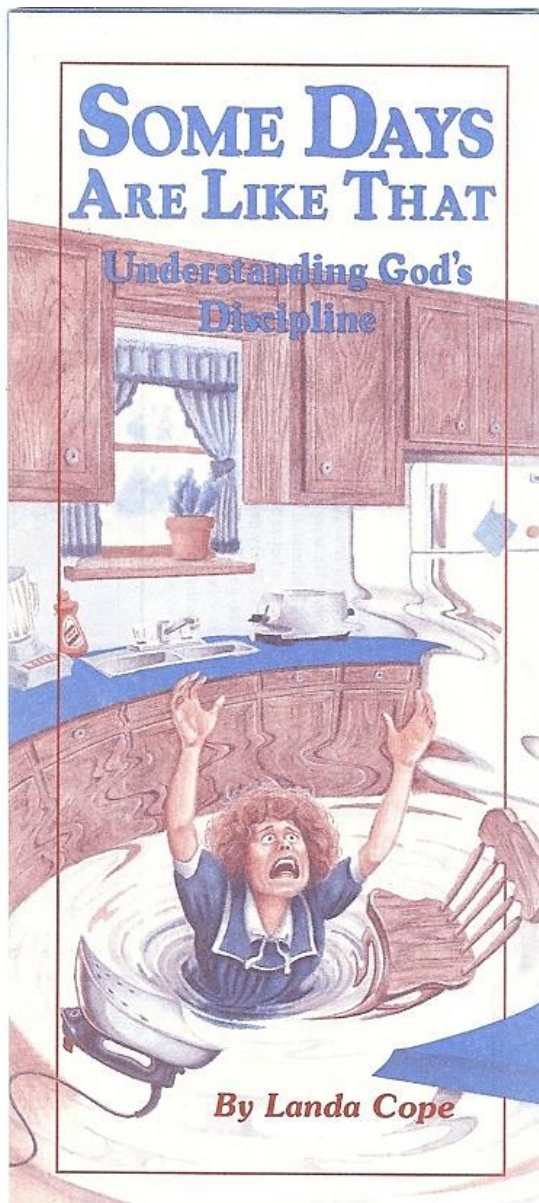




Some Days Are Like That

Understanding God's Discipline

by
Linda Cope

The series of events just kept piling up. While staying at a friend's house, I laid my best suit on the ironing board, not realizing the iron was on. Hours later a small scorch announced the deed. "A little scrape with a razor will take that right off," I thought - and it did. It also put a hole in the sleeve of my most expensive garment.

Meanwhile, almost my entire wardrobe for this three-week trip was in the washer... along with a forgotten maroon sock. Yes, it's true. Everything came out with a distinct pink tone.

Not wanting to let these events get me down, I returned to work on this article. After midnight I said goodnight to the computer and went to bed. I'd polish the article on the airplane in the morning and phone in the final corrections. As I was riding to the airport, I flipped through the pages of the printout. It looked funny. The corrections I had done the night before weren't there. Six hours of work... lost in the computer.

I called from the airport to report the bad news, jotted down a few notes, and ran for my flight - leaving my favorite 13-year-old ball-point pen laying by the pay phone.

Some days are like that.

Mental Movies

Most of us have a mental movie version of the Christian life and how it's supposed to be. You become a Christian and get really involved. You want more than Just Sunday morning services. You want commitment - 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You dedicate your whole life and God pours power on you from heaven. Everything falls together in your life

and your ministry... and all live happily ever after. Music fades. Fade to black. CUT!

Great movie! Right? Just like your life? Wrong! Somehow things don't seem to go quite like that. The real-life movie can look more like this: No music. No lights. No camera. ACTION!

SCENE 1: You plan a youth retreat at a mountain resort. You've prayed and committed yourself to see these young people come to a new level in God. You're excited with what God is going to do... through you. You wake up violently ill and must be taken to the doctor. You miss the retreat!

"Why did this happen, Lord? Wasn't I trying to do Your work? Didn't I pray beforehand? Why am I sick? It isn't supposed to be this way!"

SCENE 2: You've devised the world's greatest moneymaking scheme for missions. It can't lose. It will probably finance the last great wave of Christian service before the Lord's return. God will love it. It can't miss.

But it does miss... big! Not only are you going to lose but so is everybody around you. You sit long weekends listening to the phone not ring, asking yourself: "Why is this happening, God? Don't you love me? Don't you want all those missionaries supported? Didn't I pray? It isn't supposed to happen this way!"

SCENE 3: You take on a heavily loaded work schedule. You've prayed about it and you trust God for the strength and endurance to do the impossible. "Where He guides, He provides." Six months later you're a walking zombie in absolute exhaustion. "I must have missed it. Surely God did not intend this. Why didn't I hear you better, Lord? Why is this happening to me?"

God's Discipline

Is there any purpose or logic to the difficult circumstances of our lives? As Christians shouldn't we be able to avoid all these problems?

