A cultural response to God's discipline

by Arlene Inouye

In my Bible study group I was asked to facilitate a discussion on Hebrews 12. That particular chapter covers God's discipline, how He uses it to develop holiness in us, and what our attitudes towards it should be. In verses 4-11, the author of Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11:

> *"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges everyone whom He receives."*

As part of my preparation, I reviewed a couple of commentaries and found difficulty relating to the interpretations given. One commentary stated that suffering and affliction are from God. The right attitude is to accept them as punishment coming from a loving father who has our best interests at heart. Because He loves us and desires to lead us to holiness, He punishes and causes suffering in our lives.

As I thought about that interpretation, a few questions came to mind: Why can't I relate to the concept of discipline as punishment? Why don't I see suffering and affliction as punishment from God? Previously, I might have dismissed my questions and accepted the given interpretation. However, since working with Iwa, I have been challenged to take a fresh look at Scripture, allowing it to speak for itself more and more. When I decided to see in what ways my Japanese background could help me to understand the truth God was communicating in this passage, I realized that my reactions stemmed from my childhood experience with discipline and a concept in Japanese culture called *shikataganai*.

I grew up in a home where I was never spanked. I remember very few occasions when my parents yelled or showed anger verbally. Rather, I understood that they disapproved of my behavior often by what they didn't say—their silence communicated their feelings. Discipline was not so much inflicting a penalty for a wrong-doing as it was teaching, modeling and guiding on my parents' part. I did not behave out of a fear of punishment but out of a desire to please them.

In Old Testament times, the shepherd used the rod not to beat his sheep but to guide them in the right direction.

Couldn't God's discipline work the same way? I think too often we interpret the phrase, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" to justify spanking and physical punishment. But if you think about it, in Old Testament times, a shepherd used the rod not to beat his sheep, but to guide them in the right direction.

Related to my view that God does not necessarily discipline only through punishment, is the idea that the suffering and affliction we do experience are not necessarily caused by Him. The Japanese have a saying, *shikataganai*, which means "it can't be helped." Whatever suffering we experience is seen as a natural part of life that is to be accepted. Such an orientation makes it difficult to see suffering as God's punishment.

Given a new understanding of how culture was influencing my response to this portion of Scripture, I went back to the passage itself. I also looked up "discipline" in the dictionary. To my surprise, I found that while yes, discipline does mean to punish or penalize or enforce obedience, it also means to train or develop by instruction. In fact, the Greek word comes closer to such a translation (to instruct, to train up). I then looked up "reprove" and "scourge" and came up with the following paraphrase:

> *My child, take seriously correction from the Lord. And do not lose courage when He expresses disapproval. For the Lord develops by instruction those whom He loves and every child whom He adopts is subject to His criticism and correction.*

Since the Japanese see suffering as a natural part of life, it is difficult to see it as God's punishment.

Now I had something I could relate to. I have always seen God as a loving Father. I couldn't see Him punishing me and sending affliction to discipline me since I hadn't experienced discipline or viewed affliction in that way. My childhood experience with discipline had caused me to see it more positively, involving more correction by instruction and verbal disapproval than physical punishment or affliction. How could I take the bad things that happen to me as punishment from God when my own earthly father taught me what pleased him through other means? And how could suffering come from God when it is simply a part of life that God uses to develop character?

I believe that God uses different forms of discipline to achieve His purposes and I thank Him that He disciplines me in ways I understand. Just feeling His disapproval, and wanting His approval are enough for me to desire to change and become teachable. Those feelings serve the same function as some kind of affliction or suffering does for someone else. And the result is the same—changed behavior and attitudes that lead to good character and for the Christian, to holiness, which is the purpose of God's discipline. And I thank Him for that discipline and the opportunities to grow, all to the end of bringing a smile to His face and feeling His warm embrace. □

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