

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?” I have to admit that I struggle a little with this passage. Part of it is because I don’t like hardship. Who does enjoy hardship?

It also raises questions about the nature of suffering in the Christian life. Is all suffering that comes our way a kind of discipline from the Lord? Are only some hardships to be seen as discipline?

Certainly there are passages of scripture that we could use to say that the Lord sends hardship to his people in order to discipline them. Most of the Book of Judges, which we’ve been reading in Morning Prayer, is about the Lord using the oppressive forces of Israel’s enemies to lead Israel back to Himself. For a while, everyone does what they feel like doing, then their enemies conquer them. The people repent, and the Lord delivers them. That’s the Cliff’s Notes version of the Book of Judges.

That, however, is an incomplete view of hardship as presented in scripture. There is also the Book of Job. Job’s friends are all convinced that Job is being punished, and they let him know that. The Lord rebukes Job’s friends, which should be a lesson to us if we are tempted to tell someone that their hardship was sent by the Lord to send them a message. In the end, the only answer that Job is given is that he would never understand what was going on, even if the Lord explained it to him. Job would just have to trust in the Lord’s goodness.

Then, there is the Ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to John, when the disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind.” Jesus said, “It’s not either this man’s fault, or his parents’ fault. I am going to reveal God’s glory in this situation.”

So, there is not one simple answer in scripture that explains all hardships. When we read that we are to endure hardship for the sake of discipline, it does not mean that every hardship we ever encounter was sent by the Lord in order to discipline us. Just because we cannot necessarily know the reason a particular hardship has come our way does not mean we should not wrestle with this passage.

There are a few things we need to consider to get a better understanding of what the scripture is telling us in this passage. One thing that is important to understanding this passage is the nature of discipline. When people hear the word discipline, they frequently think of punishment. Sometimes punishment is part of discipline, but it is not in itself discipline.

When I played soccer in high school, at the end of each practice our coach made us run a lap around the stadium. It doesn’t sound like much, but after running for the two hours of practice, a lap around the stadium felt like torture. Our coach noticed that there were some players who were taking a nice leisurely pace, so he told us that the last two players to finish would have to run a second lap. The goal of that second lap was discipline, but it was not really punishment so much as it was motivation. After a few practices, no one had to run the second lap, because everyone was keeping up. The coach knew if we got used to running at a strong pace after two hours of practice, when it was time to play a game we would be in much better condition for the ninety minutes of game time, but he had to discipline us to run.

When we read that we are to endure hardship for the sake of discipline, it might be helpful to think of discipline in terms of preparation. At the beginning of the passage, we are told to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Baptism was the beginning, not the end of our life as Christians. Following Christ in the way that leads to eternal life is an active pursuit. We have to make moment by moment decisions to trust him rather than finding security in the things of this world.

What are the hardships that give us the discipline to live a Christian life? In Chapter Eleven, we read about various people who endured hardships in the past. Noah endured the hardship of building an ark. Abraham endured the hardship of setting off to a land he did not know. Moses gave up being an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, and chose to share in the suffering of Israel. Many of the prophets were rejected, mocked, imprisoned, and even killed. Then, Hebrews points our attention to Jesus, who endured hostility against himself from sinners. He did not deserve the hostility, but he willingly endured it in order to obtain our salvation.

The Hebrews are then told, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

In order to run the race of the Christian life, we have to lay aside the sin that so easily entangles us. This does not only mean that we are to avoid committing sin. It means that we need to turn our backs on the sinful nature of a fallen world. Sometimes it creates a hardship to turn away from the sinful nature of a fallen world.

I knew a young man who believed he had a vocation to be a missionary. He had shown a great deal of academic promise. Many people assumed he would become a doctor or an engineer. When he told one of his teachers that he was going to study for the ministry, the teacher asked, "Why would you waste your life like that? I mean, you could make so much more money doing something else."

There's nothing inherently wrong with making money, but the world's attitudes toward money are sinful. The world tells us to pursue wealth over most other things. It's the salesperson who sells the most product that is recognized, not the one who shows the most integrity. We tend to value careers based on their earning potential. We have to lay such sinful values aside, or we will be ensnared by the world. Following Jesus will demand, at times, that we endure the hardship of a life that is less secure in terms of wealth, power, and prestige to focus our attention on living a godly life.

That's one hardship that we must endure for the sake of discipline. Often that will lead to another hardship. When we turn our backs on the sinful nature of a fallen world, we are inviting persecution. Jesus didn't sugar coat that fact in our gospel reading today. He said that households would be divided because some would follow him and some would reject him.

In the American Church today, there is a lot of handwringing over the fact that Christians are often portrayed in a negative light. The Little Sisters of the Poor were sued because they did not want to comply with one provision of the healthcare mandate that contradicted their faith. One

anchor on a cable news channel said that Christians were at least partly to blame for the mass shooting in Orlando a little over a month ago.

We might decry all of this, and try to force people to stop saying mean things about Christians, but in our struggle against sin, we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood. Rather than wringing our hands, it might be better to endure it as a kind of discipline. It might be part of our training to turn our backs on the sinful desires to seek the approval of people instead of seeking to expand the kingdom of heaven. It is a discipline that forces us to seek security in things eternal rather than what is temporal.

So, how do we do it? How do we embrace hardships for the sake of discipline? Twice in our reading from Hebrews today we are told to look to Jesus. If you find that your faith in Christ means that you are out of step with the world around you, remember that Jesus was out of step with his culture. Keep your focus on following Jesus rather than trying to fit in to the world around you. If people ridicule you because of your faith, consider Jesus who endured the hostility of the world. It's not always easy. Sometimes it's like running another lap around the stadium after you've been practicing for two hours, but it will lead you to the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. Don't lose heart. Keep your focus on Jesus, trust in him, and he will sustain you.