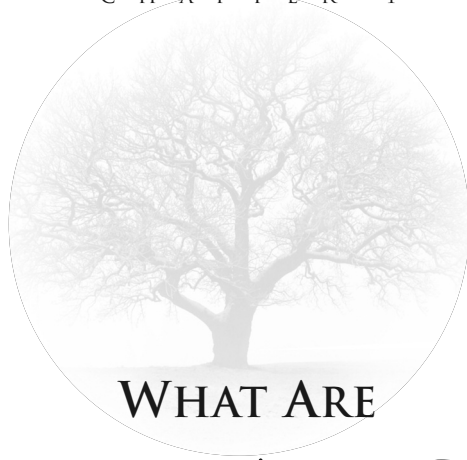


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TRIALS?

I enjoyed athletics from my youngest days and played competitive basketball into my late thirties. Other than bumps, bruises, and sprains, I can't remember health problems of any kind. In my forties, yearly visits to Mayo Clinic were simply routine. At the end of my regular checkup in the fall of 2008 the doctor added these words:

“Your PSA (prostate-specific antigen) count has gone up again.”

A review of the past four years revealed a pattern that finally got someone's attention. My count had gone from 1.3 to 1.8 to 2.2, then 2.7 and now was 3.1. Counts do fluctuate in men my age, but healthy men tend to have very low PSA counts. The regularity of this pattern had seemed significant to me, and I remember wishing the doctor had made a bigger deal about these counts earlier. But I also knew that PSA counts aren't always related to cancer, but can indicate other, less ominous health issues like enlarged prostate.

My doctor was now saying, “This is a problem, we've got to check it out further.”

That meant scheduling a prostate biopsy. The experience was somewhere between a punch in the face and dental work without Novocain. Having a robotic pincer shoot through the wall of the large intestine to collect dozens of tiny specimens of the prostate produces an experience of core-pain unlike any other. I kept hoping that the level of discomfort I was going through was an indication of the accuracy of the test.

When life is hard,
it is for a reason.

Do you know what trials are and
do you know God's purpose for them?

Days later, I was taking a taxi home from the airport when I remembered I hadn't called to get the results from my test. *Just another matter on my to-do list*, I thought as I called the urologist.

I reached him by phone, and with few preliminaries he said, "You've got cancer."

Such a small statement with such large effects—life-altering. In retrospect, I think many of us actually live expecting "the other shoe to fall" at some point. We realize at some level that we are not exempt from potential disaster, and we tend not to wonder *if* but *when* and *how* our number is going to come up. Those of us who know we are on the fallen world merry-go-round know that we won't get through life without some turns in the difficulty spotlight. But when the switch is thrown and the blinding light of a diagnosis like cancer hits us, the next moments are surreal.

There I was, alone (the taxi driver didn't need to hear my announcement), speechless (I immediately found myself thinking, *Can this be happening to me?*), and dumbfounded (*What do I do now?*).

When I arrived at home, I was still alone. The kids were away and Kathy was visiting family in Canada. The other realities in my life clamored for

attention. I had to prepare a message and be ready to deliver it. I concentrated on that immediate task. But I don't remember the topic of that sermon.

After church, I met with my kids who were in town and brought them up to date. It was hard to tell them, but I felt I needed to keep them informed. We prayed together, and I listened to my children trying to put their shock and trust into words before God. Kathy arrived shortly and I told her—I had not wanted to share news like that over the phone if I could help it. Then I got on Skype and talked to my daughter Abby, who was away at college, and let her know what was happening in her dad's life. Those were difficult moments for both of us.

Once my immediate family had the information, the news began to ripple through the congregation. Suddenly, twelve thousand of my best friends were responding, calling, and praying. Their desire to care for me was both comforting and yet also an added burden.

I began to look at treatment options (mentioned in the introduction). I learned the cure rate with radiation treatments is almost the same as the cure rate with surgical intervention, without surgery's significant risks. I looked into various kinds of radiation and eventually chose proton-radiation therapy. This is cutting-edge technology that is still not widely available (which explains our journey to California). By God's grace our insurance covered this method of treatment and the next phase of dealing with this challenge began.

As a subtext (and perhaps a central lesson) in this episode, all these events happened in the weeks leading up to a planned trip to Israel. This was to be Kathy's and my first time in the Holy Land. The medical people advised me that the treatments for cancer could certainly wait long enough to enjoy a true trip of a lifetime.

