

Hebrews 12:1-11

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Date: 18 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, I do hope that you are well and your life is good at the moment, that things are going well.

! But as I say that, it is not always the case, is it, that life is peachy, that life is easy. Often life throws a curveball at us. Life is full of hardship and difficulty.

The question is, how do we respond to life when it goes bad? I want to say that this passage that we've got in front of us is about that issue of coping with hardship and of difficulty.

It's about endurance, particularly in the Christian life, in following Jesus. The word endurance appears four times in the section here, doesn't it?

It's written to a group of Christians who, if you go back in your Bible at home maybe, look at chapter 10, that you can see what kind of experience they've had recently.

[1 : 10] They've suffered public attacks. They've suffered affliction of various kinds. They've been imprisoned, some of them. They've had their possessions stolen.

They are in trouble in the world. And there seems to be no let-up. But the command of verse 2, if you look there, is pretty clear, isn't it?

Despite the hardships, they should run with endurance the race that is set before them. They must keep going in the hardship. They must persevere to the end.

We must endure the Christian life as well as enjoy the Christian life. And we might ask ourselves, why does it have to be like that?

Why can't I go through the Christian life like a walk in the park? Why is it such hard work? The Apostle Paul calls Christians, he describes them as soldiers.

[2 : 17] Doesn't he? And as hard-working farmers. Or as marathon runners. Just picture those people, the soldier crawling through the mud with bullets flying overhead.

Or the exhaustion of long-distance running and the perseverance that that takes. Or the back-breaking work of labour in the fields.

And we can get to the point, can't we, if we've been a Christian for a long time, if we've been following Jesus for a while, maybe the initial excitement of faith has kind of waned a little.

And we're just trudging through from one day to the next. So why all of this endurance? God, why don't you just take away the difficulty if I'm trusting in you and I'm following you?

Well, he gives us three reasons why, I think, in Hebrews 12 today. Why does it have to be so hard? That the writer to the Hebrews says, first of all, the endurance of the Christian life, the hardships are for your discipline.

[3 : 30] For your discipline. Just look at verse 7. It is for discipline that you have to endure. He tells us, doesn't he, that there is a reason behind the hardship.

The reason for the struggle of enduring to the end. There is a purpose behind that. There is a godly design in that. It is discipline.

He wants to really drill this in. Did you hear that word? It's just repeated over and over again in the passage. Don't regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.

The Lord disciplines the ones he loves. What son is there whom his father doesn't discipline? He goes on, discipline, discipline, discipline. Your life, if you are facing opposition and hardship because you are following the Lord Jesus, is not out of control.

Things are the way they are for your discipline. That is the explanation. So, the writer wants to say, don't take your hardships the wrong way.

[4 : 42] Don't view them in the wrong way. Neither should you despise them, nor should you be overly discouraged by them. If you look at verse 5 and 6 there, he quotes a verse from the book of Proverbs.

And in that verse in Proverbs, there are two warnings about how we deal with hardship. Warning one, my son, don't regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.

In other words, don't despise what is happening to you. And don't despise the Lord for it. When we have hardships coming to our lives, the temptation is to grow cynical, isn't it?

Maybe there are folk who did once trust in God and had great hope in him, and yet hard things come and they grow bitter towards God.

Because they despise what is going on in their lives. He says, no, we shouldn't do that. We shouldn't forget and fail to recognise that God is using these things for some greater good, for our discipline.

[5 : 51] Don't despise it. And then warning number two comes. Don't be weary when reproved by God. Don't be discouraged when difficult times come.

Because, he says, for the Lord disciplines the ones he hates. No. He disciplines the one he loves. Often, much hardship and much difficulty in the Christian life is a sign of much discipline, which is a sign of much love from God.

in him being persistent in his intention for your good. And if you think about it, that is completely upside down thinking, isn't it?

It's just totally counterintuitive. That sometimes the greater the hardship, the greater display of love from God, sometimes when the world is hardest against God's people, it is a sign that he is most for his people.

