

LOVING DISCIPLINE  
HEBREWS 12:4-13  
JUNE 2, 1996

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Four and one-half years ago Jerry Sittser and his family took a weekend trip.

On their way home a drunk driver struck their mini-van head on killing Lynda, Jerry's wife of 20 years, his four year old daughter and Jerry's mother.

In his book entitled A Grace Disguised, Jerry writes,

"For the past few years my dominant emotion has been a nervous and doleful bewilderment. A pause at a stop sign, a last minute switch of seats before departure, a slower or faster acceleration after a turn would have spared us all unspeakable suffering...

"One of the worst aspects of my experience of loss has been this sense of sheer randomness. The event was completely outside of my control - an accident, as we say.

"Maybe", I thought, "there really is no God and no meaning to life." I was tormented by an inability to discover any explanation that made sense of the tragedy. An answer to the "why?" question eluded me."  
(in C.T. March 4, 1996)

Jerry's faith, Jerry's trust in God, was tested more than any earlier time in his life.

How can you make sense of such random tragedy?  
What possible good can come out of such deep hurt?

A few days ago, Tom (not his real name) called and asked to see me. He had attended our church for a couple of years, while in seminary more than 15 years ago, and said he wanted my counsel.

Though I did not remember him and had not even seen or heard of him for nearly 15 years, the story I heard caused in me a deep

sadness for him.

Tom graduated from seminary with a heart set on becoming a missionary. For several years he attempted to raise the necessary support but failed to do so - he couldn't go.

He engaged in another venture and it too ended in disappointment.

Finally, Tom was called to be the pastor of a church where he has served successfully for several years.

But through all those experiences what Tom has wanted, along with a way to serve God, was a wife - someone who would share life and ministry with him.

Now in his early 40s Tom sat before me as an attractive, intelligent, capable servant of the Lord - with a hurt that was breaking his heart and causing him to doubt his ministry.

He had dated through the years but never did it result in someone he could marry.

Now in his 40s he was wondering, no, he was agonizing, over the possibility that he would never marry.

It crushed him when his friends either hinted or outspokenly said why they though he wasn't married yet - all reasons laid at his feet:

As if he could change something then he would be married.

From Tom's perspective, it seemed God was choosing to ignore his deepest desire - God wasn't changing the situation.

He had become so disheartened that he wondered if he could continue as a pastor.

He wasn't ready to throw off his belief in God - but he had begun to lose heart and he had certainly grown weary.

The plea of his heart was "God please release me from this misery."

And the fear of his heart was that God wouldn't respond.  
How can he go on when the hurt is so deep.

How does a Christian respond when the problem can't be fixed or the hurt can't be healed?

God answers these questions addressing the Hebrew Christians who had already encountered hardship and were about to enter even more painful situations.

Last week I outlined for you the historical setting of this letter to these Hebrews.

Under Roman Emperor Claudius there had been an expulsion of Christians from Rome and then 15 years later under Emperor Nero the Christians were scapegoats for a natural disaster.

Throughout the Roman empire and particularly in and near Rome - Christians were being arrested, tortured and killed.

It looked like only a matter of time before these Christians would be facing the loss of everything, possibly even their lives.

The pastor-author of this letter writes encouraging them (as he says in 10:23) "to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess."

In 10:36 he tells them , "we need to persevere".

In 10:38 he reminds them that the righteous will live by faith.

And then in chapter 11, which we looked at last week, he parades before their mind's eyes a list of people who had, by faith, persevered through some of the hardest of times - even the loss of their lives.

And he concludes the list in the beginning of chapter 12 by reminding them of Jesus who more than all the others endured hardship by faith.

Finishing with these words in 12:3: "Consider Jesus who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

It is faith that is needed to persevere in this life.

Faith that is needed to remain true to God even when life seems to go wrong.

But at chapter 12 verse 4 it is as if the author anticipates a reaction from those who hear his words about faith and his examples of faithful people down through the centuries.

If God is sovereign, why do His people go through such terrible times, through such trouble, through such suffering?

