

# Discipline in the School of God - Part 1

by J.B. Stoney

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*The sermon explores the nature of God's discipline through the story of Adam, emphasizing conviction, correction, and the path to restoration.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 15:6

**Topics:** "Faith And Obedience", "Spiritual Discipline"

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## Description

J.B. Stoney preaches on the life of faith exemplified in Abraham's journey of discipline. Abram's call to leave his country and kindred, his struggle with ambition and dependence on God, his vacillation and restoration, and his testing of affections through the promise of a son all serve as lessons in faith and obedience. The discipline of relinquishing ties to nature, overcoming ambition, and surrendering affections are highlighted as crucial steps in the life of faith.

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## Transcript

No subject can be more deeply interesting to the saint than the nature and effect of that discipline which our God, in the plenitude of His love and wisdom, administers to His people.

Interesting as the subject is, and one so necessary to the secret exercises of the soul, yet it is little understood ; and the dealings of God are either counted strange, or wanting in any just or useful solution.

I propose, therefore, with the Lord's help, to present, in a series of papers, the peculiar discipline-its object and its effect, detailed to us, respecting each distinguished witness for God on earth.

I am induced to do this, in order to lead the minds of saints to study more a subject which of all others connects us most with the secret, loving thoughts of our God about us.

I accordingly begin with Adam. Though not properly heading the life of faith, yet he was the subject of severe discipline, and a remarkable illustration of its effects. Adam at one time needed no discipline-a state unknown to any since. When he fell, the day of discipline began. He who was made in the image of God, who approached nearer to God than any creature, even he, is now imbued with a spirit and a nature so adverse to God, that if he would live for God he must learn to renounce his own will, under the training of the mighty hand of God. To Adam this must have been a strange contrast to the once easy acquiescence of his mind with the will of God. Consequently he must have felt it the more ; and as the rebellion of his heart was being subdued, he must have contrasted the rule of God with the powerlessness

of innocence. As innocent, he fell ; as fallen, the hand of God exalts him not ignorantly nor passively, but in all the activity of anxious conviction. Innocence with him was a weak thing; the power of God subduing his nature no longer innocent was a great and mighty thing. He never would have sought the innocent state again, for he knew how weak it was. He knew now that he was able to do more with the power of God in a fallen state, than in unassisted innocence he ever could aspire to. As innocent, he had no sense of the value of life ; as fallen, yet believing in the revelation of God, he could now name the only creature he had yet named, the mother of all living. Under the sentence of death, he could speak of life, while as innocent, his penalty (if disobedient) was the loss of life. Innocence could have had no charm for him now. True, it was a moment of wondrous bliss; but it was a condition in which he could not stand; and under God's discipline, he stands morally higher, though conditionally lower. Adam was not deceived, but he was influenced. He early discovers the sensibilities of nature, which eventually led to his fall. Neither the world nor its glory, nor any class of the inferior creatures, can supply the craving of the sociable heart of Adam: for him there was not found an helpmeet, and it was " not good for him to be alone." The instincts of his nature were not satisfied; but when the one who satisfied them was deceived, he yields to her influence, as he himself admits: " She gave unto me, and I did eat." The first man disclosed this secret of his heart, that he was dependent on another; so that when Satan would not venture to beguile him, the object of his affections successfully influenced him. Now they have discovered themselves to be estranged from God, and they hide from His presence ; but now it is that the first lessons of His grace are propounded to them.

In discipline there is properly conviction of sin, as well as correction. Chastening or correction while there is suffering for sin is to make me a partaker of holiness. It is not to improve my nature, but so to convince me of its utter helplessness that I may be devoted unto God, which is the true and distinct meaning of sanctification, " without which no man shall see the Lord." There is exceeding pain in being convicted of sin : and if there be not a strong sense of the grace of God when we are convicted, there will be great depression, and a tendency to give up all in despair. Hence the exhortation, " Faint not when thou art convicted [Greek] of him." God does not convict hastily. He likes that, through the action of His word on our conscience, we may be the first to convict ourselves. It is very little use to tell a vain man of his faults ; it generally only urges him the better to conceal or extenuate them. It is very difficult to induce a person in ill-health and unconvinced of it, to adopt the necessary regimen; the more you remonstrate with such a one, the more strenuously will he endeavour to prove you mistaken, and you exasperate the malady you would assuage, but the really sin-convicted soul, like the patient tremblingly alive to his danger, is ready to receive every true correction and remedy that is offered.

When Adam had perfected the devices of his estranged and corrupted heart, when the aprons of fig-leaves are on and he hiding behind the trees, the voice of God searches him, although he seeks to escape from it. This is ever the tendency when light from the word first reaches us; we prepare to evade it, like the Pharisees leaving the presence of the Lord ; and therefore we are continually allowed to run to the end of our own plans, in order to learn how futile they are. Many a weary hour and long day is squandered in the execution of plans which, when tested by the searching word of God, must be entirely abandoned.

What is the nature of such plans ? Are they to distance and conceal you from God, or are they to bring you nigh unto Him, and to unfold to Him the minutest secrets of your heart ? This question tests them. Adam's were to cloak himself to escape the eye of God, and God allowed him to complete his schemes. Oh, how well each of us knows what this is! The poor prodigal tries the far country, but returns to his father's house a really humbled man. The many intentions are well tested and found to be as husks, and then the soul listens to the gracious tones of that voice from which it would fain have escaped.

It is a terrible thing to have to answer the question, " Where art thou ? " when you find out the insufficiency of all expedients to screen your conscience from the action of God's word. Did the prodigal like to answer it when feeding the swine? Did Peter like to answer it when enjoying the cheer of his Master's foes, in warming himself at their fire ? Did Adam like it when he remembered the position which he occupied in contrast with the one which he had forfeited ? The answer to the question, " Where art thou ?

" reveals the state of the conscience. The voice of God searches it, and if it has not learned that it is with God it has to do, the history of it must be, " I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." Concealment is the first effort of a suffering conscience. You neither like to see yourself, nor that any one else should see you, as you are ; and at the sound of God's voice you hide yourself, while concealment betrays distance as well as evasion. There must be some activity in the conscience when concealment is resorted to, especially when no penalty but the fact of your guilt being known is attached to it.

