

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"When the Prodigal Son Came to Himself."*

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse, but for Scripture reading I would like to look at some verses in **1 Peter 4**, if you would please turn there. We will read verses twelve through fifteen. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word.

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

You may be seated. Let's pray.

I know the parable of the prodigal son is very familiar to all of us, so I have been trying to dig out some wonderful truths that you might not have thought of before. This morning I hope to give you greater insight into **Luke 15:17** which says **The prodigal son came to himself.**

This is going to involve sharing some things at the beginning of the sermon, and we will connect the dots at the end.

Let me begin by inviting you to think about the book of **1 Peter**. Along with **Job**, this is the other main book in the Bible dealing with suffering.

And Peter teaches that there are two causes of suffering:

1. We suffer because of trials we experience. We did nothing to cause this suffering. It is simply the suffering that comes with living in a fallen world.
2. We also suffer because of sin we commit. We did everything to cause this suffering.

I want to give us a lesson just to drive this home...

Lesson One: We suffer because of trials we experience or sin we commit.

Let me show you some verses that make this point. I'm going to ask you each time if Peter is talking about suffering caused by trials or sin...so please pay attention...especially the kids...

Look at **1 Peter 2:19**...

1 Peter 2:19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Is this suffering because of trials or sin?

This is suffering because of trials that we did nothing to cause.

Look at **verse 20**...

1 Peter 2:20a For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

Pause here. Is this suffering because of trials or sin?

This is suffering because of sin.

We sinned and God disciplined. When it says we sin and are beaten for it, God is the one beating us or disciplining us.

Now look at the rest of the verse...

1 Peter 2:20b But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

Is this suffering because of trials or sin?

This is suffering because of trials. Peter describes suffering that comes from doing good...the opposite of sinning

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Look at the next chapter at verse 17...

1 Peter 3:17a For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will,

Pause here. Is this suffering because of trials or sin?

Trials. Again, suffering for doing good.

Now look at the rest of the verse...

1 Peter 3:17b than for doing evil.

Is this suffering because of trials or sin?

Sin.

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Now go to **1 Peter 4:12**...

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Is Peter talking about suffering because of trials or sin?

Trials...he says **fiery trial**.

He also says these trials test us, we should not be surprised by them, and we can even rejoice in them, because of the good they produce in our lives...and this brings us to the first part of lesson two...

Lesson Two (Part One) Trials can produce maturity...

In a word, trials are supposed to produce maturity. Listen to just a couple verses...

Romans 5:3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

Trials are supposed to produce spiritual growth and maturity. We don't like trials, but Scripture is clear that they are good for us. They are one of the primary ways we grow.

James 1:2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Just like Peter said we can rejoice when we experience trials because of the maturity they produce, James says the same.

But to let you know, the reason the lesson says trials CAN produce maturity is it is not a guarantee. It is a true saying that trials can make us better or bitter.

Let me give you one example of someone made bitter by trials. Asa was one of Judah's greatest kings, but listen to this...

2 Chronicles 16:12 In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet EVEN IN HIS DISEASE HE DID NOT SEEK THE LORD, but sought help from physicians.

Asa probably had gout or gangrene. There is nothing wrong with turning to physicians for help, but the verse is worded as a criticism of Asa for turning ONLY to physicians.

Since he reigned forty-one years, this was within two years of the end of his life. Perhaps it is because he had been faithful to God throughout his life that he was angry with God for letting him get this disease...so he refused to turn to Him.

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Now look at Peter tell us one more time the other reason we suffer...

1 Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

Is Peter talking about suffering because of trials or sin?

Sin...we can suffer because we murdered, or stole, or did evil, or meddled in other people's affairs.

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Peter knows some suffering – such as that caused by trials – is unavoidable, but he wants to help us avoid suffering that can be avoided, such as that caused by God's discipline when we sin.

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Here are some examples of discipline in Scripture:

- After Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded, **Numbers 20:12 God said, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."**
- After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, God told him through the prophet Nathan, **2 Samuel 12:10 "The sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife."**
- After Jehoshaphat entered an alliance with evil King Ahaziah to build ships, God told him through a prophet **2 Chronicles 20:37 "Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, the Lord has destroyed your works." Then the ships were wrecked.**

These men suffered because of their sin. It would be wrong to say they experienced trials. It would be right to say they sinned and God disciplined them.

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What can God's discipline look like in our lives?ⁱ

- People lose their jobs, because they slacked off for years
- People's finances are tight, because of years of impulsive purchases
- People are diagnosed with diabetes, because of years of gluttonous eating
- People are in miserable marriages, because they ignored their parents' warnings about the spouse they married

These are not trials! This is suffering caused by sin.

