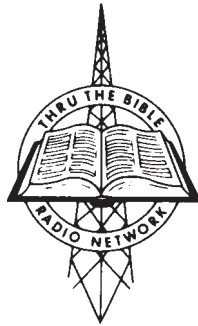


# Why Do God's Children Suffer?

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*For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto sons, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, of which all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh who corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised by it. Wherefore, lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord; looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and by it many be defiled.* (Hebrews 12:3–15)

Our subject is a perennial question that occurs constantly and monotonously more than any other Bible-related question. It is a question asked with a capital *WHY?* by both believer and nonbeliever. There have been more books written on this subject than the subject of the Antichrist or the social gospel or how to live the Christian life. And still the question is being asked, “Why do God’s children suffer?”

One of the factors that has added to the perplexity and complexity of the problem is the unbiblical sales pitch to the unsaved that is given in some quarters. It is claimed that if you will only trust Christ you will move into the green pastures where all is calm and the problems of life are solved. Even prosperity and healing abound as a bonus for believing. Another addition is joy without any sorrow and with no cloud to darken the sky. In other words, Christianity has been made an inoculation against disease and trouble. One book that was sent to me recently showed how you could make a million dollars by coming to Christ. At least the author did it, and he said that anyone could do it. The book didn’t help me at all, I can tell you that! Such promises are, to my judgment, totally unscriptural. They sound, however, very good. They appeal to the natural man. And they even sound scriptural.

Let’s understand one thing: Salvation is a redemption paid by Christ for the penalty of your sin and my sin. And the primary benefit is that a hell-doomed sinner is now going to heaven because Jesus died in his stead, and the Holy Spirit has brought conviction of sin into his heart and life while he was still “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

Now I don’t want to be misunderstood. There is joy in the Christian life. There is peace. And there is healing. I know. I have experienced all three of these, and I can testify that all of them are certainly true.

However, it is an axiom of the Christian life that God’s children suffer. There is no escape from it. The Italian reformer, Savonarola, put it like this, “A Christian’s life consists in doing good and suffering evil.” That is the picture he paints, and down through the ages God’s men

have painted that kind of a picture. In fact, the Word of God is very clear in this connection. If you go back as far as Job, which would take you back probably to the time of Moses or even to Abraham, you will find that he illustrates this truth by a great law of physics:

***Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.*** (Job 5:7)

According to the laws of aerodynamics, because of the heat being generated, sparks will fly upward. Just as that is true, man must experience troubles. We will face trouble in this world. David wrote:

***Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the LORD delivereth him out of them all.*** (Psalm 34:19)

And actually the Lord Jesus told His own (sometimes I think we forget Scriptures like this):

***These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*** (John 16:33)

Paul likewise makes the dogmatic assertion:

***Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*** (2 Timothy 3:12)

There is no if, and, but, or perhaps about that at all. It is an axiom of Scripture that God's children suffer.

God's child is not promised that he will escape pain, disappointment, and sorrow in this life. Annie Johnson Flint has expressed it in a lovely way.

### **What God Hath Promised**

*God hath not promised skies always blue,  
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;  
God hath not promised sun without rain,  
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*God hath not promised we shall not know  
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;  
He hath not told us we shall not bear  
Many a burden, many a care.  
God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,  
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;  
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,  
Never a river, turbid and deep.*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the laborer, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

You see, God did not promise we would miss the storms of life. He only promised that we would make the harbor at last.

Scripture makes abundantly clear, not only the fact that God's children *do* suffer, but the reasons *why* God's children suffer. My friend, trials would be meaningless, suffering would be senseless, and testing would be irrational unless God had some good purpose and sound reason for them. Or, as it has been put, "God nothing does, nor suffers to be done, but what we would ourselves — could we but see through all events of things, as well as He."

There is no pat answer to the problem of why God's children suffer. It is not a simple question that can be answered with one verse of Scripture. People frequently ask me, "Can you give me a verse of Scripture for that?" Well, there are a great many truths in the Word of God that you don't have an isolated verse for, I can assure you.