Concealment is, in fact, resorted to in order that we may appear better than we are. If we were willing that every one should see us as we are, there would be no concealment. A disguise was never yet adopted but for self exaltation. A lie was never maintained but to gain credit for what is not deserved. When God deals with us, we learn that " all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." The Word (see Heb. 4) acts on our conscience, " piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart " ; but it conducts to God.

It is with Him that 64 we have to do." The voice of the Lord penetrated the soul of Adam; and though girded with fig-leaves, which satisfied his own standard of morality, yet when the Word came, it tried him, and he was afraid, because he was naked-naked before God-and he hid himself.

It is important to study those two actions of the conscience ; for they give rise to much exercise and trouble in the soul, from being confounded. When a man has satisfied his own conscience, has adopted some system which conceals from himself and from others the real state of his soul, he floats for a while on peaceful waters ; but no sooner is the voice of the Lord heard, than all the elements seem to him involved in a mighty tornado. His sleep is broken; he is the convicted Peter of Luke 5: 8: he is " afraid."

The fact that he is naked and opened before God flashes fearfully before him, and so much the more because he had deceived himself, and his reputation with another had helped it on. The action of the Word of God would be desperate and overwhelming to the soul if we had not a " great High Priest passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God." He having been " tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin," supports us with His sympathy as soon as we are, through the action of the word, apart from the SIN, and His atonement, in full effect before God, sets the convicted conscience at rest at the throne of grace, there to receive the grace and mercy it needs.

This is just what Adam had to learn; consequently the voice pursues him to his hiding-place. It is in vain that we seek to escape the eye of God when He determines that it shall search us. If we " take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea," even there He will reach us! Oh, how the conscience that seeks escape from God overshadows itself within the foliage of this world 1 It engrosses itself with man's leading and most ambitious pursuits, but in vain.

The " watchers " will cry aloud, " Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, and shake off his leaves." The refuge of lies shall be exposed, and the soul must have its account with God. It must answer the question, " WHERE ART THOU ? " and all the answer needed is a tale of the plain and simple facts, " I

was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." The moment the soul of the saint is in full confession, he is in the region of forgiveness and restoration, and the Spirit expostulates with it as friend would with friend.

Adam had tried his own expedients, and they were vain and found to be profitless ; now he will listen to the grace that tells of a sure and perfect remedy. But mark 1 he first discloses the true and full condition of his soul; he confesses his fear-his nakedness-his effort to hide himself. Discipline had effected this. Now God instructs him. Adam is " meek," and God will teach him His way. He has learned that innocence was no protection against an undue influence, and that the absence of evil motive is no guarantee for true moral action.

He alone knew what innocence was, and yet it had been no safeguard. He was tempted, and he yielded to it. Conscious, indeed, that innocence was gone, and that evil motive could rule, he still trusts to himself to screen and rectify his disgrace. The expedient he adopted satisfied his own moral sense, and, what was infinitely more delusive, the moral sense of the one whose good opinion he loved to secure, and whose satisfaction was a bulwark to his own. This is a snare that few, even godly men, escape.

It is, in other words, the reputation with one's friends, pressed on the conscience, as the verdict of the last court of appeal, and conclusive to it, on any recurrence of anxious inquiry. There is a reciprocity in this kind of reputation. What you admit for me, I in return admit for you. If a girdle of fig-leaves measures the demand of your moral sense, and you accept it as sufficient for me, I in return do the same for you. This is the essence and true character of all human and religious reputation.

But the voice of God is heard, and Adam is troubled in his false and fallen position. That voice probes the entire condition, and at last he finds himself "naked and open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do." He confesses all, and he is now on the uppermost form for instruction, with an humble and a contrite spirit. To the divine challenge he admits, though with an excuse and mitigation, that he was tempted and had eaten. His justification lowers him morally, more than the charge he seeks to justify himself from. Yet it is a confession, and it is accepted as such ; and our God enters on the gracious work of unfolding His counsels.

To each actor in this wondrous scene is now meted the judgment due to the part he has played in it. Satan's sentence is first Pronounced, and while his doom is fixed, deliverance from his power and the eternal remedy of the gospel is declared to the listening and convicted Adam. It is the divine way, in restoring a soul, to establish it first in the power of God and in His grace. The draught of the fishes and the words of Jesus taught this to Peter; Luke 5. It is the groundwork for all godly recovery. When the heart is established, as David's was when Nathan said, " The Lord has taken away thy sin," then it can bear to hear what is the discipline necessary to correct that in it, which sin could act on. It is important to bear in mind the process by which the Lord reveals to the soul the discipline which He will impose. Whatever has provoked our failure is denounced, not in general terms, but in the proportion, and in the order too, of its guilt; and at the same time the true mode of deliverance is announced. Satan is not only sentenced, but the effect of his malice on man will be his own irremediable retribution. Man shall be avenged of his enemy. The serpent is not only assigned, as a signal judgment, to crawl and to eat dust, in perpetual hostility to the Seed of the woman, but his " violent dealing shall come down on his own pate his head shall be bruised.

The next brought up for judgment is the woman. She was the proximate cause of Adam's failure; but as the principal had received his sentence, she must now hear hers. She is condemned to times of great sorrow on every addition to the human family which she has been instrumental in subjecting to the power of death, with unconditional subjection to her husband, the want of which bore its first-fruits in her own fall, and led to Adam's also. Each transgressor is not only sentenced to a penalty corresponding to his guilt, but the relation in which that guilt has affected Adam is also markedly repaired.

God's servant must not be touched with impunity, but he must not err himself. The righteous God will avenge his cause, but only in righteousness. He cannot overlook the frailty of his servant, though he will rescue him when the unmitigated sentence is executed. When God enters into judgment, even-handed justice is dispensed. But acts are criminal in a greater or lesser degree: that which draws God's witness into distance from Him being more criminal in His sight, than the failure which the witness exposes by being drawn into distance.

