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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Twenty-Five God's Discipline

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and 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 reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." 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? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 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? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we might share His holiness. 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. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 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 (Heb. 12:3-13).

According to the inspired author of the book Hebrews, our heavenly Father disciplines all of His children. If we are never disciplined by Him, it indicates that we aren't one of His children. We therefore need to be aware of and sensitive to His discipline. Some professing Christians, whose only focus is God's blessings and goodness, interpret all negative circumstances as being attacks from the devil void of any divine purpose. This can be a great error if God is trying to bring them to repentance by His discipline.

Good earthly parents discipline their children with the hope that their children will learn, mature, and be prepared for responsible adult life. God likewise disciplines us so that we grow spiritually, become more useful in His service, and are prepared to stand before His judgment seat. He disciplines us because He loves us, and because He desires that we share His holiness. Our loving heavenly Father is dedicated to our spiritual growth. Scripture says, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

No child ever enjoys his parents' spankings, and when we are disciplined by God, the experience is not "joyful, but sorrowful," as we just read. In the end, however, we are better for it because discipline yields "the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

When and How Does God Discipline Us?

Like any good father, God only disciplines His children when they are disobedient. Any time we disobey Him, we are in danger of suffering His discipline. The Lord is very merciful, however, and He normally gives us ample time to repent. His discipline usually comes after our repeated acts of disobedience and His repeated warnings.

How does God discipline us? As we learned in a previous chapter, God's discipline may come in the form of weakness, sickness or even premature death:

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:30-32).

We shouldn't automatically conclude that all sickness is a result of God's discipline (the case of Job comes to mind). If sickness does strike, however, it is wise to do a spiritual checkup to see if we may have opened the door to God's discipline through disobedience.

We can avoid God's judgment if we judge ourselves—that is, acknowledge our sin and repent. It would be logical to conclude that we would be candidates for healing once we have repented if our sickness is a result of God's discipline.

By means of God's judgment, Paul said that we actually avoid being condemned along with the world. What did he mean? He could only have meant that God's discipline leads us to repent so that we ultimately aren't sent to hell with the world. This is difficult to accept by those who think holiness is optional for those on the way to heaven. But for those who have read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, they know that only those who obey God will enter His kingdom (see Matt. 7:21). Thus, if we persist in sin and don't repent, we risk forfeiting eternal life. Praise God for His discipline that leads us to repent and saves us from hell!

Satan as a Tool of God's Judgment

It is clear from a number of scriptures that God may use Satan for His disciplinary purposes. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant found in Matthew 18, Jesus said that the servant's master was "moved with anger" when he learned that his forgiven servant had not in turn forgiven his fellow servant. Consequently, he handed his unforgiving servant "over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (Matt. 18:34). Jesus ended this parable with the solemn words:

So shall my heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart (Matt. 18:35).

Who are "the torturers"? It would seem likely that they would be the devil and his demons. God may turn one of His disobedient children over to the devil in order to bring him to repentance. Hardship and calamity have a way of bringing people to repentance—as the prodigal son learned (see Luke 15:14-19).

In the Old Testament, we find examples of God's using Satan or evil spirits to bring about His discipline or judgment in the lives of people who deserve His wrath. One example is found in the ninth chapter of Judges, where we read that "God sent an evil

spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem" (Judg. 9:23) in order to bring judgment upon them for their wicked deeds against the sons of Gideon.

The Bible also says that "an evil spirit from the Lord" afflicted King Saul in order to bring him to repentance (1 Sam 16:14). Saul never did repent, however, and he eventually died in battle because of his rebellion.

In both of these Old Testament examples, the Scripture says that the evil spirits were "sent from God." This is not to say that God has evil spirits in heaven who are waiting there to serve Him. More likely, God simply allows Satan's evil spirits to work their ill limitedly in hopes that sinners will repent under their affliction.

Other Means of God's Discipline

Under the old covenant, we also find that God frequently disciplined His people by permitting troubles such as famines or foreign enemies to dominate them. Eventually they would repent and He would deliver them from their enemies. When they refused to repent after years of oppression and warnings, God ultimately permitted a foreign power to overcome them completely and deport them from their land as exiles.

Under the new covenant, it is certainly possible that God might discipline His disobedient children by permitting troubles in their lives, or He may permit their enemies to afflict them. For example, the scripture quoted at the start of this chapter about God's discipline (Heb. 12:3-13) is found within the context of Hebrew believers who were being persecuted for their faith. Not all persecution, however, is permitted because of disobedience. Every case must be judged separately.

Rightly Reacting to God's Discipline

According to the admonition quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we can react wrongly to God's discipline in one of two ways. We may either "regard lightly the discipline of the Lord" or we may "faint when [we] are reprov'd by Him" (Heb. 12:5). If we "regard lightly" God's discipline, that means that we don't recognize it, or we ignore its warning. To faint from God's discipline is to give up trying to please Him because we think His discipline is too severe. Either reaction is wrong. We should recognize that God loves us, and that He disciplines us for our good. When we recognize His loving hand of discipline, we should repent and receive His forgiveness.

Once we've repented, we should expect relief from God's discipline. We should not, however, necessarily expect relief from the inevitable consequences of our sin, although we may well ask the Lord for mercy and help. God responds to a humble and contrite spirit (see Isaiah 66:2). The Bible promises, "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

After His judgment fell upon the Israelites, God promised:

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with a great compassion I will gather you. In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you (Is. 54:7-8).

God is good and merciful!

For further study concerning God's discipline, see 2 Chron. 6:24-31, 36-39; 7:13-14; Ps. 73:14; 94:12-13; 106:40-46; 118:18; 119:67, 71; Jer. 2:29-30; 5:23-25; 14:12; 30:11; Hag. 1:2-13; 2:17; Acts 5:1-11; Rev. 3:19.