Our confusion arises from a lack of understanding about the way God deals with His children. One of the keys to a successful Christian life is learning how to receive God's loving discipline. God allows us to walk through difficult things in order to train us, strengthen us, and make us more like Himself.

I can still remember the day the Lord whispered the truth about His discipline into my heart. Some complicated and continuing problems were about to do me in. I prayed, "Lord, I feel like a kid who has just been sent to my room for being out of line. And You know what, God... I deserve it!"

Suddenly a light went on! God was disciplining me! My Heavenly Father was treating me like His child. Something broke in my spirit and I realized for the first time that this was love in action. This was what I had prayed for.

Lord, Make Me Your Child

It never occurred to me what I was asking when I prayed, "Lord, make me your child." In Hebrews, Paul gives us a vital key to our growth in Christ, and it includes our Heavenly Father loving us through correction.

The letter to the Hebrews is a passionate plea for the Jewish Christians to keep their wholehearted commitment to Christ regardless of the tribulations they are facing. Paul reminds them in chapter 11 of all the things the faithful have received and suffered in the name of Christ. Then he goes on to explain, in chapter 12, how God is "perfecting their faith." He begins with a word of encouragement: *"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."* (Heb. 12:5-6)

That's *encouragement*? Our usual concept of encouragement is a pat on the back along with a few comforting words like, "You're doing fine, buddy," or "Keep it up, honey." But discipline? Punishment? Most of us grew up disliking those words. Remember the child sitting in the corner who softly chanted, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!" Most of us didn't readily accept our correction either, let alone love it. But God wants us to *love* His correction.

Paul reminds these early Christians that their earthly fathers brought correction into their lives for their earthly good, but God was working for their *eternal* good. Their dads were models that would help them understand God's ways.

Did your father discipline you? If he did, was it for your own good because he loved you? Many of us would probably say "no." If that's true in your life, God wants to give you a revelation of His *loving* discipline. Without that revelation you will constantly misunderstand what God is doing for you. Hardships and difficulties will bring confusion and discouragement rather than being a source of greater strength in God.

All His Children

Paul says God disciplines every one of His children. He could have said "some" or "most" or "those who need it," but he said every one! So be encouraged when God disciplines you. It's a sign that you belong to Him. Do you ever feel like you're not really God's daughter or son? When we don't allow or understand our Father's correction, we feel uncared for, unloved, and insecure.

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful." (Heb. 12:11) Think about it. That means God is going to cause you and me some discomfort. How does that fit into your concept of Christian discipleship? Did you realize that was part of following Jesus? God hasn't changed since Paul wrote his letter to the Hebrews, so we're the ones who will have to adjust.

Four Types Of Discipline

The word of God uses four words for God's discipline: training, correction, punishment, and judgment. Each is an effort on God's part to win our cooperation on some critical issue in our life. We want to work with Him, not as stubborn slaves, but as willing heirs of His Glory.

TRAINING:

For Strength and Skill

Athletes, dancers, and soldiers all need training. Training requires a "trainer" with the goal of developing the strength and skill of the "trainee" to his highest potential. The trainer pushes the lazy, slows down the overconfident. He doesn't want them to miss the mark or destroy themselves with foolishness. He wants them to succeed. The best competitors are a combination of raw potential molded by excellent training.

In the Kingdom, God is our Trainer. He is developing a personalized fitness program to bring us to our best - spiritually, emotionally, and in our character. The exercises can be painful. If they don't stretch us, there's no increased strength. But don't worry! Our Trainer knows our limits. He'll never let us go beyond them... even though it might feel like it sometimes.

“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.” (Heb. 12:11)

CORRECTION:

Removing Error and Straightening

Teachers correct tests, doctors - eyes, dentists crooked teeth. Things that are inaccurate, bent, or misformed need to be corrected. Students don't usually get test questions wrong intentionally. They don't know the right answer because they didn't understand the material, didn't study enough, or couldn't remember.

Who knows everything? God alone! That means the rest of us will always have things to learn. When our Teacher corrects us we shouldn't argue. We have blind spots. If we knew where they were, we would try to fix them. We only know they are there somewhere and that they need correcting. The Great Physician must straighten us out - our job is to let Him.

“He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds CORRECTION gains understanding.” (Proverbs 15:32)

PUNISHMENT:

Consequences of Willful Disobedience

If training deals with weakness, and correction with error, then punishment deals with willful disobedience. Criminals are punished for breaking the law. Children are punished when they refuse to heed correction. When citizens and children will not respond any other way, courts and parents resort to punishment.

Why punishment? Training and correction didn't work, and our loving Father is determined. The child who is never disciplined knows no boundaries, hurts others, and becomes very insecure. There is no deterrent to his disobedience, and he grows up into a rebellious and insecure adult as well. God cares deeply how His kids turn out and will punish us for our own good if need be.

