

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Hebrews 12. 5-11

XVII

CHASTENING

A MOST prolific cause of this condition of spiritual depression is the failure to realize that God uses varied methods in the process of our sanctification. He is our Father Who has 'loved us with an everlasting love'. His great purpose for us is our sanctification—'This is the will of God even your sanctification' (1 Thessalonians 4. 3) and 'that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love' (Ephesians 1. 4). God's great concern for us primarily is not our happiness but our holiness. In His great love to us He is determined to bring us to that, and He employs many differing means to that end.

Our failure to realize that often causes us to stumble and, in our sin and folly, at times even to misunderstand completely some of God's dealings with us. Like foolish children we feel that our heavenly Father is unkind to us and we pity ourselves and feel sorry for ourselves and feel that we are being dealt with harshly. That, of course, leads to depression and it is all due to our failure to realize God's glorious purposes with respect to us.

Now this is the matter that is dealt with in such an extraordinary and perfect manner in this twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews where the theme is, that sometimes God promotes sanctification in His children by chastising them, and especially by enabling them to understand the meaning of chastisement. That is the theme to which I would call your attention. Nowhere, perhaps, do we see more clearly the fact that sanctification is God's work than in connection with this subject of chastisement. 'Look at the things you are suffering,' says the writer. 'Why are you suffering them?' The answer is that they are suffering these things because they are children of God. He tells them that God is doing these things to them for their good—'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth'. And then you notice that, not content with putting it like that he puts it negatively as well. He says: 'If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? But if ye be

without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards'—you are not truly children in the family, you are not sons. Now that is a very significant statement. Let me put it like this in the form of a principle. What this man is really saying is that the whole of salvation is God's work from beginning to end, and that God has His ways of producing it. Once God starts working He goes on with that work—'He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ'. God does not start a work and then give it up or leave it in an incomplete condition—when God starts His work upon His people He is going to complete that work. God has an ultimate objective and purpose for them and that is that they might spend eternity with Him in glory. Much that happens to us in this world is to be understood and explained in the light of that fact; and it is as definite as this, according to this man's argument, that God will bring us to that condition, and nothing shall prevent our coming into that condition.

Now God has several ways of doing this. One is to give us instruction through the great doctrines and principles that are taught in the Bible. He has given us His Word. He caused men to write these words by the Holy Spirit for our instruction in order that we might be prepared and perfected. But if we become recalcitrant, if we will not learn the lessons that are presented to us positively in the Word, then God, as our Father, with the great end and object in view of perfecting us and preparing us for glory, will adopt other methods. And one of the other methods which He uses is this method of chastisement. Earthly parents that are worthy of the name—we are living in such flabby days that we can scarcely use the argument as this man was able to do—do this. They chastise their children for their own good, and if the child is not behaving properly as the result of positive instruction, then punishment must be meted out, discipline must be exercised. It is painful but necessary, and the good parent does not neglect it. This man says that God is like that, and infinitely more so. If, therefore, we will not be obedient to the positive lessons and instructions of God's Word, we must not be surprised if other things begin to happen to us. We must not be surprised if we begin to endure certain things which are rather painful. These things are done to us deliberately by God, says this man, as a part of the process of sanctification. And you notice how strongly he puts it. He says that we have to examine

ourselves and to find out whether we are experiencing this at all, because he says here quite definitely, that if we have no experience of this kind of treatment, then it is very doubtful whether we are children at all. If we know nothing of this process we are not children, we are illegitimate, we do not belong to God, for 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth'. There is a sense, therefore, in which we can say that the person who ought to be most unhappy about himself or herself is that Christian, or professing Christian, who is not aware of this kind of dealing at all. It is something about which we should be alarmed. Far from being annoyed by the process, we ought to thank God for it for He is giving us proof that we are His children, He is treating us as His children. He is punishing and chastising us in order to make us conform to the pattern and to be worthy of Him who is our Father.

This is something that is constantly taking place in the life and experience of the children of God. It is also something that is taught everywhere in the Scriptures. There are endless examples and illustrations that might be quoted. It is the great message of the seventy-third Psalm. It is the great message of the book of Job. You find the Apostle Paul deals with it in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans where he talks about rejoicing in tribulation, etc. It enters into the argument of the eighth chapter of Romans. You get it again in the first Epistle to the Corinthians and the eleventh chapter in the section that deals with the Communion Service. The apostle teaches that there were members of the Church who were sick and ill because they were not living the Christian life—'For this cause many are weak and sickly among you'. Indeed some had died because of that—'Many sleep'. Then read the first chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians and you will find the apostle describing the experience that has happened to him. He says that it happened in order that he might learn not to trust in himself but in the living God. Another great classic statement of this teaching is to be found in the twelfth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, where Paul talks about 'the thorn in the flesh' that was given to him, and his whole reasoning and argument about that. The purpose of it all, he says, was to keep him in the right spiritual condition lest he might be over-exalted. He was given a thorn in the flesh, and though he prayed and asked God three times to remove it, God did not do so, and he at last learned his lesson. So it promoted his sanctification. Read the first chapter

of the Epistle of James: 'Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into divers temptations, etc.' It is something to rejoice in. And then see it all summed up in the word of the risen Lord Himself as you find it in the third chapter of the Book of Revelation in the nineteenth verse: 'As many as I love I rebuke and chasten'.