Our intimate group of 170 friends walked and worshiped together in the places where Jesus spent most of His time. I was reminded over and over that God's plans were far greater than my immediate problems. That week in Israel allowed me to get in touch with Jesus' power to heal and sense

His presence in an intimate way that built my faith for the months to come.

I discovered I had cancer in October. By the end of December, arrangements had been made for treatments in California. The study and sermons that led to this book began to take shape and an opportunity opened for me to preach in Pastor Greg Laurie's church near my treatment facility. If these lessons seem fresh, they are. I'm learning them and confirming them day by day in my own life.

RECOGNIZING TRIALS

As we lay a foundation for our study, let's establish some facts that you've just got to know about *trials*.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *trial* means to prove by testing; an event that demonstrates the genuineness of your faith in Christ and refines the quality of your spiritual life. So let's agree on this definition:

A trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to change my conduct and my character.

My *conduct*—that's what I do. And then to a deeper level, my *character*—that's who I am.

Trials are about what God is adjusting in the actions I choose, and what God is doing to the character that helps me choose those actions. Several biblical terms for *trials* are actually interchangeable: *suffering*, *hardship*, *tribulation*, *chastising*, and *discipline*. Trials are hard times!

These hard times vary both in intensity and duration. Tribulation can take you by storm, fast and furious. Or a trial can stretch over months or years or, in some instances, decades. It can be small and irritating or huge and shattering.

The one thing we know for sure about trials is that everyone experiences them.

In fact, if you're one of God's children, you're going through a trial right now. Some size. Some shape. It is the most difficult aspect of your life: Is it physical? Is it relational? Is it economic? Is it emotional? Is it circumstantial?

A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 12 is a great place to start answering our question “What are trials?” Read our Scripture passage on the first page of this chapter—better yet, open to this passage in your own copy of God’s Word and track the flow of thought. Later you can write what you’re learning in the margin of your Bible or write in the margins or the appropriate lessons in “Go for the Gold” (chapter 6) so you can return to these life lessons again and again.

Pick it up at verse 5b: **“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. . . . It is for *discipline* that you have to endure. . . . For what son is there whom his father does not *discipline*?”** (vv. 5b–7, italics added).

Sometimes when you’re studying a passage, you think to yourself, *I’m not sure what it’s about*. No room for doubt here. The subject is *discipline*, a term that describes God’s involvement in the hardest part of your life.

WHAT IS THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD?

The word used for *discipline* in Hebrews 12 is translated *teaching* in Titus 2:11, 12a, where it says, **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us”** (NKJV). When our eyes are opened to the glorious truth that is found in Jesus, it is to *teach* us some stuff.

Discipline is training. It’s instructing, like what parents do with their children.

DOES GOD SPANK HIS CHILDREN?

A couple years ago a TV network news program did a five-night feature on evangelicals. I just had to watch and find out what they think about me and my friends 😊. Well, as you might guess, they totally didn’t get us. On Thursday night, they did a feature on “the role of corporal punishment in childrearing.” Right—*spanking*. So they got this “expert” on childrearing that said, “Nothing good could ever come from causing a child pain.”

Now I’m aware and sensitive to the horrors of child abuse, but step away

from the excess and the evil and consider that statement in its rawest form: “Nothing good could ever come from pain.” Really? Nothing? Like the birth of a child, or the renewal of a forest after a fire, or the signal that something is badly wrong in my health and needs to be attended to?

No good from pain? What about the salvation of mankind?

Fact: Pain is often a central part of God’s purpose in this world. God *allows* and even *causes* pain in our lives. It’s one of the tools He uses regularly to get stubborn sheep to greener pasture.

I’m fond of saying that “God’s love is not a pampering love; God’s love is a perfecting love.” God doesn’t say, “Here, Billy. Have some more cupcakes. Take the one with the extra icing.” That’s not God. Your grandma, maybe, but not God.

Are you saying that God spans His children? Ah, yes, He does. The “expert” on the news program back-pedaled and said God only disciplined His children in the Old Testament. Well, welcome to Hebrews 12—“**whom the Lord loves He disciplines**” (v. 6 NASB).

For real! God spans His children. He lifts the paddle and applies it with force in the hopes that the pain will bring us to an awareness of His deeper purposes. When He saved us, He started the process that He will continue till the day we die. Salvation is just the beginning. The only reason you’re still here is because God is working on you. When His work’s done, it’s heaven for you, baby.

HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?

Hebrews 12:5 asks a funny question: “**Have you forgotten the exhortation . . . ?**” In other words, “*Have you drawn a blank?*” “Where have you been?” If you look in your Bible, you see that part of the verse is indented, signaling that this is a quote from the Old Testament; Proverbs 3:11, 12 to be exact. Interestingly, this is the most frequently quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. Nothing else even comes close. Over and over New Testament authors quote this portion of Proverbs 3. No wonder

then that the author of Hebrews asked, “Have you forgotten?” The writer is asking, “How could you not know this? This is critical information that cannot be neglected.”

And here’s the instruction: **“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord”** (v. 5b). Don’t think lightly of what God is doing. Go ahead and do some *heavy* thinking. A contrasting word is used nearby in Hebrews 12:2 in the familiar verse, **“Looking to Jesus . . . who . . . endured the cross, despising the shame.”** The word *despising* is an antonym in the original language for the word translated here as *regard lightly*. Jesus *despised* the shame of the cross—He didn’t regard it lightly. We can certainly be tempted toward shame in our trials, but we have Jesus’ example to help us endure.

When God moves toward you to make some changes in your conduct and character, do not be casual or indifferent about His approach. Don’t be sarcastic or blasé, *As if it really mattered*, or *I’m getting kind of weary of this*, or *I don’t think God really knows my limits*, or the manifold number of non-sensical ways we communicate to God that we don’t appreciate what He’s doing in our lives. He’s God! He’s a Committee of One. He doesn’t check with anybody and He knows what He’s doing.

Don’t take His work in your life lightly. Don’t be flippant or casual or indifferent when trials come your way. If they are not already here, they are coming.

As an experienced pastor, I’ve seen the full scope of human hardship. No matter which part of those painful hardships is yours this moment, you cannot despise or regard lightly what the Lord is doing.

“Nor be weary when reproved by Him.” The word *reproved* sometimes means *to convict*. The tone is intense, even harsh. When the goal is character transformation, God doesn’t move toward you with kid gloves. He’s

DON'T BE . . .
INDIFFERENT WHEN
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coming in hard. He's taking it strong to the hole. You don't have to guess that He's around. Being reproved by Him is an intense thing; but we are not to be wearied by it as though nothing good was ahead. Over and over the Bible connects weariness and losing heart. When we are exhorted not to be weary, it is as if to say, "Don't get down about this. God has a plan, so keep looking up and expecting something good to come from this." When God comes toward you with something hard, that makes *life* hard, don't get down and give up, because **"the Lord disciplines the one He loves."**

Have you ever bounced a check? It's not a great day when that happens. You didn't have the money to cover the purchase to begin with and when the bank sends the check back, it has a fine attached! Good luck collecting on that. It's a circular problem, since one notice just follows another.

A TRIAL IS LIKE A
BOUNCED CHECK . . .
A PROBLEM THAT
YOU DON'T HAVE
THE RESOURCES
TO SOLVE.

First of all, it's embarrassing because you didn't have the resources you thought you did.

It's frustrating because they tack on those extra NSF (not sufficient funds) charges.

It's difficult because you've got to work it out with the bank and work it out with the merchant.

The whole thing is a huge hassle.

A trial is like a bounced check. You feel stuck with a problem that you don't have the resources to solve. The temptation is to rant to God: "Do you see me over here, God? Do you see that I don't have what it takes to get through this? Are You paying attention? I'm about to bounce a lot of checks here. I don't have the resources. I don't have it emotionally. You're rattling my faith, God. Don't leave me in this mess."

Those expressions of desperation you feel so awful about are in fact the exact truth that God has been trying to bring to your attention. You flat out *don't* have the resources. He wants you to come to the place where you get before Him in a deeper way and tell Him what's He's known to be true all along: you are in way over your head.

God is taking you to a new level of dependence, and He *knows* what He's doing.

WHY DOES THE LORD DISCIPLINE HIS CHILDREN?

Why does the Lord discipline me? Verse 6 says, “**For the Lord disciplines the one he loves.**” Well, there you go. He disciplines you because He loves you.

You might be tempted to think, *Well, if You loved me, God, you wouldn't leave me over here with empty pockets and bounced checks.*

Let's get a better concept of love before we go on. Far from abandoning us when we're going through difficult trials, God moves toward us. Far from folding His arms; God is rolling up His sleeves. He's getting ready to do something in your life that you haven't previously been willing to let Him do. And He moves *toward* you. Isn't that good news? God is moving *toward* you. In fact, trials are proof of love. That's the point our Scripture is trying to teach us.