“The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He PUNISHES everyone He accepts as a son.” (Heb. 12:6)

JUDGMENT:

A Last Resort

God judged the church in Corinth because they didn't respond to what they already knew. He found them guilty of not loving each other. God is loving and He is just. He loves us with great tenderness, but we should not forget that He means what He says. *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31)* When God finds us guilty, we are guilty and we need to accept His loving hand of discipline.

“For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be JUDGED. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.” (I Cor. 11:30-32)

Why Does God Discipline Us?

What is the purpose of God's discipline? God doesn't waste time or energy. He's not cruel or heartless. He loves us. Hebrews 12:12-13 tells us to strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble to make sure our lame limbs are healed - not put out of joint.

I had a knee injury several years ago. It was just awful. It would slide out at the drop of a hat and the pain was unbelievable. I was very grateful to the doctors who fixed it by removing the torn cartilage that was causing the pain. I was even more grateful when “disciplined” exercise enabled me to play tennis and take on challenges again with that knee. It was healed.

God's purpose for discipline is healing. We have damaged and underdeveloped characters, personalities, emotions, and minds. Because God loves us, He is determined to see us restored and strengthened. Our Heavenly Father is not satisfied to just see us born. He wants to see us mature and grow into our full potential as His heirs. Our inheritance is not only the longevity of “eternal life”... but even more importantly, it is the quality of Christlikeness. Every day of our lives God is working for our good towards the goal of perfecting the faith that He has authored.

Paul tells us in Hebrews 12:7 that we are to “endure hardship” as discipline. Surely he was thinking of some of the difficulties he lists in chapter 11, as well as his own shipwrecks, hunger, tired nights, beatings, and physical complications.

Our difficulties are not purposed to destroy us. They are allowed in order to make us great, teaching us to respond in love and revealing areas that need more work. Failure can be one of our greatest teachers.

But why all the struggle? Can't God just zap us at the altar with "supernatural Christlikeness" and be done with it? Some, under the influence of our "fast food" society, are waiting for that to happen. We want instant wholeness. But God will never treat us like objects. We aren't robots to be programmed at His "key punching." We are human beings created in His image. He works with us to make the changes. We are to be actively involved, choosing to cooperate. He only encourages, never forces. Imagine if my knee surgeon had done all my exercises for me. His knee would be in great shape, mine would still be like wet spaghetti.

Is Every Difficulty From God?

Is every difficult situation from God? No! But you need to ask Him if He has a purpose in allowing it. God orders our steps. He *could* help us avoid those situations but He doesn't always. Why?

Wouldn't it be a shame to miss God's attempt to get our attention, and refuse Him the right to speak into our lives in some important area? When things are not going well we need to stop and ask what we can learn from the storm. "God, things are getting messy... are you trying to say something to me? Do you just want me to endure this, or are you trying to get my attention? I'm listening. Teach me, correct me, show me *anything* Lord."

God is more interested in getting through to you than you are in hearing. Don't worry. If you seek His thoughts, He will reveal them.

The lesson may be endurance, patience, or persistence in doing good. We may need to think ahead more often to avoid problems. There are times when God wants us to relax and just let things run their course. Other times He actually wants us to battle for a set outcome. Who can say all that God has to teach us about life?

Remember the three scenes I mentioned near the beginning of this article? I had the leading role in each of them. In Scene 1, the youth retreat I missed, the Lord revealed a root of manipulation in my life that had nothing to do with the retreat - but the situation was so painful I gave Him my attention long enough to finally hear. In Scene 2, my big moneymaking scheme for missions, God dealt with my unbelief and lack of trust in His ability to provide. And in Scene 3, my fully loaded work schedule, God asked me to pay a high price. I found that when we obey God we often get exhausted, but His resurrection power brought me out of my weakness to a new strength. I have never suffered like that again, even though I now carry much more responsibility.

God's Love In Action

God makes it clear that His discipline is both unavoidable and desirable. It is a direct expression of His loving concern and acceptance of us as His children. If we don't accept His discipline, we reject His Fatherly love.

God wants to redeem you and me... completely! His discipline and correction are a direct expression of His committed love. You might say He "loves us to death" - death of self and all that destroys us and keeps us weak, replacing it with resurrected life in Him.

He is totally committed to our inheritance of being like Christ. When we pray, "God make me more like you," He will do just that. He wants us to be encouraged knowing that "*all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" (Rom. 8:28)

So... when things fall apart, don't panic! God will bring good from it if you look to Him. If He's allowing something to "encourage" you right now, turn to the Perfector - the Author and Finisher of your faith. He will guide you and comfort you. Daily, in every situation, you and I are going to become more like Jesus. You are His child. When you're faced with difficult situations simply pray, "Lord, this is happening for a reason. Thank You that You will make me more like Yourself today. Amen."

Linda Cope has been with Youth With A Mission since 1971, and is now Dean of the Communications Department of YWAM's University of the Nations Hawaii branch. She has spent several years on the mission field and has taught in over 35 countries. Linda lives in Kona, Hawaii, and is a close friend and continual blessing to all of us here at Last Days Ministries.

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