After I had been laid aside for several weeks one summer with severe illnesses, I had an opportunity to study Hebrews, chapter 12. I had reached that chapter in making tapes for the *Thru the Bible Radio* program. My doctor wouldn't permit me to make tapes, but he allowed me to do what he called my "paperwork." So I was able to continue studying, and I spent a great deal of time in this twelfth chapter. I found that I was studying it, not from the position of a spectator-saint, but from the position of one who was then in the arena of suffering.

### **Reasons for Suffering**

Now I want to suggest to you seven reasons why God's children suffer. You may discover others, but I do think these are comprehensive and cover the field fairly well. But first let me put down another axiom of Scripture: God can prevent His child from suffering. I don't think anyone would argue that point. The question is, of course, why doesn't He? Why has not God kept His children from suffering — especially the severe suffering that a great many saints have had to go through?

#### ***The First Reason — STUPIDITY***

The first reason God's children suffer is for our own stupidity, our own willfulness, our own selfishness, and our willful ignorance. Many times we try to blame God for this kind of suffering, but it is our fault.

*For what glory is it if, when ye are buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. (1 Peter 2:20)*

Now the word here for "faults" is the Greek word *hamartano*, which means to miss the mark. It is a picture of a man with a bow and arrow who is shooting at a target. He comes short of that target, which simply means he misses the mark. Many of us today, because of our willfulness

and our stupidity, miss the mark in many judgments that we make. I could enlarge on this, but let me cite a couple of illustrations. Did you ever invest in a wildcat oil well in Texas? If you did, you were stupid! Anyone who would do a thing like that is stupid. Somebody says, “But I knew a man who invested and made a fortune.” Yes, one out of perhaps a million has that happen to him, it’s true. But what chance do you have of being that one? I know a young man who inherited quite a sum of money. He and his wife could have lived comfortably the rest of their lives on what he inherited. But he invested in oil wells and they were all dry holes. He lost a fortune. I have heard his wife say several times, “Why did God let this happen to us?” Well, I don’t think God let it happen to them. I think they were stupid. They missed the mark in their judgments.

Also there are those who get out of the will of God. When I was a pastor in downtown Los Angeles, a man came to me with a real problem. In fact, he had a wife who proved unfaithful to him. He was going to get a divorce. As I was expressing my sympathy to him for his very unfortunate state in life, he said, “It’s my own fault.” And he used the term *stupid*. He said, “I was stupid. I was a Christian, and at that time I thought I wanted to do God’s will. But before long I drifted out of the will of God. I got into sin and I met this girl who was unsaved. I married her, and I’ve lived in a hell ever since.” Well, he understood. He didn’t blame God for it. Many of us suffer because of our own stupidity.

### ***The Second Reason — A STAND FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS***

The second reason God’s children suffer is for taking a stand for truth and righteousness. Again I turn to 1 Peter:

***But and if ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are ye; and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled, but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear. (1 Peter 3:14, 15)***

In other words, Peter is saying here that when trouble comes to you because you have taken a stand for righteousness, first be sure you are right and that you have a right relationship with Jesus Christ. Then when you are sure of that, you can take your stand knowing that God will see you through. I know a man who was an official in a very large corporation — its headquarters were in Chicago and he was the western representative. They wanted to give him a promotion and make him one of the vice-presidents. But in that office he would have had to entertain customers by cocktail parties and procuring other forms of entertainment for them. So he refused it. He said, “I am a Christian. I won’t do that.” It cost him the promotion, and he was actually demoted. But he was willing to make that sacrifice. It cost him something to take a stand for righteousness. And I believe, friend, that any Christian who takes a stand for God today will somewhere along the line have to pay a price for it.

### ***The Third Reason — SIN***

There is a third reason God’s children suffer. We suffer for sin in our lives. If a child of God commits sin, does he get by with it? The answer, of course, is no. But God says that He will

give us an opportunity to judge sin in our lives.

***For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.*** (1 Corinthians 11:31)

In other words, when we sin God gives us an opportunity to confess that sin and make it right. If we do that, God will not judge us. But God says in effect, “You are My child and if you commit that sin, I’ll take you to the woodshed — if you won’t deal with it yourself.” And, friend, if He doesn’t take you to the woodshed, you are not His child because He never whips the devil’s children, only His own. If we don’t judge ourselves, then God says, “I will judge you.” And I think that is what John meant when he said there is a sin “unto death” (1 John 5:16), meaning physical death for a child of God. In other words, a child of God can go just so far, he can commit certain sins for which God will take him home, remove him from this life. A child of God cannot get by with sin.