The one who misleads another comes under a severer penalty than he who is misled ; though the latter is not exempted because he betrays moral feebleness. The infliction of penalties is not necessarily for correction. There was no hope of amending Satan, but yet severe penalties are inflicted on him because Adam had suffered through him. Man was God's representative on earth; injury to him was treason against God. Hence in divine discipline there is always a correction of the evil principle of nature, and also retribution for the trespass we may have committed on our fellow man.

This is exemplified in the sentence on Adam. His sin was yielding to his wife's request in opposition to the word of God. Probably he did not do so with intent; that is, with deliberation. But the word was not hid in his heart, and did not control him; for if it had he would not have hearkened to the voice of his wife. But having surrendered his place, he has to bear the penalty of it, and to become the great slave and labourer on that earth of which he was the ruler and prince.

Everything on it would bear indications of in subjection to its rightful master. To assuage the trial he must spend his life in toil in order to live; but in the end he must return to dust, as dust he was. There is deeply instructive teaching in all this ; even that if we surrender the position in which God places us in any relation, the one we retire to will inevitably notify to us, in fearful reminiscences, what has been our forfeiture. The smallest thorn and briar reminded Adam that he had surrendered his lordship in hearkening to the voice of his wife.

If David retire from the duties of the king (2 Sam. i i : i), he must surrender, in a painful way, the honours of one; 2 Sam. 15, etc. He is reminded how lightly he regarded them, by the successful rebellion of his own son. " Cursed be he who doeth the work of the Lord negligently." All the influence of Barnabas would not induce Paul to take Mark who had returned from Pamphylia. The refusal of the apostle reminded him how he trifled with, and abandoned the post once his, but which was easier lost than regained.

This is the nature of Adam's discipline. He is reminded by everything of that which he had surrendered, and the less carefully and diligently he laboured to subdue the numerous reminiscences of his failure, the more they increased, and the less able was he to sustain himself against them. By the sweat of his brow he mitigated his position for his own need. David returned, after a severe chastisement, to the throne. Mark was " profitable for the ministry " after the discipline had produced its effect.

Faith always walks above discipline, though learning from it. Adam hears the sentence on all, and in faith consenting to it,, rises above it, and calls his wife's name Eve, because she is the " mother of all living."

Faith reaches unto God, therefore it can submit to the position which judicially falls on an erring soul, and it can look to God for His own time and mode of deliverance. It accepts the punishment of its iniquity, not merely as retribution for it, but as correction.

Discipline has in fact produced its greatest effect, when the soul submits to it, as trusting in God. Adam shews this, for in thus naming his wife he makes amends to her for his former reproaches; and what was, in unsubdued nature, the agent of harm to him, is now, in the eye of faith, the channel of life. As disciplined and walking in faith, God clothes Adam, yet discipline must not be arrested nor reprieved. God drives him out and sends him to till the ground from whence he was taken, to find out what sort of a man he was, and to learn how his faith would sustain him.

It is in our immediate relations of life in the innermost circle, where there is least reserve, that we most truly disclose ourselves. A man who cannot rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God ? Power is more effectively applied at home than at a distance. If Adam is learning from discipline, it ought to be seen in his power to avoid the evil for which he was suffering. It does not appear that he does; for Eve assumes the place of naming his eldest son, again losing sight of her own place, and doubtless filling her first-born (which his name itself would suggest) with aspirations which led to his fearful contradiction of God's promise, while it was the painful evidence of her own misapprehension of it. There was the devastation of death where life was expected ; the fact that one child was murdered and the other the murderer, and that, the one in whom their hopes centred, must have been a trial to Adam which we can little conceive, but it was a discipline which produced its effects; for though it is said that Eve named Seth in the first instance, yet it is also written that Adam called his name Seth, shewing, as it appears to me, that he at length had learned what the discipline was sent to teach him; namely, to act for God, above all influence, and not to allow anything to distract him from the path of faith. He appears to have learned this in the last recorded act of his life; a very pleasing consummation, showing the effect of discipline, and a very fit and happy finale to his history.

To sum up. We learn from this history that innocence or absence of evil motive is no safeguard against influence ; that satisfying our own moral sense, or the moral sense of any one else, is no proof that we can answer, or have answered, to God's claim on us ; that if we cease to maintain our divinely appointed place we are sure to fall, and the word of God, which would have preserved us in our place, does not act on the heart outside that place ; but that in learning what it has been to follow our inclinations, our discipline will always be of a character to correct our failure, and to remind us, in very minute ways, as did the thorns to Adam, what our frailty has reduced us to.

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ABEL

Abel, as the first in faith on whom the penalty of sin was by birth entailed, must be one whose history we may expect to furnish us with outlines of that discipline, which a life eminent for faith would require. It is a mistake, and one which at times causes no little trial to the soul, to conclude, that because any line of truth or grace is strong in me, on that account nature is less assuming. The fact is the reverse ; for the more nature is made to feel its fall, the more will it assume ; and it is well to understand this. Had nature in its

first estate been of any lower order than it was, although the fall could not have lowered it more than it has, yet its aspirations and assumption to escape from the effects of the fall would not have been so violent and daring as they are. The fact of man having been made in the image and likeness of God, gives nature ground for assuming what it has forfeited ; and the more it is pressed to feel the immensity of the fall from its once high state, the more it struggles for recognition and assumes importance wherever it can. Hence it is that souls who are really in earnest to deny nature any position are opposed by it at every step, and thus learn practically that they alone who have suffered in the flesh have ceased from sin ; that only the cross of Christ frees from the power and thralldom of nature and the world ; and to this great moral truth learning death in discipline gives effect through God's grace. We learn that we are dead through the death of Christ, and that we are before God in Him, freed from all that was judged in that death. Consequently, the Father's discipline is to lead us into the practical realisation of this our position in Christ; so that we are not only dead in Him, but we reckon ourselves dead, the latter being the practical effect of the former, and discipline is the instrument for accomplishing that effect. The soul that fully learns its acceptance with God, as righteous before Him, is taught it must not be dependent on the nature from that which it is delivered, and outside of which is its existence. The apostle could say that he died daily, bearing about with him the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in his body. If our acceptance be veritable-if it be truly a deliverance from our natural state, ought we not to afford moral and practical evidence of its effect ? Nay, must it not be so ? For acceptance in righteousness being entirely above and beyond our natural condition, the more the one is enjoyed and maintained, the more the other is lost sight of. And such is the only worthy acknowledgment of this our high position. Can we maintain our natural condition and yet rejoice in deliverance from it ? If we rejoice in deliverance, must we not prove it by renunciation of that from which we are delivered ?

