

Disciplines to Maturity

by J. Oswald Sanders

God allows difficult experiences in our lives to bring us to spiritual maturity and to enrich us, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time.

Duration: 45:44

Scripture: Hebrews 12:5-7, Hebrews 12:9

Topics: "Maturity"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the mysterious ways in which God works and how we should trust in His grace rather than relying on our own understanding. He uses examples from the Bible, such as the experiences of James and Peter, to illustrate how God's plans may not always align with our desires or expectations. The preacher emphasizes the importance of having faith and seeking God's will, even in times of disappointment or inequality. Ultimately, he encourages listeners to worship and trust in the sweet will of God, knowing that He has a purpose for every situation.

Transcript

Would you read with me, please, from the twelfth chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, reading from verse 5. Hebrews chapter 12, verse 5. Have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom 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 our earthly fathers to discipline 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 at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good.

I want you to notice those words, he disciplines us for our good. With what end in view? That we may share his holiness. And if we can master that verse, we've achieved something.

He disciplines us for our good. It will always be good when God sends a discipline. Its end result will be that we will share his holiness.

For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. Later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. I want to speak this morning about some of the disciplines which God permits in order to bring us to spiritual maturity.

I'm sure that every one of us is concerned to grow and become more like Christ. And I believe that one of the major factors in a growing maturity is a correct reaction to the disciplines of God. The way in which we react to the disciplines of God will be seen in the quality of our own spiritual life.

And I believe that in these turbulent days in which we live, and they're likely to get more turbulent, we need to take a fresh grip upon the sovereignty of God, the fact that God is in charge, no matter how events may look to the contrary. He is controlling everything. Why did the Lord Jesus maintain a perfect serenity in any conditions he found himself? Because of his utter confidence that his Father's purpose and plan would be fulfilled.

Nothing could frustrate it. And we need to have that assurance, too. And as we think of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, I think we need to place alongside it another thought.

In Isaiah chapter 64 and verse 8, these two thoughts are brought together. He said, Now, O Lord, thou art our Father. Thou art the potter, we are the clay.

So here you have two thoughts brought together in the one verse. The sovereignty of God, thou art the potter, and the potter can do what he likes with the clay, but thou art our Father. And if we grasp this truth that the sovereignty of God will never clash with his paternity, it means that God will do nothing in our lives that would be contrary to his Father's heart.

And so you have, on the one hand, the assurance that God's purposes are going to be fulfilled no matter what happens. And on the other hand, we have the assurance that anything God permits, anything God sends into our lives, is for our good, just as a Father's discipline is intended in that way. It's for our good, and ultimately that we might share his holiness.

Now, in order to bring us to maturity, God uses certain disciplines. And the first one I'd bring before you is the discipline of disturbance. In Moses' song in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 11, it says, Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead him.

Like an eagle, so the Lord. Here Moses is bringing before us a very vivid picture, the picture of the mother eagle who, right up on the mountain crag, begins to build a nest. And she gathers sticks and twigs and thorns and all kinds of things and makes a rough and crude nest.

And then she lines it with grass and wool and feathers and fur or anything soft else you can get that's soft. And she lines that nest until it's perfectly comfortable, so that when her little birds are hatched out, they will have a life of perfect comfort. Everything conducive to growth and development.

The eggs are laid. The little eaglets hatch out. They begin to grow.

Life is perfect. All they need to do is to sit there with their mouths open and mother does the rest. Life's perfect.

And it goes on like that for quite a good period until they reach a certain stage of development. And then, all of a sudden, the mother changes. She stops loving them.

And she begins to pull away and tear away all the soft lining of the nest and throws it over the side. And the little birds are mystified. What is mother doing? Has she gone berserk? And when all the lining is gone, the nest is so uncomfortable that they get out and crawl up onto the edge of the nest and wonder what's the next move.

And they're looking down and peering down and there is the great precipice and the rocks down below. And all of a sudden, the mother comes along and gives one of them just, and down it goes, plummeting through space. I wonder if you could get into the mind of that little bird what thoughts it was having about its mother.

