

Hebrews 12:5

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] We're going to continue this evening on the Father theme. And I'm of the opinion, some of you may have a different view on this, but I'm of the opinion that it's not easy being a father. We have multiple duties and responsibilities. Perhaps there are some mums out there who are thinking, oh, just man up. But anyway, I do think that it's quite a difficult task, and certainly one of the duties that we have, together with mothers, of course, and one that I would urge all fathers to be mindful of, and that is the duty and privilege that we have of encouraging our children. We are to be encouragers. And this evening, I want us to consider a father's word of encouragement that is addressed and directed to his children. A father's word of encouragement found in the letter to the Hebrews and in the passage that we read earlier in the service. Notice that in verse 5 of chapter 12 of Hebrews, what do we read? And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons. The believers to whom the letter is written are to remember how their father God addressed them a word of encouragement. In this case, the reference is to words that are found in the book of Proverbs and that the author is employing for his purposes, as we're going to be giving some thought to this evening. But the first thing that I want to stress is how these words are introduced, and indeed, how this part of the letter is introduced or described.

This is a word of encouragement from a father, from our Heavenly Father to us as children. The context of this word of encouragement is the call to run with perseverance, the race marked out for us, as we read earlier on in the chapter. The race marked out for us, a race that is often very different, perhaps, to the race that we might like to run. We might like the idea that our race would be a stroll in the park, a pleasant jog on a lovely day, but often the race that is marked out for us is more of a cross-country slog with biting winds and vertical rain. And in running that race, the writer has just pointed his readers to Jesus, who endured as our example of endurance in the faith. Indeed, in the previous chapter, he had also painted this picture and presented these little bios of heroes of the faith, of men and women of faith who also endured, and they also serve as a challenge and as an example for us, as we are to run out the race marked out for us. And now he goes on in this chapter to give believers another spur to endure. And this spur to endure is this reminder of a word of encouragement from their father. That's what I want to do this evening, spend a little time considering this word of encouragement. But I don't just want to consider the word. I want to hear this word of encouragement.

I want to receive it, and I want to be encouraged by it. And I want the same for you. Let's not just consider what we find, but let's hear this word of encouragement directed to us. Hear it, receive it, and be encouraged by it. So on this Father's Day, let's listen to our Father's word of encouragement to us as sons called to run with perseverance, the race marked out for us. There's two questions that I want us to ponder on regarding this word of encouragement that is referred to there in verse 5. The first one is, what is encouraging about this word of encouragement? What in the content of this word is encouraging? So identify that first of all. And then perhaps slightly more briefly, consider how we are to respond to this word of encouragement. So first of all then, let's think for a moment on what is encouraging about this word of encouragement. Very particularly, these words that are taken by the writer from the book of Proverbs. We'll read verse 5 again. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement 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. Now we will think about these words, but we'll extend ourselves somewhat and think of what the writer goes on to say, and consider that as part really of this word of encouragement for us this evening. So what is encouraging about this word of encouragement? There's really three things I want to notice. I'll say what they are, and then we'll look at them each in turn. The first two very briefly, and then dwelling for a little bit longer in the

third. The three things I want us to notice about what is encouraging about this word of encouragement, first of all, is that we are addressed as sons, and secondly, that we are loved as sons, and then thirdly, where we'll spend a little bit more time, we are treated as sons. First of all, then, we are addressed as sons. This in itself ought to be and is an encouragement. Even before we hear the word there that begins, my son, do not make light of the light of the Lord's discipline even before we hear the word there that is in the writer the concern to stress and to explicitly highlight who we are as believers. We are sons. We are sons of God, sons and daughters of God. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons. That is who we are. Indeed, in this very letter, we're told that all the sufferings endured by Jesus were endured in our favor as sons. In Hebrews chapter 2 and verse 10, we read, in bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. The very one that the writer is pointing us to as an example of endurance, in that suffering, what was he doing? He was bringing sons. He was bringing us to glory. As we've just sung a moment ago, the wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory. So, this is the first thing. Even before we look at the content of the word, even in acknowledging or in understanding and recognizing to whom it is addressed, it is addressed to sons. That in itself is an encouragement. And I would invite you to just pause and to consider for a moment your amazing status in Christ, sons and daughters of God, and be encouraged. So, first of all, then we are addressed as sons, but then also we are loved as sons. Now, a heading such as that, you might imagine, would then lead on to an awful lot that we would want to say, but in actual fact, we're going to say very little. We're not going to dwell on this, but we do want to stress this great truth that lies behind, that underpins, as it were, this whole matter of the purpose to be found in suffering and testing. And it is this, that we are loved as sons. In the very body of this word of encouragement, we have this truth explicitly stated in verse 6, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son. The Lord disciplines those He loves. We are loved as sons of God. That, again, even before we consider the manner in which He loves us, the manner in which discipline plays a part in demonstrating God's love for us. That very truth that we are loved as sons is an encouragement for us. But then thirdly, and where we'll detain ourselves for a little longer, we are treated as sons. When we say we are treated as sons, we're specifically referring to the fact that we are disciplined as sons. Now, we're treated as sons by God in a number of different ways, but our concern this evening is on what is said here, that in this way, in this particular area, if you wish, we are treated as sons in the matter of God's fatherly discipline, because the Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son. So, there we have it explicitly, then. The writer goes on to develop that in verses 7 and 8, where we have this analogy from the lesser to the greater, where we're reminded of how we have earthly fathers who discipline us because they love us. Well, how much more our father does likewise. He treats us as sons. As our own father treated us as sons, so our heavenly father treats us as sons. So, let's just think about this matter of the father's disciplining of us. And in doing so, we're going to look at three aspects of this. We're going to look at the nature of the father's discipline, the duration of it, and very importantly, the purpose of it. So, let's think, first of all, of the nature of the father's discipline. Now, this is really very important. It's very important that we have a clear grasp of this matter. It's crucial that we be able to identify God's discipline in our own lives if we are to profit from it. So, what does it look like? See, if we don't even realize that it's going on, [11:03] I'm not saying that there won't be any profit from it, but the profit will be much reduced if we don't even realize that this is happening, if we don't realize that this is what God is doing. An appreciation of what God is doing will mean that we gain more from it. So, what can we say about the nature of the discipline that is being spoken of here? That's a demonstration of the father's love.

