WHEN LIFE IS HARD

Turning Your Trials to Gold

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Other Books by James MacDonald

*Downpour: He Will Come to Us like the Rain* curriculum (LifeWay Press, 2006)
*Downpour: He Will Come to Us like the Rain* (B&H Publishing Group, 2006)
*Ancient Wisdom* (B&H Publishing Group, 2006)
*Gripped by the Greatness of God* curriculum (LifeWay Press, 2005)
*Gripped by the Greatness of God* (Moody Publishers, 2005)
*God Wrote a Book* (Crossway Books, 2002)
*Lord, Change My Attitude* curriculum (LifeWay Press, 2008)
*Lord, Change My Attitude . . . Before It’s Too Late* (Moody Publishers, 2001)
*Seven Words to Change Your Family* (Moody Publishers, 2001)

Visit www.lifeway.com/jamesmacdonald for information about James MacDonald resources published by LifeWay.
Maybe you noticed that I titled this study *When Life Is Hard*, not *If Life Is Hard*. I have found that real living isn’t an easy existence occasionally ruffled by difficulty. Authentic, on-the-edge-of-your-seat living is made up of trials and hardship, occasionally interrupted by amazing relief. Most believers realize it’s always possible to find others who are having harder times, but I haven’t met any committed Christians who are having easy lives. Life is a challenge. Yet the Christian life is a purposeful challenge.

If you picked up this workbook with the mistaken expectation that it would help you discover a way to make life easy, you will be greatly disappointed. Here’s the truth: nothing in this study is going to make life easier. People may face varying degrees of hardship; but let me warn you that the vibrant, in-touch life God has for us as Christians was never designed to be easy.

In the winter of 2008–9 I traveled to California for cancer treatments. A lot happened before that trip, during that trip, and after that trip to teach me what Christians face when they suffer. This study is not really my story, but I will use parts of my story to illustrate just how hard hard times can be. My difficulties and challenges are not the worst I’ve ever heard about by a long shot, but through these trials God taught me how to understand, cope with, and benefit from hard times.

As we begin this study, I don’t know exactly what trials you are going through; but your Heavenly Father does! In the weeks to come, you will have many opportunities to learn what the Bible says about trials, why God allows them, and what He wants to teach you through them. Make sure you listen attentively to what He has to say to you. Let’s dive together into our study of *When Life Is Hard*.

**How to Get the Most from This Study**

1. **Attend each group experience.**
   - Watch the DVD teaching.
   - Participate in the group discussion.
2. **Complete the daily assignments in this workbook.**
   - Read the material.
   - Complete the learning activities.
   - Watch for God to change your conduct and your character as He works for your good through your trial.
Week 1

What Are Trials?

This Week’s Scripture Focus

“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.’

“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. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 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 12:5-11
**In Training for Life**

**Hard times, discipline, trials**—who does a study about these things? Well, we are about to do just that. The hard times that happen in life are usually not experiences we sign up for or look forward to, but they happen anyway. So we need to start figuring out why they happen, what good can come from them, and how to respond to them.

Think about the training experiences you have had throughout your life. Training is a form of trial. The purpose of training, however, is usually announced in advance. If you enlisted in the military, you knew there would be training. Basic training was part of the conversation when you signed your life away. But hearing about training is quite different from having a drill sergeant wake you up at four in the morning for some fun activities. Nevertheless, you expect training even if it turns out to be harder than you thought it would be.

If you’ve ever hired a personal trainer, you know the main thing you are paying for is their willingness to be obnoxious with you. Once you’ve committed to a certain routine, they are going to keep you at it even when and especially when you come up with a good excuse not to follow through on your commitment!

Personal training and military training, as difficult as they might be, can’t hold a candle to the relentlessness of God’s discipline. Maybe you didn’t expect this training when you became a believer. But the reality is if God is in your life, He is coming hard toward you with continuous, lifelong, loving discipline. So this week we will explore the nature of these trials that God wants to use in our lives.
Week 1

GROUP EXPERIENCE

As You Gather

1. If you are meeting as a group for the first time, take a moment for personal introductions.

2. Share an experience when you received training or when you trained someone else. What did you learn about training?

3. In what ways has training been particularly beneficial in your life?

Preparation and Review

1. What are examples of situations that could be called hard times in life?

2. When did a hard time you experienced in the past produce good results that you now recognize?

DVD Session 1 Viewer Guide

1. Trials are extremely ________________.

2. There are many ________________ of trials.

3. ________________ encounters trials.

