

Healthy Hardship

By David Feddes

Once upon a time there was a rancher who wanted nothing to do with God. He had always looked out for himself, and he figured religion was for wimps and weaklings. He made sure his sons, Tom, Dick, and Harry, felt the same way.

One day, though, the local preacher got an urgent phone call. Could he please come out to the ranch right away? A rattlesnake had bitten Tom, and there was nothing more the doctor could do. Could the preacher please come and pray for him?

The preacher went. Amazingly, the rancher took his hat off when the preacher came in. He even knocked the hats off Dick and Harry. Then he led the preacher into a dark bedroom. “Will you pray for Tom?” he pleaded.

The preacher began, “O Lord our God, we thank you for sending this rattlesnake to bite Tom, for it is the first time in his life that he has admitted that he needs you. And Lord, we pray for two more rattlesnakes to bite Dick and Harry, so that they too may receive this blessing. And, Lord, we pray for an especially big and ornery cuss of a rattlesnake to come and bite the old man, so that he too will know what it means to need you!”

Troubles That Transform Us

That story isn't true, but the point it makes is 100 percent true. Some of us have no use for God. As long as we're able to get what we want in life, we ignore the Lord. The more smoothly things go for us, the less we think of God. Sometimes trouble is just about the only thing that makes us listen to God and seek him.

When I was involved in media ministry, a man phoned us. He said that he had broken both his legs in a car accident. He had to spend quite awhile in the hospital in traction, unable to move. To make matters worse, the other person in his room turned out to be a Christian who liked our programs. The man with the broken legs didn't really want to listen; but he didn't want to complain to his roommate, and he couldn't leave the room; so he ended up listening in spite of himself. He heard the message of eternal life through Jesus, and he talked with his roommate about it. To make a long story short, he ended up becoming a Christian. He put his faith in Jesus and entered into a rich, new relationship with God that he had never known before.

If it weren't for trouble and hardship, some people would never come to the Lord at all, and they would be lost forever.

The Bible tells the story of a king named Manasseh. For years Manasseh lived as a filthy, vicious idol worshiper. The Lord sent prophets to warn the king and his people, but they paid no attention. Why should they? They were doing as they pleased and getting away with it. Things seemed to be going very well.

So the Lord took a different approach. He prompted a foreign army to launch an invasion. “They captured Manasseh, stuck hooks in him, put him in chains, and took him to Babylon.” At last God got the king's attention. “In his suffering he became humble, turned to the Lord his God, and begged him for help. God accepted Manasseh's prayer and answered it by letting him go back to Jerusalem and rule again. This convinced King Manasseh that the Lord was God” (2 Chronicles 33:10-13, TEV).

It's easy to ignore an occasional word of warning from a preacher, isn't it? But it's not so easy to ignore hooks in your flesh, chains on your arms and legs, and bars on your cell. God used

pain and prison to change Manasseh's heart when every other measure had failed, and still today God sometimes uses pain and prison to bring people back to him. A prisoner wrote to thank me for my radio broadcasts, and he said, "If I hadn't come to prison, I wouldn't be listening and I would still be caught up in that black hole of evil. Prison actually rescued me from myself."

Nobody goes looking for problems or pain. We don't want trouble to come, and when it does come, we don't enjoy it. Who's crazy enough to enjoy snakebites or broken legs or prison or any other affliction? We don't want such things or enjoy them, but afterward, in hindsight, we sometimes have to admit that our troubles were good for us. At the time it may have seemed that God was being cruel, but he was actually being kind. He was using healthy hardship to save us and change us in ways that would never have happened if our lives had remained trouble-free.

A prayer in the Bible puts it this way: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word... It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees... in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (Psalm 119:67,71,75). Many people have received eternal life in Christ only after God sent the healthy hardship into their lives. Maybe that's true of you. Like the biblical writer, you can say, "It was good for me that I was afflicted. In fact, it saved me."

Maybe you haven't reached that point yet. You may be having lots of problems, and you may think your troubles mean that God doesn't care about you. But often pain is the way a loving God moves us to give up on ourselves and to find life and joy in him. God loves people so much that he sent his Son to suffer and die for us, and God loves us so much that he will make *us* suffer if it's for our good.

Knowing God's love in Jesus and believing in Jesus as your Savior and Lord is the only way not to perish in hell but to have eternal life with God. That's why, if God loves you, he won't just stand by and watch as you go through life pretending you don't need him. Sometimes the only place God can get your attention is a hospital or an addiction treatment center or a prison or a divorce court or a graveside. Sometimes you have to hit bottom before you look up.

