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Coming to Grips with **God's Discipline of the Believer**

One of the most important responsibilities a father has is to discipline his children. A father who does not take this responsibility seriously is negligent and does not love his children as he ought.

Though God is the Father of all men, He has a special filial relationship to those who have been born into His family through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul the apostle encourages us to develop intimacy with our Heavenly Father: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15).

That God disciplines His children is not in doubt, but how He does is not always clear to us. We are especially confused when we try to find a

link between a particular transgression and God's disciplinary response.

When a couple, whom I shall call Sally and John, had a deformed baby born to them, they asked a question that we all would likely have asked in their situation: "What did we do to deserve this?"

Eventually, they accepted their bitter disappointment as a judgment from God because they had had premarital sex. The chickens were coming home to roost, they thought.

Yet, when the baby grew up to be a special blessing despite his handicap, they wondered whether they were right in their original assumption about the discipline of God.

William Carey, the famous missionary, spent forty years in India starting churches and doing translation work. Thousands of painstaking hours were invested learning the vocabulary and grammar of strange languages and compiling them into a massive dictionary. But this, along with other of his priceless manuscripts, was destroyed in a warehouse fire in 1812. A lesser man may have never recovered, but Carey accepted this as a judgment from God (perhaps because of his failures as a father) and began the task all over again with even greater zeal.

One Christian woman I know chose to ignore the counsel of the el-

ders in her church and decided to divorce her husband on the grounds of incompatibility. A month later she took sick and nearly died. She interpreted the illness as a direct judgment from God for her rebellion.

We've all entertained the suspicion that one of these days God will get even for our misdeeds. It is natural to interpret our tragedies in light of our past sins and blame ourselves for what has happened. We remind ourselves that the hand of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Though Christians are opposed to the pantheistic doctrine of Karma, we do believe in a general law of cause and effect. Paul wrote, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). This, we think, gives us the right to interpret the tragedies of life as a judgment for specific sins and failures.

Yet, when we stop to think of how and when God disciplines us, we immediately face some rather puzzling questions.

First, is He not inconsistent? In all three instances given above, we can think of other people who were guilty of the same sins and failures, yet they did not experience God's discipline (or at least they did not have the same tragedies come to them).

Some Christians have premarital sex, others fail in raising their children, and still others divorce for no reason, yet these believers live without apparent hardship.

As parents we have been taught to treat all of our children alike; the experts tell us that there must be consistent discipline. But our Heavenly Father seems to disregard this fundamental rule. Document the lives of both His faithful and unfaithful servants and virtually no pattern of discipline is readily discernible.

A second question: How can one be sure of the connection between a particular sin and the discipline? In each of the instances mentioned above, the people involved had other sins or weaknesses in their lives that could have accounted for the discipline. The relationship between sin and its consequences is not always easy to detect.

In this age of grace most of us give little thought to the discipline of the Lord until tragedy strikes. Then we begin to ask whether there is a connection between our sin and the heartaches of life.

To probe this topic we must study God's discipline from a broad perspective and then narrow our focus to try to answer the puzzling questions we have raised.

THE BASIS OF DISCIPLINE

The people to whom the book of Hebrews was written were experiencing persecution; indeed, they were on the verge of having to die for their faith. They had joyfully endured the seizure of their property and identified themselves with prisoners of the Lord. This meant increased persecution. But it was becoming wearisome; some wanted to give up their Christian witness.

God speaks to them:

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Hebrews 12:4-8)

The text could not be clearer: the basis of discipline is sonship. Every one of God's sons is disciplined; in-