What is God doing that he would allow his own people to experience such pain?

The temptation is to assume that life is out of control - that God has abandoned them or worse yet, that God is not in control.

What God says next, through this pastor-author, is very hard to hear - meaning I don't like it at first - but is very true, and very important that I and you understand.

Listen to what He says: 8:00 and 9:30: READ 12:4-13  
11:00 READ 12:5b-6

I want you to know that it is with intellectual humility and heartfelt sympathy for those who are the living wounded that I say what I am going to say next.

I have not endured the pain that some of you have borne or are now bearing.

I cannot speak from first-hand experience about every tragic possibility of life.

All I can do is go to God's Word and attempt with intellectual humility to understand what God is saying to those of you who are now in the midst of the battle of faith and to the rest of us who will one day go through it.

It is startling to me that God calls the hardships these Christians are enduring, "discipline".

The hardships, in their case, are persecutions for their belief in Jesus Christ.

The suffering they are experiencing is called "discipline".

Do you understand the implications of that?

This isn't a situation where they have intentionally done something wrong and God is disciplining them for it.

Their situation is not in their control.

Like Jerry Sittser whose family died,  
like Tom whose deepest desire was unmet,  
these people were not suffering as a result of their own wilful sin.

How can this be called the "discipline" of God on them?

What God is about to teach in these next verses is about God's purposes and a Christian's response to those painful and even tragic situations in life over which we have no control.

Look with me please as v5 of chapter 12 (12:5):

"You have forgotten that word of encouragement"

You are tempted to "lose heart", to give up, because you have forgotten a God-given truth that will make all the difference in the world when you go through times of great suffering.

I want to summarize the passage for you.

I want you to hear this God-given truth in two sentences and then I want you to look at it with me to see if that is indeed what God is teaching:

"For the Christian, hardship is intentionally brought on by God to bring us to maturity because he loves us. Therefore learn faith in all your hardships."(GLN) REPEAT IT!

1. First of all do you agree that the author is not talking about the slight inconveniences of life but is talking about real hardship?

Look at V4: READ

Back in chapter 10 we were already told that these people had withstood insult, persecution and even confiscation of their property as they were driven from their homes and their

neighborhoods.

I think the implication in 12:4 is that though they have not yet been killed, that could come next.

First of all then, the suffering which the author is discussing is real suffering - uncontrollable tragedy and pain.

2. But, secondly, who is behind it?

This is where this passage gets very hard for me.

What does God say about their hardships?

In verses 7-11 the author reiterates in different words what they already should have known from the Proverbs passage he just quoted in verses 5-6.

Who is behind the hardships of these Christians?

See V7 READ 7a "Endure hardship as discipline"

Discipline from WHO? GOD!

Look at the last part of V5: Whose discipline is it? "The Lord's"

Look again at V 5: Whose rebuke of you is it? The Lord's.

Look at V6: Whose discipline is it? "The Lord's"

Look again at V6: Who is doing the punishing? "The Lord"

What I find so difficult in this passage is that it doesn't say that God simply allows these things to happen.

I would be more comfortable with that.

It seems that it comes dangerously close to making God responsible for the evil that befalls his people.

Yet there is ample biblical evidence that God is not even capable of sinning or doing what is wrong or being maliciously hurtful to people.

To make God the author of evil would contradict the very nature of God.

But the author will have none of the feeble explanations for suffering that make God a helpless bystander or at best an after-the fact fixer of whatever has gone wrong.

Some, like Rabbi Kurshner, in a book of several years ago would make of God a kindly sympathizer with our pain but incapable to really do anything about it.

This author says God is not just standing helplessly by while we suffer, nor is God just reacting to the tragedies of our lives - but that God is sovereignly superintending even the hardships.

Guido de Bresi author of the Belgic Confession of Faith was executed on May 31, 1567 in Belgium. Just before he was hung he wrote to his wife a prayer: "Oh, my God, now the time has come that I must leave this life and be with you. Your will be done. I cannot escape your hands. Even if I could, I would not do it, for it is my joy to conform to your will."

