



# To Save His Soul from Death

## ***A stern tenderness***

*I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity,  
I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men,  
but my steadfast love will not depart from him...*

2 Samuel 7:14ff

We've all seen a child giving the stereotypical supermarket tantrum: child hitting his mother screaming "but I want one now!" By contrast, every parent envies the mother who can quietly say, "I'll give you some raisins when we get home" and have the statement accepted meekly – or even with anticipation! What is the secret? How can we teach self-control as a godly trait from an early age?

First let us recognise that our culture's norms do not contain the answer. We live in a society where everyone's aim in life is pleasure, the one great evil is disciplined restraint. How may we respond as Christians living in New Zealand? One place to start is to discipline our own children according to the Word of the Lord. Right now, our society is moving away from parental discipline to governmental discipline. Recent billboards have aptly labelled this "Nanny State".

In the face of various legislation trying to take away the parent's right to raise their children, let us review how the Lord wants us to raise our children, particularly in the area of discipline. We can do this in two steps.

- Section 1: We will observe how the Lord disciplines his own beloved children.
- Section 2: We can apply this in practice today with a look at Scripture and some good parental examples.

### **Section 1: The Lord Disciplines His People**

Our children are a rich blessing from the Lord – a blessing spanning generations. Psalm 127 calls them a "*heritage from the Lord.*" Yet, while they are a gift from the Lord, they are only given in trust. Just as we do not even own ourselves, so we do not own our children. They belong to God and, with us, they are his special people called to be his own.

Deuteronomy 6 makes it clear that God's ownership of his people spans the generations, "*that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.*"

Because God owns our children for their good, we must take our cue from the Lord as to how to deal with his people, our children. First of all, we can learn something about human nature and sinful rebellion from how the Lord disciplines his people. Two principles of discipline truly stand out in Scripture:

- the Lord disciplines his people severely: stopping at nothing to break their pride.
- the Lord disciplines his people tenderly: pleading as he goes, for their humble obedience.

Two main passages of Scripture will clarify this in both Old and New Testaments: Lev 26 and Heb 12. I know that nobody ever opens their Bibles when reading an article, but open yours anyway as

we study these passages. As you read, notice the applications this might have for us in dealing with our children: both the lengths the Lord will go to in order to humble his people, and his tender reasons for discipline. Here I will emphasise and heavily summarise:

### **Leviticus 26:1-13 says:**

*You shall not make idols, but shall reverence my holy day and sanctuary. If you obey my commandments, I will bless you richly. Very richly. All that you do will prosper. Moreover, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people."*

*But if you do not obey, spurning my statutes, I will do this to you: visit you with panic, disease, fever, and plundering enemies. **"And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze."***

*Wild beasts will attack you and your roads will be deserted. "And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, **and I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins.**"*

***"if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled** and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob ... Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, **I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God.** But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD."*

In the text above, obedience receives the Lord's blessing and his presence. Rebellion receives pain. Then he repeats this four times in increasing degrees of severity (I missed out two). Each time he repeats the phrase about *"sevenfold discipline for your sins."*

God promises four times to counter rebellion with pain until his son Jacob is a cowering wreck. But notice both the Lord's severity and his motivation. If at any point Jacob is humbled, then finally, when all is said and done, God is still their covenant God who saves them from slavery to sin. Staggering. It might almost be termed the Lord's desperation: he is that intent on humbling his people so that he can love them. Also note God's persistence: he is just not going to give up on them. This gives us a true perspective on discipline. For our own children we must learn what could be called this tender severity. It is not a severity devoid of love, but a severity *born out of love*. Deep love.

But, you say, should we also deal out death and starvation as God does? No, that would be to misunderstand the text. Very briefly, the key to applying this passage is that the Lord is dealing with (as it were) a single person, "Jacob", whom he prunes precisely *in order to preserve* his life to perfection. We too must discipline in order to restore.

But although discipline is to restore, not to obliterate, we must not be too hasty to become slack. Remember that the end result of *undisciplined* rebellion is death (Prov 23:13; Deut 21:18-21). This leaves us responsible to nip rebellion in the bud may God help us – before death becomes the natural result.

### **Hebrews 12:**

Lest we think the Lord's idea of discipline is only an Old Testament legacy, Hebrews says the same things. God has just listed some terrible tortures experienced by his people, and then in chapter 12 he tells us the purpose: to perfect their faith.

