

2. If the faithful throughout history were worthy examples to scrutinized and followed, that was preeminently the case with the truly faithful Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. For He was the son of Abraham in whom Israel became Israel *indeed*; the One in whom Israel at last fulfilled its covenant election and vocation as son, servant, disciple and witness for the sake of the world's blessing and restoration to God (ref. Isaiah 49:1-6).

Jesus lived out His life as the quintessential faithful son whose mind, heart and will were fully one with His Father. He alone, among all mankind, could truthfully make the claim, "to see Me is to see the Father" (cf. John 1:14-18 with 4:1-34, 5:1-20, 8:12-56, 10:22-38, 14:1-10). Thus Jesus' faithful sonship is the superlative example for men to follow, and His faithfulness saw its supreme expression in His sacrificial death at Calvary. For, by His submissive act of self-giving, Jesus fully disclosed and fulfilled His Father's purpose in sending Him into the world. His horrific and appalling death was Jesus' superlative testimony to His Father's love, goodness and glorious design for His beloved creation. Far from being detached from Jesus' brutal death at Roman hands, Israel's God was supremely revealed and glorified in it (John 12:23-28). If the Son's work was the Father's (John 5:19, 10:32-38), the apex of the Father's work was Calvary's unspeakable agony and disgrace (John 17:1-5, 19:30).

- a. The cross represented the pinnacle of Jesus' faithfulness as a Son fully devoted to His Father's purpose and will. So also it brought to a climax the *suffering* that faithfulness invariably incurs. These Hebrews were well familiar with this dynamic, for they themselves were suffering because of their faithful adherence to the messianic Son. They shared their Lord's suffering of faith, and thus the writer exhorted them to find in Him strength and encouragement for their own contest of faith – from His faithful life, but supremely from his faithful death: "*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*" (12:3-4).

Jesus had persevered in faith all the way to the point of death, and God had not yet required this of these Hebrew disciples. Whatever the challenges to their faithfulness, they were eclipsed by what their Lord had withstood; their resistance hadn't cost them their lifeblood. But it wasn't merely that His suffering exceeded theirs; they should stand firm because His suffering was *for their sake*: He remained faithful unto death in order that they should share in His triumph over death and be perfected in His life (cf. John 6:22-33, 47-58; Romans 6:1-11; etc.).

- b. The writer recognized that Jesus' suffering was crucial to his readers' perseverance in faith, but not simply because they shared a common plight with Him, or because "misery loves company." No, the key to their encouragement was recognizing the relationship between suffering and *sonship*; the fact that suffering is essential to the progress and perfection of sonship. Jesus had "learned obedience" (matured as God's human image-son) through the things He suffered (5:8), and so it is for all who are God's image-children by sharing in Him. Those who are sons in the Son will see their sonship perfected in the same way His was.

Thus the key to the readers' encouragement was viewing their hardship and affliction through the lens of their status as sons. And not merely that suffering plays a crucial role in the progress of God's children (which it does), but that it is directly and intentionally the goodness of God toward them; *suffering is a key aspect of the Father's loving discipline of His beloved children* (12:5-10).

The writer wanted his readers to rethink their hardship and affliction in terms of their new identity and status as children of the God who had now become their covenant Father through their union with His Son. And the marrow of that new perspective is recognizing their suffering as their Father's discipline. Notably, he indicated that this was not some new insight for them, but a truth they had lost sight of because of the distraction of their suffering (12:5a). Thus the author pointed them back to the book of Proverbs by way of reminder (vv. 5-6; ref. Proverbs 3:11-12). He knew his Jewish readers well enough to know their familiarity with the scriptures, and he was confident that they understood the scriptural principle that God disciplines His children. This is the focus of the passage he cited, which helps explain why he chose it. In context, the exhortation is *Solomon's* charge to his own son, not God's instruction to His children. But the marrow of Solomon's charge is the truth that God disciplines those he loves, just as every father disciplines his children, and this is the sense in which the Hebrews writer regarded Solomon's words as God's word to his readers: "*You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons.*"

- c. Hardship and persecution had caused these Hebrew Christians to lose sight of the significance of their suffering. They'd "forgotten" God's word to them, not because their memory failed, but because their afflictions were obscuring what they knew to be true. They were becoming discouraged and resentful of their difficult circumstance, no longer able to perceive their suffering as in any way related to their Father's love for them.

It's always been challenging for people to reconcile the seeming contradiction between a loving God and human suffering, and the difficulty is heightened when the suffering is close to home. Contemporary attitudes have also added to the challenge, especially the expectation of a trouble-free life: *If God is good and loving, He wouldn't want His children to suffer and would do all He could to keep them from it.* Similarly, discipline is now widely viewed as *punishment*, so that the notion of God disciplining people through suffering is most often understood as Him punishing them for their sin. In a certain sense, people have always conceived of divine interaction this way: Deities (however conceived) reward what is good and right and punish evil (cf. Job with Luke 13:1-4; John 9:1-2).

There are, then, two critical considerations for grasping the relationship between suffering and God's loving concern and care. The first is the biblical concept of *discipline*, which refers to the process of child-rearing, but as it has in mind a particular goal. Discipline isn't punishment or correction per se, but wholistic instruction and training that prepares a child for his role as an adult in the world.