Never forget this: The motivation for God's action in allowing your life to become so hard is love. He *loves* you. His eyes are upon you. His attention is toward you. All of His thoughts are about you. The goal of all your pain is your restoration to a deeper sense of His love. But keep in mind that this is biblical love—a love that is willing to take you through a valley to get you to a hilltop. No pseudo solutions or quick fixes with God. He is going for change in you at the deepest and most lasting level.

I was blessed to have great parents. But they'd be the first to admit they weren't perfect. One time when I was eleven years old, my brothers and I were playing basketball at a schoolyard, maybe a quarter of a mile away from the house. Suddenly one of those summer storms came up and KA-BOOM!—huge thunder and lightning, and the rain poured down. Now, to an eleven-year-old, this was all swweeeet. Basketball in the *rain*. But our dad was home alone, terrified for us. I get it now. *Look at it outside. My boys—where are they!?*

So first he was fearful, but not for long. Quickly fear turned to anger, and all I remember is before we ever got in the front door, he already had his belt off. I've teased with him about this, and how over the top he was, but now that I am a dad, I totally get it.

Here's what you need to know. God never does that. God never disciplines His children in anger. He's never like, *Sorry, guys, I kind of lost it for a minute. Is everybody okay?* God never loses it. With surgical precision, God orchestrates the details of our lives and perfectly measures good and difficulty, blessing and discipline.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW. GOD NEVER DISCIPLINES HIS CHILDREN IN ANGER.

We need to be careful about the analogy here. As human parents we have a lot of our own stuff tied up in the way we train our children and because we need things from our kids too. We get fearful or tired or insecure, but how much does God need? *Well . . . nothing.* God doesn't think, *I've just got to get some of these feelings out and I'm not sure how to handle it.* He doesn't *have* any needs and we're certainly not meeting His needs. He loves us perfectly and unselfishly. God's discipline is not from self-interest. He's indifferent to what the neighbors think of His children. He's not afraid of what will happen if we don't learn. He won't say, *I've got to get this into you or what's going to happen up ahead?* God's not getting some sense of fulfillment through who He makes you into.

But I thought that all of this is for God's glory. Yes, it is. But do you think God is sharing His glory because it jazzes Him? Do you think God is up in heaven saying, "Well, it was a great glory day today. We hit some new numbers?" No!

God wants us to glorify Him because that's what we were created to do! God's pleasure is in Himself, not in us. He loves us and so everything that He does is for our good and for our benefit. Even the fact that it brings *glory* to Him is something that He's sharing with us.

Then notice, “**and chastises**” (another word for *discipline*). It’s unfortunate and weak that the NIV translates that word as *punishes*. There is no punishment in discipline. All of the punishment for your sin was placed upon Christ at the cross. God is not punishing you. The goal is your benefit, nothing else.

IS IT A TRIAL OR A CONSEQUENCE?

Let’s freeze-frame for a second and make a really important distinction about trials. Always try to ask yourself this question, *Is this a trial?* or *Is this a consequence?* Many times people say, “We’re going through the most awful trial right now!” yet a discerning person would want to say, “Uh, I don’t think *that’s* a trial; that’s a consequence for your own actions.”

For example, you lost your job and money is tight, so you rob a bank. You end up in prison with a mean cell mate. Do you call that *trial* or *consequence*?

Don’t be thinking, *God is refining me*. No, you probably shouldn’t have broken the law.

Take a hard look at your situation because the way out is different if it is a consequence. The way out of a consequence is repentance. If you did wrong you need to make it right with God through repentance and with the people your sin injured through restitution.

A trial is a completely different scene. You didn’t bring a trial into your life. This is something that God has allowed. You didn’t cause it, you didn’t choose it, and you could do nothing to stop it. Remember: A trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to transform my conduct and my character. God Himself allowed that into your life.