I thought she used to love me. But she doesn't now, obviously. And you could imagine the mystification.

And that bird thought it was going down to certain death. There were the rocks. And there was nothing between them at the rocks.

But was that so? I don't know. Swifter than the drop of the little bird was the swooping of the mother. She swooped down underneath it.

You see, as they were going down, they were starting to flap their wings. They'd never used them before. Now, they're pretty feeble.

But when they got nearly to the bottom, she swoops underneath, picks them up in her wings and takes them up and lands them on the crag once more. This incident was put into poetry. The mother eagle wrecks her nest to make her fledglings fly.

But watches each, just a moment till I get, but watches each without stretched wing and fierce maternal eye and swoops if any fails to soar and lifts it to the crag once more. So God at times breaks up our nest, lest sunken slothful ease our soul's wings molt and lose the zest for battle with the breeze. But ever waits with arms of love to bear our souls all ills about.

So God at times breaks up our nest. Why? Lest sunk in slothful ease our soul's wings molt. You see, if the mother hadn't done that to those little birds, they would have never had to exercise their wings and they'd never have been able to soar up into the face of the sun.

God does that with us because unless he disturbs us, sometimes our soul's wings molt. Are your wings in good form? Or have you lost the zest for battle with the breeze? Perhaps that's the reason sometimes God moves us. Now I know that the Navigators is a moving organization.

They used to say that the CIM China in the mission stood for Constantly in Motion because that's the way it went. But then we changed our name to OMF and some wag said, well, yes, it's still Constantly in Motion, only more frequently. But there comes these disturbances.

It comes into our lives and God allows them to come in order that we might develop our capacity to soar into the heavens. God doesn't want us to be Kiwis. You know what a Kiwi is? A Kiwi is a bird that can't fly.

God wants us to be able to soar lest our soul's wings molt. But even although he does allow disciplines to come underneath the everlasting arms as we heard in the prayer, he's there. He doesn't allow us to fall.

You know, comfort is often the foe of faith. We don't always make progress when things are easiest. In these affluent days, it's hard, difficult to get to places to do things that are difficult.

Everything's made so easy for us. And yet, sometimes God moves us. My nest has been stirred many times.

I remember on one particular occasion, it was rather a big disturbance. My wife came to me. She said, I've got something from an address by Samuel Chadwick.

And this is what he said, we are moved by the act of God, not by committee, by the act of God. Omniscience holds no conference. Infinite authority leaves no room for compromise.

Eternal love offers no explanations. The Lord expects to be trusted. He disturbs us at will.

Human arrangements are disregarded. Family ties ignored. Business claims put aside.

We are never asked if it is convenient. Well, that spoke to me that time because a good number of those things were involved. God doesn't always explain himself.

He loves to be trusted. Do you love him well enough to trust him, even though you can't understand whatever he has in view? That little bird couldn't understand what motivated the mother to do what she did, but afterwards it found out, you see. Once it realized the glory and the joy of soaring, the little bird would say, how glad I am that mother tipped me out of the nest.

And so, with God's dealings, let us trust him. Don't be dismayed. Don't get disgruntled with God, but accept the discipline of God and you'll find it'll bring peace to your heart.

Sometimes, not always, not to everyone, but sometimes God entrusts us with the experience of darkness, an unexplained darkness, and I'm sure there are many of us here who have had an experience like that. God has never promised that life would be all sunshine and no cloud. Indeed, if he did, would it be the best thing? What happens to land that has all sunshine? You know, becomes desert.

And in order that our Christian lives might grow and develop and mature and be all round, God in his wisdom sometimes allows us to pass through a period of darkness when it seems as though the sky is brass. There's not a rift in the clouds. It seems as though you're in a tunnel and there's not even a speck of light away at the end.

And those experiences are not easy to take. But you know, God often meets us more deeply in the darker experiences in life than in the brighter ones. And he's got something for us.

