

## Zechariah — What Do I Need To Know About God's Discipline?

**December 14, 2014**

Welcome to CrossWinds. This Christmas we are studying the birth of Jesus from the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke.

Our theme for the series comes from Luke 2:15-17.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and **see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.**" And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And **when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.** Luke 2:15–17 (ESV)

We have two goals this Christmas.

1. **See** what really happened on that first Christmas by studying the first two chapters of Luke.
2. **Tell** our friends and community the Christmas story, just like the shepherds did on the first Christmas.

This Wednesday is our Christmas Eve service at the SAMI Center at 5:30 p.m. We hope you are encouraged in Christ as we study and celebrate his birth. We encourage you to invite friends and neighbors to come and hear the good news of the Christmas story.

Let me briefly recap.

The first week we looked at Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah in the temple that his wife Elizabeth would have a son in her old age. We learned that we can trust God to keep his word.

The second week of the series we looked at Gabriel's visit to Mary. She is a wonderful example to learn from when God changes our plans. Sometimes

God tears up the script we have for our lives and gives us a new one. How do we respond? Mary simply said, “God, I am your servant, let it be to me according to your word.” She is a model for us to follow.

Last week we looked at Mary and Elizabeth and learned about the importance of Christian friendship and Christian community. We don’t just need Bible information but we need Christians friends to walk with us through life and support us in hard times.

This week we come to the birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah’s nine months of absolute silence are about to end. He can finally talk to his wife.

Let’s read a portion of our text.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. Luke 1:57–66 (ESV)

When Gabriel announced to Zechariah in the temple that he would have a son, he didn’t believe it. He wanted proof. He wanted a sign to know that he could trust God to keep his word.

He didn’t need a sign. He could have waited nine months. He could have been satisfied that he was talking with Gabriel. Gabriel isn’t a garden variety angel. He is extremely powerful. His presence strikes fear into everyone he meets. Gabriel’s presence should have served as his sign.

Zechariah got his sign. He became the sign. He was mute and deaf until John's birth. God disciplined Zechariah for his lack of faith for nine months. Zechariah's story is a reminder that just like Zechariah, there are seasons when God may discipline us.

God's discipline is often misunderstood. Many questions come to mind. Why does God discipline us? How does God discipline us? What is the purpose of God's discipline?

This morning, we are studying God's discipline on our lives. This is very important for us to understand.

God's discipline usually involves suffering. It may be physical suffering. It may be financial suffering. It may be the loss of a job or the loss of a relationship we hold dear. God uses this suffering to discipline us. It is no different than a parent disciplining his or her child. You bring hard times into your children's lives to discipline them, to correct them, to help them to grow and mature.

When God brings suffering into our lives, we need to understand reasons why we suffer.

1. **Christians do not suffer to pay for their sin.** I hear this all the time. "The reason I am suffering in my life is because I deserve it." "God is punishing me for my sin." "God is making me pay for cheating on the test." "God is making me pay for the things I said to my friend." "God is making me pay for my sin." That simply is not true. The Bible says that for those who do not know Jesus, this life will have little sips of punishment for sin. For Christians, Jesus died on the cross to pay for all of our sin. He paid for it in full. There is no double

jeopardy. God will not make us pay for the sin Jesus already paid for. That is good news. When we suffer God is not making us pay for our sin.

That doesn't mean there is no connection between our sin and suffering.

**2. Sometimes we suffer because sin always has natural consequences.**

Sin, by its very nature, produces suffering. When you sin, you will suffer. Sin is always a stupid choice. Sin has consequences build into it. If we lie, one of the consequences is people don't trust us. If we speed, a natural consequence is a speeding ticket. If we use our words to tear people down, we won't have many friends. One of the verses that reminds us of the built-in penalty for sin is Romans 1:27, where it talks about homosexuality.

...and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. Romans 1:27 (ESV)

The Bible tells us homosexuality has consequences of that sinful act built into the sin. When we sin, God doesn't make us pay for our sin but we will suffer as a natural consequence of sin. Sin is always stupid. It is like hugging a porcupine. There are built-in consequences.

**3. Sometimes God brings extra consequences to our sin to break us from our sin.** Sometimes God extends suffering for our sin beyond its natural consequences to correct us of our sin, to break us of our sin. This week I was reading about the Israelites getting ready to go in the Promised Land. Many times they broke faith with God and distrusted him. As a result, God decided they would never enter the Promised Land. They would wander in circles for 40 years until everyone died off and only their children would go in. Those

consequences seemed very stiff. Then I remembered this is the same generation that was fed by manna from the sky every day. They had the pillar of fire by night and the cloud over the tabernacle by day. They had daily supernatural occurrences of God with them. They conveniently forgot how God humbled the entire nation of Egypt with plague after plague. They forgot what happened at the Red Sea. They forgot they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground while the army of Pharaoh was swallowed alive by the same body of water. They forgot the Ten Commandments and Mt. Sinai. Finally God said "Enough is enough. You will walk in a circle until you die!" That was God's discipline of their sin to break them of their sin. Sometimes God does that. At least Zechariah's discipline was only nine months, not 40 years!

