

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Hebrews 12:1-13 "God's Discipline?"

Today's question in the *Ask The Pastor* series is: "We read in Hebrews 12:7 "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons." Does this mean that all hardship we encounter is discipline from God? If not, how do we discern why some people suffer more than others?"

Probing question! Is all hardship God's discipline? I'm tempted to say "I hope not" and sit down..! But we must all face this question in some form, and it's said that how we deal with our troubles does more to define our lives than almost anything, so how we *perceive* our troubles is vitally important.

#### 1) God's Discipline?

Is hardship God's discipline? Some of it apparently is – the Bible uses this language in many places, not just in the book of *Hebrews*. As far back as *Job*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Deuteronomy* we find the theme: "Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD" (Psalm 94:12); and as far forward as *Revelation*: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Revelation 3:9).

Is all hardship discipline? Logic, experience and the Bible all say no. Logic says that discipline implies *desert*, but experience says hardship appears to be too random to be a just rebuke for sins committed. Even the idea of chastening children doesn't fit, because hardship seems to make no distinction

between believers and unbelievers; between "children of God" and those who oppose and despise God. Jesus made very plain that hardship, suffering, sickness and even death are not God's proportionate responses to people's sins (Luke 13, John 9). And of course the Bible show shows us many reasons for hardship apart from discipline.

So whatever Hebrews 12 means, it is not a universal *description* of hardship, and so not a universal *response* to hardship. Because when hardship *is* discipline, the right response is to *submit to it*, to endure it, to learn from it. And there is an obvious connection between *discipline and discipleship* – children of God have to *learn* his ways.

#### 2) Attack of Evil

What about hardship that is not God-sent discipline? Where does that come from, how should we think about it, what is the right response to it? There are really only three other sources of hardship: it's the way things are in a fallen messed up world; bad things happen because we bring them on ourselves; or they represent attacks from an evil enemy. As the early Christians put it, hardship, suffering and evil come from "*the world, the flesh and the devil.*"

In the reverse order: hardship can be an attack by the devil. Now you may dismiss this as old-fashioned superstition and

nonsense; but I suspect most thinking people today recognize the truth in the Apostle Paul's words that "*we fight not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil... so take your stand against the devil's schemes.*" (Ephesians 6:11-12). Someone who talked to me this week about drug and alcohol addiction called it "fighting a demon," and I do not think that is exaggerated language. The attacks of 9/11 forced even Western political leaders to use the language of "evil." The same has been and should be said about the mass murders in Rwanda, or Srebrenica, or now in Darfur or Zimbabwe.

God forbid that anyone should lay these atrocities at the feet of God! They are demonic evils, which cause not just hardship but great suffering to hundreds of thousands of people. And the words of the Bible are as apt a description as any you can find in today's vocabulary: "*your enemy, the devil, prowls around looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8); "*beware, for Satan masquerades as an angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14). How should we think about such things? What should our reaction be? *Resist* the devil. Put on the armor of God and *fight*. If necessary, *run away* from the source of danger. *Seek justice*; do not simply endure, or shrug.

What other sources of hardship and suffering do we encounter? What about ourselves - "the flesh"? Again the Bible and experience agree that at times we cause our own suffering. "*A man's own folly ruins his life,*" (Proverbs 19:3); we are "*tempted by our own evil desires*" (James 1:14). There are times when "the devil made me do it" is not the answer! We make our choices, and they sometimes have consequences that cause us and others real harm, real hardship, real suffering. Whether we are children of God or not, we must obey the rules of the universe. Gravity and human anatomy will ensure that

if we jump off a high building, we will die - whether we are believers or not!

We can eat, drink, smoke or drug ourselves to death, and we will have nobody to blame but ourselves - not our genetic predispositions, not the environment we grew up in. Personal choice trumps almost anything in the world, except the will of God. So how do we deal with hardship that we bring on ourselves? The Biblical word is still the right one: *repent*. Change the ways you do things, the attitudes you bring to life, or you will keep suffering in the same way. It's said that one of our most foolish traits is to keep doing the same thing while expecting a different outcome. Repent, change, or the self-inflicted hardships will keep repeating.