Maybe you've lived far from God. You were walking the path that leads to hell and for awhile you were even enjoying yourself. But now God, in his love, has sent a crisis into your life, and you're going through something that's just awful. If so, you may be angry and upset. You may be tempted to resent God. But it's not time to resent. It's time to repent. Learn the hard lesson God is teaching you. You need him. You can't go on without him. Let your troubles drive you to your knees in prayer. Put your faith in Jesus. Ask God to forgive you for Jesus' sake. Receive his salvation. Thank him for showing you how much you need him, and for meeting your needs in Christ Jesus.

Troubles That Train Us

But what if you already believe in Jesus and have already been transformed by him? Does that mean you'll never go through hard times again. No, hard lessons aren't just for ungodly people who need to be shocked into seeing their need for God. Trouble also comes to people who are already followers of Jesus. In Hebrews 12 the Bible speaks to Christians who have been going through hard times. They're tempted to feel sorry for themselves and give up, and they're tempted to think that the Lord has given up on them. Maybe you know the feeling. How do you cope with problems and deal with discouragement?

Well, first of all, make sure you don't exaggerate your troubles. There are situations where you can fall into panic and self-pity even when things aren't nearly as bad as they could

be. At such times, don't be a wimp. Let God make your faith tough enough to shrug off minor troubles. That may sound harsh, and I don't want to make light of things that are truly awful. But make sure you don't blow lesser problems out of proportion.

In a game of playground basketball, there are no referees. People call their own fouls. If you decide to play in one of these games, you'd better figure on some bumping and contact. You can't be a wimp and scream "Foul!" every time you get jostled a bit. Just plan on a few bumps and bruises, and don't make too big a deal of it. As the playground saying goes, "No blood, no foul!"

Hebrews 12 says something similar to people who don't have it quite as bad as they think: "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." In other words, "No blood, no foul." Hebrews puts lesser troubles into perspective by telling about heroes of faith who were sawed in two or slaughtered by swords. Hebrews speaks of Jesus, who was mocked and tortured and crucified. The author urges Christians to remember these heroes, especially Jesus, "so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Don't be shocked if you run into trouble, and if you're only experiencing some hassles here and there, keep your problems in perspective. If you haven't lost any blood, if it's not a major crisis, don't blow your problems out of proportion.

In every situation, whether your troubles are relatively minor or truly severe, remember who God is, and remember what he says in Scripture. When problems are getting you down, you may be tempted to see your trouble as a sign that God has abandoned you. But if you think that way, says Hebrews, "You have forgotten that word of encouragement [from Old Testament Scripture] that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

If you're a Christian, don't ever think your troubles mean God is out to ruin you. Quite the opposite. One of the quickest ways to ruin a child is to give him whatever he wants and let him do whatever he pleases. If God never disciplined us or put us through things we didn't like, it would mean he didn't love us and didn't care what kind of people we turned out to be. The fact that God is a loving Father means he will sometimes use trouble to train us and to help his dear children grow up.

So, says Hebrews 12, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Those are tremendous words. But how do we apply them to ourselves? What does it mean to endure hardship as discipline? How can we learn the lessons our Father is teaching us? How can hardship help us to share in his holiness and produce the harvest he wants?

Three Kinds of Hardship

Let's think about three different kinds of hardship and about the lessons we can learn from each. One kind of hardship is *punishment*, the pain we suffer for doing something bad.

Another kind of hardship is *persecution*, the pain we suffer for doing something good. A third kind of hardship is simply *perplexing*: the pain isn't a direct result of anything we've done, good or bad. It just happens, with no clear cause or explanation. Let's take a closer look at each of these.

First, *punishment*. Some suffering is directly connected to some sin we've committed. If you have a hangover and a headache the morning after a night of too much drinking, if you get a sexually transmitted disease through drug use or contact with someone who isn't your spouse, if you're locked in jail after committing some crime, if you're feeling guilty and miserable over something rotten you've done, you don't have to wonder why you're in pain. You brought it on yourself.

We saw earlier that God sometimes uses pain to jolt non-Christian people into seeing their need for God. But the Lord also uses pain to punish Christians who have been disobedient. Maybe you know Christ and trust him, but you haven't acted like it. You've sinned, and you've suffered punishment for it. Your punishment may take the form of a problem in your life, or it may take the form a guilty conscience and a sense of deep pain and sorrow. Your heavenly Father is making sure that your sin hurts. He uses punishment to discourage disobedience and to encourage obedience. Punishment is God's loving way of showing you that sin doesn't pay, that the healthiest, happiest way of life is to trust and obey him. That's a hard lesson, but a valuable one.

Not all suffering is punishment, however. Not all problems are a result of doing bad things. Sometimes you suffer for doing good. That's the second kind of suffering I want to look at with you: *persecution*. Persecution comes in various forms. If you seek to obey God, you may be mocked as a goody-goody. If you believe in creation or miracles or the resurrection, you may be laughed at for being gullible and stupid. But persecution can go beyond mockery. You can miss a promotion or even lose a job for doing what is right. In some places, you can even be attacked or killed for being faithful to Jesus.