So we see this great doctrine running right through the Bible. Indeed, all God's treatment of the Children of Israel under the old dispensation is but an extended commentary on this. It was because they were His people that He did those things unto them. 'Ye only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3. 2). It was because they were His children that He so dealt with them.

The question that obviously faces us therefore is, what is chastisement, what does it mean? It means to train. The fundamental meaning of the word is just that. It is the training through which a child is put, it is the method of training a child. We rather tend to confuse it with the word punishment. It includes correction, but it also includes instruction; it includes rebuke, indeed it may include a good deal of punishment, but the essential thing is, and the essential object of chastisement is, to train and to develop the child so as to produce a grown person. Well, now, if that is the meaning of chastisement let us consider for a moment the ways in which God does chastise.

How does God chastise His children? He does so very largely through circumstances, all sorts and kinds of circumstances. Nothing is more important in the Christian life than we should realize that everything that happens to us is of significance if we can but see it. Nothing happens to us accidentally—a sparrow 'shall not fall to the ground without your Father', says our Lord, and if that is true of the sparrow how much more so of us? Nothing can happen to us apart from our Father. Circumstances are constantly affecting us and their purpose is to produce our sanctification—pleasant circumstances and unpleasant circumstances. We should therefore be observant and always watching for lessons, seeking and asking questions.

Now let me particularize. The Bible teaches us very clearly that one particular circumstance which God often uses in this respect is some financial loss, a change in one's material position, the loss of goods, the loss of possessions, the loss of money. These are often used by God. You get descriptions of it in the Old

Testament, and it has often happened in the subsequent history of God's people in the Church, that by means of some loss in a temporal and material sense God has taught a man a lesson which apparently he could not have learned in any other way.

Then take the question of health. I have already reminded you of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter eleven. The apostle teaches quite specifically that there were some people who were sick and ill because God had sent this upon them in order to teach them and to train them. 'Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup; For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.' Now this is a method that God has often employed, so that those who say that it is never God's will that any of us should be sick or weak are simply denying the Scriptures. But let no one drop into the trap and say: 'Are you teaching that every sickness is a punishment sent by God?' Of course I am not, I am simply saying that God at times uses that method in order to chastise His children. If it is 'for this cause' that many are 'weak and sickly', it is God's action. God allowed that to happen to them, or God may have brought it upon them, for their own good. God's will is more important than the health of man's body, and if a man will not submit himself and subject himself to the positive teaching of the Word, then God will certainly deal with that man, and He may very well send an illness upon him and lay him aside in order to make him think. May I remind you that the great Dr. Thomas Chalmers always said that what really brought him, under God, to understand the gospel truly was an illness which confined him to his sick chamber for nearly twelve months. He had been a brilliant 'scientific' and 'intellectual' preacher, but he came out of that sick chamber as a preacher of the gospel, and he thanked God for that visitation. There is a parallel to that in the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, first chapter and ninth verse where he tells us that he had 'the sentence of death' in himself. And then there is the classic statement about the thorn in the flesh in chapter twelve. God did not remove that thorn because He was anxious to teach the apostle to say 'when I am weak then am I strong', and to rejoice in infirmity rather than in health in order that God's glory might be promoted. There is no doubt that God allowed this thing, God

perhaps even produced it, in order to chastise and train His servant in that particular way.

In the same way God has allowed persecution. These Hebrew Christians were being persecuted. That is why they were so unhappy. Their goods had been stolen, their houses had been destroyed because they were Christians, and they were asking: 'Why are we having this sort of treatment? We thought that if we believed the gospel all was going to be well with us, but we seem to be full of trouble, while those who are not Christian seem to be doing well and succeeding in everything. Why is this?' Here is the answer to them in this twelfth chapter.

The doctrine, however, goes further, it goes so far as to say that God seems to employ death at times in this way—'many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep'. It is a mystery, no one can understand it, but it is the clear teaching of the Scripture, and therefore I say that we must realize that all these things have a significance. By means of circumstance, the things that happen to us in this life and world, in our career, by the passing or failing of examinations, by health or sickness, by all these things, God is bringing His purpose for us to pass. If you are a child of God all these things have a significance for you, and you must learn how to examine them in order to discover their message. And thereby your sanctification will be promoted.