If Abel be the first witness of acceptance in righteousness, we shall find also that he was the first witness who, as accepted of God, was deprived of his natural life. He was a witness in one as well as in the other. If he testified of acceptance to the joy and rest of his own heart, he by death also testified how true and glorious that acceptance was ; so that " he being dead yet speaketh." This is the first order of discipline: " Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed as to sin." This is consequent on our life in Christ; for if living in Him, we ought to be dead in ourselves; and discipline, in its simplest and primary lessons, instructs us in this. There is no saint but must learn what death is ; it may be in the slow process of a continual dropping of constant small trials, or through one overwhelming calamity, or perhaps through a last illness : but in one way or another death must be learned, in order to make good to our souls their deliverance from it. And without this there cannot be testimony. Abel's history is very scanty in details, but it presents, with a vividness and vigour not to be surpassed, the two grand points in a believer's life: namely, acceptance with God, and death to every natural tie and sense-the former being the easy action of faith, the latter declared not willingly, but through violence, consequent on an altered and fallen condition, in an evil world, from which death gave relief. God allows the violence of Cain to afford an opportunity for the display of all this. He thereby declared His own grace, and Himself as the giver of it, while His servant and witness, although disciplined therein as to himself, occupied the highest place of service in the gospel, even that of suffering for righteousness' sake.

Let it then be granted that if I know acceptance well, death is my portion here, and that discipline will not overlook this ; for it is what makes the truth of my acceptance dearer to myself, and what witnesses it to others. In this consists the whole interest and instruction of Abel's history. He started in life, as we say, not according to the rule and direction given to Adam-to till the ground from whence he was taken ; Abel, on the contrary, is a keeper of sheep, which discloses at the outset that he had no intention of improving the

scene around him, or of deriving from the earth, by his own efforts, anything which would mediate between him and God.

The sense of death and judgment was before his soul, and to be delivered from this could alone satisfy him. As a keeper of sheep he tended his flock, passing from pasture to pasture as their need required. Expecting nothing to spring from the earth to relieve him, no one place on it was his permanent abode. A labourer-a wanderer, suffering from the curse which rested on everything around him, and he himself under the penalty of death in such a scene, he tended a living flock, which brought him into association with life, the very thing which his own spirit needed.

He, therefore, in faith took of the firstling of his flock, the beginning and the strength of it, and he offered it to God as God's own, and as typifying the life of Christ. This, as presented to God, met his own sense of death; but something more than this was needed in encountering the presence of God; there was need of acceptance also. This was met and answered by presenting the fat, which is the excellency of the animal, only obtainable through death; the result in resurrection of the death of Christ, which now satisfies the conscience as to its full acceptance with God.

Thus Abel entered into the mind of God as to his own state before Him, and thus he obtained witness that he was righteous, not merely as to what he did, but as to how he stood. Happy as accepted of God, he has to learn the place and the suffering of one so blessed down here. If he be accepted of God, he must be dissociated from a scene which was under God's curse. If he be delivered from the sentence of death, death can be no penalty to him ; but he must expect it where everything is contrary to the life in which he is accepted : consequently he is called to give unequivocal proof that acceptance with God and deliverance from judgment are such real blessings that actual death cannot deprive him of them.

This is his testimony and this is his discipline. As it was with Stephen, the first martyr of resurrection, so it was with Abel, the first martyr of acceptance. Stephen gave greater evidence in his death than in his life of the virtue of Christ's resurrection, and his soul advanced more into its realities in the moment of his death than it could have done during his lifetime. His last testimony was the brightest. While they, the agents of the world's evil, were stoning Stephen, he was only responding to their fatal blows by consigning his spirit to the One whom they denied and disowned; and what a proof of how perfect and assured he was in Christ's care and charge of him, that he could kneel down to expend all the strength their malignity still spared him in their behalf.

The witness of acceptance and the witness of resurrection has no part in this evil world. Everything must be death to him, and in discipline he learns this in order to actualise to himself the greatness of the gift of God, which is eternal life outside and beyond death. In whatever path you may walk you must learn this, that the Father will have it so. He must have the life of His Son true to its proper instincts. Out of " fire of sticks " the viper will remind a Paul that this is a scene of death. It is only from one tomb to another. In a shipwreck yesterday, afflicted by a viper to-day! We need this discipline. We think we can pass on like other men, enjoying the new and blessed portion we have received ; but we cannot. And it is well to understand that the Father will have us to appreciate our portion in His Son, in contrast to everything here. We try in vain to combine both, so that a great deal of our time is spent in learning that there is nothing here to meet the requirements of our new affections. There is a wandering in the wilderness in a solitary way, and yet no city is found to dwell in. But God allows this in order that His children may find that their desires can only be satisfied by Him. We must learn that we are not of the world. We cannot trust it. Christ could not commit Himself to man. Though Stephen have " the face of an angel," yet because he is true to

Christ, they will stone him. And though Cain 44 TALKS " with Abel, and they are " in the field " apparently in easy intimacy, Abel soon learns that he cannot trust him, for in that very social moment Cain rose up against him and slew him.

Our profession declares that we have done with earth. God's discipline will always lead us practically into this, as will also faithful testimony. In our discipline we may give a testimony; but how much better, like Stephen, to be disciplined in our testimony. Surely we ought to lay it to heart how much our discipline arises from clinging to the world in one form or another, instead of on account of our testimony against it. We can easily account for Abel continuing in social nearness to his brother Cain, and justify his doing so, because the hatred of man against the righteousness of God had not as yet been exposed, and we can well understand how Abel preserved his easy, familiar ways with his brother, which afforded a more favourable opportunity to Cain to effect his deadly purpose. But while it is easy and natural to account for this, on what ground can we excuse saints for continuing in social intimacy with the world ? Can we not often trace the cause and necessity for the discipline which many are undergoing to the fact that they who are alive before God in Christ, and who are through His death delivered from all. that is of the world, are still clinging to it, instead of testifying against it ? The social hour was fatal to Abel, unacquainted as he was with the wickedness of man, and unsuspecting any harm. The social hour now is often morally more fatal to those who ought to know that the prince of this world crucified the Lord of glory, and that the friendship of the world is enmity against God. Do not such need discipline ? Must they not be taught that they must surrender all that Christ was judged for ? If they do not surrender it through grace, God our Father must, because of His love, sever His children in one form or another from that world from which we are delivered according to His mind by the death of His Son. It is right and fitting so to be. Let us then accept our true place outside the world, and let our discipline be through our testimony rather than our testimony through it.

