



Sunday School Lesson for July 25, 2004.
Released on: July 20, 2004.

Study: Hebrews 12:1-13. "Faithful and Disciplined"
Questions and answers are found below.

TIME: About A.D. 67
PLACE: unknown

Hebrews 12:1-13

- 1 Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,
- 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.
- 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.
- 4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.
- 5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:
- 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.
- 7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?
- 8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.
- 9 Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?
- 10 For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.
- 11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.
- 12 Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees;
- 13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.

LESSON AIMS

To identify what the basic elements are to run a good spiritual race.

To express the importance of being patient and persistent when faced with hardships.

To identify an impediment that is hindering you from running a good spiritual race—one that you want to "lay aside."

To understand that the Lord disciplines those He loves—discipline is a mark of His love.

To grow to accept the Lord's discipline and learn from it.

LESSON INTRODUCTION

An uncut diamond is scarcely a thing of beauty. Its odd shape and dull appearance completely conceal its true value from the untrained observer.

Then the apparently worthless bit of rock is placed in the hands of a skilled diamond cutter. He or she may spend hours cleaving the stone (cutting it in two) with special tools and then many more hours cutting, grinding, and polishing the stone before it can be mounted in a piece of jewelry. Were the stone a living thing and sensitive to pain, it might well complain of this cruel treatment. Yet when this treatment has been completed, the diamond is no longer a dull and worthless piece of stone, but a brilliant and precious jewel.

Sometimes God handles us as "diamonds in the rough." He allows suffering to come into our lives—suffering that we often cannot understand or appreciate. Yet, when it is all over—perhaps many years later—we can see that God, the master diamond cutter, was working all along to fashion us into precious jewels. The cutting and grinding have shaped us into masterpieces.

LESSON BACKGROUND

This week's lesson teaches about the Christian's "race of faith," "discipline of God," and "renewing spiritual vitality." Last week's lesson gave us a list of the "heroes of faith." These heroes included Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, The Israelites, Rahab, and many other Old Testament people of faith.

Many of these heroes' sufferings are listed also: fury of the flames, edge of the sword, jeerings, floggings, imprisonment, being sawed in two, and other violent mistreatings (see Hebrews 11:34-37). All of these Christian models had shortcomings and hardships, but their obedience to God proved their love for—and trust in Him.

Like them, we too express how much we love and trust God by the way we stand up to his discipline. Simply put, if God didn't love us, He wouldn't discipline us. We are His children, and He is our Father. Parents discipline their children in the same way that God corrects His children... because it is a parent's duty to develop Christian character in their offspring. Parents who allow their children to have their way just to appease and keep them calm and happy, do more harm than good in the long run.

The following scripture is included above in the lesson text and will be explored more below, but it is beneficial for us to repeat again now for reinforcement: "For Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son [and daughter] whom He receives (Hebrews 12:6)." Let us be thankful for periodic love "whippings" from our Father. He is developing our Christian character.

SETTING OUR SIGHTS ON THE LORD-Hebrews 12:1-4

1. What must we do in order to run the Christian race effectively? (Hebrews 12:1)

The "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in v. 1 refers to the people of faith that were listed previously in last week's Hebrews 11th chapter. They may not literally be spectators watching us, but are instead "witnesses" testifying to the truth of the faith (see Hebrews 11:2, 4-6). However, from the perspective that they are witnesses to our Christian "race," then we may imagine them looking down on us as we endure the Christian pursuit of holiness. Perhaps they are rallying us on as retired athletes who ran the race before us-our spiritual cheerleaders in the faith.

Similar to an athlete training for a competitive event, Christians too must "train for" the ongoing Christian race by preparing themselves spiritually. The "weight" of sin can be akin to the excess physical weight that a runner must shed in order to improve his time on record. Can you imagine an Olympic sprinter running with a backpack full of rocks? Before you respond by saying that many runners have used this method to strengthen their legs in preparation for the "big event," I argue that no runner with the intent of winning would haul around a surplus of weight the day of the race.

Christians are in a race also-a spiritual one. And we cannot afford to have anything that hinders our ultimate success weighing us down or tripping us up. To stay focused on being the victorious body of believers that we are, we must get rid of anything that would hinder us in our spiritual journeying, jealousy, cheating, over-indulgence, laziness, or any other "weight" that does not glorify God and that could be a stumbling block for other Christians watching our lifestyle. The race is not over until your journey down here has ended.