There are two good Bible illustrations of God’s dealing with the sins of His children. In the Old Testament it is David. Now David committed two awful sins; he broke two of the Ten Commandments. Did he, as God’s man, get by with it? Well, he thought he had, and how long he concealed it we do not know. David, I think, came in, sat down on his throne, looked about him at his court, and thought, *I wonder if anyone knows*. He came to the conclusion that no one knew, so he went on with the state business. There was brought before him the different ones who represented other governments, those with complaints, and so forth. One day there slipped into the group a man who actually was a very fine friend of David’s. He was Nathan the prophet. I think David said, “Hello, Nathan,” not thinking that Nathan knew anything about his hidden sin. And when there was a lull in the business of the court, Nathan said, “I have a little story I’d like to tell you.” You will find this incident recorded in 2 Samuel 12. Nathan told him about two men in his kingdom. One was a very rich man with flocks and herds. The other was a poor man with just one little ewe lamb. He loved that little lamb and had raised it with his children. Then a visitor came to see the rich man and, instead of reaching into his own flock and taking a lamb for the visitor’s dinner, the rich man went over and took the pet lamb that belonged to the poor man and killed it. David, who was redheaded, stood up in anger. (It is interesting how we can always see the fault in the other fellow. We can clearly see the other person’s sin, but it is difficult to see our own!)

David said, “As the LORD liveth, the man who hath done this thing shall surely die” (2 Samuel 12:5). I tell you, that’s righteous indignation on the part of David.

But Nathan, who is the bravest man in the Bible in my opinion, pointed the finger and said, “Thou art the man” (2 Samuel 12:7).

Now David could very easily have denied that he was guilty. He could have just lifted his scepter, and his servants would have taken this man Nathan out and executed him. Nobody would have been the wiser. But that’s not what David did. He bowed his head and confessed, “I have sinned.” You see, David had tried to conceal his sin. Instead of confessing it to God after he had done it, he went on to commit a far greater sin and was attempting to rationalize that. So God took him to the woodshed, and He never took the lash off his back. Very frankly, when I read the story of David, I feel like saying to the Lord, “You’ve whipped him enough!” But David never said that. He went through it without complaining because he wanted the joy of his salvation restored to him (see Psalm 51:12). He wanted to be back in fellowship with God. So David learned that God judges sin in the lives of His children.



Then in the New Testament, in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira illustrate the sin unto death. I believe they were children of God. They lied, but in the early church they could not get by with a lie. Death isn't the immediate result today, by the way, but because the early church was a holy church, they couldn't get by with it. God judged them. They committed a sin unto death, and God took them home because God will deal with His own children.

### ***The Fourth Reason — PAST SINS***

The fourth way in which God's children suffer is that we suffer for our past life of sin — sin committed even before we were saved. Now I want to be very careful here because a great many people will say, "But since I came to Christ, doesn't that mean all my sins are forgiven?" Yes. If you've accepted Christ, you will never come before Him for judgment which will affect your salvation. Never! "Well, if I committed a sin before I was saved, do you mean to tell me that I suffer for that?" You surely will. Listen to Paul as he writes to the Galatians:

***Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*** (Galatians 6:7)

What kind of a man is he referring to? A Christian man. Paul is writing to believers. We reap what we sow. This is, I think, applicable to people in any walk of life, whether they are believers or nonbelievers. But Paul is writing to believers, and he says we are going to reap what we sow.

That principle is at work everywhere in the physical world. You sow corn and you reap corn. You sow peanuts; you reap peanuts. You sow cotton and you reap cotton. You plant an orange tree, and you're going to pick oranges someday. "Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant young Pharisee who hated Jesus and hated Christians, stood one day while men brought their outer garments and put them at his feet. Then he gave the signal to begin the stoning of Stephen. "But," you say, "Paul was converted on the Damascus Road. God has forgiven him." He certainly has. Paul is on the way to heaven, you can be sure of that. But, you see, he committed an awful sin. And so on his first missionary journey in Lystra, they dragged him outside of the city, stoned him, and left him for dead. (I believe he was dead, and God raised him from the dead.) But you never hear Paul complain about the stoning. Paul knew that whatever you sow, you reap — he's the one who wrote these words to the Galatians (see Galatians 6:7-9).