You may have heard of the Baptist preacher John Piper. John Piper is pretty popular, isn't he, in the States. And a few years ago, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

[7 : 13] And in the time of his treatment, over a couple of years, he thought a great deal about the issue of suffering and of hardship in the Christian life. He wrote many things over that time, but one article really jumped out where he entitled it, Don't Waste Your Cancer.

Don't Waste Your Cancer. He was saying, wasn't he, that counterintuitive way of thinking of hardship is don't waste the things that make you suffer in this life.

Don't take them the wrong way. Don't waste the opportunity that God is giving in this moment to discipline you and to grow you and to teach you things that otherwise you wouldn't have learnt about yourself and about him.

We should never say, should we, if we're following Christ and we trust in him, that God is punishing me if I'm suffering for some reason.

God is punishing me for something I've done and I'm paying back in this suffering. I want to say Christians are not punished.

[8 : 24] Jesus Christ, as we trust in him, as he dies on the cross, he endures, doesn't he, the suffering that we should have endured, that we deserve.

He takes every ounce of punishment that we deserve for rebelling against God. But, we are rebuked and we are chastened and we are put back in line.

Christians are disciplined. But, what sort of discipline is it? If you think about that word, we just don't like it, do we?

The word discipline. The more I've said it, I wonder whether you want it to move away. Does it make us think of old-fashioned public school lashings?

Is this a brutal, cold, systematic kind of discipline like SAS selection? God is going to thrash all of the impurities out of us like some evil schoolmaster.

[9 : 31] Well, no, because the example he uses of this discipline is the caring and loving discipline of a good father, isn't it, in verse 6.

The Lord disciplines the one he loves. He chastises every son whom he receives. He uses the illustration later on in verse 9 of an earthly father who loves his child and who disciplines them.

So, endurance is there in the Christian life for discipline, but secondly, it is there for fatherly discipline. not just any old discipline, fatherly discipline. The writer's aim here is to get us to move from despairing and despising God in the hard things to loving him for them and taking advantage of them in our lives to be subject to him for change, to almost value these opportunities that suffering brings.

So, what he does here, he argues from the lesser to the greater example, doesn't he? He uses the lesser example of a good earthly father. This might not be the experience of everyone in this room of having a good earthly father, but we know, don't we, what a good earthly father should do.

That he disciplines his child and the child respects and loves him for that. The word in the original Greek language means to correct or to educate.

[11:15] And an earthly father does that for the child that he loves. He would be a bad father if he neglected to do that, wouldn't he? So that the child develops and grows and moves from childish things to grown-up things so that they can live a bigger and fuller life so that they can engage with the world properly.

The father teaches the child so that they can experience life to its fullest. Our little two-year-old, we're trying to teach him not to say, I want, but please may I have every single time he forgets it. Please may I have, not I want. Why do we do that? Is it because I'm a stickler for politeness and for doing the right thing? Well, actually, yes. But it is for the purpose, isn't it, of him knowing how to engage with people properly, of honouring his father and his mother, and engaging in good relationships with people and eventually enjoying life more.

It's not because I want to come down on him and tell him he's always doing the wrong thing all the time, but that he will enjoy life. Discipline is for the grace and benefit of life, isn't it?

And his argument is that if earthly fathers know how to do that, how much more good in your life will God's discipline do for you? Just look at the comparison in verse 10.

[12:51] They disciplined earthly fathers us for a short time as it seemed best for them, but he disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.

Earthly fathers can discipline us, can't they, to give us a well-rounded character for earthly life. But do you see what God is aiming at here?

He disciplines his children to share his holiness for a heavenly life. Hardships come to develop us, to make us holy and to make us fit for heaven for a much fuller life than we know now.

Hardships come in God's plan that we will become more like him in building our spiritual maturity. So since God does this for his children, notice in verse 6, he does it for every son, that is the one who receives the inheritance, he does it for every believer who is a son whom he receives.

