

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

If it's not too huge a starter question... what kind of God allows suffering?
(Maybe only allow 5 word answers max!)
Would you ever answer that question with "a loving one"? Why or why not?

Today's passage shows how the Christian's suffering is a sign of God's love...

QUESTIONS

What does 4 tell us about the situation these readers were in? What was their "struggle"?
How might 4-5 be a slight 'telling off'?
What have they forgotten? (5)

What kind of person is God likened to? (7)
What do loving Fathers do? (6)
How does this discipline feel at the time? (11)
What is God's attitude to us in disciplining us?
What is the outcome of this discipline? (10-11)

Can you think of ways in which your parents disciplined you? Or other types of discipline, such as sports or music practise or study?
How did you feel towards discipline at that time?
Looking back, how do you feel about it now?

Turning the tables... If you are a parent, why do/did you want to train your children? (*presuming you do!*)
How is this different from mercilessly punishing them?
What would you say to your kids if they said, "If you loved me, you wouldn't make me do my homework / eat my veg / get up early for my paper round...?"

How are we tempted to feel when times are hard?
How is this idea of Fatherly discipline or training helpful in those times?
What would it say about God if these hard times never came to us?

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

Are there situations in your life which make you "weary" of God's training? (5)
What do you need to remember? (6)

What kinds of things might God be teaching us through hard times?

What are we told to do in 12-13? What does it mean?

Read Isaiah 35:3-6, 10 which talk about the world being renewed.

What should we say to the person with "weak hands" and "feeble knees" to "strengthen" them? (4, see also Heb 10:37)

Heb 12:2 says that Jesus was able to endure the cross because of "the joy set before him." How does our wonderful future hope help *you* to keep going?

Why not encourage each other now about this great future!

And pray that we'd be willing to submit to God's training, even when it's hard.

Hebrews 12:4-13



Theme of *Hebrews*

Hebrews is written because of an urgent problem: the readers are on the verge of apostasy. Apostasy is the opposite of conversion; it is 'falling away from' or 'throwing away' Christ (3:12; 4:11; 5:6; 10:35). That is the 'sin' in Hebrews, and the 'temptation' they face is 'drift' (2:1). But their drifting is surprisingly not into irreligion, but back into the Jewish faith from which they had converted.

The main argument (to warn them against this drift) is that in Jesus God has spoken his **final word** (chs 1-4) and completed a **finished work** (chs 5-9/10): why go back to the 'shadow' (cf 10:1)? All of *Hebrews*' dense theology is included to serve the main application of this 'word of exhortation' (13:22).

Theme Sentence for 10:4-13

Hardship is training from our loving heavenly Father, so we should endure and encourage others too.

How this passage fits in

This passage continues the theme of the letter, exhorting Christians to keep being believers no matter what. We've already been introduced many times to the idea of people falling away from the faith (2:1, 3; 3:12-14; 4:1, 11; 6:6; 10:26-31, 38-39). A big reason people fall away is due to suffering, primarily persecution. Things get hard so they stop trusting and retreat into sin and religion, which can make life easier in the short term. However, the believer has a long-term future hope and so they stick with it (10:34).

Chapter 11 gave lots of examples of believers who lived and died by faith, taking the long view that the primary benefits of salvation are not for the here and now but for after our death or after Jesus' return. The long line of testimonies reaches its peak in 12:2-3, which shows Jesus as the prime example of a believer. He endured the horrors of the cross because of "the joy set before him". That's what we need to do as well.

The big application of these great stories of faith comes in 12:1, where we too are called to throw off our sins and run the race to the end, since we have all these other believers cheering us on. The sports metaphor continues in our passage, speaking of a fight, intense training, and the need for the whole team to carry the injured members so they don't drop out. It's the same message as the whole book so far ... keep being a believer today and urge others on too!

Application

- understand suffering as part of God's Fatherly discipline
- endure through suffering, still trusting and submitting to God
- encourage others to stay strong through hardship

Commentary

4 The readers were facing a "struggle against sin". In 1 we're told to throw off the sins which slow us down and pull us off course in the Christian life. So this struggle could be the inner battle against personal sin. But 3 speaks of Jesus' battle with "sinners" who showed hostility to Him, which might imply that the readers' struggle was against persecution – the effects of sin 'out there' in the world.