Mel Trotter, who was one of the great evangelists in my generation, held meetings for us when I was a pastor in Nashville, Tennessee. After a service one night, a group of us went over to Candyland. Everyone else ordered a big malt or milkshake, but he ordered a little glass of water. That was all.

Mel Trotter was a converted drunkard and probably sunk as low as any man could sink. He'd even stolen the shoes off the feet of his little dead daughter when she was in her coffin — took them out and hawked them to buy liquor in order to get enough courage to go to the funeral. You just don't go any lower than that! Yet God saved him, and he had become an outstanding evangelist. So as we were enjoying our malts we began to kid him because he had only a little glass of water. I never shall forget his answer. He said, "When the Lord gave me a new heart,

He did not give me a new stomach. I still have the same old stomach that liquor ruined.” May I say to you, “...For whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7).

This is the reason I feel so sorry for many of these kids who have been on drugs. Many of them are turning to Christ. I have received literally hundreds of letters from ex-hippies who have changed lives. But, as I told one up in the Bay area, “It’s wonderful that you have come to Christ now, but when you begin to get around fifty years of age, you’re going to find out that your body will have to pay for what you went through.” You don’t escape. You cannot escape. God says, “Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

### ***The Fifth Reason — A HIGH PURPOSE OF GOD***

There is a fifth reason why God’s children suffer, and that seems to be some lofty purpose of God that He does not always reveal to the believer. Job is an example of this. I am inclined to believe that Job wrote the book that bears his name, and I wonder if Job was made to suffer, not because there was anything wrong in his life, but because Satan had made a spurious remark, an accusation against him and God. In substance, Satan’s charge was, “Job is serving You only for what he can get out of it. If You let me get to him, I’ll show You. He’ll turn against You. He’ll curse You to Your face!” So God then took down the hedge He had around Job and let Satan move in. And, as this man suffered, he demonstrated that he was no paid lover — Job didn’t love God for what he could get out of it. He was really genuine.

Also God said a strange thing about Paul the apostle when he was converted. He said He was going to make him a missionary to the Gentiles, then He said, “For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). While it is true that Paul suffered for sins in his life before his conversion and he reaped what he had sown, he also suffered immeasurably in his life as a missionary. He details this in his second letter to the Corinthians:

*...In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes, save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23–28)*

He suffered so that no one can say, “Well, nobody has ever suffered as I’ve suffered.” Paul has experienced the limit, friend. You and I never have suffered as much as he has. He is to stand as a witness to that for every child of God.

### ***The Sixth Reason — FAITH***

Now we come to the sixth reason Christians suffer. Some believers suffer for their faith in a heroic manner. This is something I noticed for the first time in Hebrews, chapter 11, as I was going through it this time. Notice the following verses:



*Who, through faith, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again....* (Hebrews 11:33–35)

Here is a group of people who, by faith, gained great victories for God. This is wonderful. And, friend, it is wonderful to be able to say, “I’ve been healed.” No one knows how happy I’ve been to be able to say that. But there are some who haven’t been able to say that. In the middle of verse 35 we are introduced to another company. Notice what we are told about them.

*... And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment; they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tested, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented (of whom the world was not worthy); they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.* (Hebrews 11:35–38)

Now this is a strange thing. We first saw a group of people who by faith escaped the edge of the sword. Then here is another group of people who were slain by the sword, and both acted by faith. Frankly, I don’t even propose to reconcile the two. There are some folk whom God permits to suffer — you have known saints like this. I rather think they are His choice saints. James and Peter, you recall, were arrested by old Herod. Herod took James and put him to death. Peter he put in prison, but God got him out. Is the Lord playing favorites? No, He is not. James could endure martyrdom; Peter could not at that time. Later on he was a martyr also, but not then. He was growing in grace. It is my opinion that God does not permit some Christians to suffer for the simple reason that they can’t take it. God lets one group escape the edge of the sword, and they do it by faith. But I don’t think they had quite as much faith as the other group. I think of the French Huguenots (and when France destroyed the Huguenots, that’s the day the nation started down to become a second-rate nation). The Huguenots went into battle, knowing they would be slain, saying, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” I don’t know that I could have joined their army. I’m a little too flabby for that army. But they were able to do it.