He disciplines us for our good. Listen to what he says in Isaiah 45 and 3. I will give you the treasures of darkness, the hordes hidden in secret places. These are the words were spoken to Cyrus, but they're true to us.

I will give you the treasures of darkness. There is something to be gleaned in that dark experience that we can get in no other way. You see, God's intention in his discipline is enrichment, not impoverishment.

It's blessing, it's not cursing. And he allows us to have it in order that we might be blessed. He can meet us in the storm cloud just as easily as he can meet us in the brightness of the sun.

And even though the darkness may seem for a moment to obscure his face, even though we can't describe his face in the darkness, if we put out our hand, we will feel his reassuring clasp and we'll hear him say, I will hold your right hand. See, that's what faith does. Faith puts out its hand in the dark.

It can't see the face, but it can feel the reassuring clasp of the hand of God. I love that word of Moses. He spoke about the thick darkness where God was.

And now, it's not so bad if God's in the thick darkness, but he is. He's always there, and it is our trust that enables us to find him. I dare say many of you have read Isabel Kuhn's books.

She was one of our missionaries, a great missionary, and a woman who, if you met her, she was always seen to be triumphant. But I was with her when she was dying. And she said something to me that I found it very difficult to believe.

She said, do you know that all my life I have had a battle against depression? There it was, the darkness. And God didn't remove it from her, but she triumphed over it. She was enriched by it.

And through her books and not only her missionary work, she has been able to enrich thousands and tens of thousands. Sometimes these experiences are a trust. She didn't go down under it, but she came through it, and God used it in blessing for others.

Now, God didn't spare his own son an experience of darkness, did he? There was the physical darkness, of course. There was darkness over all the land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour. But that was nothing compared with the darkness that came into his soul as the Father averted his face while Jesus was bearing the sins of the world.

What did he do? How did he react in those circumstances? Now, it's very interesting in reading what our Lord said on the cross. You can see that his mind was dwelling on the Scriptures, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, he said, thy thirst and so on. His mind was going over the Scriptures.

Is there any prophecy yet unfulfilled that I should fulfill in these closing moments? And I believe that while his soul was enveloped in darkness, very probably his mind was resting upon those words in Isaiah 50 and verse 10, whoso walketh in darkness and hath no light, let him trust in the Lord and let him stay upon his God. There he was in the darkness. What was he doing? You can tell what he was doing by what he said.

He said, my God, my God, why didst thou forsake me? You forsook me? I don't understand why, but you are still my God. My faith hasn't crumbled under the test. Even in the midst of the darkness, I still lay hold on you.

You are still my God. You see, what did he do? He trusted in the Lord and stayed himself upon his God. Well, here is the prescription.

If we're going through darkness, what do you do? You do just that. You trust the Lord. You stay yourself upon God.

You know him so well that you can trust him even in the darkness. And then in due time, you'll come out of the darkness. I think those three young men, Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, had a dark experience.

How dark it would be. The fire was bright, but all the experience, seeing them heating the furnace seven times hotter, you'd put yourself in their position. And then they're thrown in, and that's the end of it.

Was it the end of it? God caused the flames to burn with a strange discrimination, and all they did was to burn the cords that bound them. And suddenly, they found themselves walking in the midst of the fire with the Son of God. I will give you the treasures of darkness.

And would those young men afterwards, looking back over that experience, would they not say how glad we are that God didn't spare us that terrible experience? Why? Because they were enriched by it. They got the treasures of darkness. Another discipline, the discipline of disappointment.

God doesn't always fit in with all our desires or all our plans. We often build up a mental picture of what the thing should be. Have you ever done that? You're called to a new center or to a new job, and you've got your own picture of what it should be, and when you get there, I didn't expect things to be like this.

I didn't expect conditions to be like this. I didn't expect the people to be so unresponsive and so on. We build our own mental picture often and make our plans, but they don't always materialize.