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Now here's an important question...

As much as the suffering caused by trials is intended to produce maturity, what is the suffering produced by sin intended to produce...in other words, when we sin and suffer because God is disciplining us, what is that suffering supposed to produce?

In one word: repentance!

And this brings us to the next part of lesson two...

Lesson Two (Part One) Trials can produce maturity (Part Two) and discipline should produce repentance.

If we understand trials are supposed to produce maturity and God's discipline is supposed to produce repentance, can we see why it would be so problematic to experience a trial and think it is discipline or experience God's discipline, but think it's a trial?

If people experience a trial, but think it's discipline, then they blame themselves for the suffering they are experiencing:

- They wonder why God is upset with them...when He isn't upset with them
- They wonder what they did wrong...when they didn't do anything wrong
- They wonder what they need to do differently...when they don't need to do anything differently

As a pastor, few things are worse than seeing people suffer and think it is their fault...when it is not their fault.

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But can you also see why it is unfortunate when people experience God's discipline, but think it is a trial?

Their suffering will not produce the desired outcome, which is repentance. As tragic as it is when people experience a trial and wonder if it is their fault, it is equally tragic when people sin, God disciplines them, but they think it is not their fault.

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It's important to understand the difference between trials and discipline, because we don't want to go through life suffering as a result of our sin, without ever understanding it is our fault.

We would end up saying things like:

- Why am I suffering?
- Why am I so unlucky?
- Why do all these bad things keep happening to me?

If we said this and friends loved us enough to be honest with us, they would say, "These things keep happening because you sinned, and God is trying to bring you to repentance."

But that's not going to happen if we don't understand we are experiencing discipline versus a trial.

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The premier place in Scripture discussing God's discipline is **Hebrews 12**. The word discipline occurs 9 times in verses 5 through 11. We are going to go through these verses quickly, because there's one point I want to make that is related to **Luke 15**.

Please turn two books to the left to **Hebrews 12**.

The main point I want you to see is in verse eleven, but we will start at **verse 5** for context...ⁱⁱ

Hebrews 12:5 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. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” 7 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? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Briefly look at the beginning of verse eleven. It says: **Hebrews 12:11a For the moment all discipline seems painful**

I really appreciate the Bible’s candidness; it tells us discipline is painful.

So, I would like to provide a few reasons we can be encouraged even when we are being disciplined...because **verse 8 says in which all have participated.** And this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: Be encouraged when disciplined, because it means we (Part One) are God’s child.

We want to be confident in our salvation, and when we sin and God disciplines us, we can be encouraged that He does so because we are His children and He loves us.

When I see other people’s children misbehaving, I do not discipline them because they are not my children. God acts similarly toward unbelievers. Sometimes people sin and it looks like “they are getting away with it.” Either God is giving them time to repent, or they are not His children.

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Look at verse nine...

Hebrews 12:9 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?

Although we disliked being disciplined while growing up, we know it made us respect our fathers.

Conversely, children who aren’t disciplined typically don’t respect their parents.

Hebrews 12:10 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.

God disciplines us perfectly...and this brings us to the next part of lesson three...

Lesson Three: Be encouraged when disciplined, because it means we (Part Two) are in God’s hands.

Notice the words **as it seemed best to them.** As a father I am disciplining my children as seems best to me. But I am far from perfect.ⁱⁱⁱ

But God, on the other hand, disciplines us perfectly. We can be confident that His discipline is **for our good.** We never have to wonder if He is acting too severely, choosing the wrong punishment, or failing in some other way.

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Consider a situation that took place with David after he sinfully numbered the people. God gave him the choice between three punishments...

2 Samuel 24:12 “Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.” 13...“Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land?” 14 Then David said, “I AM IN GREAT DISTRESS. LET US FALL INTO THE HAND OF THE LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.”

When David was disciplined, he was in great distress, but he wanted to be in God's hands.

When we are **in great distress**, because we are being disciplined we can be encouraged that we are in God's hands. He knows what is best.

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Look at our last verse...

Hebrews 12:11 For the moment all discipline seems painful but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

And this brings us to the last part of lesson three...

Lesson Three: Be encouraged when disciplined, because it means we (Part Three) can produce fruit.

God disciplines us so that we would repent. I don't want to spend much time on this, because I have talked about it before, but this is one of the places in Scripture that makes the point that genuine repentance produces fruit.^{iv}

Remember when John the Baptist was baptizing, he said, **Bear fruit worthy of repentance.**

When we think of repentance we think of stopping something – the sin – but we should also think of starting something – producing fruit. This is known as putting off and putting on.