He saw even the gallows as God's actions not the actions of men only.

Now that may sound malevolent, mean, until we see the third thing the text teaches us on the subject.

3. Notice, please, the purpose for which God disciplines us through hardships: Look at the last part of V10: READ

"God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness."

Look at V11 "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."

When we think of the concept of discipline we most often think of punishment.

And when we think of punishment we think of it in terms of retribution or payment for crimes or sins.

A huge debate has raged for years in our criminal justice system.

Are our prisons primarily places for rehabilitating criminals or are they primarily places of justice - meting out penalty for the crimes committed?

When we think of discipline or punishment as justice - as paying for what we have done wrong - then we must understand that none of God's children will ever be so disciplined or punished.

Jesus Christ has finally and fully paid for our sin.

We will never be held responsible for the eternal death our sins deserve - justice has been met in Christ's death on the cross.

The wages of sin is death - eternal separation from God.

For themselves, Christians cannot rightly think of discipline or punishment in the sense of justice.

But we can and must think of discipline and punishment of the Christian as education.

The word "discipline" used throughout this passage is the word for teaching - similar to the word "pedagogy".

Even when the words "rebuke"(end of V5) and "punish" (V6) are used it is in the context of training, teaching, correcting.

God is in the business of teaching us and he will use even painful methods to accomplish it.

I have known the feeling and I have heard the cries, "What is God trying to teach me?"

"I'm willing to learn, I give up, just tell me what is it?!"

The context in which this whole discussion is set is the topic of faith.

Among other things that God may teach us in the midst of suffering is this large issue of faith.

Paul said to the Thessalonians, "Your faith is growing more and more...in all your persecutions and trials you are enduring."

(2Th 1:3-4)

James wrote, "consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature..." (James 1:2-4)



Similarly Peter wrote, "Rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith may be proved genuine." (I Pt 1:6ff)

Simply put, nothing teaches dependence on God like dependence on God.  
Nothing teaches great faith like great hardship.

Last week I defined **faith** as **"the act of believing God and mentally seeing his vision of the future even when we can't see it with our physical eyes."**

**Faith is trusting God even when you don't have the immediate physical evidence to support such trust.**

Two years ago my daughter Stephanie gave me a children's book that I think illustrates this beautifully:

**Billy and the Attic Adventure.**

**"There once was a little boy named Billy.**

**Billy loved to explore things.**

**One day, when Billy's dad came down from the attic,**

**Billy got an idea.**

**Billy climbed upstairs and found all sorts of fun things to explore.**

**One thing was an old leather helmet too big for his head.**

**When Billy finally tried to come down from the attic, his foot slipped.**

**Billy could barely hang on by his hands and the helmet covered his eyes.**

**Mom! Dad! Billy screamed.**

**I'm here, Billy, said Dad.**

**Just let go. I'll catch you.**

**But I can't SEE you Billy cried.**

**You don't need to, said dad, I can see you.**

**So Billy let go , and fell, right into dad's arms." (Daryl Worley by Tyke Corp.)**

**Most of us have an almost insatiable need to control our situations -**

to trust ourselves rather than God.

That propensity for self-trust must be crucified for us ever to be the holy, Christ-like people God intends to populate heaven with.

David Watson, the British pastor who suffered greatly for several years with cancer wrote, "Behind much anger about suffering is our human arrogance which assumes that God must somehow justify his existence and explain his actions before we are prepared to consider the possibility of believing him." (Watson Fear No Evil p 127)

A friend once told Joni Erickson Tada (a quadraplegic since age 17) "you don't have to know why God let you be hurt. The fact is God knows - and that's all that counts. Just trust him..." (In Watson p131)

God is in the business of taking us deeper and deeper into an understanding of himself.

The experience of Job is an awesome story.

I think Phil Yancey is right, the Book of Job is not about "where is God when it hurts?" but about "where is Job when it hurts?"

When absolutely no reason could be found for Job's suffering, would Job still trust God?

The book of Job is about faith in its starkest form.

Trusting God with no other evidence except our relationship with Him.