Now I understand that the lines may not always be perfectly clean in this distinction. Just keep in mind that the part you caused through a bad

TRIALS WE
EMBRACE AND
LEARN FROM,
CONSEQUENCES
WE REPENT AND
TURN FROM.

choice you made is resolved through repentance. *Trials we embrace and learn from, consequences we repent and turn from.*

“God is treating you as sons” (v. 7b). So, if you’re reading this and thinking, *All this talk about trials is interesting but everything’s rocking in my house, and it’s been like that for a long time. No real problems of any kind. Everything’s great with my family. My kids are perfect. I got money in the bank. I just came back from the doctor and he said I’m a finely tuned machine, etc.* Hate to tell you, but that’s not good news for you, because all God’s kids are getting it. If you have no trials in your life at all, not ever, you need to return to “Go.” You may not really be part of God’s family through faith in Christ.

The possibility may shock you, but if you have never experienced trials, you may be outside His family. But move beyond your surprise—you can repent and allow God to include you in His family. Here is a sinner’s prayer that can help you walk through the steps of repentance:

Dear Father in heaven,

I know that I am a sinner and deserve Your rejection and punishment. Thank You for loving me enough to send Your Son, Jesus, into this world to die as payment for my sin. I repent of my sin and turn to You alone for my forgiveness. I believe that You are the only One who can cleanse me and change me. I now receive Jesus as the Savior and Lord of my life.

Thank You for coming into my life and forgiving me of all my sin. Thank You for giving me the gift of eternal life! I trust in You alone. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen.

If you prayed that prayer honestly and intentionally for the first time, you are now among God’s children. And you can now look for Him to treat you as His child.

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons” (v. 7). When He disciplines you, God is relating to you as His own

children. You can't just wake up one day and go, *I think I'll be one of God's children today*. Everyone is not God's child, no matter what you hear on Oprah.

John says that the only people who have the authority to be God's children are those who have received Jesus. **“To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”** (John 1:12). I hope you've made that life-changing decision.

“If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate” (v. 8). *Illegitimate* actually means “born of a concubine.” *I don't know who your dad is, but it's not God the Father*. If you're not getting the discipline **“in which all have participated,”** you need to take a closer look at your heart and your hope. How could the Scripture be clearer?

As much as I appreciate this proof of sonship, sometimes I wish I didn't have this stuff going on in my life. Yes, I understand. Honestly, at times things seemed easier before we came to Christ. In a sense they were.

But in another sense, they were not. You were so clueless then. You didn't get the whole picture. You didn't know where you were going. You didn't know the big answers for anything. Life is harder, but now you have some categories. There's no question that the sons of this world have it easier for a season! But then, if they don't come to faith in Christ, it soon goes *really* downhill. What a sad and tragic end awaits those who reject Christ—God's only provision for their salvation. What a glorious thing to be called a son or a daughter of the living God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Part of being in the family means that God is now working on you. And life is so short; we will only be here for a little while longer. Whew! It's going by fast, isn't it? Get the full benefit from these trials. Life is short and eternity is very, very long.

GET THE FULL
BENEFIT FROM THESE
TRIALS. LIFE IS
SHORT AND
ETERNITY IS VERY,
VERY LONG.

YOU ARE LOVED

Do you remember the classic *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*? Tom didn't have parents, but he had Aunt Polly. One day, Aunt Polly disciplines Tom. She pulls out a cane and begins to spank him intensely. As Tom wails, Huckleberry Finn is off on the side rolling around laughing. He thought it was great that he wasn't getting in trouble. But turn the page and Huck Finn is off on his own weeping as he realizes that he doesn't have anyone who cares enough about him to provide the security and the support that will make him better. It's only the silliest of children who dream of a life without discipline. "Lord, forgive us for the times that we have resented or even thought lightly of Your discipline in our lives."

Why does the Lord discipline His children? Because He loves us.

"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?" (v. 9). "Earthly fathers" means literally, "fathers of the flesh" or dads. In New Testament times most everyone had a dad who showed interest in their training and development. Sadly, we have an epidemic of fatherless children in our culture. However, there are no fatherless children in God's family.

"We have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them." We respect our earthly fathers. *Respected* literally means *it turned us around*. I was going along thinking that I had everything together and then my father reached out and took hold of me to turn me around. Most of the time, when someone who loves us intervenes that aggressively we "respect" them, or turn around. We stop the wrong direction we were headed and set out in a better one. That's respect. We *had* to. There weren't a whole lot of ways out of that.

Dad was in charge! "You're going to learn this. You're going to sit here. You're going to study now. You're going to eat that!" *He's dad!* The older I get the more I realize how little I knew when I knew it all.