But of course a fourth source of hardship that we have to deal with is that we live in a messed up *fallen world* where nothing works properly. However you understand "the Fall," you know from experience and the Bible that bad things happen randomly. Typhoons and tsunamis sweep towns and villages away. Volcanoes and earthquakes devastate whole regions. Drunk drivers kill innocent pedestrians; buildings collapse, bombs fall. Some of these tragedies can be traced back to human folly, greed and evil; often they cannot. It is generally futile to search for someone to blame. As Jesus said, "*in this world you will have trouble.*"

The only response is to deal with victims and suffering and hardship with compassion, to support one another in this strangely broken world, to do all the good we can in all the places we can; to fix what can be fixed, knowing that we will never fix it all.

### 3) God At Work

So finally we come back, as believers always must, to the question of what *God* is up to, and how we can discern the meaning and the

right response to suffering. Faced with hardship, should we submit, resist, endure, repent, fight, try to heal, or say with fatalistic resignation "it is the will of God"?

If a good God controls our world, why are things as they are, and how are we supposed to respond to hardship? Is it all God's fault, or all God's design, all part of his inscrutable providence? People have wrestled with these questions for millennia – the attempt, as Milton called it, "*to justify the ways of God to man.*" Theodicy, the philosophers and theologians call it – and you need to know that the almost universal conclusion is that it cannot be done outside of faith. There is *no answer* to "the problem of suffering" that commands universal acceptance; only from *within the life of faith* is it possible even to glimpse an answer.

No Christian thinkers have grappled harder with these issues than Augustine and Calvin. Both were convinced by the Bible, by reason, and by experience, that "the will of God is the cause of all things... and that all the counsels of men are governed by his providence;" while at the same time insisting that "God is not the author of evil" (Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk 1). How does this "work"? The Bible presents us with the bare contradictions. Jesus said "*the Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him*" (Luke 22:3); "*By God's set purpose and foreknowledge... wicked men put Jesus to death on a cross*" (Acts 2:23).

Augustine asked: "the Father delivered the Son, Christ his own body, and Judas his Master; how then is God just and man guilty?... only that *their reasons were different.*" So God's good will and the folly and sin of humans are made to co-exist and co-labor for God's good purposes. "*He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,*" (Ephesians 1:11) says Paul; and he also

"*works for good in all things for those who love him*" (Romans 8:28).

But even this is not enough to satisfy us, is it? Why do some people suffer so much, others apparently so little? Why is there no proportion in the hardships of this world? To say "God is working out his purposes," or agree with Augustine that "*he who is good would not permit evil to be done, were he not omnipotent to bring good out of evil*" is not enough. The great earthquake that flattened the city of Lisbon in 1755 killed 100,000 people; and caused Voltaire to write *Candide* to attack the notion that we live in "the best of possible worlds" ruled over by a good God. Dostoevsky has Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* swear that the suffering of one innocent child is too much to justify God's supposed providential use of evil for ultimate good.

It's not just that our minds are baffled by the idea of God's providence ruling over the sufferings of the world; it's our emotions too. And that is perhaps appropriate, because Christianity does not encourage a fatalistic shrug that whatever happens "must be the will of God." That is obedience to an inscrutable and unchangeable providence. Christianity says three things about hardship and God that go far, far beyond the submissive shrug.

One is that if you want to understand suffering even a little, you must get to know this God personally. You must know him as you would know a person, you must experience his love and his graciousness and his goodness, and only then will you be able to *trust* him fully. You will learn, as you can learn with another human being, what it means to trust your life in their hands, even when you don't know or understand everything about them. But trust does not demand *total* knowledge, which is why it is also called *faith*.

The second thing Christianity insists on is that God himself has suffered. So he not only understands and empathizes with our suffering, but in the passion of Jesus Christ he has done something profound to redeem all the suffering of the world. A God who himself suffers offers us a new vision and a new set of responses to suffering and hardship. And among those responses is the third Christian distinctive on suffering: it is an object of prayer, which can change it. Christians do not shrug "it must be God's will;" they pray "Lord, what is your will in this situation?" They know God well enough to know that he can, if he wills, remove the hardship, or give strength and comfort to endure it, or turn it into a learning experience, or turn it into ultimate good.

Finally, to return to our questioner: how can we discern what is God's discipline, what is not, and why some people suffer more than others? I can do no more than repeat what I said a month ago about "Guidance" and seeking God's will on anything: look into the Bible, expect inner promptings from the Spirit, consult other Christians, reason it out, look at the circumstances, and pray. Those six things, all linked and interdependent, can lead us to know God's will. They are also part of learning to *know God*, which is how we come to trust him even when we do not understand his ways.

Let us pray...