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So one of the other reasons we can be encouraged when God disciplines us is because if it leads to repentance it will also lead to greater fruit in our lives.

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Notice the words **to those who have been trained by it**. The word "it" refers to God's discipline. The fruit of righteousness is produced by people who have been trained by God's discipline.

This also implies that some people are not trained by God's discipline...which other places in Scripture supports. Listen to these verses...

Proverbs 27:22 Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his folly will not depart from him.

One of the characteristics of fools is that no matter how much they are disciplined, they don't learn. Their foolishness doesn't depart from them.

Jeremiah 5:3 O Lord...You have struck [the Jews] down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but THEY REFUSED TO TAKE CORRECTION. They have made their faces harder than rock; THEY HAVE REFUSED TO REPENT.

Even though God severely disciplined the Jews, they didn't learn. They made their faces harder, which describes their stubbornness and refusal to repent.

My point is there is no guarantee that just because God disciplines us that we will **be trained by it** or learn from it.

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As I look back on my Christian life, I see times that I was not trained by God's discipline.

Usually this meant being disciplined again. I wish I would have learned earlier, so that I didn't have to be disciplined again.

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Now go ahead and turn to **Luke 15**.

The prodigal son is being disciplined by God. We are familiar with the first few verses, so I will read them quickly...

Luke 15:12 and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

Right when he spent everything there was a famine. There is nothing coincidental about this.

God’s discipline doesn’t look like a hand coming down from heaven with a belt to spank us. Instead, He works through circumstances that cause us to suffer...in the prodigal son’s case He used a famine.

Luke 15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

Things got so bad for the son that he became a slave and began to starve. The question is:

- Did he learn?
- Was he trained by God’s discipline?

The answer is yes, look at verse seventeen...

Luke 15:17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’

Notice the phrase **when he came to himself**.

This is one of the best descriptions in Scripture of what it means to be trained God’s discipline. It means coming to our senses...and this brings us to Lesson Three...

Lesson Three: Coming to our senses is part of being trained by God’s discipline.

You might remember from earlier in the chapter that one of the themes of these 3 parables is repentance. The words repents and repentance occur 3 times in verses 7 through 10:

- **Luke 15:7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who REPENTS than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no REPENTANCE.**
- **Luke 15:10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who REPENTS.”**

The word for repents in these verses is *metanoēō* (pronounced met-un-ay-oh). It means, “*To change one’s mind for better.*”

You have probably heard before that repentance means having a change of mind, and that is correct.

It is synonymous with coming to our senses, which is how it’s translated in some Bibles such as the NIV and NASB...and how it is described elsewhere in Scripture...

2 Timothy 2:25 God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may COME TO THEIR SENSES and escape from the snare of the devil.

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And isn’t this exactly what we say about people when they are backslidden, or ensnared in sin?

We say, “When are they going to come to their senses?”

Now take your mind back to the beginning of the sermon...

When it says the prodigal son **came to himself**, or came to his senses, it means he recognized he was experiencing discipline versus a trial.

Think about this...

The son didn't have to wake up or come to his senses about his suffering. He knew he was suffering. That wasn't something he had to figure out.

Coming to his senses means he understood WHY he was suffering:

- He knew it WAS NOT because he was an unlucky person experiencing a trial.
- He knew it WAS because he was a sinful person who needed to repent.

For us, coming to our senses means recognizing:

- This isn't because I am unlucky or have it worse than others.
- This isn't anyone else's fault.

Instead:

- This is my fault.
- I am suffering because I sinned.

I also want to point out that the son had to hit rock bottom before coming to himself:

- Interestingly, his misery caused him to finally able to think clearly.
- He had to be feeding the pigs, longing to eat the same food they ate, before they come to their senses.

Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom before coming to ourselves:

- It can take misery to cause us to think clearly.
- We might have to be feeding pigs, longing to eat the same food they eat, before we come to their senses.

Let me close with this...

Until we repent:

- We are thinking illogically and foolishly.
- We are not ourselves
- We are acting irrationally.

But when we repent:

- We are thinking logically and clearly
- We have come to our senses.

And then we have a loving Heavenly Father looking forward to receiving us as joyfully as the father in the parable...but that's next Sunday's sermon 😊.

Let's pray.

ⁱ Please listen to me carefully – and just to let you know ahead of time I received permission to share all these examples...

When you have a miscarriage that's not your fault.

