

Night of Weeping

Why GOD's Children Suffer

by Horatius Bonar

Copyright © 1845

CHAPTER 4

THE FAMILY DISCIPLINE

"**TRAIN UP A CHILD in the way he should go**" is the injunction GOD lays on us. But it is, moreover, the principle on which He Himself is acting with His Church. He is training up His children here. This is the true character of His dealings with them. The education of His saints is the object He has in view. It is training for the kingdom; it is education for eternity.

How momentous, then, is the training! It is GOD who is carrying it on by the HOLY GHOST. It is the Church, which is the Body of CHRIST, that is the subject of it. And it is to prepare her for an everlasting kingdom! In bringing many sons unto glory, it was needful that even the Captain of their salvation should be made perfect through suffering. Surely, then, GOD lays vast stress upon this discipline.

In His estimation it is no unimportant nor unmeaning exercise. Knowing this, the apostle exhorts us on this very point, "**My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.**" It is too solemn to be despised, too momentous to be overlooked. The education of GOD's family is concerned with it. The preparation of an heir of glory depends on it.

This discipline begins at our conversion. The moment we are taken into the family it commences. "**He... scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.**" It is not always visible; neither are we at all times conscious of its operation. Nevertheless, from the very day that we are "**begotten... again unto a lively hope**" it begins.

It ends only with life, or in the case of the last generation of the Church, with their being "**caught up... to meet the Lord in the air.**" It is a whole lifetime's process. It is a daily, an hourly discipline which admits of no cessation. The rod may not always be applied, but still the discipline goes on.

1. It is the discipline of love. Every step of it is kindness.

There is no wrath or vengeance in any part of the process. The discipline of the school may be harsh and stern, but that of the family is love. We are sure of this; and the consolation which it affords is unutterable. Love will not wrong us. There will be no needless suffering. Were this but kept in mind there would be fewer hard thoughts of GOD among men, even when His strokes are most severe.

I know not a better illustration of what the feelings of a saint should be, in the hour of bitterness,

than the case of Richard Cameron's father. The aged saint was in prison **"for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."**

The bleeding head of his martyred son was brought to him by his unfeeling persecutors, and he was asked derisively if he knew it. "I know it, I know it," said the father, as he kissed the mangled forehead of his fair-haired son, "it is my son's; my own dear son's! It is the Lord! Good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me or mine, but who hath made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days."

2. It is the discipline of wisdom. He who administers it is the **"Only wise God."**

What deep wisdom then must there be in all His dealings! He knows exactly what we need and how to supply it. He knows what evils are to be found in us, and how these may be best removed. His training is no random work. It is carried on with exquisite skill. The time and the way and the instrument are all according to the perfect wisdom of GOD. The fittest time is chosen, just the very moment when discipline is called for, and when it would be most profitable. The surest, most direct, and at the same time gentlest method is devised. The instrument which will be surest yet safest, most effectual yet least painful, is brought into operation. For all is wisdom in the discipline of GOD.

3. It is the discipline of faithfulness. **"Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me,"** said David.

All is the doing of a faithful GOD - a GOD who is faithful to us as well as faithful to Himself. **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend,"** says Solomon; and the believer finds in trouble the faithfulness of the truest of friends. He is so faithful that He will not pass by a single fault that He sees in us, but will forthwith make it known that it may be removed. He gave this command to Israel, **"Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him,"** (Leviticus 19:17) and He Himself acts upon the command He gave.

He is too faithful a Father to suffer sin upon His children unreprieved. He is true to us, whether in sending the evil or the good; shall we not say, truer and more faithful when He inflicts the evil than when He bestows the good? It almost at times seems to break the heart of a loving friend to be obliged to say or do anything severe toward the friend he loves. Yet for love's sake he will do it. In faithfulness he will not shrink from it. And in doing so, is he not true to his friend? So with a chastening GOD. He is faithful when He blesses - more faithful when He chastens. This surely is consolation. It may well allay all murmuring - and establish our hearts in peace.

4. It is the discipline of power.

He who is carrying it on is not one who can be baffled and forced to give up His design. He is able to carry it out in the unlikeliest circumstances and against the most resolute resistance. Everything must give way before Him.

This thought is, I confess, to me one of the most comforting connected with the discipline. If it could fail! If GOD could be frustrated in His designs after we have suffered so much, it would be awful! To be scourged and suffer pain by one who is not able to make good to us the profit of this would add inconceivable bitterness to the trial. And then our hearts are so hard, our wills so

stubborn, that nothing save an Almighty pressure applied to them can work the desired change.

