

Perfected Through Suffering

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was a stormy night on the Sea of Galilee, waves battering a small boat, the wind howling, and the disciples gripping the sides in terror. In the midst of this chaos, Jesus walks on the water, unshaken, calling to Peter, “Come” (Matthew 14:29). Peter steps out, but the crashing waves overwhelm his focus, and he begins to sink. Yet Jesus reaches out, pulls him up, and brings him safely to the boat. That moment of trial, of fear and faltering, was not Peter’s end but a step in his journey to his rock-like faith upon which Christ would build His Church. So it is with us. Our trials, temptations, and sufferings are not God’s abandonment but His chisel, shaping us into the likeness of His Son, who Himself was made perfect through suffering.

Our text from Hebrews 12 speaks directly to this truth. The author writes to a people weary from persecution, tempted to drift from the faith, and wondering why following Christ brings such hardship. Let’s hear the Word of God: *“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘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, and chastises every son whom he receives’”* (Hebrews 12:4-6).

The Greek word for “discipline” here is *paideia* (παιδεία), which carries a deeper meaning than mere punishment. It refers to the training and education of a child, the careful shaping of a life toward maturity and virtue. God’s discipline is not a cold, arbitrary act but the loving hand of a Father molding His children. This is not abstract theology. Consider the early Christians in Rome during Nero’s reign in the 60s AD. They faced unimaginable horrors—burned as torches, thrown to wild beasts,

crucified in the arena. Yet, through their suffering, their faith shone brightly, drawing others to Christ. Their trials were not a sign of God's absence but of His presence, refining them as gold in a furnace. Their steadfastness under persecution testified to the world that God's kingdom was worth more than life itself.

The writer of Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3, reminding us that God's discipline is proof of His love: *"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons"* (Hebrews 12:7-8). This is not a call to stoic endurance but to trust in the Father's purpose. Think of King David, whose life was a tapestry of trials. He fled from Saul's spear, hid in caves, and mourned the rebellion of his son Absalom. His sin with Bathsheba brought personal and national consequences, yet each hardship drove him deeper into God's mercy. From those trials came psalms like Psalm 51, where David pleads, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God"* (Psalm 51:10). His suffering was not his undoing but his making, shaping him into a man after God's own heart.

The text continues: *"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"* (Hebrews 12:11). The "peaceful fruit of righteousness" is not a fleeting emotion but the deep, abiding character of Christ formed in us. The Greek word *eirenikos* (εἰρηνικός), translated "peaceful," suggests a harmony and wholeness that comes only through God's transforming work. This truth was lived out in the life of Fanny Crosby, the 19th-century American hymn writer who was blinded as an infant. Despite her disability and personal losses, including the death of her only child, she embraced her suffering as God's refining work. Through her trials, she composed thousands of hymns, including "Blessed Assurance" and "To God Be the Glory," which have strengthened the faith of generations. Her hardships were the crucible where God forged a heart of worship, bearing the peaceful fruit of righteousness that testified to His unshakable kingdom.

The writer urges action in response to God's discipline: *"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed"* (Hebrews 12:12-13). Suffering can weaken us, tempt us to despair, or lead us to stray. But God calls us to press forward, to pursue holiness, and to guard against bitterness. The example of Esau serves as a sobering warning: *"See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal"* (Hebrews 12:15-16). Esau traded his eternal inheritance for a momentary comfort, a bowl of stew. In our trials, we too can be tempted to seek quick relief over God's promises. Yet God calls us to hold fast, trusting His eternal plan over temporary ease.

The text then lifts our eyes to a cosmic perspective: *"See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven"* (Hebrews 12:25). This is a call to hear God's voice, not just in the trials but in the unshakable kingdom He promises. *"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire"* (Hebrews 12:28-29). The Puritans of 17th-century England embodied this perspective. Facing exile, imprisonment, and loss for their faith, they saw hardships as the norm for God's people. Puritan preacher John Flavel wrote, *"Afflictions are the common lot of God's children, and no true Christian escapes them."* They expected trials, believing that God used them to build His unshakable kingdom. Their perseverance under persecution strengthened the church, proving that God's purposes prevail even in suffering.

What does this mean for us? Jesus, our Savior, was made perfect through suffering. Hebrews 2:10 declares, *"It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering."* Jesus endured the

cross, despising its shame, to become our perfect Savior. His suffering was not defeat but victory, securing our redemption. Now, through our trials, He is fashioning us into His likeness. Like Peter on the water, we may falter, but Jesus lifts us up. Like David, our sins and sorrows drive us to God's mercy. Like Fanny Crosby, our brokenness becomes a canvas for God's grace. Like the Puritans, we learn to see trials as the forge where God shapes His people for His unshakable kingdom.

Our sufferings are not random or meaningless. They are the Father's paideia, His loving discipline, training us for righteousness. Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, has gone before us, victorious through the cross. In Him, we too are victorious, being shaped into His image, destined for a kingdom that cannot be shaken. His work in us is powerful and eternal, turning our trials into triumphs, our sorrows into songs of grace. Hold fast to His promises, for He is faithful, and His kingdom endures forever. Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in Him.

Pastor Ron Breight Christ Lutheran Church Forest Hills, Pennsylvania

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