

*“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A young police constable, involved in a rescue effort in a river sluice, drowns trying to recover the body of a young boy, leaving behind not one, but two families caught in unexpected grief. A young mother, looking forward to the birth of her second child is diagnosed with breast cancer. Her options: undergo treatments that risk the child, or give the cancer time to spread. In either case, the consequences will likely result in the loss of either her life or that of her child—possibly of both. A senseless war in Ukraine causes terrible losses of life and causes many to become refugees in other lands. In these, and in thousands upon thousands of situations like them, we keep hearing the same question arising again and again: Why? Why do things like this happen? Why is there so much pain and suffering in our world?

For the Christian, the question of why often becomes more difficult. We don’t just ask why and throw up our hands in frustration because we don’t have the answers. Our question is often much more direct: why does God allow these things to happen to me? It is hard enough when the suffering of the world doesn’t seem to make sense or doesn’t seem just according to our standards. When we are the victims, when we are the ones who are suffering, when it is our family, our friends, who are in pain or distress, we expect God to give a good, solid reason as to why these things are happening in our lives.

In our text today, the answer to the question of suffering is set forth, not as an apologetic response of God to the difficulties of life, but as an insight into God’s greater purposes. What we are told is that there is method amid the madness of this life, as God disciplines His beloved children, leading us through the pains of this life closer to Him and the glory He wants us to have with Him forever.

St. Paul said: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28, ESV) I have always found great comfort and hope in those words, and pray that I may always believe them, especially if I should suddenly see some adversity in my life that just doesn’t make sense. That really is the biggest problem, isn’t it? Things don’t always make sense. Even worse, they don’t seem fair. Bad things happen to good people, and good things seem to surround bad people. Back in 1981, there was a popular book written by Harold Kushner, a conservative Jewish rabbi. The book is entitled, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”. The problem with the book is that it left a certain emptiness, a feeling that sometimes this is just the way things are. Kushner suggests that God isn’t all-powerful to fix everything. One day everything may be bright and wonderful; the next it may all come crashing down around you. We may just think, “well, whatever will be will be.” But God would have us see something far different in the difficult times of our lives. He wants us to know that there is method amid the madness. Our text tells us that God uses the suffering and troubles of this world to discipline us. He disciplines us because we are His dear children and He loves us.

Of course, that is not what children think when they are being disciplined. That is not what we think when we find ourselves being disciplined by God. What parent hasn’t heard a child vehemently spit out the words, “I hate you”, because we have laid down some punishment or taken away some privilege, much to the child’s dismay. Yet we lay down the rules—and enforce them—because we love our children. Junior reaches for a hot stove, and we slap his hands. He isn’t happy, but we know it was for the best. Our little princess is told she cannot cross the street by herself, but she sees all the other children playing on the other side, and so she runs across the street without looking. We react; we discipline, because we recognize what our children cannot see for themselves, namely the danger of their actions. We discipline out of love for them because we want to keep them safe. Even though the issues and the dangers may change over the years it is still true that loving, caring parents will continue to discipline because they want the best for their children. Contrary to the belief of the children, and contrary to the belief of

many child psychologists, this discipline is one of the most important things we can do for our children. It trains them in righteousness; it keeps them from the greater harms and dangers of the world; it helps them to grow into responsible, healthy adulthood.

But we have trouble making the same connection with God's discipline of us. We have trouble seeing the good that discipline brings to our spiritual lives and our eternal well-being. It is so hard for us to believe and accept the fact that there is method amid the madness, that there is some greater purpose behind the suffering of our lives. For us, it would be so much simpler if God would just take away all the pain and difficulty of our lives. But would it be better? If fire didn't feel hot, would we move away from it as quickly when our skin were in danger of being consumed? If our bodies didn't feel pain, would we truly care for them the way we should? If sin didn't have its consequences of pain and suffering, would we truly pay attention to it and its affects upon us the way we should?

The root cause of all suffering and pain in this world is sin. If there were no sin, there would be no pain, no trouble, no disasters of any kind. Without sin, there would be no crime, no war, no drunk drivers. But our world is not free from sin. It is filled with sin, and getting worse. We, too, are sinful people, people who deliberately and knowingly do those things that are contrary to the holy will of God. We do them, and think we can do what we want because we have the right to choose our own path. In spite of the fact that God warns us again and again that the path of sin leads to death and destruction, we cross the street, oblivious to the traffic rushing towards us, threatening our life. We do what we want, mindless of our headlong fall into the gaping jaws of death and hell.

Now I know what you're thinking. Yes, it makes sense for God to discipline the bad people, but we aren't bad. King David would disagree. Like David, we always have to admit: ***"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."*** (Psalm 51:3-4, ESV) If God didn't love us, He could let us go on our merry way, doing whatever we wanted, and letting us suffer the consequences of our actions. But God loves us, and does not want to see us truly suffer, to be destroyed by our stubbornness and unbelief. He wants us to live in glory with Him. The suffering of this world is God disciplining us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. It is not the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. That punishment was laid upon the only One who has done nothing worthy of punishment, the only One who should truly enjoy a life free from suffering. That is why we are told: ***"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*** (Hebrews 12:1-2, ESV)

It is on the cross that Christ endures our punishment, and suffers because of our sin. He didn't have to do it; He could have said, "let those rotten sinners deal with their own sinfulness." But He set aside Himself and His glory to save us. He took into Himself our humanity so that He could die in our place in that most cruel death so that sin's power could be broken. He rose again to destroy the true suffering of death and hell. And He lives to lead us away from sin and into the life God has given us as His children through our baptism.

This is where we see His method amid the madness. When God allows or brings suffering into our life, He does it to make us mindful of sin and its destructive power. Don't think of it as cause and effect: we said a bad word, and so we stub our toe as discipline. It could be that, but God is dealing with the greater reality of sin. He loves us and disciplines us, letting us feel the pain and suffering of this world, so that we will turn from our sin to the life only He can give. Sickness may come so that He can put other things right in our lives. Financial reversals may come to pull us away from something that may hurt us or that may lead us from Him. Yes, these things do hurt. They don't make life pleasant but through them we see the terror and pain of sin—and we flee from it. In them, we recognize how much we need the Father's help—and He is with us to deliver us. God is never vindictive, simply out to get us for the things that we have done wrong in His sight. He is training us, equipping us and leading us to the greater life, the life only He can give.

William Shakespeare wrote: "In sickness let me not so much say, 'Am I getting better of my pain?' as, 'Am I getting better for it?'" When we see the suffering of our life for what it is—a gentle chiding and discipline from a loving father—we will grow through it and find the benefit of it. Best of all, it assures us that we, who trust in that Saviour who has first suffered for us, are being led by our loving God to the glory of life with Him, where we will share in His holiness forever. Amen.