It's probable that the readers' struggle was a mixture of both. Outside pressure was causing them to retreat into sin, i.e. away from Jesus. This verse is meant as something of a rebuke. "Resist" and "struggle" are both athletic words and "the point of shedding blood" was thought of as the sign of a good athlete or fighter... which they hadn't reached yet! Compared to Jesus' struggles, they had so far barely broken a sweat but were already thinking of throwing in the towel.

Unlike Jesus, whom they should look to as the ultimate example of living/dying by faith (3), they hadn't yet had to shed their blood. 10:32-34 tell us that there was some formal persecution in that some were being imprisoned, as well as informal mocking and "reproach". Whether the plundering of property was official confiscation or random lootings, we don't know. But no-one had yet been killed for their faith. However, as you read these last chapters, you get the impression that things are about to get harder for them. (See the ominous word "yet".)

5-6 The writer quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 here as a reminder that when parents love their children, they will discipline them. The proverb is aimed at kids who have just been sent to their room or spanked and are angry or sad about it. Perhaps they think their parents don't love them – after all Dad just did something unpleasant and you do nice things for people you love, right?! (Wrong, as we'll see later.)

The aim of the proverb, connected with the "have you forgotten..." intro might imply that the readers weren't taking their current struggles very well. The persecution was causing some of them to drift back into Judaism, which was much more respectable and safe, and drift away from Jesus. They mustn't forget this truth or take discipline lightly!

7-9 Just like a loving father will discipline his children, so God disciplines us out of love.

If a man has a one night stand and the woman becomes pregnant, having to bring up the child on her own, that son isn't going to receive any fatherly discipline. He won't have a dad to help instil good morals and habits by bringing order and authority into the boy's life. This might seem like more fun for the lad than being grounded on a Saturday night, but that lack of discipline only proves the child is "illegitimate" (8).

This passage has lots to say about earthly parenting – so dads should take note! It's sad that the statement in 9 that "we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us" is not true for many people today, so we should tread carefully as we teach this. But even where this hasn't come from a dad, it's clear how it's a loving thing to bring discipline.

The main point of the section is *not* about our parenting though! The presence of godly (or at least active!) dads is assumed in the passage to make the bigger point: if loving human fathers bring discipline, how much more will our loving heavenly Father? And how much more should we be willing to "be subject" to Him in this (9)?

Somewhat strangely, we should be concerned if hard times didn't happen to us. Because what kind of dad/God would allow that? Only legitimate sons receive an inheritance. Only proper sons have a relationship of love. And only real sons are disciplined.

10-11 Hard times don't come along because God doesn't care. Quite the opposite. They come precisely *because* He loves us. Just as human fathers have those few years in which they try to shape our characters for the better, so God has plans for us which require discipline too.

God is interested in our holiness (10), not *just* our happiness. In the short term, discipline is never nice. But God has a longer term aim for us – "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (11), a harvest of holiness.

Discipline is described as "training" (11). That links back to 1-2 in which the Christian life is likened to a race. We need to throw off everything holding us back (namely, our sin) and run with endurance. If we're going to make it to the finish line, we need this kind of training which comes to us through times of hardship.

This raises big questions. If Jesus our high priest has dealt with our sins, why are we being "chastised"? Firstly, the motive is key! Hell is not doing people good and we mercifully miss out on that kind of "chastising". This kind is intended for our good, so is very different!

Secondly, discipline is different from punishment. This isn't a case of doing something bad so God sends us some trouble. It's more about how tough times strengthen us and cause us to lean more on Him, sharpening our priorities. Punishment is payback; discipline is rehab. It's like the 'discipline' of getting up early for a run – rough but doing me good. When troubles come, we should ask, "What is my Father God trying to teach me through this?" rather than "What did I do wrong to deserve this?!"

12-13 All the stuff about fathers and discipline comes to its application here, which could be summarised as... endure and encourage!

These verses are allusions to a few Old Testament passages. Isaiah 35:3-4 says that we should encourage the weary with the truth that God will come to redeem them (and the universe too). Proverbs 4:25-27 speak of making level paths (NIV) and sticking to them, not veering off into sin. This might also be a reference to Exodus 17:8-13 where Moses is given a seat and his tired arms are supported by his friends. So we should support one another to endure.

This is yet another way of saying "let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works... encouraging one another" (10:24-25) and "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'" (3:13). We must stick close to Jesus, and strengthen others to as well.