   A trial is a ________________ circumstance allowed by God to change my ________________ and my ________________.

4. Everyone is going through a trial ________________ ________.

5. There are many terms for trials in the New Testament, including suffering, hardship, difficulty, chastening, and ____________________________.

1. What is the discipline of the Lord?

   Our acknowledging that we don’t have the ________________ needed to see us through the Lord’s discipline is exactly what God is going for.
2. Why does the Lord discipline His children?

The way out of a consequence is _______________________.

He disciplines us because He __________ us.

3. How should I respond to the Lord's discipline?

We must ______________, “You are right, God.”
We must ______________ to God.

4. What results from the Lord's discipline?

When God disciplines us, He has a good ______________ in mind.

God's purposes in our discipline are very ______________—not at all like Satan, who continuously condemns us with _________________.

______________ is the absence of everything that causes turmoil, pain, restlessness, and fear.

5. How do I make the most from the Lord's discipline?

The __________ is momentary.
The ______________ is immense.
The ______________ is conditional.

Responding to the DVD Teaching

1. How would you answer in your own words, What are trials?

2. What questions about trials do you hope will be answered in this study?

3. What is the difference between consequences of our actions and hard times that seem to come out of nowhere? Identify examples of both.

4. Describe one way you have submitted to training from the Lord.
   What happened after you responded that way?

Read week 1 and complete the activities before the next group experience.

If you missed this session, you can download the DVD teaching from www.lifeway.com/downloads.
Day 1

RECOGNIZING TRIALS

Today’s Scripture Focus

“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.’ ”

Hebrews 12:5

Jesus knew what it was like to be treated as a son under discipline. He knew what it was like to face a distasteful, difficult circumstance with no immediate way out. There was only one way through: by submitting to God’s will. That’s why, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus could pray about the cup passing from Him yet later accept that the suffering before Him was the very cup His Father had prepared for Him. Knowing that this was the Father’s will wouldn’t make the trial easier, but Jesus knew He could trust His Father.

In the same way, our knowing what trials are won’t transform something hard into something easy. By the time we have gone through these six weeks of study, I can guarantee you will still have questions, and you will still struggle when you encounter hard times in the future. But beyond all of the questions and answers, I pray that you will emerge from this study with a deepened and settled trust in God. Truly knowing God as He wants to be known is even better than having answers. And trusting Him makes the answers we have go a lot further!

Defining a Trial

Throughout this study we will use this definition of trial: a trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to change our conduct and our character.

That definition includes four components that allow us to regard any circumstance in our lives as a potential trial. What are they?

1.
2.
3.
4.
Based on your personal experience and observations and keeping in mind the characteristics of a trial, add at least one more example of each type of trial below.

**Small trial:** flat tire;  
**Large trial:** broken leg;  
**Short trial:** flight delay;  
**Long trial:** canceled flight;  
**Irritating trial:** headache;  
**Devastating trial:** cancer diagnosis;  
**Stretching trial:** child leaving home;  
**Devastating trial:** losing a child;  

All of us in God’s family are experiencing one or more trials now. Identify current circumstances in your life that seem to fit the description of a trial.

Job is the biblical character most commonly associated with suffering. Over the course of a few days, Job endured more suffering than most people do in a lifetime, losing his children, his wealth, and his health. The striking thing about Job is the way he endured his trial. Have you ever heard of the patience of Job? He earned that reputation by maintaining his faith in God throughout his ordeal. Job summarized his position like this:

“He [God] knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.” *Job* 23:10

Job acknowledged that God allowed his trial; yet Job submitted to the process and expressed confidence that God would bring positive change from his suffering. Job’s words epitomize the hopeful view of trials we are going for in this study. Trials come to all of us; but if we respond with faith, God will bring us out of the experience as gold.

**The Lord’s Discipline**

The Bible frequently uses the word *discipline* for trial; for example, the word *discipline* is central to Hebrews 12:5, our focal Scripture today. What is “the discipline of the Lord”?