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## ENOCH

In the history of Enoch we learn this great truth, that the surest path, and the one which, as to outward circumstances, is the most exempt from discipline, is a life of hope, being by faith translated-actually in expectation and interest having passed away from this present scene. Enoch, no doubt, had the secret chastenings which every son in our nature needeth, but by faith, as a witness, he walked with God, in the hope of being with Him, and thus he passed beyond death without being a victim to it. During his walk of three hundred years, hope placed him beyond this evil scene, and therefore he prophesied as to what would be the consummation of it. If he was the first man who passed out of it through the power of faith, superior to the sovereignty of death, so was he the prophet of the last moments of death's cruel dynasty. If he were the first who was translated from the world, he, in the enjoyment of hope and the domain which it spread out before his soul, could best tell what would be the end of the world. Abel took his place as the witness of acceptance in righteousness, and the world could not endure him; he was unsuited to it, and it to him; he fell, and his blood was shed on it by the hand of his brother. Human righteousness is honoured among men, but righteousness through grace, by faith, honestly maintained, is always abhorrent to man, for it gives him nothing to do, nothing to improve, but to receive all from God and with God, and this

necessarily places him in isolation from an human interests. Abel was a righteous man in an evil world, and he found a grave in it--a terrible death and an unnatural one. Relationship with God only places me in antagonism to the world. If we be sons of God, the world knows us riot, as it knew not the Son of God. If in this life, though a son, I only have hope, I am of all men most miserable. Abel must have been happy in his soul with God, but he was miserable in the world, and in the end he suffered a cruel death in it. His very new position entailed this suffering on him ; it demanded of him to die to everything around, because if he was righteous, everything around was unrighteous. If he did not by faith walk in hope above this scene, then he must die in it, and this is just where Enoch is a witness of a better thing: and he can prophesy of the accomplished glory, while Abel can but cry, by his shed blood, for a vengeance on a world that would not bear a righteous man!

It is plain that in an evil world a righteous man must either die in it or pass out of it in the power of translation. Enoch did this latter, after he had walked with God. Nothing can purify us from this world but hope, and the hope, too, of being with the One whom Enoch saw: " My Lord cometh, and ten thousand of his saints with him." The Lord personally engaging the heart, dissociates more from the earth than anything else. " For their sakes [he says] I sanctify myself, that they also may be truly sanctified." For the heart linked with Him outside the world is the most perfect sanctification. Saints pass through much discipline from outward circumstances, because their hearts are only set on being justified ones in the earth, a blessed position beyond all question ; but ours is one incompatible with everything earthly : and hence, if the soul does not own this it must be taught it; thus Paul was taught to surrender Jerusalem and all the associations there his heart clung to. He passed through many afflictions ere he was morally delivered from his earthly. hope. Heavenly hopes exposed him no doubt to other sorrows, but death was not one of them, for he longed to depart. If our hope were really translation to see the Lord, beyond doubt the casualties of this life would but little distress us ; they never could touch our hope; and our sufferings from present things are not so much from their actual influence or value to us as that they form so great a part of our hopes. It is our hope that lends an interest to everything about us, and belonging to us. The only discipline that Enoch sets forth is a long walk with God and a prophetic testimony, and therefore it is the path that the well-disciplined child will walk in, and the better he adheres to it, the less will he need either a " weight " to be removed, or his unbelief to be admonished, which is the end of all the Father's discipline.

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NOAH

Noah's history is peculiarly interesting, because it affords us a type of the servant of God on the earth, who is testifying to the world of the vanity of everything here by his preparing an ark to get safely out of it. He is in fact the head of the new order in moral power. Adam was only a few years dead, as were also Seth and Enoch, and therefore Lamech his father might count on God to send them some " rest "-some evidence of His care and government. This Noah proved to be; and consequently his life is very instructive to the servants of God. Abel and Enoch were witnesses of principles, but Noah is the witness of God, in a scene where those principles were declared and now disregarded. Noah therefore is God's patient witness and servant in great long-suffering, warning of coming judgment. The earth was corrupt before God, and the

earth was filled with violence : all the barriers between clean and unclean were broken down. The children of God intermarried (the most intimate intermixture) with the daughters of men as " they chose." The will was the only guide and the only check to these unhallowed unions. The NAME of God was lost in the earth. The religion of Enoch and the fathers may have remained, but the lines and characteristics which the children of God should observe to preserve His name were now surrendered to the dictation of their own will. Thus in this early day was disclosed that the gratification of our own will, no matter how great we are positionally, will entail our surrender of that testimony to a holy God, which assuredly behoves us in an evil world. Position is valuable if maintained, but aggravates our defection if not ; because the higher it is, the less will it bear the slightest defection. A failure which would be unnoticed in a lower position, would be intolerable in a higher. It was necessary to tell Timothy not only to purge himself but also to flee " youthful lusts " or impulses. The will must not come in if the insular position of God's people on the earth is to be maintained. Hence heresy is simply a determined adherence to one's own opinions, on any subject. Now this doing as " they chose " was the ruling influence with man at this time, after the departure of Enoch, whose prophecies were unheeded; and God, now in His goodness and forbearance, raises up a testimony for Himself in the person of Noah.