And sometimes God seems to be rather unsympathetic to us. I believe that in experiences like this, it gives us an opportunity to mature. What is going to be my reaction, even if I am disappointed? The way in which I react to it is going to make a big difference to my growth in my own spiritual life.

David had a great idea. Why it didn't come to him early, I'm at a loss to know earlier, I'm at a loss to know. He said, here am I, isn't this incongruous? Here am I, living in a palace that has taken years to build, and while I'm there, the ark of God is in a tent.

He said, I know what I'll do. I'll build a magnificent house worthy of God. And you know, you can imagine how the thing began to formulate in his mind.

You could see him enthusiastic about it. And he brings his friend Nathan in and shares his plans, and Nathan gets excited too. Oh, this is wonderful.

We'll do something worthy of God. And in the night, God comes to Nathan and says, Nathan, go and tell David thou shalt not build for me a house to dwell in. And God gave his reasons.

He had his reasons for David not doing it. But can you imagine the terrific disappointment? Was it not a good aspiration? Was it not a lovely thing? Was it not a right thing? And yet God is unsympathetic. The way in which David reacted is an evidence of the character and caliber and maturity of the man.

He didn't go sour. He didn't go away and say, well, if I can't do that, I won't do anything. What did he do? He accepted the discipline of the Lord.

Lord, all right, you're not going to allow me to build this house. I'm desperately disappointed, but if I can't do that, I can at least place all my wealth and all my time and all my energies into preparing the material so that my son can do it. You see, the way in which he reacted to was a tremendously important thing.

And in the event, he was enriched by it, not impoverished. And so in our reaction to the disappointments, when God disappoints us, it's generally because he's got some better thing he wants to give to us or some alternative thing that is more in line with his plan. You remember that Paul and his party, they assayed to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit suffered them not.

Then they wanted to go to Mycenae, and the Spirit forbade them. Well, isn't it a good thing? You're told us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, and then we go this way and you stop us and we go that way and you stop us. Was that their reaction? No.

They were mature Christians. What did they do? They stopped. They prayed.

They consulted. And as they did that, God gave them clear, positive guidance. And they were able to say, we assuredly gathered that this was what the Lord wanted.

You see, it wasn't his time. He intended Bithynia and Mycenae to have the gospel. They got them later.

But his timetable was that it should go to Europe. Europe was to hold the key to the evangelization of the world. Their desire, perfectly right and laudable, but he directed them in another direction.

They would be disappointed that God had some better thing. And I think this is a factor we need to recognize. As a young man, I volunteered to go to the mission field, and I wanted to go to Bolivia.

And I gave up my legal work and went into training, and I'd only been there a very short time when family circumstances compelled me to go back to business again. And I was offended with God. I was only a young Christian.

I was offended with God. Here, I'd made sacrifices to go and serve the Lord. I'd just step out, and he shuts the door.

And for a few months, it took me a few months, stupidly, before I found my feet again. I was offended and disappointed in the Lord. But looking back, when I see how much better a plan he had, I say, Lord, how wonderful that you were loving enough to thwart my plan.

And I think that should be our attitude. I worship thee, sweet will of God, and all thy ways adore, and every day I live, I seem to love thee more and more. Isn't that the desire of our hearts, even if it's not always the expression of our hearts? Another discipline is the discipline of inequality.

God doesn't always seem to treat everybody the same. He seems to treat some unfairly. Have you ever thought that other people seem to get all the breaks, and you seem to get all the tough ones? Well, you're not alone in that.

In Ezekiel 18 and verse 25, I think it is, the people complained, the ways of the Lord are not equal. Or in the RSV, the ways of the Lord are not just. Here they were complaining about the way in which God would work.

They felt they hadn't been fairly treated. And this is something that we can easily allow Satan to thrust into our minds. We blame the people over us, of course, for it.

We blame the headquarters for making wrong appointments and that kind of thing. But of course, we need to go a bit further back than that. Asaph, the psalmist, had got into this position.