*12:1ff: Let us also throw off sin, and in faith of our own, look "to Jesus, the founder and **perfecter** of our faith.*

*"In **your** struggle against sin you have **not** yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (by contrast with the men of faith above). And 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** (literally **whips**) 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."*

Notice how the author to the Hebrews quotes the Proverbs to show that God disciplines his people like a father disciplines his son. Then he says that children who are not disciplined are not unloved – they are not true sons! Neither is God talking about some kind of easy-going discipline. He even refers back them to those parts of the church which have shed blood to achieve perfection!

Once again at the end of the quote, he spells out for us the reason for the painful discipline. All this is for the tender purpose of perfection, peace and righteousness: *"For our good, that we may share his holiness."*

## **Humility**

My own experience of the Lord's discipline is no different. Hardship brings humility. We reach the end of our own strength, and have at last to fall back on His goodness. And he is always good – once we have submitted to his will. *"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him."* (Lamentations 3:25)

The other possible outcome of the Lord's discipline is hardness of heart, as when God plagued Pharaoh. It is the kind of hardness that occurs in those whom the Lord does not love, and whose hearts he does not soften. This 'discipline' ends in eternal death. Now, you say, is this what we might get from the discipline of our children? Shouldn't God guarantee his softening work on our children?

But before we blame the sufficiency of God's work, let us look to our own work. Hardness of heart is what comes of a pride that is not used to being broken. If we do teach humility to our children, they will indeed develop the pride of which God says, *"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

It is my own experience at the hand of my parents that a little hardship is good for the humility. There are times when I recall my attitude to my parents as plainly stubborn and rebellious. That attitude took a miraculous turn once that well-known board of correction had been applied to my seat of knowledge.

People of God, the Lord knows what is the best way for us to deal with our children. And, praise his name, he has told us what it is! Let us not proudly ignore him.

So may we not be soft, but in tender love throughout, may we be driven to the severity that is required to rescue our children. As for the practical, God has given us plenty of advice on how to discipline, but I will deal with some of that in section two.

## **Section 2: Discipline of Children in Practice**

*Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from death.*

Proverbs 23:13, 14

Discipline by example is a powerful thing. In this section the example of well-known and wise parents will serve us a very practical base. I will draw together wisdom from three sets of parents.

My parental examples are Tedd Tripp who authored *Shepherding a Child's Heart* and my own parents, Bruce and Lois Hoyt, all of whom the Lord has richly blessed with wisdom and experience in this area. Some of this is merely advice from experience. Don't take it all as 'gospel', but weigh it yourself and apply it as well as you can.

Discipline is a very broad thing. It includes both:

- verbal and physical love (hugs, holds & good-night kisses).
- verbal and physical correction.

**But the big picture is love** which must permeate the correction. The correction is just momentary and directive – like punctuation in the grand sentence of love. Discipline in its broader sense encompasses all of this (Deut 6:5ff). This article will deal primarily with that small element of physical correction, but within the context of the grand picture of love.

This context of love is founded in the quality of the parents' marriage. The child responds to the care and respect that parents have for each other, and is secure in their loving marriage. By observation, marriages where there is love and respect are also those where children are secure, and where discipline is most effective. My father has a maxim, "The best thing you can do for your children is to love their mother (or father)."

But while love is the constant background, this is not primarily an article about love. It is about practical elements of corrective discipline. Not much good advice is available from our society in this practical area – partly because our society prefers to avoid restraint and discipline completely. If this article seems hard to you, remember that is because we are talking about the hard part – unglamorous, but necessary: the punctuation of the sentence.

There are many different kinds of good discipline including the giving of privileges, removal of privileges, encouragement, reproof, and physical correction. All of these are necessary and useful. However, in view of topical trends, it is worth giving primary attention here to physical correction.

In Part 1 we looked at the Lord's severe but tender discipline of his own children. Now we will apply this in concrete terms. In a kind of reference style, I hope to answer the Why, What, and How...

### **Reference Section**

1. **Why** discipline? *To restore* the child to the circle of blessing – to obedient humility. (Lev 26:44ff) Tedd Tripp in his excellent book *Shepherding a Child's Heart* gives a simple graphical tool similar to these, which we can draw for our children to reinforce the loving message of discipline. Figure A is a happy child inside the circle of blessing, under the crown of God. Figure B is a sad, cowering child not living under God's blessing. The purpose of discipline is to move our children back into the circle of blessing.
2. **What** to discipline? Plain and simple: *rebellion*; whether in action, speech, or body-language. We saw this in the way God deals with his son Jacob. Discipline was promised only for continued rebellion. The strength of this approach is that it focuses on the child's motive, not his action. The severity of discipline is proportional to the rebellion of the child's attitude, not to your grief over the broken vase. You need to find out why the child offended before you discipline. It may help to observe the child's face. A veteran teacher once told me that a rebellious child's heart is often written plainly on his face. The most common evidence of

rebellion is *disobedience*. Tedd Tripp says to require obedience without *challenge*, without *excuse*, and without *delay*.