Noah had been five hundred years upon the earth before he was called to his especial work, and we are told that he was, in his life and age (as generation may be interpreted), a witness of the truths already revealed through Abel and Enoch on the earth. It is said that he was " a just man," or righteous, of which Abel was the witness, and that he " walked with God," which was the great and holy line observed by Enoch. Such is the man who is called to declare the name of God-that is, what God is, and what God has declared Himself in the world. Principles of truth to bless man had been distinctly witnessed to on earth. Now when all moral obligation to the holiness of God or apprehension of it is relinquished, God comes forth to declare Himself. And His faithful servant devotes himself to trace in new, deep and broad lines the nature of God. God is his object as well as his subject. Man may forfeit and surrender his own dignity and position, and do so beyond remedy: but the truth of God, and what God is, which afforded this dignity and position, cannot be surrendered, but every true servant stands by it and maintains it-not to repair the human vessel which ought to have preserved it, but to vindicate His name and goodness, which had been lost sight of. When principles are enunciated by God they are for man's blessing, and therefore are peculiarly for men as their object; but when the men who receive them make light of them, so that their beauty and value are marred, then it becomes the servant to resuscitate them-not as toward men, though they be still for them, but FOR GOD, whose honour is the more paramount, when indifferentism to it prevails. And the more distinctly and vividly they are presented, the more are the careless and unbelieving condemned, but the more are the true servants-those moral victors--crowned with honour and blessed. The servant, among such as Noah was surrounded with, had much to learn besides his own acceptance and association with God.

The discipline is suited to the service required. Patience pre-eminently was the great lesson Noah had to learn ; but it was patience, too, combined with toil. Enoch had patience, but it was in a separated walk. Noah must have it in practical life, dealing not with that which was grateful to him, but with adverse spirits. Enoch escapes from men to walk with God, and is patient therein for three hundred years. Noah has to do with men in daily toil, condemning the world, and is a preacher of the righteousness which by faith he had as believing in God, who was morally denied in it. Instead of comfort from work and toil, as his father Lamech expected, it is work and toil to reach comfort and rest, and toil, too, to condemn the world, on which the curse of God rested. Patiently he worked on, and patience had its perfect work, so far though we shall see later on in his history that his nature betrays the contrary. To arrive at comfort and rest in an

evil world, I must patiently maintain the name of God and His truth. We often propose a good and worthy object to our souls, but we little know the trying and toilsome path we must tread to reach it. That Noah was to be a comfort and a rest concerning the work and toil of man's hands was undoubtedly true, though Lamech never lived to see it. He saw it in progress. The purpose to reach a good and desired object modifies greatly intervening difficulties. Noah, while patiently witnessing of the distinctness which ought to mark the children of God on earth, was preparing an ark for the saving of his house, and also condemning the world for their unbelief and denial of God. Let him only be the patient servant, and comfort would accrue to his own house by the very toil in which he was condemning the world for their ignorance of God.

God always honours the servant who honours Him. "Because thou hast kept my word, and not denied my name, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and they shall know that I have loved thee." When God and His truth (at all times as much as has been revealed) have lost their true moral effect on the consciences of men, the only sure and certain means of restoring it; even to one's self, is to declare emphatically, let God be true, and every man a liar! I turn from men to bear witness of the truth, for no conscience, after all, can be rightly blessed when God is not presented to it according to the truth. Therefore if truth be fallen in the streets, the valiant for it, like the most valiant One, avow that for this purpose came I into the world, that I might bear witness unto the truth.

After years of discipline and toil, Noah is in the ark. Very often the quality we are most pre-eminent for, and from which we have gained most, becomes inactive, and we suffer much. Noah, doubtless, became impatient to quit the ark after it had accomplished its purpose. In nothing is our impatience or wilfulness so much exposed as here. Noah was a witness of adherence to God's mind, in opposition to the wilfulness of man around him. He toiled for many a year to prepare the ark, and now he is impatient to abandon it, as soon as it has afforded him salvation. God has been vindicated, His truth witnessed to, Noah and his house saved; and now he wants to leave it before it is God's time. It is a greater test to remain in the place of blessing than even to reach it, for many untoward things may induce or press us to seek it, but if the mind be not satisfied, if it be not occupied with the riches of God's inheritance, and in participating with Him according to the joy of His heart in the circle of His delights there, "the leeks and onions" outside invite its attention; the saved and blessed one is in more danger of being drawn aside than the unsecured one—the will is at work, and the very rest to his conscience affords liberty to his unoccupied mind to seek and plan for itself. The emancipated raven, going to and fro, is an apt emblem of the restlessness of our impatient spirits. The dove reads Noah a different lesson. The raven had taught him the true causes of wilfulness, which he himself had witnessed against, like a dog roaming up and down, and not satisfied. The dove tells first that he must have patience. How humbling when we are rebuked by the weak, gentle accents of confiding love! The dove had a home in the ark, why should not Noah? The second time the dove returns with the branch of peace, so that not only must he submit, but patience having had its perfect work, he wants nothing. The olive leaf tells us the fulness of blessing which is his. And when the dove goes forth again she may tarry abroad. Discipline has matured Noah, and he is called into a new scene wherein he is to demonstrate the valuable education afforded to him! he having come forth from the ark in all the vigour and faithfulness of a victorious servant, to set forth God in His proper place on the earth. God is pleased, testimony is restored, and with it increased blessing to man.

After this Noah begins to find rest and comfort for himself. Self-pleasing takes the place of patience, and there and then he exposes the frailty of the greatest servants of God when they seek their own rest and gratification. The going to and fro of thoughts, like the raven, when we are encompassed with still unabated difficulties, may tell us what our propensity is; but when we have succeeded, and we have set

ourselves down to enjoy ourselves, our weakness, in its broadest lines, is exposed-(cursed be he who promulgates it). Though God has long borne with us, He must teach us His grace. If I betray my weakness, when in the excess of my enjoyment, I learn how frail I am; and thus Noah finds how frail he is after all his self-renunciation and service and with this warning voice his history significantly closes.