When he saw the prosperity of the wicked, he saw that somehow or other the wicked man seemed to prosper, and the righteous man, why, he seemed to go from trouble to trouble. And in Psalm 73, as he's telling about it, he said he looked around and saw him flourishing like a green bay tree, and he sees the righteous man having a tough time, and he said, my feet had well nigh slipped. I'd almost lost my foothold.

My faith had almost given way until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I saw their end. Ah, that's it.

Then I saw their end. You lose your faith and your feet begin to slip if you're looking merely at the immediate. Things are unequal now.

You take this, for example, in the early church. Here you have James and Peter, two of the apostles. They go out to preach for the Lord.

They're both equally zealous, equally faithful. James is put in prison, and the Lord allows them to come and chop his head off. Peter is put in prison, and the Lord sends an angel to strike his shackles off to open the prison door and takes him to a prayer meeting.

You imagine Mrs. James and Mrs. Peter hanging out there washing and talking it over. Can you imagine Mrs. James saying, it's not fair. The ways of the Lord are not equal.

My husband was just as much a man of God as yours was, and yet God allowed my husband to be executed, and he took your husband to a prayer meeting. Pretty specious, isn't it? And yet, God knows what he's doing. And this is where the maturity of faith comes in.

Lord, I don't understand. There is no explanation, but this is not the end. It was when Asaph saw their end.

I saw their final destiny. I saw what happened to the wicked. You see, he realized that there was a day coming when there would be equality, when all the inequalities of this life will be ironed out, and when everything will be given its true value.

Then he saw what it meant, and his faith was able to rise again. I was traveling in Asia some years ago with Mr. Fred Mitchell, who was the British director of our mission. I was the director for Australia in those days, and we traveled around several countries, and we came to Singapore this morning.

We parted. He was going back to England. I was going to Hong Kong.

We waved each other goodbye. He got as far as Calcutta, and the plane was blown up. He was killed.

I went on quite safely to Hong Kong. Now why was he taken? Why was I spared? Any explanation? No explanation. God doesn't explain himself.

We'll know someday. But here are the inequalities of life that have to be accepted in faith, even although we can see no answer. We just say, even so, Father, for so it seems good in thy sight.

Some of you have read Amy Wilson Carmichael's books. If you haven't, you pick up any one of them, and you've got a treasure. She had a great deal of suffering in her life, and on one occasion she said this, I cannot recall a single explanation of trial.

And she went through terrible trials. She said, I can't recall a single explanation of trial. We are trusted with the unexplained.

Will you put that in the fleshy tables of your heart, if not in your notebook? We are trusted with the unexplained. God does not always undertake to explain himself. The last one I want to speak about is the discipline of delay.

God doesn't always move as fast as we'd like him to. Is that true? Some of us have more trouble with that one than others because of our disposition. We are impatient, and we want everything to happen at once.

And I have sympathy with that kind of people, very much. Phillips Brooks was one of your great preachers from Boston in past days. And on one occasion a friend went to see Phillips Brooks, and he went to his home and was ushered into his study, and they found Phillips Brooks pacing up and down, great agitation.

And his friend said, Phillips, what's the matter? What's the trouble? Phillips Brooks says, trouble enough. I'm in a hurry, and God's not. Well, I think we'll have occasion to prove that too.

We'll be in a great hurry, but God is not always in a hurry. Why? Our hurry, our impatience is the outcome of our lack of knowledge of all the facts involved. God's delay is the outcome of his lovingly taking into account all that is involved in the situation.

He knows. His timing is perfect. We are trusted with the unexplained there too, and we can leave it with him.

You see, God will not be stampeded into premature action by impatient children. Many of you are parents. Do you allow your kids to push you around when you know that what they're asking is either it takes time or something else? You don't allow it, and because you love them, you want the best for them, and God won't be stampeded.