2. What does it mean that Christ is the "author and finisher" of our faith, according to Hebrews 12:2?

If our goal is to become Christ like, then we must look to Jesus as both our model and our inspiration. The word "author" can be understood as "pioneer" or "trailblazer." Jesus set the example of what the life of faith should be, and of course, He made it possible by His redemptive work. "Author" and "pioneer" are terms that appropriately suggest that Jesus has gone ahead to mark the path for those who will follow.

As the "perfector of our faith" Jesus has completed that which is necessary for a victorious life. He did this by enduring the cross. He was willing to undergo that shame because He knew the joy of doing God's will.

That joy is complete now that He sits "at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12)." This indicates that He has been restored to the glory that He knew before He came into the world.

3. In what way do we benefit from studying the example of faith set by Christ? (Hebrews 12:3-4)

When running a race, especially a long one, it is easy to get worn out and to want to give up. A sense of discouragement can become overwhelming. Considering the formidable enemies and obstacles the believer faces in his spiritual warfare, there is little hope of survival without setting one's mind on Christ.

No one has had to endure more hostility than the Son of God, who was the special focus of the God-hating enmity that consumes sinful man, an enmity that Satan was only too desirous to exploit (see Genesis 3:1-6, 15; Luke 22:3-4; Romans 8:7-8; and James 4:4).

There is no doubt that every believer is in spiritual warfare against sin, but we have the testimony of the faithful and of Christ Himself that God can preserve us and give us victory. We should not feel sorry for ourselves or cower in fear but rather trust in God's care.

TRAINING TO REACH THE GOAL-Hebrews 12:5-13

4. What two temptations concerning God's discipline must a believer resist? (Hebrews 12:5-6)

God's people must resist two separate temptations. On the one hand, they must not "despise," or take lightly, the correction they receive. But neither should they let themselves be crushed and defeated by it.

In those dark times when God punishes His wayward children, we must not forget that His actions grow out of love, out of concern to keep us on the narrow path (Matthew 7:14). If we forget this, we are likely to become bitter and resentful, crying out in self-pity, "Why me, God, why me?" When we were being punished for our misdeeds as children, it was not always obvious to us at the time that our parents loved us. In fact, we often resented both the punishment and them. Only as the years passed and we achieved a certain level of maturity-and possibly after we became parents ourselves-did we come to realize that they punished us because they loved us.

Do you remember being told right before a whipping, "This is going to hurt me as much as it going to hurt you?" God would rather not have to punish us, but He knows that it is something that has to be done for our betterment

Accepting a rebuke with the proper spirit is not easy, but it is more endurable when we bear in mind that the discipline is a mark of God's love (v. 6). The discipline might be quite severe, but those who are subjected to it can rest in the knowledge that it is the experience of every person whom God calls His son [and daughter].

5. Why is it significant that the book of Proverbs is quoted? (Hebrews 12:5b-6)

It is significant that the author of Hebrews quoted from Proverbs because that Old Testament book has much to say about the importance of chastening in the training of a child. Because there is much spiritual foolishness in us as God's children, chastening is a natural part of our lives.

The writer wants the readers to understand that regardless of what the future might hold, God still loves them. The sufferings that they are to undergo may be the result of evil persecution or chastisement from God for sinful disobedience. If it is to be the latter, the readers should realize that God's chastisement grows out of love; it is neither vindictive nor based on a desire for revenge.

6. In what way is it a good sign when we receive God's chastening? (Hebrews 12:7)

When we accept chastening and realize its ultimate purpose, we rejoice in knowing that this is the process He is using to help us maintain a special relationship with Him. He is dealing with us "as sons" [and daughters].

The scriptural text asks us a rhetorical question: Is there any father who does not discipline his son? The answer is taken for granted. Of course fathers who care about their children administer correction. That God does this with us is proof that He is indeed our Father.

7. What does it signify if a person does not receive chastening? (Hebrews 12:8)

On the flip side of verse 7, the author of Hebrews says in verse 8 if a child does not receive any instruction or discipline, it is evidence that he is not a true son. Since every true child receives chastening, those who do not are "bastards," or illegitimate children. In the ancient world such a situation carried a great stigma and usually resulted in many disadvantages. Since the illegitimate child is not a rightful heir to the family inheritance, no one considered it worth the trouble to give him careful instruction and training.

