

Lessons Learned in the Wilderness

God's Discipline in the Desert (Deuteronomy 8)

"God's discipline of his children is his comprehensive training plan for our maturity." William Boekestein¹

"The famous football coach Tom Landry put it this way, 'The job of a coach is to make men do what they don't want to do, in order to be what they've always wanted to be.' That is not a bad description of what God is doing for and in us because of his desire for our good. He is making us what we were meant to be, and what in our sanest moments we want to be, by means we would never choose on our own. This being the case, we will think of God's discipline according to what we think of holiness. If we long to be made holy—if we cry out to have hearts renewed, for sin to be removed, to be like God in our thoughts and desires—then we will not flinch when he enters us into afflictions, since they are the regimen of his training for all who would be holy." Richard Phillips²

"God disciplines those whom he loves. Getting your attention with trials and difficult circumstances, God's Word in Scripture serves as the organ of correction, as the voice in your ears to correct, to console, to rebuke, to train, and so on. This is fatherly 'discipline.' Notice how close the word *discipline* is to another biblical word, *disciple*. God's discipline serves to make us Christ's disciples. The trials we face are divinely designed to mature us so that we become more serviceable disciples in Christ's church and kingdom." J. Mark Beach³

Description of Discipline

"Learning that molds character and enforces correct behavior; from a Latin word meaning 'instruction' or 'training.' To discipline a person or a group means to put them in a state of good order so that they function in the way intended. Discipline, in spite of a popular misconception, is not inherently stern or harsh. Bible translators chose 'disciple' as an appropriate term for one who learns by following."⁴

God's training through both instruction and correction for the sake of our growth and good. When God takes us through the desert of the wilderness, it *can* be part of disciplining us. Discipline is training. It isn't just correction but it can also include teaching and instruction. It's part of God's classroom for growing our view of him and faith in him through real-life opportunities. Discipline aims to teach us key spiritual lessons we'll need in the future, or it provides an opportunity (test) to put into practice the lessons we've already learned. Without some of the pain of spiritual training in discipline, there's no gain in spiritual growth as disciples.

Discipline in the Bible

Two sides or aspects of discipline as training and teaching—this applies to the Christian life, parenting, the classroom, or discipline for some skill.

- Instruction in what is good or right (Heb. 12:11; 2 Tim. 3:16; Ps. 94:12-13; Deut. 8:2-5).

¹ William Boekestein, "Thriving Under God's Discipline: Trading Temporary Pain for Eternal Gain," at reformedfellowship.net

² Phillips, R. D., *Hebrews*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 549.

³ J. Mark Beach, "The Blessing of God's Discipline," <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/blessing-gods-discipline/>

⁴ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). [Discipline](#). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 631). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

- Correction of what is wrong or potentially destructive (Heb. 12:6; 2 Sam. 7:14; Prov. 3:11-12; Ps. 119:67-75; Rev. 3:19-20).

A few summary remarks on discipline. God's discipline is:

1. Part of how God teaches and trains us as his children and disciples (Ps. 94:12-13; Heb. 12:3-11).
2. Designed for growing our faith and giving us a chance—test—to practice what we've (Deut. 8:2-10; Heb. 5:8; 1 Peter 1:6-9).
3. Done out of and because of his love for us (Prov. 3:11-12; Rev. 3:19; Heb. 12:5-11).
4. With our good in mind and according to God's wise and caring purposes (Deut. 8:15; Heb. 12:10).
5. Unpleasant in the moment but life-giving and good in the long-run (Heb. 12:11; 1 Peter 1:6-9).
6. Part of helping see the damage and destructive of idols and sin (Ps. 119:67; 1 Cor. 11:32).
7. Accompanied by God's comfort, care, and healing (Job 5:17-18; Hosea 6:1).
8. Often part of trials and afflictions, even if the training is to experience dependence on God or see the faithfulness of God (Deut. 8:2-10; Matt. 4:1-11).
9. Reflected in how earthly parents discipline their children in love and for their greater good (Heb. 12:5-11; Prov. 3:11-12).