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### ABRAHAM

THE discipline which is necessary and suited to the life of faith is what we shall find pre-eminently exemplified in Abraham's history. Man, at Babel, had disclosed the secret purpose of his heart. He built a city and a tower, whose top was to reach to heaven. He said, " Let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth." He sought to accomplish it by his own works, and independently of God. God confounded him in his attempt, and the whole human family is made to feel that it is debarred from intelligent combination by the loss of a common medium of communication, so that man became estranged from his fellow-man; whatever might be his sense of common kindred his thoughts were checked or became incommunicable. When God had thus confounded the independence of man, He, ever true to the purpose of His love, as soon as the evil is checked, unfolds (and by a man too) how that desire which man had aimed at, in independence of God, can be attained in a supreme degree of dependence on God. And this, I may remark in passing, is always His way with us; we feel our need, and attempt to supply it by our own means; the Lord must confound us in the attempt ; but having done so, He leads our souls to find and acquire an inconceivably greater answer to our wishes than even that which we had described for ourselves. The prodigal only sought " sustenance " from the citizen in the " far country," but in his father's house he found not bread merely, but abounding welcome and a fatted calf.

But to resume. The confusion of tongues being a fact, God now enters the scene and calls out from it a man even Abram-to be the witness of faith and of dependence on Him, and to look, not for a " Babel," but " for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." And we are graciously given the history of this witness and servant of God, in order to instruct us as to what our nature is in its action under the call of God, and how God deals with it under its many phases of self-will and independence ; how He corrects, subdues and leads it into His own ways, which is for our blessing.

The word of God to Abram is, " Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land which I will shew thee," and the word becomes the discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. We never know the real intent of our own wills until we demand them to submit implicitly to the expressed will of God, which His word unfolds. We may not see any very great divergence in our course from the mind of God until we measure it with the exact requirements of the word of God; and mark, not the requirements of a part of that word, but the whole of it.

In fulfilling it partially we alter or qualify His mind as revealed; in departing from the spirit of it we lose the instruction; but it is in adopting it, and adhering to it as a whole, that the soul is delivered from self-will, and led into the blessing which its instruction proposes. But then it is here that comes in all the trial and exercise, for exercise and conflict there must be, from the continual effort of the natural mind to evade or qualify the word of God, and the inflexibility of God's purpose (because of His love) to confine us strictly to

His own mind.

And this conflict necessitates discipline, and thus explains incidents in our history which would otherwise be inexplicable to us. The call of Abraham was clear and definite. It required him to relinquish locality and all kindred associations, and to enter on a scene prepared of God. The accuracy of his obedience tests the measure of his strength; he begins to obey the call; he went forth from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan; he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt at Charran.

He received the word and undertook to obey it, and yet we find he did so imperfectly ; he only relinquished his country, and not his kindred associations! he remained at Charran till his father was dead. Nature had come in to check full obedience to the call of God, and this is a great warning to us. We approve of, and adopt the call, but it is only as we walk in accordance with it that we discover the demands it makes on our nature. Nothing so proves our want of true energy as inability to accomplish what we readily undertake.

How many enter on the life of faith eagerly and cheerfully who find ere long that they cannot " let the dead bury their dead," and though they are ready in heart to seek " another country," they are detained and turned aside by some link to nature. Nothing is so difficult to man as to relinquish the ties of nature without compensation, because such relinquishment must produce isolation, unless he has found some other absolute association; and this is just what the Lord proposed when He added, " Follow thou me."

But if a relinquishment of these ties be an isolation from the nearest communication with natural existence, so must the maintenance of them be the maintenance of the most direct avenues to the human heart, and hence it is written, a " man's foes shall be they of his own household." There is no escaping nature outside grace. When Barnabas chose his kinsman Mark, he also chose Cyprus, his native country. His failure was not only in nature, but unto nature.

Abram, then, failed at first in performing the second part of God's call ; he did not leave his " father's house," and consequently is detained till his father is dead. This is the first stage in the life of faith, and though he entered on it readily and heartily, as it is written, " he went out, not knowing whither he went," he found that he could not perform it until death had severed the bond which still attached or connected him with nature. Faith is dependence on God, and independence of everything human to sustain it. The path proposed to Abram accordingly demanded the distinctest expression of dependence on God alone. It could not be without sacrifice, neither was it meant to be, and besides the exercises which his own heart must have passed through in treading this path of faith, he is taught that death must practically sever the tie which detains him on his way. The first stage is not traversed without the heart tasting of sorrow through death, but death which brings its own deliverance. If Abram had not been detained by his father, but had pursued the unknown path without halting till he reached the place to which God had called him he would have escaped the sorrow which death entailed ; but having allowed himself to be detained, nothing could relieve him but death; and therefore under that discipline he passes. Thus it is in mercy with many of us ; our dependence on God is not simple and distinct ; we halt in the path of faith, and are detained by some link to nature until it dies, for die it must, if we are to pursue our course with God, unless we die to it.

Death, then, having dissolved Abram's tie to nature and freed him from it, he must renew his course, disciplined, no doubt, by that which had removed the weight which impeded him: a discipline which he might have escaped had he walked in more energy of faith, but by which he was nevertheless a learner; and how wholesome the lesson-that faith does not sway the natural desire in the recesses of the heart,

that, though the blessings be great, if it submits to the dictation of God without exposure, yet it rarely does, and even if it does for a while, will ever be contending for an open expression of itself ; and, if openly acting, it must be openly subdued. If I allow my natural will to lead me, and thus turn me aside from the path of faith which is God's line, I must, when God in His mercy restores me to the right line, know in myself the setting aside of my will. This is self-mortification, and this is discipline.

To young believers, to all, it is important how we undertake and accomplish this first stage of the life of faith : failure and vacillation here may entail sorrow and indecision throughout our course, for we never diverge from the path of faith without picking up " a thorn " from that nature which we are called to repudiate. It will be either nature mortified, or nature exhausted, or nature bereaved : and though we may be freed, as was Abram, by the death of his father, the failure though amended may not be eradicated in its effect, and if so, the discipline which it demanded must be continued. Lot went with Abram, but not only was he ever a trial to him personally, but his descendants were the greatest scourge to Abram's descendants ; and their malignant enticements at the instigation of Balaam are set down in Scripture as a type of the worst machinations against the church of God; Rev. 2: 13. Wherever we fail once, like a horse that stumbles, we are likely to fail again, consequently there must be, through God's care of us, a continual reminder to warn us of our tendency, though grace, when acting in us, always is most seen when most wanted.