How ill-fated it is for a child to not have an identity through his father through no fault of his own, and as a result to not receive correction in love from that father.

8. Why is God's discipline better than that of an earthly father? (Hebrews 12:9-10)

No matter how hard parents may try, there will always be those times when disciplining their children would better be carried out at a later time when the parents are not upset or enraged. Let's face it, we are only human. And in our humanness we are prone to act sometimes out of emotions-emotions that may cause us to mistakenly use excessive force in whippings, or use inappropriate language in verbal correction, or sentence unfair punishments. For this reason, it is usually better to only discipline when it can be done in LOVE, and never when the intention is to physically harm a child.

God's discipline of His children-on the other hand-shows perfect wisdom, and is not mixed with any degree of selfish or impure motive. And the chastening He administers leads to eternal blessedness. Everything our heavenly Father does is perfectly designed for our ultimate benefit, for in Him matchless wisdom, power, and goodness are combined.

If we as children have grown to respect our parents for the love they showed us and the sacrifices they made for us, "how much more should we" respect our heavenly "Father" for all that He has done for us?

9. What is the end result of God's chastening? (Hebrews 12:11)

No right-thinking person is likely to seek punishment! But when we understand and accept punishment as a part of God's plan, then we will enjoy a "harvest of righteousness and peace." This frees us from the bitterness and resentment that often results from suffering. With such freedom comes greater devotion to the Master. God's discipline is for our eternal good. Again, God disciplines His people out of love (Revelation 3:19).

Just as weeding and pruning are unpleasant exercises in the garden but produce good results, so the process of spiritual discipline brings forth a good crop. After the turmoil and hardship of spiritual chastening comes the peace and serenity that is the blessed by-product of righteousness. The world can offer only a temporary and illusory sense of peace, but those who, like an athlete, go through God's rigorous training program will find rich reward in the end.

10. How does a good response to chastening benefit other believers? (Hebrews 12:12-13)

Runners in the marathon, which is a distance of more than twenty-six miles, speak of a certain point in the race where they "hit the wall." That point is usually around the twenty-mile mark. At that point they suddenly are overwhelmed by the feeling that every ounce of energy in their bodies has been exhausted and they can't go any farther. The winners, of course, somehow reach down and find the strength to finish.

The writer seems to be describing Christians who have "hit the wall." They believe that they have exhausted every ounce of their spiritual energy and can't make it to the finish line. "Feeble arms and weak knees" in a runner are signs of exhaustion. Runners look for these signs in their competitors and, seeing them, take new courage.

We can be certain that Satan is watching for every sign that might indicate that Christians are completely exhausted and will become easy prey for him. Here the faltering Christians are encouraged to put every bit of energy into one last effort to make the finish line. (See Isaiah 35:3.)

Our lesson text concludes with a reference to Proverbs 4:26. "The lame" refers to weaker Christians. The stronger Christians are to help them. They do this by making "level paths" for "feet" to follow; those Christians who have greater spiritual maturity have a responsibility that the less mature Christians "be healed," and that none of them would be disabled. Undoubtedly this includes setting a good example. Christian leaders will give an account for how well they lead God's flock

(Hebrews 13:17)-much like a track coach leads his team.

CONCLUSION

Any form of discipline can be painful, and this is certainly true of the discipline we experience in the Christian life. We are called to accept and endure God's "whippings" because it leads to righteousness living. It also proves to us that God is indeed our Father and that we are His children.

Jesus Christ is the one who knows the way to Heaven. He also knows our weakness and the problems we would face during our journey. On the night that He was betrayed, He said to his disciples, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). May we have the courage and the strength to follow Him no matter what the cost. May we also renew our failing devotion to Him when God disciplines us.

PRAYER

Dear Father: We thank you for sending your Son to set the example of faithful service, regardless of what it cost Him in suffering and shame. Teach us to lay aside the weights that hinder us and to run with perseverance the race of life. In our Lord's name, we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER...

"When you feel weary, remember that cloud of witnesses!"

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our lesson next week we will see how we are to select good leaders in the church. We will explore what makes good leaders, and why they are so important in the life of the church—God's church.

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