God, with infinite knowledge, moves toward us and He wants us to turn around. For that turning to take place two things must happen:

First, we have to admit, “You’re right, God. I’m not.” God is a perfect parent who uses perfect methods in the perfect amount. You get the logic. If you respected the discipline of an imperfect parent with imperfect methods, who used imperfect amounts, can’t you respect the discipline of a perfect parent who uses perfect methods in the perfect amount? Can’t you admit that God’s right?

You say, “Well, James, I’ve got to be honest with you. I don’t always feel that. Sometimes I feel like it’s too much.” I’ve felt that. My wife and I have felt that. “Not more, God. Not now, God.” That’s the way I felt when I found out I had prostate cancer. That’s the way I felt when I learned my mother was very sick. “Do you see over here, God? We’re just barely hanging on and do You think this is a good time for that?”

Sometimes chastening *does* overwhelm us. The reason is tied up in our reluctant and progressive admissions, as we resist and rebel:

1. *“There’s no problem, God.”* We won’t admit we have anything that we need to work on. “I mean, have You been in my small group lately, God? Those people need You more than I do. Seriously, God. Work on them.”
2. *“Okay, there’s a problem. But it’s not my problem.”* We tell God, “It’s my spouse’s problem. It’s my kids, God. Do you see the whole picture? You always come at the end, but did You see what really happened?” When we deny that the problem is us, we are refusing God’s discipline and we get overwhelmed because we are attempting to get through it without His grace (a lot more on that in chapter 4).
3. *“Okay, there is a problem. And it is me, but it’s not my fault.”* Guilty with an explanation, but hardly an admission. “Now God, I’m sure You know about my past [or my parents or my _____; you fill in

the blank].” Sadly, some people have spent a lot of money talking to trained people whose specialty is teaching you to hang the blame in someone else’s locker instead of putting the responsibility in the only place that can really benefit you—in *your* locker.

Nothing good is coming until I admit, “It’s me, God. I’m the one. I’m the reason. You know what You’re doing. I’m not making excuses, I’m not blaming others, I know the only person I can help is me. So let’s get it on, God. Please help me get this in the rearview mirror as soon as possible, I really want to change.”

And then, after we fully admit, we must do one more thing to turn around . . .

Second, we have to submit. “**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 *subject to*, some of the translations have *submit*. Isn’t it cool that God is called the “Father of spirits”? God is the Author or the Creator of the immaterial part of you—the part of you that lives forever. More than anything else, the part that He’s working on is your spirit.

How should I respond to the discipline of the Lord? First, admit. Tell God, “There’s a problem and it’s me.” And then I should submit to God. I should bow my knee to Him. “Do it, God. Do it in me. Do it to the max. Do it now!” Just get those things going and you have already turned the corner on trials.

Now let’s talk about what to expect as you make those two choices.

THE RESULTS OF THE LORD’S DISCIPLINE

Here’s a good summary of our imperfect human parents: “**For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them**” (v. 10a). Mom and Dad had only a few years and they did the best they could.

We put our youngest on a plane back to college today. I can't believe how quickly our kids have grown up. When they were young, I had like eight game plans I could use to train them. I had a whole deck of cards with moves I could make to teach them. On any given day, I could pull out two or three different cards and teach them in different ways. Now that they're in college, I'm wondering what happened to my cards. The time and the opportunity are gone! The human parenting experience passes so quickly and we discipline "as it seemed best."

Even the best parents don't have perfect judgment: It depends on the messenger—which parent is talking. It depends upon their mood—what's happening at work, or the marriage, or the weather. It depends upon the moment—there is so much subjectivity that goes into parenting.

But not with God.

1. His Good for Us

God "**disciplines us for our good.**" This trial is working together for your good. As tough as the hard place you are at is, God is getting you to a better place. You have to hold on to that. God knows where the bull's-eye is and He's aiming for it. Like the best dentist, God is only drilling out decay, stuff that has made you restless and miserable all your life. When the work is done, your life will be better, but only if you embrace what God is doing. So get on God's agenda and embrace His good purpose as an expression of His love. Open your heart to His love, even in this. Open your mind to the incredible benefit that He will soon reveal.

And by the way, it's a specific good God's going after. He has something very precise in mind. Satan, your enemy, deals in generalities. He accuses you with vague insults, "You're such a loser." *In what?* "In everything." And so you walk around feeling like a complete zero. But that's your enemy talking. God never does that. God's is very precise in what He does in us. "We're going to work on *this* now. Ready? I don't like the way you talk to your wife . . . after work . . . on Fridays."