### ***The Seventh Reason — DISCIPLINE***

As we come now to the seventh and last reason God’s children suffer, let us read Hebrews 12:6.

*For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.* (Hebrews 12:6)

The word “chasten” is a bit misunderstood because it is interpreted as meaning punishment. Actually it is not that at all. It belongs in an altogether different category. It literally means child training. Our word today for it would be *discipline*. In other words, God does not have undisci-

plined children. He disciplines His own, and there are certain lessons He gets through to us by suffering. Therefore we have this matter of discipline. The Judge punishes; the Father chastens. Punishment is for breaking the rules of the Father, as we have seen. God deals that way with His children. But when He chastises, or child trains, He is doing that in love. It does not have the same background as does punishment. However, this does not mean it is not severe and that it does not hurt.

It's rather like the old chestnut about the father who took his son out to the woodshed for a little discipline. But before the father whipped the boy, he sat down and wept. As he looked up at the boy, he said, "Son, this hurts me more than it does you." And the son said, "Yes, Dad, but not in the same place."

Our heavenly Father, I'm confident, is not severe because He takes delight in disciplining us, but He does it for our benefit. Therefore, the writers of Scripture did not show us, as God's children, how to *escape* suffering but how to *endure* suffering. That is the most important thing. There is a worthy purpose and a productive goal to be gained in the chastening or the discipline of the Lord. God uses that method.

### **Benefits of Suffering**

There are several benefits that accrue to you and me through the discipline of the Lord. I want to mention four of them.

#### ***Patience***

***If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? (Hebrews 12:7)***

*Patience* means to be able to endure, and that includes being able to endure suffering. Therefore God disciplines us in order that He may teach us how to endure trials, sickness, and suffering. Patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It doesn't come in a gift-wrapped package at Christmas. Patience is something that comes through suffering. In Romans, Paul says that tribulation or trouble works patience in the life of a believer:

***...But we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience.***  
(Romans 5:3)

Again let me say that to suffer and not realize why you are suffering is, to my judgment, one of the most foolish things a believer can do. When God disciplines us, He is trying to teach us endurance. He is trying to teach us patience.

#### ***Assurance***

Now the second benefit is assurance that we are children of God. If you want real proof that you are God's child, suffering will provide that.

***But if ye be without chastisement, of which all are partakers, then are ye bastards,***

*and not sons.* (Hebrews 12:8)

He says here that if God does not discipline you, then you are not actually His child. God disciplines every one that He receives. A proof that you are a child of God is the fact that He disciplines you. Suffering is not always an evidence that you are in disfavor with God. It is not always an evidence that you are out of His will or that you've done something wrong. Rather, it is proof positive that you are His child. He is trying to teach you something, and He is trying to show you that you are His child.

It may be that we as Americans will soon have real testings. The little changes we are having to make now in our lifestyle are nothing, in my opinion, to what may be coming in the future. And it may be a marvelous way God will use of weeding out those who are not His own. William the Conqueror, who probably did more for England than any other ruler (in that he is the one who tore down the old Saxon buildings of wood and began to erect those magnificent structures like Westminster Abbey and St. John's Chapel, which is in the Tower of London), is called William the Conqueror, but he didn't sign his name that way. He signed his name William the Bastard because he was the illegitimate son of Robert, Duke of Normandy, and was recognized by Robert to succeed in his place. And so William the Conqueror never let the world forget his real background. I believe that a great many church members today could sign their names the same way. They are church members, but they actually are not children of God. They really haven't been born again into the family of God. They have no proof that they are God's children.

God disciplines His own so that we will *know* we belong to Him.

### ***Profit***

There is a third reason for God's discipline. It is for our profit.

***Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh who corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.*** (Hebrews 12:9, 10)

The "profit" here is not material profit. I don't think that book I mentioned which claims to show how you can make a million dollars by becoming a Christian ought to be in print. I do not think God is moving in that direction today. The profit happens to be spiritual profit, and that is "partakers of his holiness."