4. **Sometimes we suffer not because of sin but simply because God plans to mature us.** In God's love, he allows suffering in our lives that has nothing to do with a corrective response to our sin. Sometimes God brings suffering in our lives simply because he is training us. He is maturing us. He is teaching us to rely on him more and know him better. Let's put our fingers in the Bible and trace out what this looks like in action to see if we can learn more about why God disciplines us.

**God disciplines us out of his fatherly love.**

Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. Deuteronomy 8:5 (ESV)

Every good parent disciplines his or her children. When you discipline your child, you discipline them out of love, not out of hate. If your children refuse to listen to you or if they are endangering themselves, you discipline them because

you love them. We don't discipline other people's kids. We discipline our kids out of love. Whenever God brings hard times in our lives to discipline us or correct us we must remember why God does it. He does it from his loves for us. God's discipline is always rooted in his incredible love, not his hate, just like a father's discipline of his son.

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** 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? Hebrews 12:5–9 (ESV)

There is a lot we can learn from these verses.

**Discipline** means a direct response to sin in our lives designed to correct us. This is the same as a parent disciplining his or her children to correct them from sin, stubbornness or rebellion. God will do the same thing by bringing hard times in our lives to correct us. Remember, he does it all because he loves us so much. He disciplines like a good father, not out of hate.

**Chastise** means the entire range of trials and tribulations which God brings into our lives to mortify sin and build faith. It is not a trial brought into our lives to correct us from sin. This is a little like good coach. A good coach puts his team through hard practices so they are prepared for the game. In the same way, God will sometimes bring adversity into our lives simply to grow us or mature us in our love of him.

**God will bring hard times in my life because he loves me.** This verse flips our normal thinking on its head. We say, “God, if you loved me, how can you let this happen to me?” The Bible says that it is because God loves us he brings hard times in our lives. Those hard times are evidence of God’s love. He only disciplines his children; he only trains and matures his children. He does it all out of love.

**If we respected the wisdom on our earthly father’s discipline, we should respect the wisdom of our heavenly father’s discipline.**

Some of you were spanked as a child. Some of you spanked your children. Nobody disciplines his or her child perfectly. Nobody spans his or her child perfectly.

Today, we hear that those who spank their children are abusive and hateful. We hear spanking is evil. That is unbiblical. Spanking, if it is done right, is evidence of a father’s love for his children.

Whoever refuses to spank his son hates him, but whoever loves his son disciplines him from early on. Proverbs 13:24 (GW)

Just as a spanking is evidence of a father’s love for a child because he wants to turn his child from sin and destruction, when God spans us it is evidence of his love for us, not evidence that he hates us. Let’s face it. Sometimes we deserve a good spanking to turn us from our sin, even as adults. God is big enough and loving enough to do it.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Revelation 3:19 (ESV)

The word reprove means *to show in the wrong*. If God loves you, he will show you that you are in the wrong and he will discipline you, which means to correct you of your sin. Jesus said, “Be quick to repent and avoid God’s discipline.” The key thing to remember is God’s corrective discipline and the trials he lets into our lives to improve us are all sourced in God’s incredible love for us.

**God’s discipline is always a blessing to do us good.**

Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproveth; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty. Job 5:17 (ESV)

This is a completely different picture than we are accustomed to. If God is bringing suffering in your life to correct you of sin or if God is letting you go through hard times and trials in life that are not related to sin, you are blessed. You are not cursed. If you are suffering today and it has brought you to your knees and it has you at the end of your wits and it has you repenting of your sin, you are blessed. Look at this amazing promise from God. We read it but we have a hard time believing it.

And we know that for those who love God *all things work together for good*, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

All things include the hard times. That includes the deaths of those we love. That includes cancer. That includes defeat in sports. That includes life-threatening injuries. That includes even the process of aging, physical weakness, pain and death. God promises to use all of that suffering for our good and his glory. All of that suffering matures us.

This was even true of Jesus.



Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.  
Hebrews 5:8 (ESV)

Jesus learned obedience through suffering. If God did good in Jesus' life through his suffering we can rest assured that he will do good in our lives through our suffering. Suffering and hard times cannot and will not thwart God's plans to do good in our lives. They are intended to grow us and make us more like Jesus.

For a moment, let's be brutally honest. Virtually everyone who has not suffered in life is shallow, unmotivated, self-absorbed, and lacking in character. You know it and so do I. If we succeeded in avoiding all suffering and discipline we would develop in ourselves and in our children the very sort of character we least admire.

God's discipline on our lives is not just sourced in God's love, it is God's very blessing upon us.

**God's discipline of our lives is better than anyone else's discipline of our lives.**

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. 1 Corinthians 11:31–32 (ESV)

This sound like a mind-bender. It is actually straight forward. If we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. That means when we look in the mirror, we don't see ourselves as that selfish, that prideful, or that egotistical. We don't see our sin as that bad.

