

Is the Biblical Teaching on Corporal Punishment Only Figurative?

The book of **Proverbs** offers some of the most clear and powerful statements in all of Scripture regarding the value and importance of *corporal* (i.e. bodily) punishment as an element in the proper training of children. For example, in this book the Holy Spirit commands:

- *“Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod and deliver his soul; from hell [i.e. sheol]”* (Prov. 23:13-14, NKJV).
- *“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him”* (Prov. 22:15).
- *“He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly”* (Prov. 13:24).
- *“The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother”* (Prov. 29:15).

There is an argument made in the religious world that essentially minimizes the force of these passages. The argument suggests that, 1) the word translated “**rod**” here actually refers to an instrument that if used on a child would cause serious bodily injury. Because of this, it is argued that, 2) the term “**rod**” must be understood in a figurative sense. Is this a proper way to interpret such passages?

Let us state first of all that Scripture does not teach any type of corporal punishment that would seriously or permanently injure a child. Even the Mosaic Law commanding the stoning of a *“stubborn and rebellious son”* was aimed at one mature enough to be considered a *“glutton and a drunkard”* – conditions small children could not attain without their parents allowing such behavior (**Deut. 21:18-21**). In addition to this, this law was part of the criminal code of the Law of Moses for the Israelites, and is no longer binding under the New Covenant (**Heb. 8:13**). With that said, we must recognize that Scripture does teach that discipline of a child is intended to be temporarily unpleasant. The Hebrew writer put it *“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”* (**Heb. 12:11**). This doesn’t mean that all “chastening” must involve corporal punishment, but it does show that the very nature of “chastening” involves temporary pain in order to train and produce proper behavior. This *pain* is not figurative, but literal.

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The word translated “rod” in **Proverbs** is the Hebrew word *shevet*. It is true that this word can mean “rod” in the sense of a *club* or *staff*. This word was used of the “scepter” promised to the tribe of Judah foreshadowing the royal line that would ultimately lead to Jesus (**Gen. 49:10**). This word was also used of the “rod” with which a master might beat a servant in the Mosaic Law prohibiting the punishment of slaves so severely that it could result in death (**Exod. 21:20**). This same word, however, can also mean *offshoot*. It is used in the book of **Judges** of the “pen” of a writer (**Judg. 5:14**). In fact *shevet* is most frequently translated “tribe” in that the tribes were *offshoots* from Jacob, or whatever patriarch was being considered (e.g. **Gen. 49:6, 28, Exod. 24:4; 28:21; 39:14; Num. 32:33; Deut. 1:15; etc.**). So when the book of **Proverbs** referred to the “rod (*shevet*)” used in the discipline of children it was talking about what used to be called a *switch* (i.e. the offshoot of a branch) not a *club* or *staff*. I have heard people talk about the old days, when children had misbehaved, being sent to cut their own *switch*, which was used to spank them. This instrument caused no real injury to the child, but it did produce a sting that was memorable enough to correct the behavior. It is ironic that our world resists imposing a temporary sting to shape lasting behavior, yet thinks nothing of imposing a permissiveness that causes lasting damage to the character and conduct of a child!

Clearly, there are times in Scripture when the term “rod” can have a figurative sense. Paul asked the Corinthians, “*Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*” (**1 Cor. 4:21**). He wasn’t literally going to beat them—he was talking about the measures of firm rebuke necessary to move them to reform their actions. In the passages in **Proverbs**, however, when the term “rod” is used of the discipline of children there is no indication that it should be understood figuratively. For example, the first text above commands, “*Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you beat him with the rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from Sheol*” (**Prov. 23:13-14, NASB**). We note that it says the *shevet* is to be used to “beat” the child. This word is the Hebrew word *nakah*. It means simply *to strike*, but can be used of a severe blow unto death (**Exod. 21:20**), or of a lawful implementation of punishment (**Deut. 25:2-3**). In its use in **Proverbs 23:13-14** it is clear that the Holy Spirit commands some type of physical contact. This is not abuse, but it is not speaking figuratively.

Christians must abhor the physical abuse of children. The barbaric and ungodly heart that would maim and disfigure innocent and helpless children deserves the most severe punishment in this age and even worse in the age to come! It is, however, insulting and infuriating when the behavior of monsters such as that is compared in any way with the actions of loving parents who exert controlled and measured corporal punishment upon their children in order to shape their behavior as God has commanded. That is not abuse; it is the behavior of parents who love their children enough to shape proper attitudes and actions.

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