Ah, when the soul is at strife within itself, battling in desperate conflict with its stormy lusts, when the flesh rises up in its strength and refuses to yield, when the whole heart appears like iron or is adamant, it is most blessed to think upon GOD's chastisements as the discipline of power! It is this that assures us that all shall yet be well. And it is in the strength of this assurance that we gird ourselves for the battle, knowing that we must be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

There might be love in the dealing - love to the uttermost - and yet all be in vain. For love is oftentimes helpless, unable to do aught for the beloved object.

There might be wisdom, too, and yet it might prove wholly ineffectual.

There might also be untiring faithfulness, yet no results.

It might be altogether impotent even in its fondest vigilance. It might be baffled in its most earnest attempts to bless. But when it is infinite power that is at work, we are sure of every obstacle being surmounted, and everything that is blessed coming most surely to pass. My sickbed may be most lovingly tended, most skillfully provided for, most faithfully watched, and I may be most sweetly soothed by this fond and unwearied care; yet, if there be no power to heal, no resistless energy such as sweeps all hindrances before it, then I may still lie hopeless there; but, if the power to heal be present, the power that makes all diseases flee its touch, the power that, if need be, can raise the dead, then I know of a truth that all is well.

Ah, it is blessed and comforting to remember that it is the discipline of power that is at work upon us!

GOD's treatment must succeed. It cannot miscarry or be frustrated even in its most arduous efforts, even in reference to its minutest objects. It is the mighty power of GOD that is at work within us and upon us, and this is our consolation.

It is the grasp of an infinite hand that is upon us, and nothing can resist its pressure. All is love, all is wisdom, and all is faithfulness, yet all is also power. The very possibility of failure is thus taken away. Were it not for this power there could be no certainty of blessing, and were it not for this certainty, how poor and partial would our comfort be! He, yes, He who chastises us is "**able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us**" (Ephesians 3:20).

Hence to a soul, conscious of utter helplessness and weary of the struggle within, between the spirit and the flesh, there is "**strong consolation**" in remembering the power of Him whose hand is now grasping him so firmly on every side. His sorely tossed spirit finds peace in calling to mind "**the years of the right hand of the Most High**" - all the "**works of the Lord [and his] wonders of old.**"

The "**Strength of Israel**" is the name he delights in, as the name of his Chastener. He thus bethinks himself, the God who made these heavens and stretched them out in their vastness and

majesty, who moves these stars in their courses and arrests them at a word, is the GOD who is chastening me. He who raises and stills the mighty deep and all the multitude of its waves, the GOD of the tempest and of the earthquake, 'the framer of light and dark, the wielder of the lightning and the builder of the everlasting hills,' is the GOD who is now laying His rod so heavily upon me. Thus each new proof or aspect of Jehovah's power becomes a new source of consolation in the day of chastisement and sorrow.

Such, then, is the nature of the family discipline when viewed in reference to GOD. Love, wisdom, faithfulness, and power unite to devise and carry it out. It must, then, be perfect discipline, the completest and most successful that can be thought of or desired. It is well to look at it in this light, for it is thus that we become entirely satisfied with all that comes to pass and feel that "**it is well.**"

But let us consider it in another aspect. We have seen what it is when flowing out of GOD; let us see what it is when operating upon man.

As we observed before, GOD's object in chastisement is the education of His children, the training up of the saints. It is their imperfect spiritual condition that makes this so necessary. And now we proceed to inquire in what way it works, and toward what regions of the soul it is specially directed. For while, doubtless, it embraces the whole soul in all its parts and powers, it may be well to consider it as more especially set to work upon its mind, its will, its heart, and its conscience.

1. It is the training of the mind. We are naturally most unteachable as well as most ignorant, neither knowing anything nor willing to know. The ease of prosperous days augments the evil. GOD at length interposes and compels us to learn. "**The rod and reproof give wisdom**" (Proverbs 29:15).

- He sends trial and that makes us willing to learn.
- Our unteachableness gives way.
- We become aware of our ignorance.
- We seek teaching from on high.
- GOD begins His work of instruction.
- Light pours in on every side.
- We grow amazingly in knowledge.
- We learn the meaning of words now which we had hitherto used but as familiar sounds.

Scripture shines out before us in new effulgence; it flashes into us; every verse seems to contain a sunbeam; dark places become light; every promise stands out in illuminated splendor; things hard to be understood become in a moment plain.

How fast we learn in a day of sorrow! It is as if affliction awoke our powers and lent them new quickness of perception. We advance more in the knowledge of Scripture in a single day than in years before. We learn "**songs in the night,**" though such music was unknown before. A deeper experience has taken us down into the depths of Scripture and shown us its hidden wonders.