This intentional, goal-oriented concept of discipline is becoming less common in contemporary Western culture, which tends to take a more subjective, child-oriented approach to child-rearing: Good parenting now focuses on nurturing a child's sense of self-identity and self-worth, affording him every opportunity to develop his own interests, and working toward his eventual personal success.

But child-rearing was very different in the ancient world, and discipline in parenting had nothing to do with the child's own interests and desires, but focused instead on the role he or she was expected to fill. Children were perceived in terms of the *family's* good, and the father was the final determiner of that "good" as it pertained to each child. That "good," in turn, determined the training and preparation (*discipline*) a child received until he (or she) was ready to fulfill his responsibility, whether through vocation, marriage, etc. It wasn't that parents had no concern for their children's happiness and well-being, but they perceived those benefits as transcending their personal gratification. For most people, life consisted of hard work and bare survival, and children were expected to do their part in providing for their family. Children of noble birth didn't work as laborers, but their lives were no less devoted to the family's well-being. In fact, sons in such families were often raised outside of their home by nurses and pedagogues chosen by the father to prepare them to assume their role in the family when they came of age (cf. Galatians 4:1-2). From the lowest laborer to the highest lord, no one was asking his children, "How can I help you fulfill your dreams?"

The process and practice of child-rearing and discipline vary in different eras and cultures, but all parents instinctively recognize an obligation to their children, however they choose to act on it. Here, the writer focused on *fathers* and *sons* because of the unique relationship that existed between men and their male offspring in the ancient world. Men viewed their sons as an extension of themselves, and so the means for perpetuating their life and its significance. This was as true of the laborer and tradesman as the king on the throne. Thus the writer's rhetorical question: "*What son is there whom his father does not discipline?*" Discipline (purposeful instruction and training) demonstrated that a man regarded a child as his son; and as it is with men, so it is with God (12:7-8).

The second crucial consideration is the *role of suffering* in God's discipline of His children. If discipline is intentional and directed toward a certain goal, that goal for God's children is their full conformity to the likeness of His unique Son. And that conformity involves the transformation and perfection of their *humanness*. God's goal for human beings is that they become all that Jesus is as resurrected and glorified man. Put simply, God's intent is that His human creatures fully realize their created nature and function as His image-bearers. But bearing God's image in the world involves manifesting His life and likeness, and this implicates the concept of *sonship*. In scriptural terms, a son is *of* his father, so that to see a son is to see his father. But this is only the case when a son fully embraces and lives out his sonship – when he is true to who he is in relation to his father.

This, then, is the key to understanding why suffering is vital to the discipline by which God grows His children in their sonship. This sort of sonship involves understanding, conformity, devotion and dependence, and all of these are nurtured through suffering (in its various dimensions and expressions). *And this is true for every human being – the spotless Son of Man as well as every child of Adam.* As much as for the vilest sinner, suffering was fundamental and essential to Jesus' growth and maturity as God's son.

The discipline Jesus was subjected to involved suffering in every form, yet He was, from the point of His birth, the sinless Son in whom the Father was well-pleased. This shows that His suffering wasn't punitive, and neither was His Father's discipline. Throughout His life Jesus was fully pleasing to His Father, and yet His progress from newborn baby to exalted image-son was marked by hardship, injustice, affliction, and anguish. So much so that these things are the marrow of Isaiah's great messianic portrait (53:1-9). *But why was it that the flawless, faithful Son had to "learn obedience" through suffering?*

- Jesus lived a perfectly faithful life as God's human son, but as a process of normal human growth, not as a static condition. He was obedient to His Father at every point throughout His life, but commensurate with the state of His maturity as a human being. What it meant for Jesus to be faithful as a small child was very different than as an adolescent or a grown man. He was "made like His brethren in all things," which meant that He passed through the same stages of development that all people do.
- Jesus grew and matured as a human being, and so did His relationship with His Father. He learned what it means to be a son of the Creator-God by growing in His understanding (of His Father, Himself, and His mission), His communion with His Father, His devotion to Him, and His dependence on Him. And all of this growth was nurtured through the things He suffered, because suffering drew Jesus ever closer to the One in whom He found all wisdom, love, and provision.

But as it was with the Son of Man, so it is with every son of the Father; all must walk the path of maturing sonship that has suffering at its center. Jesus triumphed over His Adamic nature at every turn, always living in perfect faith and faithfulness, and yet He needed to experience difficulty, temptation and affliction to learn what it means to truly live as a son of the Father in perfect intimacy, devotion, trust, dependence and joy. It was through the fruitfulness of His suffering that Jesus was able to claim that seeing Him is seeing the Father. How much more, then, is this path of sonship necessary for the other sons whose faith and faithfulness are imperfect and easily distracted? Moreover, this discipline comes at the hand of a Father whose love, wisdom, and intention are perfect. If children yield to the flawed discipline of their finite human father, much more should they embrace the discipline of their all-loving, infinitely wise Father who seeks their ultimate good – their full conformity to Him as image-sons (12:9-10).