

A New Perspective on Suffering Hebrews 12:3-17

We are back to Hebrews 11-12 this week and in this series we're learning how to live by faith in troubling times and we've seen a lot of good teaching so far from the author of Hebrews. He has helped us understand what true faith really is; he's reminded us that we need to live like strangers and exiles here on earth; he's shown us the importance of living with courage, and that we need to endure in faith throughout this life by looking to Jesus. Now this morning he is going to help us again by giving us a new perspective on suffering in our lives. He's going to show us one of the reasons God allows us to suffer for our faith. Why does he permit persecution and suffering? Why does he let his people go through it? How should we look at the suffering we encounter and the hostility we feel from people who are enemies of Christ?

Some of you have already faced situations where you have suffered for your faith. It might be that you have a family member who is hostile toward Christ and has rejected or mistreated you because of your faith. Maybe they've reviled and slandered you or excluded you from family activities. That can be very painful.

Others may have faced suffering at work where you've been ridiculed because of your faith or maybe attacked and maligned. Maybe people have falsely said things against you and you can feel their animosity. Maybe you've been demoted or fired, or treated unfairly. Maybe you've lost contracts or work opportunities.

Maybe you've posted something about your faith on social media and been publicly attacked and ridiculed. People have made faulty assumptions and accused you of things that aren't even close to true. Maybe you've lost friends.

In all these situations, you've gone through suffering for your faith. How should you look at that suffering? How should you respond to it? I think a lot of times Christians respond by trying to defend themselves, to clear up the misinformation and try to get the facts straight and restore their reputation. In other situations they might try to ignore it – brush it off as evil people doing evil things and give it no further thought. Some might respond with a victim

mentality and just feel sorry for themselves. Some might pray for their enemies that God might show them the truth and open doors for the gospel, or they might pray imprecatory prayers against their enemies, that God would punish them for what they did.

But the author of Hebrews is going to give a whole new perspective of the suffering we go through for our faith and it's probably something that most of us don't really think about. He wanted his readers to be able to see something very important in their suffering to encourage them to endure and I think it will be valuable for us as well.

The people this book was written to were suffering. They had a Jewish background and were rejected by their people and forced to relocate. And it wasn't easy to follow Jesus in their new community either. So they were growing weary of suffering for their faith in Christ. The author of Hebrews has been calling them to endure and not give up, and now he's going to give them a new way to look at their suffering.

He begins this passage by telling them to keep their suffering in perspective...

Read Hebrews 12:3-4.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

So basically I think he's saying, "Yes, you've suffered for your faith but remember that Jesus went through far more suffering than you when he died on the cross for your sins. Keep that in mind. You haven't yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood like he did."

And then he goes on to explain that God was actually doing something in their suffering. God was actually using suffering to bring about something good in their lives if they would have eyes to see it.

Read Hebrews 12:5-11

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 reprov'd by him.*

⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷It 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? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Besides 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? ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

For the past two weeks I tried to find an explanation for this passage that would separate the suffering the readers were going through because of their faith from this teaching about the Lord's discipline, because I really didn't like what it sounded like. But I was unsuccessful. I don't think he changes subjects here and randomly throws in a teaching about discipline at this point in the letter. I think he's saying that the Lord's discipline is directly related to the suffering they were going through.

And I don't like that! Is he saying that the persecution they were going through because of their faith was the Lord's discipline in their lives? Why on earth would God use persecution to discipline his children for living by faith in Christ? That doesn't sound like a loving father. Aren't his children doing what's right? How can persecution be discipline? Something feels wrong about this. It feels completely contrary to what I believe about God. Passages like this force you to dig deeper.

The question is, how can God use persecution and suffering for faith in Christ as a way to discipline his children? At some point I realized that I was applying my perspective of discipline to this passage rather than looking at it from the author's perspective. When I hear the word "discipline," I think of punishment for disobedience. Like when a child says something sassy to their parent and gets their mouth washed out with soap. If that's what discipline means here, it doesn't make sense. That would mean that God was bringing persecution to punish his children for their faith in Christ.

The original language this was written in was Greek, so I looked up the word that's used here, and here's what I found... The Greek word is "paideia" and it has a broad meaning. Words used to define it include: discipline, instruction, training, education, nurture, tutorage, correction. HELPS Word-studies defines it as "*instruction that trains someone to reach full development (maturity).*" The New American Standard Concordance defines it as "the rearing of a child, training, discipline." The Topical Lexicon on Bible Hub says that "*In every setting in which this word occurs in the New Testament it points to the formative process by which character, faith, and obedience are shaped through purposeful training that may include corrective measures.*" In explaining this particular teaching it says: "*This passage insists that chastening is neither punitive wrath nor arbitrary affliction; it is love-driven training designed to produce "the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." The Father's intent is restoration and maturity, not mere retribution.*"

In other words, if you look at this from the author's perspective you see that he was saying God was using the persecution and suffering they were going through for their spiritual formation. He was using it to make them more like Jesus. Through persecution he was shaping them, training them, forming them, and preparing them in order to bring them to fuller spiritual maturity. That's why it says in verses 10-11: "*He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*"

The same idea shows up in several passages of Scripture:

- James 1:2-4 "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."
- Romans 5:3-5 "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."
- Romans 8:28-29 "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his

purpose.²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

- 1 Peter 4:12-14 “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.”
- 2 Corinthians 4:8-11 “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies.¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

The men who wrote the New Testament all saw persecution as a blessing because through it God was forming Christ in them. Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 5:10-12 “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*”

So the author of Hebrews was encouraging his readers. Their suffering was not worthless affliction caused by evil people, nor was it God's punishment like I was first thinking, it was part of God's training plan to make them more like Jesus. Therefore it was actually evidence of the genuineness of their faith and the certainty of their adoption, redemption, and salvation.

So after encouraging them with this new perspective, he concluded with a call for them to move forward in courage and renewed zeal for holiness.

Read Hebrews 12:12-17.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and

for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

You may be facing persecution right now and feel discouraged. You may be growing weary and upset that God doesn't just take it away. All of us may face persecution for our faith in the days ahead. How are we going to respond to it? How are we going to endure? Today the author of Hebrews has given us a new perspective to arm ourselves with, with the promise that if we endure and allow ourselves to be trained by it, we will share in Christ's holiness and witness the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Earlier he promised there'd be a great reward.

No, it will not be pleasant, but it will be worth it. These light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all. And we will never go through it alone. “I will never leave you or forsake you.” Christ will be with us in the fire, our Savior who has gone before us and endured greater hostility than we, and he is waiting for us to one day join him in our eternal home where suffering will be no more, but only joy and everlasting bliss.