You and I live in a day of action, which also is in the church. I've said many times, "Get busy for God. Do something for God." And we have a great deal of activity and movement instead of a desire to live a holy life for God. But He wants a holy life. He wants that above your service. Really, what has happened to old-fashioned holiness? I started off in the Methodist church, and I just can't get away from it. I remember hearing Bishop Moore, of the old Southern Methodist Church, say years ago, "If the Methodists were as afraid of sin as they are of holiness, it would be a great day." Well, not only Methodists, but that would apply, I think, to believers everywhere today. We need holy living, and God disciplines His children that they might have a holy life.

## ***Productivity***

The fourth thing, and the last I shall mention, is that God wants us to be productive Christians.

***Wherefore, lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.*** (Hebrews 12:12, 13)

In other words, God wants us to grow up. He wants to get us off Pablum and out of the baby stage. He wants to get us out of the spiritual nursery and get us going. He wants to make us men and women of conviction and courage, stamina and strength.

Someone asks, “How may I teach my children to live the Christian life and to attend church?” The answer is: By living the Christian life yourself and going to church yourself. This is something that is desperately needed — courage and conviction in the lives of believers.

It was my privilege to have the poet, Martha Snell Nicholson as a member of the Church of the Open Door when I was pastor in Los Angeles. She wanted to be baptized by immersion, and I baptized her in a bathtub. She was a shut-in and in ill health for many years, and her body could not be touched anywhere without her screaming out in pain. As I baptized her, lowering her down into the tub, she screamed at the top of her voice. It was horrible. However, in spite of her suffering, the last book of poems which she wrote was entitled *Hearts Held High*. Isn't that lovely? In reading any poem in that book, you would never dream that the author was suffering so. I tell you, God disciplined her in order that she might write wonderful poetry which has blessed many a heart. The greatest pulpits in Southern California are not in churches; they are on beds of pain. There are many wonderful saints of God who are not in churches — they are not able to attend services. One thing the radio ministry has opened to my eyes that I'd never really seen before is the number of people in this country who are bedfast, and by faith they are living for God. I know one woman who writes a volume of letters every month to encourage missionaries on the field, and she is lying on a bed in constant pain. What a message!

## **Reaction to Suffering**

Now what is your reaction to the chastening of the Lord? How do you respond to it?

There are several ways you can react. You can despise it. That's what the writer to the Hebrews says, “Despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.” Now, how can you despise it? You can despise it by ignoring it, that is, by not relating it to the fact that God is trying to get a message through to you, trying to tell you something. You can accept it just like a dumb animal or a brute beast accepts pain. And a great many people are doing this. They say, “Well, it's just my luck.” My friend, if you are a child of God, you haven't had hard luck. God is trying to tell you something. He says, “Despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him” (Hebrews 12:5).

Another way you can react to God's discipline is to become a crybaby. You can say, “Why did God let this happen to me?” Have you ever heard a Christian say that? He says here, “Faint not when you're rebuked of Him.” That suffering, that problem, or whatever it is that has come to you, is a challenge, and God intends for it to be that.

Then there are others who become super-pious saints. They are very passive about suffering. They develop sort of a martyr complex, and they say, “Well, this is my cross and I’ll bear it,” when all the time there is inner rebellion going on. But they take it like the fakir in India who lies down on a board filled with nails. Oh, my friend, that is not what God wants you to do.

Listen to Him:

***Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised by it.*** (Hebrews 12:11)

No suffering at the time seems to be pleasant. I scream at the top of my voice, if you want to know the truth, when it comes to me. Of course it is not joyous — but it’s just for a brief moment. It is like the deacon in a church in the South expressed it. The preacher had asked for verses of Scripture that were favorites. And this deacon got up and said, “My favorite verse is, ‘And it came to pass.’ ”

Everyone looked puzzled. The preacher asked, “What do you mean your favorite verse is, ‘And it came to pass’?”

“Well,” he said, “when trouble comes to me, I just turn to where it says, ‘It came to pass,’ and I thank the Lord it came to pass and it didn’t come to stay.”

Now this may not be a correct interpretation of that Scripture, but I tell you, it’s a marvelous truth that God’s Word teaches. And that is what verse 11 is saying. “No chastening for the moment is joyous” — it’s terrible. Don’t say you are a martyr and you are going to bear it. Say, “I’m going to get out of this as quickly as I can.”