Well, this passage presents a very broad spectrum of circumstances that could be viewed as serving a disciplinary function. And let's just skim through the passage and notice a few of them. There, if we begin at verse 3, just going a little bit before the word of encouragement that we have in verse 5. In verse 3, we read, Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. So, here the matter of opposition is referred to. It's referred to in the context of the opposition that Jesus endured. But in presenting Jesus as our example, the implication is that we too will suffer as a result of opposition, an opposition grounded in a hatred towards God and the gospel. So, opposition that is because we are Christians, because we are seeking to be faithful to God, for that reason we will endure opposition. This is one way in which,

this is one aspect of the suffering that we will endure that God uses to discipline us, opposition. Then in verse 4, notice other languages used. We read there, In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Now, this phrase is a little bit more difficult to understand. The reference to blood being shed suggests that the idea of persecution is still in mind. We've just been given the example of Jesus, and we know how He shed His blood, how He suffered in this ultimate way for us. And then immediately it goes on and says, well, you haven't done that yet. But nonetheless, it would seem to be pointing towards that possibility, that kind of suffering because of persecution, violence that we might face because of our faith. That on the one hand, but then it also says, and it begins the verse by saying, in your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And so, how these two things come together perhaps isn't altogether clear. The language of struggling with sin suggests more the idea of struggle and indeed pain and suffering that we can endure as we struggle with our own sinful nature. And what is it that is being said? Well, on balance, I think we would veer towards that second possibility that here the writer is talking about, struggle and hardship that we endure as we struggle with sin, with our own sin, our own sinful nature, our own proneness to succumb, to temptation. And as we struggle with that, this is also part of how God forms us and disciplines us. So, opposition, struggle with sin. And then as we come into the word of encouragement itself that has been drawn from the book of Proverbs, we have this very word, discipline. My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline. The Greek word here is a word, you might say, a very generic word that perhaps covers all the other aspects that we're going to be noting as we skim through the passage.

It was a word that could be used to describe child-rearing through instruction and training and correction. And what is being suggested here is that God uses suffering and hardship as one means of instructing us, of correcting us, not the only means, but one of the means that God uses, discipline, correction, instruction. But then even within that word, another word appears, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.

[15 : 37] Punishment. Now, that brings in another aspect to this. And the word is clear enough, suffering and pain that is the result of being punished by God when we do wrong. We are, of course, and we delight in this, and we thank God for this, that as we have put our trust in Jesus, we are spared eternal punishment as believers, but we are still subject to temporal punishment that is for our good to discipline us, to form us, to lead us in the direction that we ought to go.

As we continue reading, and certainly in our version here in verse 7, we find another word, endure hardship as discipline. But in actual fact, the word there is simply the same word, discipline, that we've met already. But even the fact that the translators choose to translate it with the word hardship would suggest that certainly the translators understand that any kind of hardship, regardless really of its source or nature, is in some sense a form of a discipline that God uses for our good. So even that brief skim through some of the vocabulary of the passage, we see that it covers quite an array of very different circumstances. If we were to try to summarize or categorize, we could speak of suffering or pain caused by Satan and his hosts as they would oppose us because we are believers. Suffering and pain that is the result of our own sinful nature and behavior and the consequences of that. And suffering and pain that is just part and parcel of life in this fallen world.