Job expressed confidence that God would bring positive change from his suffering.
Read the following passages and record the synonyms for discipline.

“I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:6

**Discipline is equated with** ___________ ___________.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” James 1:2-3

**Discipline means** ________________ and ________________.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” Titus 2:11-12

**Discipline means** _________________.

Hebrews 12:5 says not to be weary when we are reproved by God. *Reproof* is still another synonym for *trial*.

**Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17:**

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

**In what ways is the Bible our guidebook for discipline or reproof?**

Hebrews 12:5 teaches that discipline is “of the Lord,” and our definition of *trial* states that a trial is allowed by God. It’s important for Christians to remember that God allows challenging circumstances in our lives for a reason. Our job is to trust Him and learn what He wants to do in and through us.

Hebrews 12:5 reminds us to avoid two negative responses to the Lord’s work of discipline in our lives: regarding it lightly and becoming weary.
What do you think it means to regard lightly the discipline of the Lord?

What do you think it means to become weary under God’s disciplining hand?

When you consider the Lord’s disciplining work in your life, are you more likely to regard it lightly or become weary with God’s methods?

Poor in Spirit

So the writer of Hebrews is telling us that if you’re a follower of Christ, discipline is coming. Testing is coming. Reproof is coming. It’s one of the more sobering aspects of the Christian life that’s likely to leave you feeling vulnerable.

Have you ever bounced a check? If so, you were either caught by surprise and shocked to discover you didn’t have as much in your account as you thought, or you were ashamed because you had assumed you could cover the check before it cleared the bank. To make matters worse, you were assessed a monetary penalty for your indiscretion. The feeling of indebtedness or temporary bankruptcy isn’t pleasant. The fact that your check was denied is a harsh slap of reality.

The same thing can occur in other areas of life. How often do you balance your ethical accounts? How much do you have in your goodwill-toward-others account? What was the last withdrawal you made from your spiritual-gifts fund? There’s nothing like the demands of God’s discipline to show us how little we have in our accounts.

One purpose of discipline is that God wants us to be aware of our utter dependence on Him. This is true from the beginning to the end of our experience with God in this life. In the Beatitudes Jesus described the basic building blocks
of a relationship with God. His first instruction was “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). “Poor in spirit” means spiritually bankrupt—nothing to bring to the table, no resources to cash in. We come to God empty-handed. And from that point on, anything we have is what our Heavenly Father has given to us. As uncomfortable as helplessness may be, it’s what God is going for when He disciplines us. It’s not that He enjoys our being helpless; rather, He knows unless we realize our helplessness, we won’t rely on Him or experience all He has for us and all He can accomplish through us. You see, God really knows what He’s doing!

Think about a trial you are going through. Check the statement that best expresses the way you are responding.

- I am responding with scorn.
- I am responding with weariness.
- I am submitting to God and learning what He wants to teach me.
- Other:

No matter how you are responding to God’s discipline, write a prayer expressing your thoughts to God, admitting your helplessness, and describing the way you want to respond to His discipline in the future.

How do your past experiences show that God really knows what He’s doing when He disciplines you?


**Day 2**

**WHY DOES THE LORD DISCIPLINE HIS CHILDREN?**

**Today’s Scripture Focus**

“‘The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ 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 12:6-8*

Does God spank His children? Yes, He does! This fact is stated in Hebrews 12:6, part of today’s key passage, which quotes Proverbs 3:12. The phrase “chastises every son whom he receives” means our Heavenly Father doles out loving punishment to His children when that is necessary. One way He does this is by letting the consequences of sin take their course in our lives. This concept flies directly in the face of the modern, watered-down image of God as a kindly soul who wouldn’t hurt a fly. I sometimes wonder how often God has to discipline people who angrily inform Him that if He dares punish them for the deliberate disobedience they are about commit, well, they won’t like Him anymore.

Threatening God with unbelief or a cold shoulder is about as effective as the tactic we used with our parents when we threatened to hold our breath until we got our way. I don’t know about your dad, but mine saw tricks like that coming a mile away, and he didn’t hesitate to chastise me when I needed it. And even when his punishment caused discomfort, I knew his love for me as my father ultimately motivated this discipline.

**Proof of Love**

So why does the Lord discipline you?

