

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 12:4-11**

To better understand why God disciplines us.

Read the Text:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:4-11, ESV)

Study the Text:**Disciplined**

In light of the triumph of Jesus Christ over suffering and death, the author of Hebrews now turns to the suffering of his audience to remind them that they have not suffered to the extent that others have. Moreover, he reminds us that what feels like suffering is actually God's *disciplining hand*, meant for our *benefit*. Below is a breakdown of key terms and concepts in this passage.

STRUGGLE AND RESIST

Verse 4 begins with a reminder that though his readers have "struggled against sin," they have "not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." The implication is that our suffering, compared to the suffering of other faithful saints, is not as extreme since we have "not yet resisted to the point of shedding" our blood (Heb. 12:4). The end of chapter 11 named a number of individuals who have paid the ultimate price because they stayed the course and ran the race. Of course, Jesus, our "founder and perfecter of the faith," has

“endured the cross” for our sin (Heb. 12:2). We, on the other hand, are still in the process of running the race, which is why we need endurance (Heb. 12:1).

This race is not easy, however. The terms “struggle” (ἀνταγωνίζομαι [antagōnizomai]) and “resisted” (ἀντικαθίστημι [antikathistēmi]) have further significance than what is initially obvious. Both terms recall a boxing match, which was often violent, bloody, and sometimes even resulted in death.¹ The implication is that the difficulties Christians might face while running the race of faith might be devastating, even physically. This includes persecution in a formal sense, as well as interpersonal relationships severed because of one’s faith. Moreover, the author’s inclusion of the phrase “not yet” indicates a real possibility of *future suffering*. However, Christians must think about their suffering differently than the natural person. We are called to shift our thinking away from being victimized by the sins of the world and towards the idea that our suffering is actually for our benefit.

FATHER AND SON

Verses 5 and 6 reframe our suffering as a father’s disciplining hand on his son. The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, which reminds us that God is our heavenly father who disciplines us for our sake. Keep in mind, Proverbs is the quintessential book of wisdom in the Old Testament. That means reframing our suffering and seeing ourselves as beloved children (not victims) is an act of wisdom above all others. Wisdom demands that we see the disciplining hand of God for what it truly is: a *benefit*. Verses 7 and 8 affirm this: “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”

Verses 7 and 8 actually advance the idea that a Christian who does not face the disciplining hand of God is likely not a Christian at all! Discipline is to be expected from God, who acts as a loving father to his children. Anticipating a negative response to this idea, the author goes on in verse 9 and says: “Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?” The term “disciplined” is the Greek παιδευτής (paideutēs), which means something like “an instructor or teacher,” and is sometimes used in the context of an athletic trainer, furthering the race/boxing imagery. The author is demonstrating the reality that if earthly fathers discipline us for our own good, how much more good will the discipline of the heavenly father be?

There is also an unusual title given to God here in verse 9: “the father of spirits.” Various scholars have suggested several interpretations. Some argue it refers to God’s fatherhood over specifically believers. Others argue that “spirits” refers to our non-material essence and therefore conveys a sense of fatherhood for all humans. Still others argue that it refers to God as a “spiritual father” (as opposed to a human father). The most sensible reading, however, is that it refers to God’s divine authority over the spirit world, that is, angels and other non-physical entities. God is the Creator over all things, physical and non-physical. There is God, and then everything else falls into the category of “creature.” Therefore, the author of Hebrews recognizes God’s ultimate supremacy over all things “visible and invisible” (Col. 1:15).

PAIN AND PEACE

Ultimately, our Creator disciplines us for our benefit, and while it may seem unpleasant while it is happening, “it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11). The underlying

¹ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 618.

principle, then, is that peace is only attainable through discipline. When we understand that God's disciplining hand is meant for our good, it helps us reframe our experiences in light of our sanctification and our ultimate hope that Christ will one day bring all pain and suffering to an end (Rev. 21:4).

What About Now?

The main thrust of this passage is that Christians need to reframe their suffering. We might experience suffering as a result of our faith, and yet if we are still alive, we have not suffered as those who have gone before us, with Christ as the ultimate example. However, it also might be that your suffering is the result of the Father disciplining you to form you more into the image of Jesus. Either way, suffering takes on a positive expression when we realize it either binds us to a common heritage or sanctifies us into the image of Christ. When we recognize this, we can deal with it more effectively, move through it, and continue to serve the Lord as he leads us.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Hebrews 12:4. What does the author say you have not yet experienced in your struggle against sin?

2. Read Hebrews 12:5. What is implied by the exhortation that calls us "sons?" What Old Testament verse is being quoted in verse 5? What is the main idea of this verse?

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 12:6. What Old Testament verse is being quoted in verse 5? What is the main idea of this verse?

2. Read Hebrews 12:7. For what reason are we told to endure? How does God treat us?

Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 12:8. If you do not face discipline, what does this imply about your relationship with God?

2. Read Hebrews 12:9. How are earthly fathers compared to the heavenly father? What is meant by "the father of spirits?" (Hint: See above notes)

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 12:10. How does the discipline of the earthly father differ from that of the heavenly father?
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2. Read Hebrews 12:11. Is discipline enjoyable in the moment? But what is the benefit of it?
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Discuss the Text!

Session 31 Discussion: Discipline

The main thrust of this text is the need to reframe our suffering from being a victim to being disciplined by a loving father. Talk as a group about how you have experienced the disciplining hand of God in your own life, and how it has positively formed you.

1. Icebreaker: What are things you do that are not fun while you are doing them, but bring blessing to your life once they are done?
2. How do you usually respond when you are corrected?
3. Hebrews 12 connects suffering, resisting sin, and God's fatherly training. How can we recognize what God may be teaching us through hardship without assuming that every painful experience is punishment for a particular sin?
4. Why does the author describe God's discipline as evidence that we are his beloved children? When would that truth be comforting, and when might it be difficult to believe?
5. Earthly parents discipline imperfectly, but God disciplines us "for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). How should the perfection of God's character change the way we understand his discipline—especially if our earthly parents disciplined us poorly?
6. What painful or uncomfortable situation might God currently be using to train you? What would it look like to submit to his work and pursue the "peaceful fruit of righteousness" rather than merely trying to escape the discomfort?
7. Kid Talk: Talk to your child about the correction they experience in school. Ask them: "Is the teacher just trying to be mean, or are their corrections meant to benefit you?" Then explain that God does this with us sometimes, as well. As a loving father, God disciplines us so we become more like Jesus.

Takeaways:

1. Suffering identifies us with those who have suffered before us, especially those who have paid the ultimate price for their faith.
2. Suffering for Christians is different from that of non-Christians, in that it is the disciplining hand of the Father.