Mrs. Siewert, who was responsible for the *Amplified Bible*, carried on with me a running, friendly war as long as she was alive. I would correct her Bible; then she would correct my sermons at the Church of the Open Door. When I had surgery for cancer, I asked everybody to pray for me. She wrote to me and said, “Now, Dr. McGee, you are ready to go so I am going to pray that the Lord will take you home.” I wrote a reply to Mrs. Siewert in a hurry, “Don’t you pray that prayer. This is between the Lord and me, and you let Him handle it.” I wanted to be cured of cancer. I was prepared to learn the lesson God had for me, but I wanted to *live*. In my opinion, it is nonsense to be passive about it.

There is a fourth way we can react to suffering. We are told to endure chastening.

***If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?*** (Hebrews 12:7)

The thing that is important here is that we are to endure chastening. Let me be personal at this point. When I got cancer in 1965, I made the announcement of it on my radio program, and I asked folk to pray for me. God did hear and He did answer. I had periodic x-rays made, and they showed that my lungs were still clear of the seven cancer spots. I thanked God for healing. But I want to say this to you: I accepted cancer as punishment from God. I believe He was punishing me. And I’ll tell you the reason. I had been at the Church of the Open Door for fifteen years. I had come to the place that I didn’t need the Lord to bring the crowds. I was doing it myself — I *thought* I was. As a result, the Lord put me flat on my back to let me know that I was absolutely nothing. He said, “I can remove you from this scene, and I do not need you.” He

punished. That was eight years ago.

Now this summer when I was stricken with an illness, I did not feel that it was punishment. I felt He was chastening me. It was discipline. I was confident that I was in God's will. I went to Him and said, "Look, I think I've learned all the lessons I need to learn, and I'd appreciate it if You would make it possible for me to fulfill my obligations." You see, I'd been going to the Northwest for twenty-five years for conferences, and I was scheduled to be up there six weeks during the summer. I didn't know what they would do without me. So I begged the Lord, "Let me go." Actually I rebelled against the chastening and against my doctor's orders. I got up and attempted to make a move. And He slapped me down, oh, so hard! I never have suffered like I suffered at that time. I had to cancel twelve conferences in the summer and fall. God assured me, "It's all right. They will get along without you. I want you to lie down and just get acquainted with Me. I want you to know that I love you and that you have a lot of lessons to learn yet." I found out that the Lord had a lot of things to teach me. I had never been brought as close to the Lord as I was during that time. Never. How wonderful He was.

When the summer was over, I got a telephone call from the Northwest about coming up the next summer, and I asked them, "By the way, what kind of a summer did you have this year?" They said, "We had the best summer we have had in twenty-five years!" To the Lord I said, "They did get along without me, didn't they!" He said, "Yes. I'd like you to get acquainted with Me."

Not only that, but my wife and I sat for three months out on our patio that summer. I hate being idle. Although I did a lot of study, I wanted to make tapes and do other things. But instead I got acquainted with my wife. I was telling my doctor about it. He's a wonderful Christian but he's a little hard-boiled. He said, "Yes, and I bet you found out you have the most wonderful wife in the world." I said, "That's exactly what I found out." It's amazing what you can learn when you are flat on your back. You simply have to look up to the Lord and let Him speak to you.

How do you respond, friend, when suffering comes?

There are no accidents in a Christian's life. Even when he has an "accident," it's not accidental. It did not happen by chance. Do you take an inventory of your life when trouble comes? Do you ever evaluate your suffering? Do you turn your stumbling blocks into stepping stones?

"Why did God let this happen to me?" is a good question. And there is a better answer to it. There's a goal to be attained, a race to be won, a battle to be fought, and there is a benefit here and now.

Job discovered this truth. He says,

***But he knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tested me, I shall come forth as gold.*** (Job 23:10)

God not only refined him, but He doubled everything he had lost. Someone counters, "But God didn't double his children. He gave him the same number of children that he had lost." No, He doubled them also. You see, when he lost the cattle, he lost them permanently — they were gone forever. But when he lost his children, he did not actually lose them — they just went on before him. So God *doubled* his children also.

Then there is Paul the apostle. I don't read that Paul ever received a reward down here. In fact, he became a martyr, but he could say at the end of his life:



***I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.*** (2 Timothy 4:7, 8)

Paul will get his reward afterward.