_How does today’s focal Scripture answer that question?_
Hebrews 12:6 says, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves.” Well, there you go. God disciplines you because He loves you. Far from folding His arms, God rolls up His sleeves to get ready to do something good in your life. Far from abandoning you when you go through difficult trials, God moves toward you. Isn’t that good news? In fact, trials are proofs of love.

Never forget this: if God allows your life to become hard, His motivation is always love. He loves you. His eyes are on you. His attention is directed toward you. All of His thoughts are about you. The goal of all your pain is your restoration to a deeper sense of His love. But keep in mind that this is biblical love—a love that is willing to take you through a valley to get you to a hilltop. No pseudosolutions or quick fixes with God. He is going for change in you at the deepest and most lasting level.

Think about your trial. What feelings are you experiencing in dealing with it?

- ☐ Fear
- ☐ Abandonment
- ☐ Loneliness
- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Hopelessness
- ☐ Hopefulness
- ☐ Comfort

- ☐ Other:

What evidence of God’s love have you seen in your situation?

Mark Twain’s book *Tom Sawyer* reflects a profound understanding of the connection between love and discipline. Twain was a keen observer of human nature. The scene in which Aunt Polly is making life hard for Tom Sawyer while Huck Finn laughs from his hiding place is a classic portrayal of human reactions. We tend to smile when others are being disciplined, especially if we are just as guilty of wrongdoing. We’re just happy we didn’t get caught. But later Huck Finn weeps when he realizes no one in his life cares enough about him to guide, discipline, and even punish him. He realizes firsthand that pain can be a reminder that someone really loves us.

Identify a past experience when you know God’s discipline and training showed His love for you.
I once heard a child-development expert say on television, “No good could ever come from causing a child pain.” I couldn’t disagree more! The statement is nonsense. It automatically places the following things in the bad category: birth, shots, dentists, spankings, and any parental response (such as saying no) that causes a child to cry.

In a typical loving parent-child relationship, how would you categorize the following? Use D for discipline, P for punishment for wrongdoing, and U for undetermined.

___ Encouraging you to walk when you still wanted to crawl even though you would sometimes fall

___ Giving you a regular chore like loading the dishwasher

___ Spanking you for lying

___ Insisting that you put borrowed tools back in place though it was inconvenient

___ Holding you to a promise you made

___ Making you pay for a window you broke

___ Withholding driving privileges from you even though you were going to pay the fine for your speeding ticket

___ Taking you to the dentist even though you were afraid of drills

What are some good things that have come from painful experiences in your life?

Scriptures like Romans 8:32 point to Jesus’ painful death on the cross as the source of good things for believers:

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

List some of the good things in your life that resulted from the cross of Christ.
Consequence or Trial?
Take a close look at your situation, because the way forward is different if your hardship is a consequence of sin rather than a trial. A consequence is the direct result of sin you have committed. The way out of a consequence is repentance. If you did something wrong, you need to make it right with God through repentance and with the people your sin injured through restitution. A trial is a completely different scenario. You didn’t bring a trial into your life. Remember, a trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to transform your conduct and your character. God Himself allowed that into your life.

If you are going through a trial, is it a consequence of sin or God’s discipline?

What clues helped you distinguish between the two?

The way out of a consequence is repentance. If your hardship is the result of wrongdoing on your part, take a moment to repent and confess it to God. Ask for His forgiveness and for His help in overcoming the consequences of your actions. Is there anyone to whom you need to apologize and make restitution? If so, plan to do this.

Are You Being Disciplined?
One of today’s verses says, “God is treating you as sons” (v. 7). So if you’re reading this verse and thinking, All this talk about trials is interesting; but everything’s rocking in my house, and it’s been like that for a long time. No real problems of any kind. I’m in great health, and everything’s great with my family. I hate to tell you, but that’s not good news for you. All of God’s kids are receiving discipline. If you have no trials in your life at all, you need to go back and ask yourself whether you are part of God’s family through faith in Christ. The possibility that you are not in the family may shock you, but you can repent and allow God to make you His child.

How do you know you are in God’s family?
Now read these verses:

“To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12

“God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” 1 John 5:11-12

Does your answer to the previous question match God’s criteria in these verses?

John 1:12 says the only people who have the authority to be God’s children are those who have received Jesus. I hope you’ve made that life-changing decision.

