

DIVINE CHASTISEMENT

"AND ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him." Hebrews 12:5.

One purpose of the New Testament scriptures is to help people to keep their loyalty to Christ in a very difficult world. One of the things which we have to do in life is to learn to accept disappointments and difficulties. There is no use in kicking at them, or nursing a grievance because of them. That reaction only makes them harder to bear. It sets up an inner friction which galls the spirit.

Part of our trouble is the idea that life was meant to be easy and pleasant. It is strange that such an idea should have entered our minds. There is no ground for it in the New Testament, and no evidence of it in life. The evidence is all the other way. A certain amount of hardship and suffering comes to all. We cannot develop properly without discipline, regardless of whether it is imposed from within or from without. A soft life is a flabby one. How people can look back on various sore experiences and thank God for them. Like the Psalmist, many of us can say, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted." Since life is a place of discipline, we should not be surprised if we are called upon to go through the mill of adversity and struggle.

It is important, in our study of divine chastisement, that we draw a sharp distinction between divine punishment and divine chastisement. The distinction is very simple, and yet it is often overlooked. God's people can never be punished for their sins, for God has already punished them at the cross. There the Lord Jesus, our blessed substitute, suffered the full penalty of all our guilt. That is why it is written, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." Neither the justice nor the love of God will permit Him to exact payment again of what Christ has already discharged to the full. The difference between punishment and chastisement does not lie in the nature of the sufferings of the afflicted. There is a three-fold distinction between the two.

1. In the character in which God acts.

In divine punishment God acts as Judge, and in divine chastisement God acts as Father. Sentence of punishment is the act of a judge, for a penal sentence is passed on those charged with guilt. Punishment can never fall on the child of God in this judicial sense because his guilt was all transferred to Christ: "Who his own self bear our sins in his own body on the tree."

Although the believer's sin cannot be punished, and the Christian cannot be condemned, yet he may be chastised. The Christian occupies an entirely different position from the non-Christian: he is a member of the family of God. The relationship which now exists between God and him is that of parent and child; and as a son he must be disciplined for wrongdoing. Folly is bound up in the hearts of all God's children, and the rod is necessary to rebuke, to humble, and to subdue.

2. In the recipients of each.

The objects of divine punishment are God's enemies. The subjects of divine chastisement are His children. As the judge of all the earth, God will yet take vengeance on all His foes! As the Father of His children, God maintains discipline over them. Punishment is judicial, and chastisement is parental.

3. In the design of each.

Punishment is retributive, and chastisement is remedial. The former flows from God's anger, and the latter from His love. Divine punishment is never sent for the good of sinners, but for the honoring of God's law, and for the vindication of His government. But divine chastisement is sent for the well-being of God's children. When the believer is smarting under the rod, God is not smiting him in wrath but is correcting him in love. Chastisement evidences our divine sonship, for the father of a family does not chastise those outside his family, but those within he guides and disciplines in order to get them to conform to his will. Chastisement is designed to promote our highest welfare.

I. The Certainty of Divine Chastisement.

When a child does wrong and disobeys a parent, if that parent is a good one, he will chastise the child in order to teach it the important lesson of obedience to parental authority, thereby aiding in the proper development of character. So it is with our Heavenly Father. "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." Chastisement is inevitable if one is a child of God. Divine chastisement is administered in a manner and degree according to the need of each child who has disobeyed.

There are various kinds of chastisement, such as, disease of body, distress of mind, loss of property, injury of character, profligacy of children, faithlessness of friends, and persecution for righteousness' sake.

While all chastenings are sufferings, not all sufferings are chastenings. Because David's son was taken from him as a chastisement does not mean that every child who dies is taken for the same reason. David knew why his child died. When we are corrected of God for our sins, we always know what it is for. Do you think any good parent would take one of his or her children and whip it and never let the child know why? Is God less fair and merciful than we are?

God's chastisement is limited to His children. A father looked out a window and saw two boys fighting across the street. He went down and discovered that one of them was his son. After separating the boys, he inquired into the cause of the trouble. Each seemed to be equally to blame. Which one did he chastise? He chastised his own because he loved him and wanted to correct him for his own good. He did not touch the other boy, because he belonged to someone else. So it is with God. He chastises His own. Many heartaches would be avoided if God's children would only remember that when wilful sin is committed the chastening rod is sure to strike.