Bad stuff happens, and we suffer as a result of that. And all of these things are used of God to mold us and to discipline us, to instruct us. And this is important. We can and we should view all pain and suffering as purposeful and as part of our Father's loving discipline and molding of our lives and characters. Now to know that that is so does not remove the pain far from it.

It remains painful. Indeed, the passage explicitly acknowledges that it is painful. In verse 11, we read, no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. It is painful. And knowing that there is a purpose in it does not remove the pain. But nonetheless, it is important for us to recognize that there is indeed a purpose behind those things that we endure. Now we're going to think a little bit more about that matter of the purpose in a moment. But there, a brief outline, we might say, of what we're calling the nature of the discipline, the different forms, if you wish, that it takes.

But let's notice also the duration of the discipline. This is also important. How often is pain and suffering deepened by the cry, how long? In your own experience, I'm sure you can relate to that.

[18 : 55] When pain is particularly difficult and hard to bear because there seems to be no answer to the question, how long? You know, when there's an end in sight, that in itself brings a measure of

relief.

So how long is an important question for us to be able to answer? Well, what can we say about the duration of the discipline? Well, I think we can note two related truths with regard to duration. First of all, we can say that any suffering that we endure is temporary. There is an end in sight. This is implied. It's implicit in the teaching that we have in this chapter. In verse 11, for example, no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace. And the implication is clear that the time of suffering passes. It has its time, and it comes to an end. Now, in this life, there will be other pain and suffering that perhaps takes its place, but it's very clear that it is temporary. It's not permanent. It is also, in the grand scheme of things, brief. It may not seem brief to us, but in the grand scheme of things, if we think of what Paul says as he writes to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verses 16 and 17, therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, the nature of the discipline, the duration of the discipline, but then also the purpose of the discipline. And the passage points to a number of intertwined purposes that all come under the big truth that it is for our good. In verse 10, we read that our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good. So, it's for our good. Now, in what way?

In what way is the discipline that we endure that is painful? And how is that for our good? Let's just think of some ways in which it is for our good. In some way, we'll be reiterating or re-emphasizing points that we have made already. First of all, it's for our good in that it serves to identify us as sons. Now, we touched on that when we've spoken of the very fact that being addressed as sons serves as an encouragement. But suffering very clearly is intended, and the writer here is very clear on this, it's intended at one level to identify us as sons. The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son. And then, of course, He presents the other side of the coin that if you're not disciplined, well, where does that leave you? What does that say about your status? You're not legitimate children at all. But if you endure discipline, if you are under discipline, then that serves as its purpose to identify you as part of the family that God is indeed your Father, to identify us as sons, but also to assure us of the Father's love. Again, this is really reiterating what we have already said, so we won't dwell on it. But a third purpose, and here we're mentioning something that we haven't mentioned as yet, so maybe just take a little bit more time to develop it. I think a third purpose that we find in the passage of discipline, of the suffering that accompanies it, is that its purpose is to make us more like Jesus. We said that the general umbrella truth is that it is for our good, but what does the writer go on to say when he speaks of God's discipline as being for our good? Well, immediately he goes on to explain what he means by that. He says that we may share in His holiness. There in the second part of verse 10, that we may share in His holiness, the holiness of God. This is its purpose, that we may share in His holiness, the holiness of God perfectly manifested in Jesus. And so, God's discipline upon us has this as its central and ultimate purpose to make us more like Jesus, to be holy as He is holy. And as we also read in the following verse, that our lives would be ever more characterized, ever more marked by righteousness and peace. Verse 11, 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. Lives characterized by righteousness and peace. That is a life that looks like Jesus. And so, the purpose of the Father in disciplining us is that He would make us more like Jesus. Now, in identifying these purposes that really go together one with the other, it is, I think, important to recognize that there will be times in our lives, in the real world of the suffering that we face, there will be times when we are unable to see God's purpose in our pain. At times, the very suggestion of purpose might appear almost obscene.

And we might recoil at the very possibility that the pain that we're enduring, or perhaps that we're witnessing others enduring, and to imagine that there is a purpose in this, it just doesn't seem to make any sense at all. And we simply can't see it. And there will be such times, there are such times, and at such times, I think, we simply have to trust, to rest in the reality that God is good, and that even though there are times when we can't begin to understand, God knows what He is doing. This isn't something where we can coldly look up the key verses and say, oh no, I'm fine, because this verse says this. Yes, the Word of God is for our encouragement. It is to help us. But we recognize that there are some times when we'll find it so very difficult to see the purpose. But the

fact that we can't see it is not a reason for us not to rest in our God who is good, and who does all things well, in His dealings with us also. But let's also move on and more briefly think about how we should respond to this word of encouragement. Having thought a little of what is encouraging about it, how do we respond to it? Well, we can begin with the don'ts, the don'ts that we have in the very word of encouragement. There are two there in verse 5. My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you. Two don'ts to begin with. Don't make light of it.