Michael Quoist imagines God speaking to him:

"Son I am here.

I haven't left you,

How weak is your faith!

You are too proud.

You still rely on yourself...

You must surrender yourself to me.

You must realize that you are neither

big enough or strong enough.  
 You must let yourself be guided like a child.  
 A little child.  
 Come, give me your hand, and do not fear.  
 If there's mud, I will carry you in my arms.  
 But you must be very very little,  
 For the Father carries only little children."  
 (in Prayers of Life 1963 Gill and Macmillan Limited)

Jerry Sittser, whose wife Lynda and daughter were killed in the head-on collision I mentioned earlier wrote three years after the tragedy:

"Despite my having been a Christian for many years before the accident, God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is quieter but stronger.

I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to him; yet I want to serve him with all my heart and strength.

My life is bountiful, even as I continue to feel the loss.

Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful.

I have slowly learned where God belongs and have allowed him to assume that place - at the center of life rather than at the periphery." (C.T. Mar 4, 1996)

The more mature we become in our Christian faith the more likely it is that we will suffer even greater hardships, even deeper pain - because God is in the process of transforming us into men and women of FAITH - People who don't trust just in the reasons or the evidence but trust in God alone.

4. I want you to see lastly, this morning, that God's motive for wanting to teach us great faith is that he LOVES US.

In verses 6-10 God makes it clear that his reason for disciplining us, even with rebukes and painful circumstances is that he loves us. Look at V6 READ

The author makes much of the issue of adoption - we have become

children of God.

Our country and even our churches are filled with people who think discipline and love are contradictory.

And they have abandoned their children in so thinking.

Other than Jesus, no child has ever been born who did not need the discipline of his parents or he would ruin his life.

Lack of discipline is indicative of abandonment not love.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic book The Problem of Pain, "If God is love, He is, by definition, something more powerful than mere kindness." (p41)

We want mere kindness - sympathy without discipline.

But God gives us so much more - he gives us love - love which cares enough to use whatever it takes to conform us to the image of Christ .

Lewis went on to say, "We are...in very truth a Divine work of art, something which God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character..."

It is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but (when we think like that) we are wishing not for more love but less." (Lewis p43)

To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God." (Lewis p48)

Phil Yancey tells of visiting his mother one holiday.

They reminisced and soon the picture box came down from the closet shelf.

They talked their way through years of pictures until Phil noticed a picture of an infant with his name written on the back.

What got his attention was the crumpled condition of the photo as if one of the childhood pets had mangled it.

He asked his mother why she had hung on to such an abused photo.

**When Philip was 10 months old, his father contracted spinal lumbar polio.**

**He died three months later.**

**He was totally paralyzed at age 24 and had to live inside an iron lung because he was so weak he could not breathe on his own.**

**Phillip's mother, was one of few visitors allowed.**

**And she would sit day after day with her husband.**

**Lying in his steel cylinder, he asked for a picture of his son who was not allowed into the room.**

**That picture was attached to the iron lung - jammed in between some metal knobs - thus the wrinkled condition of the photo.**

**When Phil's mother told him the story of the crumpled photo - he had a strange and powerful reaction.**

**It seemed odd to him to imagine someone caring for him whom, in a sense, he'd never met.**

**Yancey writes, "During the last months of his life, my father had spent his waking hours staring at that image of me.**

**There was nothing else in his field of view.**

**What did he do all day? Pray for me? Yes, surely.**

**Did he love me? Yes.**

**But how can a paralyzed man express his love, especially when his own child is banned from the room.**

**That photo, Yancey went on to write, is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father.**

**SomeONE I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me as well as he could.**

**"I mention this story, he writes, because the emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of Love.**

**"Someone IS there, I realized.**

**Someone is watching life as it unfolds on this planet.**

**More than that, Someone is there who loves me.**

**It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on."**

**(yancey in Disappointment with God p 254-5)**

**"For the Christian, hardship is intentionally brought on by God to bring us to maturity because he loves us. Therefore learn faith in all your hardships."**

**Prayer / Prayer Hall / Benediction**