II. The Causes of Divine Chastisement.

Much chastisement is the rod in the hand of the Father correcting His erring child. But it is a serious mistake to confine our thoughts to this one aspect of the subject. Often God's chastenings are corrective. They are sent to empty us of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. He chastens us in order that "we might

be partakers of His holiness." The phrase "that we might be" has direction in it, and the direction points toward a purified and beautiful life. The object of the chastisement is to deliver the subjects of it from sin, to establish them in the faith, and to perfect them in holiness. Divine chastisement is intended to correct the faults of Christians, to prevent further sins, to prove God's love to them, to strengthen their faith, to promote their well-being, to teach them to be obedient, to develop their character, to lift them to higher levels of experience, and to bring them into a condition of usefulness.

III. The Consequences of Divine Chastisement.

In considering the spirit in which divine chastisements are to be received, it is to be observed that all chastisements are not sanctified to the recipients of them. Some are crushed beneath them, while others are hardened thereby. There is no virtue in trials and troubles in themselves. It is only as they are blessed of God that the Christian is helped by them.

With reference to the consequences of divine chastisement, there are two dangers or evils to which the Christian is liable, and against these he is warned.

1. Despise not.

"My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord." There are a number of ways in which Christians may despise God's chastenings.

(1) By callousness.

All the man of the world knows to do is to make the best of a bad situation, to grit his teeth and bear it to the best of his ability. Having no divine Comforter, Counsellor or Physician, he has to fall back on his own poor resources. It is inexpressibly sad when we see a child of God conducting himself as does a follower of Satan. For a child of God to defy adversities is to despise God's chastening hand.

(2) By complaining.

When we murmur at it, that is despising God's chastening. That is what the Hebrews did in the wilderness; and there are still many murmurers in Israel's camp. We complainingly ask, Why this affliction? What have I done to deserve it? We look around with envious eyes, and are discontented because others are carrying a lighter load. God chastises twice if we are not humbled by the first. Patient submission is the only way to receive chastisement. A want of resignation shows that we despise God's chastening hand. "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord."

(3) By criticisms.

We despise the chastening of the Lord when we say there is no use in it. How often we question the usefulness of chastisement! As Christians we seem to have little more spiritual good sense than we had natural wisdom as children. As children we thought that the rod was the least necessary thing in the home. It is so with the children of God. When our plans are thwarted, when losses are ours, we say, "What good could possibly come out of this?" Like Jacob, we exclaim: "All these things are against me." What is this but to despise chastening? Shall thy ignorance challenge God's wisdom?

(4) By carelessness.

Men despise the chastening of the Lord when they refuse to profit by it, or fail to mend their ways. Many have despised the rod, and in consequence have

not profited thereby. Many a Christian has been corrected by Almighty God, but in vain. Sickness, reverses, bereavements have come, but they have not been sanctified by prayerful self-examination. Be assured that there is some reason for the divine chastening. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan once said, "No affliction would trouble a child of God, if he knew God's reason for sending it."

2. Despair not.

"Nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him." Thus we are admonished not to give way to despair under chastening. There are different ways in which the Christian may faint when the Lord chastens.

(1) When he gives up all exertion.

We must not sink under the reproofs and strokes of the divine discipline, though they be severe. The fact that our trials are regulated by our Father's hand, that they are educational, that they are intended and adapted to promote our spiritual and eternal well-being, should keep us from sinking beneath their pressure.

To "faint" means rendering ourselves unfit for the discharge of our duties. When a person faints, he is rendered motionless. How many Christians are ready to give up the fight completely when adversity enters their lives! How many, by their attitude, say, God's hand is heavy upon me, and I cannot do anything. Instead of fainting when thou art rebuked by Him, recognize His hand in it.

(2) When he questions his sonship.

Many Christians, when the rod descends upon them, conclude that they are not the children of God after all. They forget that it was written, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous." "But if ye be without chastisements, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons." Learn then to look upon trials as proofs of God's love, purging and purifying thee.

(3) When he despairs.

Some have the notion that they will never get out of their trouble. Somebody says, "I have prayed and prayed, but the clouds have not lifted." Then comfort yourself with this reflection: It is always the darkest hour that precedes the dawn. Therefore, "faint not" when thou art rebuked of Him.