Another way in which God chastens us, and I must put it in a category on its own, is this. God undoubtedly at times seems to withdraw His presence and to hide His face from us for this precise purpose. You will find that that is the great theme of the Book of Job. You will find it again in the Book of Hosea in chapters 5 and 6. God even tells the people there: 'I will go and return to My place till they acknowledge their offence, and seek My face'. God withdrew Himself and withdrew His presence, withdrew His face and His blessing in order to bring them to the place of repentance; it is a part of sanctification.

Then again one often finds in the Christian life that there are variations in feelings and in sentiments. That is a matter that often troubles and perplexes God's people. We have all known something about it. You find that for some reason or another the experience you have been enjoying, suddenly comes to an end and you say with Job: 'O that I knew where I might find Him'. You are not conscious of having done anything wrong, but God seems to have withdrawn Himself and you feel yourself

to be deserted. These desertions of the Spirit, that seem to take place from time to time, are again but parts of God's way of chastising His children, part of His great process of training and preparing us for the grand end and object He has in view for us.

That brings me to my next question which is this. Why does God chastise? We have seen what chastisement is, we have seen how God chastises, we now ask the great question, why does God do this? And there are abundant answers to the question in this section of His Word. From verse 5 to verse 15 in this twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews is really nothing but an extended answer to this question. It is because God loves us—'For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth'. That is the fundamental answer. It is all because of the love of God. It is because God loves us that He appears at times to be 'cruel to be kind'. It is all done for our good; that is the thing we must lay hold of, it is always for our good. Now look at the statement in verse 7. In the Authorized Version it says: 'If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons'. But the Revised Version, and various other versions, are beyond doubt very much better at this point. It is not so much: 'If we endure chastening'; it should rather be put like this: 'It is for your chastening you endure'. Why are you enduring? That is the question; that is the question these Hebrew Christians were asking—if we are Christians why are we enduring? And the answer is that you are enduring because you are Christian, you are enduring for your chastening. In other words the purpose of your enduring is your growth, your training, your development; the things that you are enduring are part of your chastening. What is chastening?—Your training. So that we have to take hold firmly of that fact, that all the suffering and the enduring and all the unhappiness is with this great end and object in view, namely, our preparation and our training. But the author says it again—and you notice how he goes on repeating himself—in verse 10. 'For they'—earthly parents—'for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, but He for our profit that'—in order that—'we might be partakers of His Holiness'. Now there it is stated in its most explicit form; quite definitely the teaching is that God chastens us in order that we might become partakers of His holiness, in order that we might be sanctified. It is all done, he says, 'for our profit', and the profit is sanctification. God sanctifies us through the truth by doing

these things to us and then, by means of His Word, expounding to us what He is doing.

Now if that is the general object that God has in view in chastening us in this way, let us also look at some of the particular reasons which He has for doing so. One is that there are certain faults in us, certain faults in all of us, which need to be corrected. There are certain dangers confronting all of us in this Christian life against which we need to be protected. The fact that a man is a Christian does not mean that he is perfect. Alas, you do not immediately on belief in the Lord Jesus Christ arrive at a state of complete perfection. Indeed you do not arrive at that state at all in this life; there is imperfection remaining, the 'old man' remains. The result is that there are certain things that always need to be dealt with in particular, and in the Scriptures we are told very clearly how God uses chastisement in order to deal with some of these particular problems. What are they? Here is one. Spiritual pride, spiritual elation in a dangerous and in a wrong sense. Let me remind you of the classic words which put this so perfectly and which really need no exposition at all. The Apostle Paul in the twelfth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians says: ' . . . I knew such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell; God knoweth; how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter; of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me'—and listen—'And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations; there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure'. There it is perfectly. The apostle had been given some very rare, exceptional, unusual experience, he had been lifted up into the third heaven, he had seen and had heard and felt wonderful things, and the danger was spiritual pride, being exalted over-much. And he tells us that the thorn in the flesh was sent to him, was given to him deliberately in order to safeguard him. Spiritual pride is a terrible danger, and it is a danger that persists. If God does grant us in His mercy and love some unusual experience, we are in a position which the devil may exploit to our harm; and oftentimes men who have had such

experiences have needed chastisement in order to keep them in the right and safe place.

Another danger is the danger of self-confidence. God has given gifts to man and the danger is for man to rely upon himself and his gifts and to feel in a sense that he does not need God. Pride and self-assurance are a constant danger. These are not sins of the flesh as such, these are spiritual dangers, and are therefore even more dangerous and subtle.

Then there is always the danger of being attracted by the world and its outlook and its way. The point that is made by the Scriptures is that these things are so subtle. It is not that a man deliberately sits down and decides that he is going back into the world. It is something that happens almost imperceptibly. The world and its attractions are always there and a man slips into them almost without knowing it. So he needs to be chastised lest he comes to love the things of the world.