What possible benefit could there be in suffering for doing good? One thing you learn through persecution is that your faith is real and strong, that it's not flimsy or phony. When your life as a Christian is easy, you may wonder sometimes whether you truly trust God or whether your faith is really just empty talk. But when you endure opposition and trouble, you learn that, yes, you do love and serve God no matter what, not just when it's easy. You learn that your faith is indeed genuine (1 Peter 1:7).

Another lesson you learn and experience through persecution is that you're in good company. The prophets and heroes of faith suffered pain and opposition, and so did Jesus. When you suffer for doing good, you experience greater union with the heroes of faith and, most importantly, with Jesus himself. As the Bible puts it, "The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives" (2 Corinthians 1:5), and we experience "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10).

Through persecution you learn that you're part of a great army, following a great Leader, engaged in a great and heroic battle. You learn that, with your Lord's help, you've become enough of a soldier to worry Satan and draw his fire, and you're enough of a soldier not to run away. That's encouraging, isn't it? The lessons of persecution are hard lessons, but they make you a more confident, capable soldier of Christ.

We've talked about the lessons we can learn through punishment and through persecution. But what about pain that is *perplexing*? What about the things you suffer that seem

to make no sense at all, that have no apparent cause in anything you've done, either good or bad? You can lose your job, or endure a terrible illness, or bury someone you love, or suffer any number of other hardships, and there seems to be no reason for it. It's not punishment for being bad or persecution for being good; it's just something terrible that happened to you.

These mysterious, perplexing hardships are probably the hardest kind to deal with and learn from, even harder than punishment or persecution. Punishment hurts, but at least we can learn a clear lesson about sin. Persecution is painful, but at least we have a sense of taking a heroic stand with Christ. Perplexing hardship, however, has no clear link to anything in particular, whether sinful or heroic. It just hurts.

When Suffering Seems Senseless

I hesitate even to suggest lessons we can learn from our heavenly Father through such mysterious and sometimes horrible hardships. I don't for a moment want to sound like I have all the answers. Please don't take anything I say as a full explanation for why such things happen. I'm not trying to provide a complete explanation, and I'm certainly not trying to minimize the pain. I know what it's like to stand at the graveside of a loved one whose suffering and death made no sense at all to me. I still don't have a complete or satisfying explanation for her death. But I know from my own experience and from God's Word that God can use even the most perplexing pain to transform us in ways that nothing else could do.

One lesson you learn is unconditional trust. Trust isn't so hard when God's ways are plain and seem to make sense. But when you're going through pain and trouble that makes no sense to you, you have no idea what God is doing or why something so rotten is happening. To all appearances, it looks like he's out to destroy you. But you trust him anyway. You walk not by sight but by faith in a Lord who says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).

Another lesson you can learn from unavoidable, unexplainable suffering is that this world is not your home. If everything is going the way you want, if you're starting a vacation, or falling in love with someone, or if you're just plain successful and happy, how eagerly do you pray for Jesus to return and set all things right? You're content with things just the way they are. But when pain and problems strike you, seemingly out of nowhere, you learn afresh that you are in a world that's broken by sin and suffering and death, and you learn that you are not exempt from the world's pain—even if you are a Christian. At that point, your longing for a better world becomes much more intense. Happy times can be delightful gifts from God, but it is through trouble that your Father makes you eager for your true home. As C.S. Lewis put it, "Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home." Hardship makes us hungry for heaven.

Still another lesson our heavenly Father teaches through perplexing hardship is tenderness and sympathy for others. When you've walked the path of pain, your love for others becomes more sensitive and real. When your life is pleasant, it's easy to offer glib words to people in pain. But once you've suffered yourself, especially if your suffering defied explanation, you'd rather offer a tender embrace and weep with those who weep than pretend that a few pious words from you can solve everything.

In what I've just written, I've tiptoed along the edge of doing just that: dealing with someone else's pain by offering what sounds like an explanation. Let me say again that I'm not trying to explain away your pain. I don't pretend to have a complete explanation of God's ways.

I don't pretend that my words will make your pain any less. Only God can fully explain his ways, and only God can heal your wounds and wipe away your tears.

Having said that, however, I do believe, from the Bible and from my own experience, that God calls us to endure hardship, not just as a meaningless blow we have to absorb, but as a discipline that shapes us to be more like Christ. If you're not a Christian, ask yourself: "Is God sending me troubles in order to get my attention?" And if you are a Christian, ask yourself: "Am I willing to be shaped into whatever God wants me to become, even if it hurts? Am I willing to learn the lessons my heavenly Father is teaching me, even when the lessons are hard?" May God bring each of us into a closer relationship to him, even if it sometimes takes healthy hardship.