It's not a sign of his rejection when difficult things come, but of his reception and of his love. Saying to us, you are in my family and you are going to enjoy heavenly life.

[14:21] And if we are expecting a life of roses and if that is what we are experiencing all of the time and we think that is normal, we've got to wonder, haven't we, what claim have we got in the family of God?

He uses the word illegitimate, doesn't he? If we're not disciplined, then we're illegitimate, sons, we're not in the family. But when things are hard, it is a sign that God is making us holy, preparing us for heaven.

So the endurance is for discipline, it is for a father's discipline. Thirdly and lastly, the endurance is for momentary fatherly discipline. It is for momentary fatherly discipline.

Just drop your eye down to verse 11. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who've been trained by it. Let's be honest about it, no discipline is pleasant, is it, in the moment. But isn't it true that often the best things for us are the most difficult things in our lives?

[15:43] when I was a little boy, it's a trivial example, when I was a little boy, there was a bowl of grapes on top of the piano in the living room, and I tried to steal some grapes once, and my dad called to me, and I got a wallet around the back of the legs, and it wasn't nice, it was painful, but I learnt then not to steal.

It's a really trivial example, isn't it? in all seriousness, it hurts to have our weaknesses and our impurities exposed.

As God's purpose is to make us more holy, and that indwelling rebellion against him is still there, his concern will always be to expose it and to deal with it, and that is going to hurt in life.

It will hurt to have the impurities burnt away. God may end up dealing with us quite harshly in life. He may take things away from us or put things into our lives that we didn't welcome and we didn't want to shake our self-confidence.

But the point of verse 11 is that that pain is only momentary, isn't it? It will be slight, like the blink of an eye in the grand scheme of things.

[17:09] It's like when a doctor pushes on the wound to find out where the source of pain is. It hurts for that moment, doesn't it? He does that as he seeks to heal it, not to irritate it, God isn't just throwing things out in our lives to wind us up with hardship, but to draw out our weaknesses and

heal and to make holy.

And it's momentary. if we think about it in 60 billion years time in eternity, if Christ has returned and we're all in heaven by then, with new resurrection bodies and our bodies are glorious and there's no more pain and no more suffering and we're in the presence of God.

60 billion years time, will we have a second thought for the 70, 80, 90 years of suffering that we've had in this life? Maybe it'll be a little pinprick on our minds by that point, won't it?

It'll be momentary and we'll see it then for what it is. He says, then we will enjoy the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

I think now we don't enjoy this peace because actually the fruit needs to mature, doesn't it? We don't enjoy that fruit fully because there is still things in our lives which need sorting out our own pride and our self concern.

[18 : 50] They destroy that peace as it should be. But to those who are trained by these discipline issues, to us if we are willing to consider the hard things in our lives as part of God's discipline, if we don't despise those things and as we ask God to help us understand what he is doing, to have our pride dealt with, well, then there is a day when with perfect peace we can enjoy the fruit of those things, that we will be perfectly righteous and we will be holy.

And hardships will come, won't they, for all of us, if they haven't already, many of you are, I know, suffering with many hardships. We are to expect them, but Hebrews 12 tells us we should expect them, but we should not dread them.

We need not fear them and always be paranoid and always be anxious about future hardship. The message is don't fear hardship, actually, don't fear hardship, don't waste hardship as well.

Don't miss the opportunities that they bring. Christians, we want to be more holy, don't we? I want that, I struggle with many things, but I want to be more like Jesus and God in his grace uses hardships in that struggle all.

Let me close with a quote from J.I. Packer. He says, God seeks the fellowship of his people and will send them as gifts, both joy and sorrow, to detach their hands from the things of this world and to attach those things to himself.

[20 : 42] They are put in our lives to make us fit for heaven, for fellowship with him, aren't they? so don't despise hardships in your life.

Ask God to mould you in his fatherly discipline that you will enjoy this peaceful fruit of righteousness as you are trained by his discipline.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.