Yet another danger is that of resting on our oars, the danger of being satisfied with the position we have reached in the Christian life—smugness, self-satisfaction. We are not modernists, we do not believe the kind of thing so many believe today, we are orthodox, we cease to do certain things which we know are obviously wrong. We believe we are perfect in our belief, and that our lives are beyond reproach, and so we become smug and self-satisfied. We rest upon our oars, and so we do not grow. If we compare ourselves with what we were ten years ago, there is really no difference. We do not know God any more intimately, we have not advanced one step, we have not 'grown in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord'. We are resting in a state of self-satisfaction. Perhaps I can sum it all up by saying that it is the terrible danger of forgetting God and not seeking Him and His fellowship. It is the awful danger of thinking of ourselves in terms of experience, rather than constantly in terms of our direct immediate knowledge of Him and our relationship to Him. As we go on year by year, in the Christian life we ought to be able to say that we know God better than we used to, we should be able to say that we love Him more than we once did. The more you know any good person the more you like such a person, the more you love such a person. Multiply that by infinity and there is your relationship and mine to God. Do we know God better, are we really seeking Him more and more? God knows, the danger is to forget Him because we are interested in ourselves and in

our experience. And so God in His infinite love chastises us in order to make us realize these things, in order to bring us back to Himself, in order to safeguard us against these terrible dangers that are constantly threatening us and surrounding us. Let me put it to your experience. Can you say that you thank God for things that have gone against you? That is a very good test of our whole profession. Can you see why certain things—things which were unpleasant and which made you feel very unhappy at the time they happened to you—can you look back and say, 'It is good for me that I was afflicted', like the Psalmist in Psalm 119. 71.

I say then that God chastises us for these particular reasons. But let me put it all positively. To be sanctified means that we display certain positive qualities. It is to be the kind of person who is exemplifying the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount in his life, it is to be a person who is showing the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, etc. Now that is what sanctification means. God, in sanctifying us, is bringing us more and more into conformity with that condition. And it is very clear that in order to bring us there it is not enough that we be given the positive teaching of the Word; the element of chastisement is also necessary. The Word exhorts men to 'look to Jesus'. You notice that it does so in the chapter before it comes to the chastisement. The author's exhortation is: 'Let us run with patience the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus, . . .'. If we did that always nothing else would be necessary; if we always kept our gaze upon Him and tried to conform to Him, all would be well. But we do not, and therefore chastisement becomes necessary. And it is necessary in order to produce certain qualities in us. Here they are. Humility—it is in many ways the crowning virtue. Humility, the most priceless of all the gems, one of the most glorious of all the manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit—humility. It was the supreme characteristic of the Lord Himself. He was meek and lowly in heart. 'The bruised reed He will not break, the smoking flax He will not quench.' It is the last point at which we arrive, and, God knows, we all have to be humbled in order to arrive at humility. Failure can be very good for us there. It is very difficult to be humble if you are always successful, so God chastises us with failure at times in order to humble us, to keep us in a state of humility. Examine your life and see this kind of thing happening.

Then take heavenly-mindedness. The Christian is to be heavenly-minded. His great interest should be there not here. How difficult it is to be heavenly-minded, to keep 'our affections on things above', to 'set them there and not on things which are on the earth'. How often has it become necessary that God should chastise us in order to make us heavenly-minded. We so cling to the world that God has to do something which shows us very clearly that the things that bind us to this world are fragile and can be snapped in a second. And so we are suddenly awakened to the fact that we are only pilgrims in this world, and we are made to think of heaven and of eternity.

Meekness! How difficult it is to be meek in our attitude towards others and in our relationships with them—love to others, sympathy towards others. There is a sense, I suppose, in which it is almost impossible for us to be sympathetic unless we know something of the same experience. I know very well in my work as a pastor that I would not have been able to sympathize with people, indeed, I would not have been able to understand certain people and their problems, unless I had passed through the same experience myself. God has sometimes to deal with us in order to remind us of our need of patience. He says in effect: 'You know I am patient with you, go and be patient with that other person'.

These, then, are some of the things that show us clearly the need and necessity for chastisement. God, because He loves us, because we are His children, does chastise us in order that it may eventually lead to this marvellous and wonderful 'peaceable fruit of righteousness'.

So far we have looked at it all in principle. In our next study I hope to show how this same section applies all that teaching and how we are to apply it to ourselves. The great principle is that God deals with us in chastisement because we are children. If, therefore, you are not aware of something of this kind of dealing, I can but urge you to go back and examine yourself and make sure that you are a Christian at all because: 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth'. Blessed be God Who has undertaken our salvation and our perfection and Who, having started the work will go on with it, and Who so loves us that if we will not learn the lessons voluntarily, will chastise us in order to bring us into conformity with the image of His dear Son.