You know, Abraham tried to do that with God, didn't he? God promised him a son when he was an old man, when it was past the time for having a son. And then after the promise, 15 years went by, nothing happened, no son, no sign of a son. And Sarah's faith apparently got a bit frayed, and she came to him one day and said, Abraham, you know that it's quite all right in our culture for a man to have a secondary wife.

I'll give you my maid Hagar, and perhaps you might have a son by her. And he did. And he had a son Ishmael, and he loved Ishmael.

And he pled with God that Ishmael might live before him. But what did God have to say about it? You see, he tried to push God's timetable 10 years ahead. It was 25 years before God gave the son.

And by his unbelief and by his impatience, Abraham unleashed on the world the Muslim menace and pushed up your gas prices very high. You can blame that on Abraham. But God will not be stampeded into premature action.

And we've got to adapt our step to his. He won't adapt his step to ours. We've got to trust him.

You take, for example, the incident in the home at Bethany. Lazarus falls ill. He's very seriously ill.

And the sisters are deeply concerned. Jesus is right away in the north of the country. They immediately send off a messenger to him.

And the message was very simple. Lord, he whom you love is sick. They knew that was all that was necessary.

They didn't need to even ask him to come. They knew that immediately he got that message, he'd come. And he'd be at their side in their trouble because, well, he loved them.

It says Jesus loved Arthur, Mary, and Lazarus, so they will be there. But you read in John chapter 11, what does it say? When Jesus got the message, he stayed two days in the same place where he was. Would you have done that if you'd had the power of the Lord and concerned about your friends? He stayed two days in the place where he was, allowed them to go through the trauma of seeing their brother die and putting him in the tomb, four days dead, body beginning to corrupt.

My, he put them through the mill, didn't he, by his delay. And yet, why did he do it? Did he have a purpose in it? Of course he did. If you read in the verses surrounding that incident, you'll find the recurrence of the word believe, believe, believe.

He said to Martha, said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe thou shouldst see the glory of God, and so on. What was he doing? He was educating their faith. He knew that there was going to be for them a blessing immeasurably greater than if he had been there and saved Lazarus from passing through death.

After that demonstration of his power at the tomb when he said, Lazarus, come forth, and he came forth. You think of the tremendous impact that would make on his disciples and on the friends round about when they saw Christ as the resurrection and the life. And afterwards, when Mary and Martha and Lazarus would be seated around their table in the home in Bethany, would they not say, Lord, how glad we are that you stayed two days in the same place where you were.

You see, he disciplines us for our good. That's first. He's a father, and he does it for our good.

That we might share his holiness, he does it in order that we may mature in our spiritual lives. Spiritual maturity is likeness to Christ. And that's why our Lord permits these disciplines.

Now I close with this. I quoted this yesterday at the meeting with some of the staff. There was a lady called Emma Piechinska, a British peeress, or she was in some of the nobility, and she married a Polish count.

And the Polish count was a sadist. He led her a terrible life. I've read her life story.

It's a rather tragic life story. But in it all, this woman triumphed. And at the end, this testimony was given to her.

She made magnificent bouquets out of the refusals of God. Her life was enriched by the things that were withheld. She made magnificent bouquets out of the refusals of God.

We think that the blessing lies in the things that we get. She proved that in the things which were withheld, there came into her life an enrichment and a blessing that could come in no other way. Her life was enriched by the things that were withheld.

It seems to work in reverse gear to the worldly viewpoint, doesn't it? But I believe that our reaction to the disciplines of God will determine whether we are mediocre, ordinary, half-mature Christians, or whether we are Christians who are spiritually maturing at least and daily growing in likeness to our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, I've asked that we might sing a hymn, and I'm told that it's not well known, but I think we'll have it all the same if you don't mind. The words exactly interpret what I've been saying.

It's written by Calper the poet. I know some of you'll know it. God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. 603, number 603. Let's stand as we sing.

God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. You fearful saints, fresh courage take.

The clouds do so much dread. Arbig with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.

Behind the frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour. The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is your true heir, and scan his work in vain. God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.

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