Deuteronomy 8

The wilderness is viewed as a test (8:2) and discipline (8:5) as part of God's training plan to grow them, prepare them, and increase their faith. God's tests, like discipline, are meant for our good (8:16) and are part of his Fatherly plan for raising us up and instructing us in the ways that lead to life. Here are ten things we see in Deuteronomy 8 that God was teaching them about or lessons they were to learn through the training ground of the wilderness.

God takes them through the wilderness:

- 1) to reveal any areas of growth needed or sinfulness in their heart he wants to purify them of
- 2) to help them feel their dependence on God and need for his help
- 3) to strip them of trusting in anything other than God so he alone can directly feed them and protect them
- 4) to teach them about who he is as God and how he will care for them every step of the wilderness and in every single trial they face
- 5) to increase their faith through God's provision, power, protection, and presence in the trials
- 6) to provide a track-record of God's faithfulness they can look back on in future trials and fears
- 7) to prepare them for a season of blessing and God's mission for them as his people
- 8) to teach them know how to enjoy God's blessing without stealing the credit or ignoring God once things are easier
- 9) to prove God's ways are good and his commands are to be obeyed—and that they lead to life and joy
- 10) to show that he always leads them with purpose and his plan is to do them good in the end (8:16)

Benefits of Discipline from "[The Discipline of the Lord](#)" by Charles Spurgeon

- We learn to discern the evil of sin.

- It teaches us the unsatisfactory nature of worldly things.
- Our frailty and weaknesses are exposed.
- We learn the value of prayer.
- We look to the Bible for comfort, wisdom, direction, and power.
- God himself becomes our teacher.
- We learn to rest in the will of God
- We grow in our spiritual education.
- We learn to rest in God's timing for righting wrongs as our just judge.

Trained by Trials

"The writer tells us two things God does to raise us right, beginning with fatherly discipline. The Greek word for this is *paideia*, from the word *pais*, meaning 'child,' and speaks of the raising of a child. This is the primary way we should think about God's treatment of us in our trials. Just as a parent trains up a child, subjecting him or her to a process of education and arranging demanding experiences designed to spur development, so God also leads us through this life. As with a son or daughter in childhood, our whole lives are preparation for the age of maturity that waits for us in the life to come. This explains so many of our trials. God sends us challenges and hardships, not out of spite, but out of paternal love. Trials are designed to make us stronger, to apply force against the muscle of our faith to push us forward toward our spiritual potential." Richard Phillips⁵

"This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort or another—it is to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast....God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore He takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Himself." J. I. Packer⁶

"By affliction He teaches us many precious lessons, which, without it we should never learn. By affliction He shows us our emptiness and weakness, draws us to the throne of grace, purifies our affections, weans us from the world, makes us long for heaven. In the resurrection morning we shall all say, "It is good for me that I was afflicted." We shall thank God for every storm." J. C. Ryle⁷

For Further Study

Discipline: Heb. 12:3-11; Ps. 94:12-13; 119:67, 75; Prov. 3:11-12; Rev. 3:19; Hosea 6:1; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 1 Cor. 11:32; Job 5:17-18; Deut. 8.

Training: 1 Tim. 4:8; 2 Tim. 3:16; Eph. 6:4; Titus 1:8.

Testing: Gen. 22:1-2 (Heb. 11:17); Ex. 16:4; 15:25; 20:20; Deut. 8:2, 26; Ps. 17:3; 1 Thess. 2:4; James 1:12; 1 Peter 4:12; Hebrews 12.

- "[How Does God Discipline Christians?](#)" by D. A. Carson at thegospelcoalition.org
- "[How Do I know If I'm Being Disciplined by God?](#)" by John Piper at desiringgod.org/interviews
- "[Thriving Under God's Discipline: Trading Temporary Pain for Eternal Gain,](#)" at reformedfellowship.net

⁵ Phillips, R. D. (2006). *Hebrews*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 543). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

⁶ J. I. Packer, quoted in Phillips, R. D. (2006). *Hebrews*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 544). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

⁷ J. C. Ryle quoted in Phillips, R. D. (2006). *Hebrews*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 544). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

- [“The Father’s Love in Disciplining”](#) by Dustin Crowe at indycrowe.com
- [“The Blessing of God’s Discipline”](#) by J. Mark Beach at Ligonier.org
- [“The Discipline of the Lord”](#) and [“The Divine Discipline”](#) by Charles Spurgeon