Hebrews 12:8 explains, “If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate.” If you’re not getting the discipline “in which all have participated,” you need to take a closer look at your heart and your hope.

Maybe you’re thinking, As much as I appreciate this proof of sonship, sometimes I wish I didn’t have this stuff going on in my life. Yes, I understand. Honestly, at times things seemed easier before we came to Christ. In a sense they were.

But in another sense they were not. You were so clueless then. You didn’t get the whole picture. You had no idea where you were going. You didn’t know the big answers for anything or what God is all about. There’s no question that the sons of this world have it easier for about the next 10 minutes! But then, if they don’t come to faith in Christ, it really goes downhill after that. What a sad and tragic end awaits those who reject Christ—God’s only provision for their salvation. What a glorious thing to be called a son or a daughter of the living God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Part of being in the family means God is now working on you. One reason we have difficulty accepting His work in our lives is that our view of Him is so limited. God is much greater than we give Him credit for. He really knows what He’s doing, so we can trust Him when hardship comes our way. When you’re in the mist of trials, you can rejoice to know that God loves you and that He will work in your circumstances according to His larger purposes for your life. He is molding you into what He wants you to be for eternity. So determine now to get the full benefit from your trials. Life is short, and eternity is very, very long.
Explain in your own words how God’s discipline proves His love for His children.

What clues do you have, if any, about what God may be doing through a current trial you are experiencing?

If you have doubts that you are part of God’s family, talk to God about this. Seek the guidance of your pastor or another mature believer.

If you know you are God’s child, commit your trial to your Father and ask Him to show you His love through this time of discipline and to help you learn what He intends for you.
Day 3

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Today's Scripture Focus

“Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?”

Hebrews 12:9

Each of us is living history. The fact that you can read these words means that you have gone through a process of education. Can you remember learning to read? Do you recall the halting efforts to sound out words and the wonder of realizing that the sounds of the letters worked together to form words, sentences, and meaning? All of that took time; someone didn’t let you give up.

You also had to learn to walk. At first you fell down a lot. You may still have the scars to prove it! You may not remember the sense of freedom you had the first time you walked across the room into the arms of a waiting parent, but it must have kept you going. Others offered encouragement. You went from a tumbling toddler to a confident walker. Later, you learned to walk and chew gum at the same time!

These steps of development prepared us for the next lessons in life. That’s why the writer of Hebrews could say, “We have had earthly fathers” and expect to make a point. He was appealing to his readers’ living history. Today’s verse says your earthly father disciplined you, and you respected him for it. When it comes to discipline, we can get clues from our past experiences, good or bad.

Think for a moment about your father, teachers, and other influential persons who reared you. Identify three of them and describe their positive contributions to your life.

____________________ taught me by ...

As a result, I ...

When it comes to discipline, we can get clues from our past experiences.
taught me by ...

As a result, I ...

__________ taught me by ...

As a result, I ...

In what ways have you respected or acknowledged those “fathers” recently? How could you express your gratitude for the benefits they gave you?

Fathers of Faith
This week’s Scripture focus, Hebrews 12:5-11, has an important history and context for a discussion of godly influences. Do you remember the subject of the preceding chapter of Hebrews? Turn to Hebrews 11 and look at the paragraph headings in your Bible. Run your finger down the page and observe the names that pop out at you—Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and so on. They were all included in the chapter for one reason.

If Hebrews 12:5-11 is all about discipline, Hebrews 11 is all about _________.

When people look back on your life, will they mention faith and discipline in describing your time on earth? Why?

One of my prayers for this study is that you will have a much clearer perspective on the way hard times in your life can be teachable moments that God uses to grow your faith.

Hebrews 11 has long been recognized as the hall of biblical heroes, our ancient fathers of faith. They are what Hebrews 12:1 calls a “cloud of witnesses” because their lives offer us countless examples of faith and life lessons in what it means to walk with God. So when the writer says, “We have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them” (Heb. 12:9), he has our immediate biological dads in mind; but the context reminds us that we’ve got a huge crowd of examples we can’t ignore, sort of looking down on us from history.
But don’t miss the passage that comes immediately before Hebrews 12:5-11. Verses 2-4 focus on the role Jesus plays as the “founder and perfecter of our faith” (v. 2). He is the source and object of our faith because He “endured the cross, despising the shame” (v. 2).