Have you been around people who are blind to their own sin? They don't see how their actions hurt others. They are blind to their self-absorbed nature.

That is all of us to varying degrees. We are blind to our sin so we would never judge ourselves appropriately for our sin.

Nobody else around us is in a good position to judge us properly. We are skilled at masking our sinfulness to others. Even our spouses only know us partially.

Here comes God. He loves us. He knows us fully. He sees our selfishness, ego and pride. Out of his immense love he says, "I love my kids. I love them too much to not correct and mature them." He brings suffering in our life to do it. In response we get on our knees. We pray. We listen to the Holy Spirit and start to see the sin in our character. We repent. We cling to the grace of God and become more like Jesus. It is all for our good.

One of the problems we have with God disciplining us is it always seems too hard and too long. Nine months of silence for Zechariah? Isn't that discipline a little overdone? Anybody agree on that one? Here is the deal. God knows exactly how hard to discipline us and how long to discipline us to correct us of our sin. He never disciplines us longer than is necessary because he loves us and he is the perfect father! That means God's discipline on our lives is usually harder and longer than we think is necessary because we are more sinful and stubborn than we are willing to admit. Remember, if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. We think we look pretty good but God sees us like we actually are.

Remember that God's discipline in our life is the perfect discipline because he knows us and our sin better than we know ourselves.

## **The result of God's discipline is a life of holiness, character and integrity.**

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character, men of integrity with no weak spots. James 1:2-4 (J.B. Phillips)

James was talking about trials and temptations that come into our lives not as corrections from sin but God brings them into our lives to mature us. When we endure them and mature under them we become men and women of character and integrity with no weak spots.

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. Hebrews 12:5–11 (ESV)

Here is the same idea. Discipline is always painful but on the back side of God's discipline is a holy and righteous life.

How many of us want to be men and women of holiness, character, integrity and righteousness? If you want to be that kind of man or woman, the way to get there is not saying 50 Hail Marys. It is not attending church. It is not having Christian friends. The path to holiness, character and integrity is only through the door of trials and suffering. That is the path where you learn to depend on God, rely on God, repent of sin, and have a changed life.

One of the ways you can respond to this message is telling God that while you aren't seeking his discipline or trials, you understand why he allows them in the lives of the children he loves. Tell God that holiness, character and integrity are so important to you and you are OK with him bringing suffering into your life,

if that is what it takes to make you a man or woman of holiness, character, righteousness and integrity.

**The result of a disciplined life is a hunger to seek God and his Word.**

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law... Psalm 94:12 (ESV)

One of the things we struggle with as Christians is an appetite for God and his Word. There are so many things distracting us. There is television. There is the Internet. There is e-mail. There are all of our kids' sports programs. There is even the distraction of church. We often have little time to think, pray, read the Bible and reflect on what God is saying to us.

Let me tell you what happens when trials and suffering comes into our lives. We find time for seeking God and reading his Word in a hurry. The television goes off. We find a place to be alone. We get on our knees. We desperately seek God.

One of the great blessings of suffering that God brings in our lives either when he correct us of sin or is simply maturing us is we see things in God's Word that we missed for years. The Bible seems to take on new life. We listen as we read the Bible like we haven't for years. The largest steps of spiritual growth that make lasting changes happen in times of suffering and difficulty.

"Suffering so unbolts the door of the heart, that the Word hath easier entrance." - Richard Baxter.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 (ESV)

Paul was a very self-sufficient guy. He was brilliant. He could think his way through just about anything. He could speak his way through anything. When you have the kind of intellect that Paul enjoyed, one of the problems you run up against is you start to rely on yourself instead of God. God, in his love for Paul, brought him into a time of incredible affliction while in Asia so he was literally at the end of himself. He was afraid he would die. He had no hope. He had no strength. He had nothing he could do to save himself, but that was all good. All he could rely on was God.

When the bottom dropped out of Paul's world, he realized God was carrying him. He could rely on God to keep him and sustain his life. That is what Paul discovered in the most severe adversities of life.

Many of us can also attest to this as we have faced trials and suffering beyond our ability to endure. In financial trials, checks showed up mysteriously in the mail. In physical trials, God gave us just enough strength to make it through the day. In emotional trials, God had people call to encourage us in our time of need. Soon, you realize that when you can't carry yourself God is carrying you!

## **Conclusion**

My friends, this is a hard message for some of us to swallow. Too many of us were weaned on the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. It isn't true. The truth is that because God loves us so much, we will suffer. We will suffer more than non-Christians because God pays special love and correction on his children. Remember this is why God disciplines us and matures us through

trials and suffering. It is sourced in his fatherly love. It is always meant to be a blessing, not a curse. It is always the proper trial for us because only God knows us truly. He will never discipline us more than is necessary. The result is always a life of holiness, character, integrity and righteousness, the very character we admire. The result is we become a man or woman who seeks God and has a hunger for his Word because our suffering has trained us to turn to him and rely on him.

God is good, especially in his discipline. Please stand as I close in prayer.



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