3. **How often** use physical discipline? Whatever you think the child needs depending on the state of his heart. Prov 13:24 simply says "*diligently*".
- My father used the maxim "If you smack in love, you cannot smack too much." Most of my parents' boys were very hard of heart, and at certain stages would receive multiple smacks in one day. Being softer, the girls rightly got off much lighter. Some children may respond very well to rebuke and seldom require a smack at all.
  - Because you hate to cause pain, it can be a temptation to become a nag in your smacking by frequently using painless little "stop that" reactionary smacks. That merely addresses behaviour, not attitude, and because it is quite controlling, it can be exasperating for your children. The greater pain of estrangement can result. You have not left them enough space to decide on obedience themselves, and you may dull them to proper discipline. A harder smack less often, with proper communication, can address the attitude of the heart (and, consequently, the behaviour).
  - You do not always have to discipline every sin if there are more important lessons being learned. Thankfully, the Lord does not rigidly discipline us for every sin that we do he restores and sanctifies us bit by bit. It is better not to address an issue until you are ready to see it out to the end.
4. **How** to use physical discipline? Heb 12:11 plainly says to use pain; the Proverbs say the '*rod*'. This must be done in love that is expressed. Prov 2-4 are an expression of this fatherly love.
- Don't over-correct. Often just a word can be enough to direct a child, and non-physical methods of discipline are valid in many cases. But for rebellion, the Scriptural language clearly assumes the common use of something physical as a base: words used are the *rod*, *stripes*, *chastisement*. Some say the '*rod*' is merely a biblical metaphor for some kind of emotional restraint. This view does not do justice to the other words used in the Bible.
  - It is best to use an instrument that will cause sharp pain, but only briefly. We can be inclined to shy away from discussion of the actual instrument used, but the Bible makes no such exception. My own parents used a sturdy flat stick. You need something stronger than a wooden spoon, and preferably flat so that it stings without bruising. A secure handle also helps you avoid mistakes. Apply it to a child's seat which has plenty of natural padding so that a mistake is difficult.

We barely have time to scratch the surface of practical matters here, but for a much fuller reference, refer to one of the books mentioned in footnotes 2 and 3.

## **Case Study**

Depending on the child's age and any number of factors, some variant of this scene may be a regular occurrence in a good parent's household:

*"Duncan, you're not to say 'No' to your mother. You know that. Now, go into your bedroom."*

*Duncan runs to the bedroom. "I'm going to give you two smacks." <Smack, smack>. Duncan cries.*

*"Now, do you know why you had to have a smack?"*

*"Because I said 'No'" he admits (on a good day).*

*"Yes. It is rebellion. And it is important that you obey Mum. The Proverbs say 'a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother'"*

*You continue "But let me hug you <big hug>. I don't like to smack you, but when you disobey, I have to for your own good. I love you <another hug>."*

Let's look at some features of this common-sense scene.

- You are communicating in calm, reasonable tones and also take time to listen to Duncan.
- Duncan knows before the smack exactly why he has to have it.
- He knows you're in control because you promise a specific number of smacks.
- Duncan is given an opportunity to verbalise his sin, helping him to understand it. Without the smack, Duncan's answer may well have been defiant: "But I didn't want to obey!" With the smack, he is humbled.
- After the smack you again communicate your love in words and actions. You may want to change the subject to a more pleasant topic, making it clear that the sin is forgiven and the slate clean, "What are you going to build on your train this afternoon?"
- Where appropriate, you should have Duncan go and ask his mum for forgiveness.

**Continued Defiance:** What is to be done when defiance continues? Once in a while Duncan will continue in defiance despite your discipline. He may show this by not hugging you or by continuing to mope. This is a tough situation, but God's record tells that it is a common one. We need to recall our research in Part 1 of this article where God promised repeatedly to repay the sins of his beloved people sevenfold if they did not turn and listen to him. God knows that our sin is a much worse long-term enemy than the temporary pain of discipline.