**Read Hebrews 12:2:**

“… looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

In the sense that we have been using the term discipline in this study, how would you describe the cross of Jesus as discipline in His life?

According to Hebrews 12:3, as we struggle in our lives, we always ought to “consider him who endured.” Jesus is our number one reason not to “grow weary or fainthearted” along the way, because we have His example and because we have His empowering presence in our lives.

Yet even with the array of biblical examples and Jesus’ ultimate example to draw on, the writer still tells us to remember our imperfect human fathers and appreciate their flawed efforts to discipline us. In one way or another, they turned us around. Their training got our attention. And we respected them for it. We can bring that perspective to the hard experiences God allows in our lives.

**How Should I Respond to God’s Discipline?**

The examples in our lives—our earthly fathers and spiritual fathers—require two responses from us that we can find in Hebrews 12:9.

1. We have to admit we have a problem or an area in our lives that requires discipline and training.

2. We have to submit to the discipline God provides.

One reason we don’t like hard times is that they expose problems, weaknesses, and blindness. Not only do we dislike the experiences themselves, but we also
resist what they point out in us. That’s why we instinctively use three levels of
defense against admitting that God has put His finger of discipline on a place
in us that needs it:

1. Denial

2. Deflection

3. Excuse or explanation

Read the following expressions that illustrate these defensive responses
toward God during hard times. Beside each statement write the number
from the previous list that corresponds to the response that is expressed.

___ This may be a hard time, but it has nothing to teach me.
___ I can see that these difficulties are revealing weaknesses in me,
   but they are not my fault! Someone else is responsible.
___ Problems? What problems? I don’t need these trials!
___ Look, there may a problem here, but it belongs to someone else. I’m
   just caught up in the backwash from my wife’s/kid’s/friend’s problems.
   Things will be better when they get straightened out!
___ I realize I’ve got this problem, but I inherited it. Look at my dad;
   he’s the same way. I can’t help it.
___ I don’t understand why God is letting me go through this trial. Several
   people in my small group could really learn from hard times like these!

Until we get beyond these defenses against the discipline of the Lord, the good
results that can come from our difficult experience won’t arrive. We have to admit
we have a problem that requires discipline.

So how do we put these defenses in our rearview mirror? Notice the last phrase
in Hebrews 12:9: “Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits
and live?” “Be subject” means submit—our second response to God’s discipline.
Admittedly, submission is not a hot-button idea in society today. The world’s
mind-set is contrasubmission. But the verse says to submit (“be subject”) to the
“Father of spirits,” to God Himself.

James 4:7 highlights an important reason we need to submit to God during a
trial: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from
you.” If you’re going through a hard time, the Devil is always standing by, ready
to point out that God doesn’t care and isn’t going to take care of you. Effective resistance to the Devil always begins with submission to God. We can’t resist in our own strength and expect the Devil to be impressed or motivated to flee. But aligning ourselves with God through submission allows us to rest in the truth that God’s ways are best, and the Devil has to come through God to get at us.

What difference do you think it would make if you always responded to Satan’s attacks by immediately declaring your submission to God?

If you are experiencing a trial, can you honestly say you have submitted it to God?

If not, why?

☐ Lack of trust
☐ Didn’t see it as God’s discipline
☐ Blamed God
☐ Didn’t admit the problem
☐ Other:

Before we can begin to see the good results that God intends to develop through discipline, we have to engage those areas of discipline as fully as we can. It’s not easy to pray, “Do it now, Lord. Cut deep. Get it all. I’m leaning into what You have placed before me. Accomplish all that You intend in me through this trial.” But that prayer can be an effective expression of submission that will free you to learn from the trial your Heavenly Father has allowed in your life.

Pray about the issue of submitting your trial to God. You may need to repent of wrong ideas, anger, or blame. Try to submit to His will in this circumstance.
Day 4

THE BIG TAKEAWAY

Today’s Scripture Focus

“They disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”

Hebrews 12:10

Every year thousands of people wonder what it would be like to stand at the top of the world, the peak of Mount Everest. Hundreds of people make the trek to at least look at the mountain. Each climbing season dozens of adventurers manage to arrive at one of the base camps around the grandest of all mountains. But the schizophrenic weather, the difficult climbing, and the extreme heights winnow climbers on the mountain to a hardy handful. Few make it to the top. Some even die trying.