Whether now or later, there is always a reward for His faithful children. Someday God will wipe away all tears, and He will heal all the broken hearts. Then He will reveal the reasons for those puzzling experiences that you and I had down here.

Do you remember when the children of Israel went through the wilderness? They crossed the Red Sea in great victory, and they sang the song of Moses unto the Lord (Exodus 15). God delivered them. What a victory it was! Immediately, their first experience in the wilderness was that of running out of water. Then they came to Marah where there was water, but when they got down to drink it, the water was bitter. They began to complain — their first experience was a bitter experience. So God said to Moses, “There is a certain tree here. You get that and put it in the water, and it will be sweet.” (See Exodus 15:22-25.) Friend, you and I need to bring Jesus Christ and His death on the tree into the bitter experiences of our life to make them sweet. That is the only thing in the world that can make the experiences of suffering down here sweet.

We are to “run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). How?

***Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher [architect] of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*** (Hebrews 12:2)

The most important thing is to draw near to God. When we do, He promises to draw near to us. We need to keep very close to Him in these days.

Let me conclude with a very homely illustration. When I was a boy, I went to grade school in southern Oklahoma. On April Fool’s Day it was the custom among the bad boys to play hookey. Well, although I was a good boy (you could have asked my mother and she would have told you what a fine boy I was!), I went with a bad crowd. On April Fool’s Day I would play hookey with these boys. Well, one time we came to school on April the first, put our books in our desks, then about a dozen of us went down to the old Phillip’s Creek to go fishing. It wasn’t a good time to fish because it was the spring of the year and the water in the creek was at a high level. Fish just don’t bite when the creeks are up. But we fished nonetheless and had a good time running up and down the creek to the different holes we knew. None of us caught any fish, but we had a great day. When we started back home, the problems began to arise. We decided the best thing to do was to go by the school, get our books and take them home so our parents would not suspect what we had done. When we reached the schoolhouse, everybody had gone, so we walked into our room. And when we walked into the room, the principal, apparently knowing what we would do, walked in after us.

“Boys, did you have a good day?”

“Yes, sir.” It *had* been a good day up to that moment!

“Did you catch any fish?”

“No.”

“Well, follow me,” he instructed. And he began a parade down the hallway to his office. He

sat us down and gave us a little talk. We knew what was coming. He said, “Now I keep my switches down the hallway locked up in a closet. I’ll go down and get them, and I’ll come back and punish each one of you.”

So while he was gone to get his switches, one of the boys, who had been in there more than any of the rest of us and knew his way around, gave the best advice that I ever received. He said, “Now when he hits you with that switch, the first lick will just burn you up because he starts off with you way out on the end of the switch. But as he whips you, take a step toward him. Keep moving toward him. The closer you get to him, the less it’ll hurt.”

That was the best advice I ever had. I remember the first lick he hit me — it really burned. But I began to edge toward him, and when he finished, I was somewhere pretty close to his hand and it wasn’t hurting me at all.

That was a great lesson. And since then, I have learned that God also disciplines His children. If you don’t want it to hurt, the thing to do is to get close to Him. The closer you are, the less it will hurt. You remember that the Lord Jesus said (as recorded in John 15) that He is the vine, we are the branches, and the Father prunes the branches. That hurts to be trimmed like that! But, as the old Scotch divine said, the Father is never so close to the branches as when He is trimming them. That is wonderful. We need to get close and stay close to Him.

The following lovely little poem was given to me when I had cancer surgery and again during my latest illness. I have deeply appreciated it, and I’d like to share it with you.

### **I Needed the Quiet**

*I needed the quiet so He drew me aside,  
Into the shadows where we could confide.  
Away from the bustle where all the day long  
I hurried and worried when active and strong.  
I needed the quiet though at first I rebelled,  
But gently, so gently, my cross He upheld,  
And whispered so sweetly of spiritual things.  
Though weakened in body, my spirit took wings  
To heights never dreamed of when active and gay.  
He loved me so greatly He drew me away.  
I needed the quiet. No prison my bed,  
But a beautiful valley of blessings instead —  
A place to grow richer in Jesus to hide.  
I needed the quiet so He drew me aside.*

— Alice Hansche Mortenson