Abram now enters on the second stage of the life of faith--a stranger in a strange land, depending on God, and he builds an altar; for the strangership into which faith leads us fixes our souls on God, and worship follows. But when the consequences or circumstances of our strangership occupy us, we lose the rest which faith supplies, and seek relief elsewhere. Thus Abram, when he found that there was a famine in the land, turned aside from the path of faith on which he had entered, and went down into Egypt.

How humbling it is to find how vacillating we are in that path, and however happily and firmly we seem to be walking in it, how needful to say " Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall " 1 Although Abram is graciously restored to the path from which he had departed, and even returns to the place where he had the altar at the beginning, we find that the thorns which he picked up in his wanderings pierce him in his restoration. The cattle, the gains of Egypt, provoke a collision between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot; but restoration always advances us in moral power, for true restoration sets us above that from which we are restored; and now truly restored, he looks not to consequences, but, depending on God, maintains the path of faith in high moral power. My first difficulty in a walk of faith is to get clear of nature, place and kindred, and, being delivered therefrom, and in felt strangership, my next is the tendency to advance, or exalt myself, or to find rest in this new position, even as an emigrant in a wild and distant land seeks to make a home for himself as speedily as possible. This desire to advance, so strong a passion in the human soul, and the moving principle of all the great efforts of Babylon, may be designated ambition, but must be overcome by the man of faith, as God's witness in this evil world. Thus Abram's ambition is now tested; but discipline has done its work, and his restoration is complete. Does he seek any acknowledgment or advancement in this new country ? No! he is walking by faith, and resigns all present superiority to Lot, who, gratifying his ambition, chooses the well-watered plain, while Abram is blessed with a fuller revelation as a reward for his faith. But even this is not to be enjoyed without suffering, for the moment I am on the path with Christ, I am on the path of one sent of God to minister to His people down here ; and Abram, the dependent man, pursuing his unseen and separate path, has now to come forward and render the very service which Christ fulfilled, and rescue his brother Lot, who, on the contrary, had gratified the ambition of his nature by mixing himself with the course of this world, and had been

consequently embroiled in its sorrows. And if, in the dangers and exercises of this service, Abram was made to feel what he had to suffer from this natural tie which he had brought from Ur of the Chaldees, his soul was at the same time confirmed in the path of dependence on God, and as his faith had on the former occasion been rewarded by a fuller revelation of the promised inheritance, his conflict and service are now rewarded by the refreshment and blessing of Melchisedec in the name of the Lord God, possessor of heaven and earth, surely more than enough to compensate for the renouncement of the ambition of mere nature!

Here let me add, that though we separate from home and kindred, and still further take heavenly standing, yet if the tendencies of our nature be unsubdued, and we seek in any wise to distinguish or advance ourselves in our new position, we shall be as Lot; while, on the other hand, though we may - often need discipline and be taught to renew our course after failure, yet, if we really seek to maintain the path of dependence and separation, our faith will be strengthened by increased revelations, and our service will be invigorated by association with Him who is our Forerunner within the veil, " even Jesus, an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec."

We now enter on the third stage of Abram's history in the path of faith, and one in which he is brought under an entirely new line of instruction, even in the exercise of his affections. The ambition of his nature has been tested before; now his affections are to be put under discipline and this is brought about in the first instance by the promise of a son, which is the subject of chapter 15. Let me say, in passing, that in tracing the history of this servant of God, I confine myself to the one subject, even discipline. I pass over many episodes on which others have dwelt largely, such as his communion with God, intercession, etc., most interesting as it all is, but which has already been entered into fully.

It appears to me that the true state of Abram's heart is exposed in his reply to God's most gracious appeal to him in the commencement of this chapter. True, it was quite right for him to wish for a son; it was a wish responding to the counsels of God respecting him, and the lack of which would not have been according to the mind of God. But still his reply, " What wilt thou give me ? " does not rise to the elevation in which God sought to establish him, even in perfect contentment and satisfaction with Himself, for what could He " give " him greater than the assurance of being Himself his " exceeding great reward " ? Nevertheless, God in His grace meets him on his own level and promises that which He had before counselled to give; but a long course of discipline lies between him and the fulfilment of the promise, and as Abraham must learn in his own home a preparation for that trial to his affections which awaited him so many years afterwards, and which it was necessary for him to pass through in order to perfect him in the life of faith. It was not at all that he undervalued the fulness and nearness in which God had revealed Himself to him, but he disclosed the secret feebleness of the human soul to rest in God apart from any human link. God knows this, and offers graciously to supply it ; but if He promises and gives Isaac, Abraham must hold him from God.

Abraham believed God, but his heart needed preparation and discipline, as we see by the impatience of nature which he evinces while waiting for the fulfilment of the promise, and this he is subjected to in his own private circle. Perhaps there is no greater cause of delay to the accomplishment of what God purposes to confer on us than the natural mind (if I may say so) getting a hint of it; for as it is a point with Satan to spoil what he cannot defeat, so is it with the willfulness of our nature which would fain adopt and accomplish what originated entirely outside itself and with God; just as Eve, interpreting a spiritual truth by a natural mind, takes Cain for the promised seed. It does not and cannot enter the heart of man the extent and nature of what God prepares for them that love Him. An Ishmael was Abraham's measure, an Isaac

was God's. In the meantime Abraham must learn, through contention, strife and sorrow what is the fruit of his impatience, and in the end he must do what was very " grievous in his sight," even to banish his son. Thus our inventions do but postpone our real blessings, for it is necessary that we should see the end of them. It must have been a period of nearly twenty years from the time of the promise to the birth of Isaac, and many were the exercises he had to pass through during that time, as well as many and great communications made to him by the Lord.

We are now come to the fourth stage of Abraham's path of discipline; chapter 21. His cup seems to be full - Isaac is given-the bondwoman and her son cast out-the Gentile powers typified by Abimelech come forward to acknowledge that God is with him in all that he does, and he plants a grove and he calls on the name of the everlasting God. But more discipline was necessary to ensure to his soul that the filling of that cup was entirely from God, that He could fill, empty, and fill it again, and that He alone was the filler of it. Abraham had given up expectation from the world--can he now surrender the object of his affections and hopes ? and not only so, but will he be the actual perpetrator of the wrench himself ? It was " very grievous in his sight " to cast out Ishmael; what must it be now

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