Meanwhile, millions of others don’t get it. They shake their heads, perplexed. Why on earth would anyone in their right mind go to such extremes and have nothing to show for it afterward? Why risk so much for such a small reward? We want our successes to come with tangible results. There’s not a trophy waiting at the summit of the mountain, so why even climb in the first place? When asked that question, English mountaineer George Leigh Mallory is credited with the famous statement “Because it’s there.”1 Is that it? Climbers are driven to climb whatever is in front of them?

Or is the result something more subtle? Is the takeaway something unseen but precious? Climbers may come back from the summit empty-handed, but that doesn’t mean they descend with nothing. The test of the climb and the effort to reach the top have brought out something in them and taught them about themselves. The trial has changed them. The climb has disciplined them. Those who never climb have a hard time imagining the value of results like these.

Which of the following activities offer you a challenge that is itself the reward?

☐ Running

☐ Practicing an interpersonal skill like listening

☐ Participating in a group Bible study

☐ Following through on a task
Why are these activities so rewarding for you?

Sharing His Holiness

Today’s Scripture focus reminds us that God’s discipline comes with a reward. Through our trial our Heavenly Father is disciplining us for our good—to make us holy. When people read this truth, they often admit they were expecting more from God as a result of the hard times in life. They say, “Holiness? For my good? That’s really it? The takeaway is something I become, not something I get?” And the only appropriate answer is a resounding yes!

Why the letdown? Because our expectations tend to be almost the exact opposite of God’s intentions. First, we don’t readily connect hardness and goodness. We hesitate to believe something difficult can be good for us. We have mixed feelings when we memorize verses like Romans 8:28: “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” “All things” must necessarily include hard things. But we have a difficult time getting our minds around the idea that when God is at work, even hard things can bring good into our lives.

Second, we tend to be clueless about holiness. A. W. Tozer wrote, “Neither the writer nor the reader of these words is qualified to appreciate the holiness of God. Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds to allow the sweet waters that will heal our great sickness to flow in.” What exactly does it mean to be holy, anyway?

What is your personal definition of holiness? If we agree that God is holy, in what sense can we be holy?
What do the following verses tell you about holiness? Write what each verse says about holiness or sanctification (the process of becoming holy).

Exodus 3:4-5:

Exodus 20:8-11:

Ephesians 1:3-4:

Ephesians 2:19-22:

Ephesians 4:22-24:

Colossians 1:21-23:

1 Thessalonians 4:7:

1 Peter 1:13-16:

Now write a new definition of holiness, based on these passages.

Hebrews 12:10 makes it clear that our holiness is God’s ultimate objective for each of us, and discipline is His method. Our parents give us their best shot in a limited way for a short time, but God is in it for the long haul. The longing for something deep and meaningful that saturates our every pursuit reveals that God hardwired us to desire holiness—authentic connection with Him. The phrase “that we may share his holiness” describes the source of holiness—God Himself. So if you are a child of God through faith in Christ, your Father will use His loving discipline to make you holy.
For Our Good

Consider this: the people around you are in one way or another pursuing holiness. If they aren’t following God, they pursue an infinite number of substitutes for what we were designed to desire. They may risk everything for wealth, pleasure, or power, believing that achieving any of these things will result in the wholeness they long for. But they are deceived. They arrive at destinations that were advertised to give them fulfillment only to discover emptiness. Instead of wholeness, they find a vacuum in their lives that still hasn’t been filled because it can be received only through a relationship with God.

Identify something you once pursued that didn’t satisfy.

Why is the pursuit of holiness the only thing that can satisfy our most basic longings?

What a tragedy it is when we who claim to be children of God fail to admit we desperately need to grow in holiness or to submit to God’s Fatherly discipline. How could His training fail to result in good for us when it flows from His love for us? And what could be better than to discover over a lifetime that He has disciplined us into holiness by sharing His character with us?

My experience has been that God moves toward us in hard times. Difficulties should make us think, God is close! When we spend time with Him in the crucible of discipline, He accomplishes His plans for us.

How has God trained you in holiness through past hardship?

What is He teaching you about holiness through your present trial?