When the wall heater in your house is old and it catches on fire and burns some of your house down and destroys much of your stuff, that's not your fault.

When your son has leukemia, or cancer of the blood, that's not your fault.

When your son becomes deaf at two years of age, that's not your fault.

When your husband has "nodular regenerative hyperplasia" and the nodes in his liver cause his blood to back up so much it bursts in his stomach, that's not your fault.

Your child has a – genetic disorder – glycogen storage disease

And I'm convinced, because of the free moral agency of children, when they rebel, which might be the worst trial some people experience – it's not always the parents' fault.

But...

When you've been a poor steward of your money and you suffer financially, that's your fault.

When you're selfish and uninvolved in people's lives and then wonder why people don't seem interested in you, that's your fault.

When you disrespect your husband and he has trouble cherishing you, that's your fault.

When you yell at your kids and they lose respect for you, that's your fault.

When you gossip about people and lose friends, that's your fault.

When you've spent years growing up playing video games and you wonder why no girls are interested in you and no father will let you marry his daughter, that's your fault.

When church hasn't been a priority and then your children get older and don't go to church, that's your fault.

ii Hebrews 12:4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The Hebrews were experiencing persecution, but they had not yet been martyred for their faith. The author's point is because they were called to be willing to be martyred for their faith, they needed to take care that they didn't faint under the lesser sufferings they were experiencing, which is resisting temptation that leads to bloodshed.

The author of Hebrews is arguing from the greater to the lesser. The idea is if they should be willing to be martyred for their faith, they should be willing to do the lesser difficult thing, which is resist sin. In other words, if you are willing to die for your faith, you should be willing to resist temptation.

DONE on v.4:

- JM
- Moody
- Nelson
- Owen
- HCSB
- Wiersbe

iii Ephesians 6:4 says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath."

Sometimes I ask myself, "I addressed this with my children before, if I bring it up again, will I be exasperating them?"

Katie and I pray for wisdom raising our children, but we do not know absolutely that we are doing what is right.

Prior to pastoring, I taught elementary school for almost ten years. When students disobeyed, I regularly found myself wondering what the appropriate punishment would be—detention, suspension, time out, or call parents?

Circumstances make things even more complicated. What is the punishment for a student who lies once, versus a student who demonstrates a pattern of deceitfulness? What about a student who mistreated a student for no reason, versus a student who acts out when provoked?

Once, when my class was walking in a line, a notoriously cruel student repeatedly flicked another student's ear. This went on for a while, revealing significant self-control from the student being picked on. Finally, he turned around and kicked the bully as hard as he could. What was an appropriate punishment for the student who kicked the other student? Part of me wanted to congratulate him for standing up to someone who intimidated others.

^{iv} God disciplines us because He wants us to repent. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about repentance is stopping a sinful action, but repentance is as much about starting (producing fruit), as it is about stopping. John the Baptist said: "Bear fruits worth of repentance" (Matthew 3:8). Ephesians 4:25–32 provides examples of repenting (stopping, putting off), and producing fruit (starting, putting on):

- Ephesians 4:25a—"Therefore, *putting away lying*, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor.'"
- Ephesians 4:28–29—"Let him who *stole* steal no longer, but rather let him *labor, working with his hands* what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let *no corrupt word* proceed out of your mouth, but what is *good for necessary edification*, that it may impart grace to the hearers."
- Ephesians 4:31–32—"Let all *bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you*, with all malice. And *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another*, even as God in Christ forgave you."

As a pastor, people have asked me, "I repented of _____. Why do I keep struggling?" I respond by asking, "What did you start doing instead? What did you produce in place of your sin?" For example:

- You stopped going to bars, but then how did you spend that time?
- You stopped yelling at your kids, but what did you start saying to them?
- You stopped coveting, but what did you start giving?

There is an unfortunate human tendency for reform to be temporary. Psychologists, prisons, and juvenile centers can testify to this. One main reason is people attempt to repent without producing the corresponding fruit. When sin is removed, the vacuum that is created must be filled with fruit. In Matthew 12:43–45a, Jesus told a parable that warns against repentance that leaves a hole:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

The unclean spirit pictures sin, and the man removed it from his life, but he did not produce fruit. He stopped without starting. He put off without putting on. As a result, his life (the house) remained "empty." Things looked good at first (swept, and put in order), but the spirit (sin) returned and the man's condition was worse. When true repentance has not taken place, inevitably a person's situation deteriorates as the sin grows. We can be encouraged by God's discipline, because it "*yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness* to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11b).