Luther used to say, "Were it not for tribulation I should not understand Scripture." And every

sorrowing saint responds to this, as having felt its truth - felt it as did David, when he said, "**Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest . . . and teachest him out of thy law.**" (Psalm 94:12) "**It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.**" (Psalm 119:71) What teaching, what training of the mind goes on upon a sickbed, or under the pressure of grief! And, oh, what great and wondrous things will even some little trial whisper in the ear of a soul that is "**[learning] of the Father**"!

In some cases this profit is almost unfelt, at least during the continuance of the process. We think that we are learning nothing. Sorrow overwhelms us. Disaster stuns us. We become confused, nervous, agitated, or perhaps insensible. We seem to derive no profit. Yet ere long we begin to feel the blessed results. Maturity of judgment, patience in listening to the voice of GOD, a keener appetite for His Word, a quicker discernment of its meaning - these are soon realized as the gracious results of chastisement. The mind has undergone a most thorough discipline, and has, moreover, made wondrous progress in the knowledge of divine truth through the teaching of the HOLY GHOST.

2. It is the training of the will. The will is the seat of rebelliousness. Here the warfare is carried on. "**The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.**" At conversion the will is bent in the right direction, but it is still crooked and rigid. Rebelliousness is still there. Prosperous days may sometimes conceal it so that we are almost unconscious of its strength. But it still exists.

Furnace heat is needed for softening and strengthening it. No milder remedy will do. "It requires," says a suffering saint, "all the energy of GOD to bend my will to His." Yet it must be done. The will is the soul's citadel. Hence, it is the will that GOD seems so specially to aim at in chastisement. Fire after fire does He kindle in order to soften it; and blow after blow does He fetch down on it to straighten it. Nor does He rest till He has made it thoroughly flexible and hammered out of it the many relics of self which it contains. He will not stay His hand till He has thoroughly marred our self-formed plans and shown us the folly of our self-chosen ways.

This is specially the case in long-continued trials; either when these come stroke after stroke in sad succession, or when one fearful stroke at the outset has left behind it consequences which years perhaps will not fully unfold. The bending and straightening of the will is often a long process, during which the soul has to pass through waters deep and many, through fires hot and ever kindling up anew. Protracted trials seem specially aimed at the will. Its perversity and stiffness can only be wrought out of it by a long succession of trials. It is only by degrees that it becomes truly pliable and is brought into harmony with the will of GOD. We can at a stroke lop off the unseemly branch; but to give a proper bent to the tree itself, we require time and assiduous appliances for months or years. Yet the will must give way. However proud, however forward, it must bend. GOD will not leave it till He has made it one with His own. *

3. It is the training of the heart. Man's heart beats false to GOD. It is true to many things but false to Him. When first the HOLY SPIRIT touches it, and shows it "**the exceeding riches of [God's] grace,**" then it becomes in some measure true. Yet it is only in part. Much falseheartedness still remains.

- It clings too fondly to the creature.

- It cleaves to the dust.
- It is not wholly GOD's.

But this cannot be. GOD must have the heart; nay, and He must have it beating truly toward Him. He is jealous of our love, and grieves over its feebleness or its falling away. It is love that He wants, and with nothing but truehearted love will He be satisfied. For this it is that He chastises.

* "Character is a perfectly educated will," says a German writer.

These false throbbings of the heart; these goings out after other objects than Himself He cannot suffer but must correct or else forego His claim. Hence, He smites and spares not till He has made us sensible of our guilt in this respect. He strips off the leaves whose beauty attracted us; He cuts down the flowers whose fragrance fascinated us; He tears off one string after another from the lyre whose music charmed us. Then when He has showed us each object of earth in its nakedness or deformity, then He presents Himself to us in the brightness of His own surpassing glory. And thus He wins the heart. Thus He makes it true to Him. Thus He makes us ashamed of our falseheartedness to Himself and to the Son of His love.

Yet this is no easy process. This training is hard and sore. The heart bleeds under it. Yet it must go on. No part of it can be spared. Nor will it cease till the heart is won!

If the Chastener should stay His hand before this is effected, where would be His love? What poor, what foolish affection! He knew this when He said, "**Let them alone**"; and it was the last thing that His love consented to do, after all else had failed. One of the sharpest, sorest words He ever spoke to Israel was, "**Why should ye be stricken any more?**"

Let us remember this, and not faint, even though the heart has been long bleeding. Let us remember it, and seek to make the sorrow shorter by gladly joining with Him in His plan for getting possession of our whole heart. We need not grudge it. He has "**good measure**" to give us in return. His love will taste the sweeter, and it will abide and satisfy us forever. It is well for us to be thus trained to love Him here, with whom, in love and fellowship unbroken, we are to spend the everlasting day.

4. It is the training of the conscience. A seared conscience is the sinner's heritage. It is upon this that the HOLY SPIRIT first lays His hand when He awakens the soul from its sleep of death. He touches the conscience, and then the struggles of conviction come. He then pacifies it by the sprinkling of the blood, showing it JESUS and His cross.