Sometimes the answer to continued defiance is simply to administer the discipline again. Other times it is best to cease until the next offence and let the Scripture you have spoken settle in. This is not an easy situation, and you need the support and assistance of your spouse in this task. Plan your responses to continued defiance.

Persevere. A story of Bruce Ray's will draw this out:

*"One day we took Susanna to the bank, and the teller gave her a lollipop. She wouldn't say, 'Thank you,' so we made her return the lollipop. Then we took her outside where we talked to her, spanked her, and loved her. When we took her back into the bank, we promptly went through the whole thing again. Susanna still refused to say, 'Thank you.'*

*"As the day progressed it became apparent that this would be a very crucial test in her life. Susanna was the most stubborn of our children. She was determined that no matter how many times we spanked her, she would not say, 'Thank you.' For three long days we put her into situations where she knew she had to say those words, and when she didn't, we spanked her. Those were three of the most miserable days of my life. I didn't know what else to do, except to persevere in consistency. Finally, on the third day, she said it. What a time of rejoicing for all of us! And what a change in Susanna! She was so happy that she phoned one of the women in the church and said, 'Aunt Nancy, I obeyed. I said "thank you", and now I'm happy!'"*

**Age factors:** Tedd Tripp indicates that the majority of smacking occurs before five years of age, and Bruce Ray says *"As the twig is bent, so goes the tree' ... When the rod is used diligently in the formative years, it will be used less frequently in the transitional or teenage years."*

What does this really mean for how soon we should smack? The Scripture gives no direct answers, possibly because the right answer varies between children. But the principle is very simple we have already covered it. We smack because of rebellion. As soon as we can be sure that our child is acting in rebellion, and not listening to our voice, we should consider smacking. Each parent must decide when this is the case.

**Security and Teens:** The training package we've talked about contains verbal and physical love, plus verbal and physical correction. Only a consistent diet of this mix can produce the security that your child needs. This security will be evident from the earliest ages and will continue on through his teenage years.

An example will serve to illustrate the security that your child needs. For many years my parents tried to teach me to play the piano under the tutelage of my mother. It was always a drudge to me. Toward the end of this experience in my early teens, I became very rebellious. I hated the drudgery, the correction, and even the consistency and patience! (for which they deserved my gratitude).

Then a strange thing happened. As a teen, my parents had largely stopped smacking me, but I began to crave my parents' spankings! I vividly remember feeling cheated for not receiving them. You see, even though I had created the conflict myself, I still loathed the constant tension, and experience had taught me that spankings bring restored relationships and love.

Full of insight, Bruce Ray spells out for us what was going on.

*"The teen wants and needs a stable home life. He will rock the boat and try his wings, and to some extent that's good. A sensitive parent will give him some room along with much loving counsel and guidance. But the teen also wants to know the boundaries. How far can he fly? How late can he stay out? Sometimes he feels like a prince; other days he feels like a toad. Do you love him with his pimples and whiskers as much as you loved him before? He needs reassurance, the reassurance that you care enough about him to discipline him when he errs. 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline.'*

*"The rod is less prominent now, because he has already been trained to respond in obedience. Verbal reproof will frequently be sufficient to put him back on course. But when it fails, that means he needs to be retrained. The rod must be brought back out to physically reinforce the lesson ... The rod is a symbol of your loving care and concern: he has been trained with it all his days."*

**Worship and Prayer:** When we discipline our children, we are teaching them about God. Biblical discipline is not take-it-or-leave-it for Christians. If you never make your child go to bed, but only try to convince him that he is tired, then you are also teaching him to obey God only when he feels God's diagnosis is right.

According to Bruce Ray, *"The parent is preaching a sermon to his child. He is preaching a sermon which reveals something of the nature of God, something of the nature of man ... something of the character and nature of sin, and also of judgment or the consequences of that sin ... In fact, we may even go so far as to say that biblical discipline is an act of divine worship. How so? It is glorifying God through obedience to Him; it is revealing, instructing, and manifesting something of the character and nature of God to the child."* Do we accurately portray God as we wield the rod? Do we accompany it with the Word?

If this is true – that we are prophets in our homes – then who is adequate to such a task? If discipline is an act of worship, then surely prayer must be primary. We need to pray – first of all for ourselves in our weakness, to Him who *"is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think"* (Eph 3:20). Then we need to pray for our children – in order that we may *"save their souls from hell"* by the turning of their hearts toward their Heavenly Father.

May God be our support and success.

Berwyn Hoyt

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