God's very specific. Satan condemns us with generalities. God lovingly moves toward us with surgical precision: "This is what's next on the sanctification agenda for you." The ultimate objective, of course, is *for our good*.

After forty-five weekdays of treatments in California, I returned to the Midwest to wait for results. Waiting four long months to get a read on the success or failure of a course of treatment takes on its own form of agony. Week after week of "not knowing" might have been unbearable except for two powerful, strengthening factors. The first was a growing sense in my day-to-day interaction with God that things were going to be okay—He had things in hand and under control. The second was the unexpected reality that there were more pressing matters at hand to distract me from dwelling on my health.

I remember a number of times sympathetic friends came to me: "You must really be burdened with the uncertainty of your cancer treatment."

My response was, "Oh yeah, there is *that*, isn't there?" Pressing matters had moved my focus from mere waiting and pacing, but those thoughts were always in the back of my mind.

Now I realize I was on an accelerated learning curve in the area of trials. I was getting a new sense of God's seriousness about sanctification in my own life.

2. *His Holiness for Us*

"That we may share his holiness." *Holiness*. Usually when you use the word *holiness*, people roll their eyes or wince. *Holiness? That's it?* This proves that we don't get what holiness is yet. Holiness and happiness should be synonyms. Holiness is the complete state of God-centeredness and God-likeness. Sin causes suffering. If you choose to sin; you choose to suffer. Holiness is the absence of everything that causes turmoil, pain, restlessness, and fear.

You definitely want more holiness, and that's what trials are for, **"that we may share his holiness."** Your holiness is God's endgame in the matter that

caused you to start reading this book in the first place. Okay? So here's the next important question . . .

HOW DO I MAKE THE MOST OF THE LORD'S DISCIPLINE?

Wouldn't you agree with Hebrews 12:11? **"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant."** Not a lot of explanation is needed there. The problem is that trials often give me nearsightedness. I can only see what's right in front of me and I miss what's coming *later*. **"But later it yields."** If you plant submission to God in your life there will be a great yield or harvest up ahead. If you plant resistance and rebellion to God's will for your life, that will result in a very different harvest.

What's coming? **"the peaceful fruit of righteousness** [a synonym for holiness] **to those who have been trained by it"** (v. 11). In the chapters ahead we are going to talk a lot about how to be trained by a trial and what happens if we refuse, and what about trials that go on and on, etc. But for now let's just review the main parts of this first portion of Scripture. To make the most of the Lord's discipline, remember these three things:

1. *The pain is momentary.* This is not going to go on forever. Better days are ahead.
2. *The profit is immense.* You will receive **"the peaceful fruit of righteousness,"** the practical quality of godly living—a bushel of blessing, a barn full of bounty.
3. *The promise is conditional.* The profitable fruit of righteousness comes **"to those who have been trained by it."** That's what we're going for in this study. Your trial can train you for righteousness. I hate the thought that I'm wasting my time here or going through this pain for no purpose. Pain has a good purpose—don't you want to get it right this time?

Prayer of Commitment

God, I want to be trained by this trial. I want to experience the peaceful fruits of righteousness. I want to be a partaker of Your holiness. Thank You that You know the way that I take. Thank You that, by Your grace and by Your Spirit You promise that when You have tried me, I shall come forth as gold. I'm counting on it. I'm resting in it.

Thank You for it now, in Jesus' name. Amen.

FROM GOD'S HEART TO MINE

Hebrews 12:5–7

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reprov'd 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.

Hebrews 12:11

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.

MINING FOR GOLD

1. Pause over the prayer at the end of the chapter and wait in silence for God to speak to you. The first few actions or decisions you make following each of these chapters will make a huge difference in your life.
2. As you think of your life in the light of this chapter, what have been some trials you have experienced? Which are the obvious ones in your life right now?
3. How clear are you on the difference between trials and consequences? Too often we jump to the conclusion that we're bearing a cross when we're actually suffering the consequences of poor choices.
4. Have you settled the issue of ultimate consequences between God and you already by submitting and admitting your condition as part of sinful humanity? When did the sinner's prayer become your personal prayer?
5. How does God's love as a perfecting love rather than a pampering love affect your view of trials?
6. What signs can you point to in your hard times that indicate God is moving toward you for good?
7. To what extent are you willing at this point to "be trained" (Hebrews 12:11) by God through your hardships?