Then giving it to taste forgiveness, it rests from all its tumults and fears. Thoughts of peace are ever breathed into it from the sight of the bleeding sacrifice. It trembles no more, for it sees that that which made it tremble is the very thing concerning which the blood of CHRIST speaks peace. "**Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.**" Thus it is softened.

Its first terrors upon awakening could not be called a softening. But now conscious forgiveness and realized peace with GOD have been to it like the mild breath of spring to the ice of winter. It has become soft and tender. Yet only so in part.

GOD's desire, however, is to make it altogether tender.

He wishes it to be sensitive in regard to the very touch of sin, and earnest in its pantings after perfect holiness. To effect this, He afflicts; and affliction goes directly home to the conscience. The death of the widow's son at Sarepta immediately awakened her conscience, and she cried to the prophet, "**O thou man of God... art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance?**" (I Kings 17:18)

So GOD by chastisement lays His finger upon the conscience, and forthwith it springs up into new life. We are made to feel as if GOD had now come down to us, as if He were now looking into our hearts and commencing a narrow search. Moreover, we see in this affliction GOD's estimate of sin. Not, indeed, the full estimate. No, that we only learn from the sufferings of JESUS. But still we gather from this new specimen of sin's bitter fruits somewhat of His mind regarding sin. This teaches the conscience by making the knowledge of sin a thing of experience - an experience that is deepening with every new trial. "**If they be bound in fetters, and be holden in cords of affliction; then he sheweth them their work, and their transgressions that they have exceeded. He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity**" (Job 36:8-10).

In these last days how little is there of tenderness of conscience!

The world seems to know nothing of it save the name. It is a world without a conscience! And how much do we find the Church of CHRIST a partaker in the world's sins! "**Evil communications corrupt good manners.**"

It is sad to observe in many saints, amid much zeal and energy and love, the lack of a tender conscience. For this GOD is smiting us, and will smite us yet more heavily until He has made it thoroughly tender and sensitive all over, "**hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.**"

This training of the conscience is a thing of far greater moment than many deem it. GOD will not rest till He has wrought it. And if the saints still continue to overlook it, if they will not set themselves in good earnest to ask for it, and to strive against everything that would tend to produce searedness and insensibility, they may yet expect some of the sharpest strokes that the hand of GOD has ever yet administered.

Such, then, is the family discipline!

We have seen it as it comes forth from GOD, and we have seen it as it operates upon man. And is it not all well?

What is there about it that should disquiet us, or call forth one murmur either of the lip or heart? That which opens up to us so much more of GOD and lets us more fully into the secrets of His heart must be blessed, however hard to bear. That which discovers to us the evils within ourselves, which makes us teachable and wise, which gives to the stiff will, flexibility and obedience, which teaches the cold heart to love and expands each straitened affection, which melts the callous conscience into tender sensitiveness, which trains up the whole soul for the

glorious kingdom - that must be precious indeed.

Besides, it is the Father's will; and is not this enough for the trustful child? Is not chastisement just one of the methods by which He intimates to us what He would have us to be? Is not His way of leading us to the kingdom the safest, surest, shortest way? It is still the paternal hand that is guiding us. What though in seeking to lift us up to a higher level, it has to lay hold of us with a firmer, or it may be a rougher grasp? It is still the paternal voice "**that speaketh unto [us] as unto children**" - dear children - only in a louder, sharper tone to constrain the obedience of His too reluctant sons.

One remark more would I add to these concerning this family discipline.

It is not designed even for a moment to separate them and their GOD, or to overshadow their souls with one suspicion of their Father's heart. That it has done so at times, I know; but that it ought never to do so I am most firmly persuaded. Is it not one of the tests of sonship, and shall that, without which we are not accounted sons, make us doubt our sonship, or suspect the love of our GOD?

That love claims at all times, whether in sorrow or in joy, our simple, full-hearted, peaceful confidence. It is at all times the same, and chastisement is but a more earnest expression of its infinite sincerity and depth. Let us do justice to it, and to Him out of whom it flows. Let us not give it the unworthy treatment which it too often receives at our thankless hands.

Let us beware of "**[falling] from grace**" at the very time when GOD is coming down to us to spread out before us more largely than before all the treasures of His grace. "**We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,**" is to be our song. It ought always to be the family song! And shall it cease or sink low at the very time when it ought to be loudest and strongest? Should not trial just draw from us the apostle's triumphant boast:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

For is it not just when we are brought under chastening that we enter upon the realities of consolation, the certainties of love, and the joys of heavenly fellowship in ways unknown and unimagined before?

~ end of chapter 4 ~
