially difficult conditions. Perhaps he has new lessons in self-denial and self-distrust to teach us. Perhaps he wishes to break us of complacency, or unreality, or undetected forms of pride and conceit . . . Perhaps his purpose is to draw us closer to himself in conscious communion with him; for it is often the case . . . that fellowship with (God) is most vivid and sweet, and

Christian joy is greatest, when the cross is heaviest. Or perhaps God is preparing us for forms of service of which at present we have no inkling.”⁶

Respond properly to God’s discipline!

Nothing can stop God from pursuing his good purpose through His discipline—but we can nullify its good effect on our lives by not responding properly to it. So seek to respond to God’s discipline in the following ways. Take note of which of these responses arrests your attention, and give special attention to it.

Expect suffering

vs. being undone by it because you are surprised.

1 Pet. 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.

Many Western Christians expect this life to be mainly easy, with occasional bumps. This perspective makes suffering more difficult when it comes. John Newton, a former slave-trader who wrote “Amazing Grace,” also had to learn not to be surprised by trials.

I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace,
might more of His salvation know and seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray, and he, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.

I thought that in some favored hour at once He'd answer my request
and by His love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of that, He made me feel the hidden evils of my heart,
and bade the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Nay more, with His own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this?" I trembling cried. "Wilt Thou pursue this worm to death?"
"This is the way," the Lord replied, "I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ from self and sin to set thee free,
And cross thy schemes of earthly joy that thou might'st find thy all in Me."⁷

Focus on God’s promises

vs. focusing on the suffering.

2 Cor. 4:16-18 We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 86.

⁷ John Newton, cited in J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), pp. 14-15.

producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

“Look” (*skopeo*) means “fix our gaze on.” The “unseen, eternal” things refer not only to the next life, but also to all of God’s promises and provisions.

If you focus on your sufferings, their “weight” will increase and crush you. But if you focus on God’s promises and affirm them by faith, His Spirit will renew you and lift you above your sufferings. This is the key to Paul’s “spiritual buoyancy” (“We do not lose heart”).

Remember also how faithful God has been and how much good he has brought from previous sufferings (probably starting with your conversion!).

Express your pain to God, and trust Him whatever the cost

vs. withdraw from God to escape the pain.

Matt. 26:37-44 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter.⁴¹ “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Jesus told His disciples how sorrowful He was, and He asked His Father to spare Him from the cross! Yet along with this lament, He expressed His commitment to do His Father’s will rather than what He wanted.

It is important to lament, or you may shut your heart down and/or grow bitter toward God. But is also important to submit to God and yield your “rights,” or you may harden your heart in unbelief.

1 Pet. 4:19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Ask God to show you what he wants you to learn

vs. only asking God to remove your suffering, or comparing your suffering to others.

Jas. 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

The context of this verse is Christians suffering all kinds of trials.

But realize that God may not always answer this immediately.

Jn. 21:18-22 “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.”¹⁹ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!”²⁰ Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them . . .²¹ So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”²² Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!”

Beware of getting stuck on why you suffer more than others! This usually leads to self-pity or bitterness toward God and others. Remember God’s grace and promises, and keep following Jesus!

Let others give you God’s encouragement and perspective

vs. isolate yourself and get discouraged and/or deceived.

2 Cor. 7:5 For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

This is one reason why it’s so important to be in Christian community—friends are in place when you need them for this (Eccles. 4:10).

Heb. 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

Remember that you may need not only empathy and comfort, but also correction of a wrong perspective or attitude.

Rejoice and thank God *during* your suffering

vs. grumbling, complaining, becoming stoic, etc.

Jas. 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Anger toward God when suffering often indicates unbelief in his sovereignty and/or goodness. It also often indicates a legalistic mind-set—that you deserve better treatment from God because of your devotion to him.

We can get to the point that we have a positive sense of anticipation about what God will do through this new trial!

Conclusion

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

CS Lewis from *The Screwtape Letters*

“Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

Memory verses

Heb. 12:11* - God’s discipline is painful, but it produces maturity in those who allow themselves to be trained by it.

2 Cor. 4:7-12** - God takes us through an ongoing process of sufferings so that Christ’s life may be manifested through us to impact others.

Jas. 1:2-4* –Rejoice during trials because God is working through them to make us spiritually mature.

Assignment

Study for the exam.