Pray, asking God to make you holy through this experience.
Day 5
TAKING STOCK, TAKING ACTION

Today’s Scripture Focus
“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 writer of Hebrews knew Jesus was the best example of everything for us. When it comes to living as a child of God, Jesus demonstrated over and over that we can’t go wrong if we follow and imitate Him. The problem is that trials often give me a case of nearsightedness. I can see only what is right in front of me, and then I miss what is coming later. But verse 2 admonishes us always to follow Jesus’ example: “… looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Amazingly, Jesus could see beyond the cross. He endured the immediate, undeserved hardship and suffering because He knew the ultimate objective. Nevertheless, He still had to go through the cross, the trial God placed before Him. That’s how Jesus learned obedience: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8). Jesus was always an obedient Son, and living here on earth gave Him abundant opportunities to demonstrate His obedience. By looking to Jesus, we can also become obedient sons and daughters as we experience hardship.

In what ways can a person practice “looking to Jesus” in life’s trials?

How will Jesus’ example affect the way you approach your hard situation?
Painful Discipline

Today’s Scripture focus reminds us that “all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant” (Heb. 12:11). The trial you face may have made you all too aware of the pain of God’s discipline. Haven’t you found that it’s easier to say to God, “Lord, I trust You, and I will obey You” when you are in calm waters? When everything seems to be going our way, it’s easy to claim faith. But trusting God or obeying Him takes on a different flavor in the raging furnace of hardship or doubt. Think of Daniel’s three friends. Daniel describes the good life for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as overseers for the king. They had it made! Then the king got the idea to create a huge image of himself and demand that everyone bow before it or face the painful consequence of a fiery furnace. The three friends chose not to bow and were ushered toward the flames. Although they had done nothing wrong, it looked as if they would be toast if they didn’t compromise and worship the statue.

The three young men made several points in what everybody thought would be their final words. They answered the king respectfully, consistent with their commitment to serve him. They simply couldn’t worship him or his statue. They declared their trust was in God, who could save them from the furnace. They graciously informed the king their ultimate allegiance was to Someone greater than he, which didn’t please the king at all. And they added this crucial footnote in the event God did not choose to save them: “If not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:18). He might be the king, but the three men in front of him were determined to worship the one true God.

So what happened after their bold testimony and courage? God let the king throw them into the furnace! The guys who tossed them into the oven were killed by the heat. Yet the three friends stayed cool in the flames. Hearing the crackling flames and watching their executioners die probably “seemed painful rather than pleasant” (Heb. 12:11), but they understood that God’s purposes were much higher than providing them with an easy, safe life.

Identify a painful trial that has required you to learn obedience to God.
How was your relationship with God affected during and as a result of that trial? Were you able to look to Jesus? Did you learn obedience?

The Peaceful Fruit of Righteousness
Hebrews 12:11 gives us a helpful way of thinking about the specific results of God’s work in and around us to train us in holiness. Although the discipline seems painful, its seed “yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness [another way to describe holiness] to those who have been trained by it” (v. 11). Here are three crucial factors to keep in mind.

1. The pain of trials is momentary (“for the moment”).

What have been some momentary trials in your life that could serve as reminders that trials have ending points?

2. The profit from trials is immense (“the peaceful fruit of righteousness”).

What are some benefits that have come into your life as a result of past trials?

3. The promise regarding trials is conditional (“to those who have been trained by it”). Our responses to trials have a lot to do with the benefit we receive from them.
Think about a trial in your life right now that you hope to be trained by. You may not yet know the timetable or how the profits will manifest themselves, but take a moment to tell God you are ready to be trained by this seed of difficulty in your life.

As you end this first week of assignments, let me assure you that God knows what you are going through. He knows you intimately, and He knows in exact detail what’s going on. He grasps even the parts of your difficulties that are eluding you, and He knows the result He desires for you. As you walk through this difficult experience, you can learn from the inside out to say with Job:

“He knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.” Job 23:10

What is happening in your life right now is not the result of God’s inattentiveness or lack of concern for you. For this moment focus on that thought: God knows the way your life is going. And no matter how dark and overwhelming the pathway may seem now, He has good things ahead. He is gradually bringing you to a place of holiness, and that’s more valuable than gold.