[26 : 38] Now, how can we make light of it? Well, perhaps in different ways. But one way that I would suggest that often is the case is that we simply don't take the time to pause and to listen to what God is saying and doing, and to take seriously what He is doing and saying in the midst of the suffering that we face. In that way, we make light of it. We simply don't listen, and so we miss out in considerable measure on the purpose that there is in it. Don't make light of it. I'm sure there are other ways that we can make light of it, but I think that's one that I would suggest. But there's a second don't.

The second don't is don't lose heart. Don't lose heart when He rebukes you. That's our natural inclination. We don't like being rebuked. We like to be congratulated. We like people to say nice things about us, and of course there's a place for that. But we find rebuke difficult. I think that's true of us all, and our natural inclination when we're rebuked is to lose heart. And so the writer recognizing this says, no, don't do that. Don't lose heart when you are rebuked. And don't lose heart because you've got to understand that this is good. This is a demonstration of your father's concern for you. If he didn't care, he would say nothing. We know that in the matter of our own children. As parents, we have a particular responsibility to correct, to rebuke our own children. We don't have that responsibility for other children. Indeed, in many cases, it would be inappropriate of us to rebuke other children. We can get in all sorts of trouble when we start rebuking other people's children. Parents get very defensive, quite rightly, when that happens. But when it's our own children, then we do. And this is what has been said. You know, if you're rebuked by your father, well, that's good. That's a demonstration of who you are. Our natural inclination is to not welcome it, but we need to overcome that, that we might not lose heart. One of the early church fathers, Chrysostom, in the fourth century, the bishop of Constantinople, he, on this matter, writes concerning believers, see it is those very things in which they suppose they have been deserted by God that should make them confident that they have not been deserted. Those very times of difficulty and trial and suffering where we think, well, where's God? He's abandoned me. And Chrysostom wisely says, no, those very things are evidence that he's not abandoned you, that you've not been deserted.

And it would appear that he practiced what he preached as his last words before his death in exile are reputed to have been, glory be to God for all things. So don't make light of the Lord's discipline and don't lose heart under it. Rather, how should you respond? Well, we are to respond, first of all, with gratitude. Again, reiterating really some of the things that we've said already.

Grateful as we consider the status we enjoy as sons. Grateful for the love with which we are loved, and grateful for the purposes that God has for us to run the race that He has marked out for each of us.

We are to be grateful, but we also are to submit. We are to submit to the Father's discipline. And this submission, I think, is two related aspects. We are to be subject to the Father's will, but also we are to do our Father's will. It's not simply a passive submission. And while God knows best, and so we passively accept our lot, but also to actively do the Father's will as that is made clear to us. This is part of our submission to the Father's word of encouragement, the Father's discipline upon us.

[30 : 39] And of course, part of our response also is that we are to be encouraged. Its purpose, this word, has its purpose to encourage us, will let us be encouraged. And then finally, when we do respond as we ought, what are the consequences? Well, we touched on some already in the matter of purpose, but let me point you to two consequences identified in the passage for you and for others. If we begin with a consequence for others when we submit as we ought to the Lord's discipline. And one consequence for others is healing. There's a... the final verse that we've read is, again, a verse that's somewhat difficult to have a clear view of what is meant by it. But notice what it says. Well, we'll read really from verse 12. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. In consequence of what I've said, in consequence of this encouragement that God brings to you, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet. That's addressed to

the believer who's listening and taking on board this word. But then it says, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

And there it would seem to be speaking about others. I think the meaning of this verse, though it can be understood in different ways, I think the meaning of this verse, certainly one possibility is that what we're being told is that as we respond as we ought, as we take encouragement, as we submit to God's discipline, as we run the race set for us, there is a sense in which we will serve as pacemakers or guides for others to follow, and as they do to experience healing and wholeness in their lives. There are good consequences, not just for ourselves, but for others in our submission, but also, of course, for ourselves. Let's notice in verse 9 a very powerful statement that is made here concerning the benefits, the consequences of submission to God's perfect will for us. In the second half of the verse, how much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live, and live? We find it difficult to combine these two words. Submission, we often think of as being that which kills life. How can we live life to the full when we're subject to another, when we're submitting to another? And yet, in God's plan, it's the reverse. It's in submission to Him that we know and experience life to the full life, eternal life of a character and richness that we will never know in the absence of God's loving hand of discipline upon us and guiding us ever onwards. So, as the writer rightly recognizes, that he realistically recognizes, as believers, we are prone to forget. You have forgotten that word of encouragement. We are prone to forget, but may God help us never to forget this word of encouragement addressed to us by our loving Heavenly Father. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you indeed for the great privilege that we can address you. Thank you.