

“Running the Race”

Hebrews 12:1-11

The same faith that conquers kingdoms and obtains promises also brings hardship. Waiting for God to act can be a long, wearying process; remaining loyal to Him can bring violent persecution; and obeying Him always leads to much self-denial. The truth is, walking with God is hard and requires deep personal change. It demands the same kind of endurance as an athlete running a long race. Many temptations to quit or grow bitter flood the mind and have to be resisted. Resolutions to stay the course have to be made over and over again. And sometimes the pressures grow so strong we feel too weak to resist them anymore. It's in those moments, especially, that we need to turn to these verses of Hebrews because the author is speaking to people who are struggling just like that.

These first-century believers were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus and it looked like even more severe persecution lay ahead. So the author pleads with them like a coach exhorting weary athletes. He reminds them that the life of faith is a tough challenge for anyone. It requires total commitment and daily sacrifices for the rest of our lives. But as tough as that may sound, it's not impossible. We can do it so long as we remember the truth about why God allows us to suffer. Yes, it's a long tough race in front of us, but if we keep our eyes focused on the goal, we'll not only finish the course, but we'll cross the line stronger and better than when we started.

What Does He Say? (Heb 12:1-11)

- 1) (v 1) – Reread: the Bible and you'll see the world has never welcomed believers and the walk of faith has always been costly
- 2) (v 1) – Release: the worldly things that weigh you down (Heb 13:4, 5)
- 3) (v 1) – Refuse: to be embittered against God like our ancestors were during the Exodus (Heb 3:7-19; 12:15; Dt 29:18)
- 4) (v 1) – Run: with endurance like an athlete through the persecutions and sufferings that come against you
- 5) (vs 2-4) – Remember: that God let His own Son suffer more abuse than anything we'll ever suffer... but also remember that afterward He resurrected Him and seated Him at His righthand
- 6) (vs 5-8) – Receive: God as your Father knowing that He is going to discipline you and change you. He trains each one as if he or she were His child
- 7) (vs 9-11) – Respect: God's right to bring hardship into your life. As with Jesus, the life of faith will bring persecution, temptation, patience and great self-denial. It is painful, but He uses it to shape our character.

The Truth

These early believers were asking the question, “Why has following Jesus gotten us into so much trouble?” and many wanted to quit and go back to the comfortable lives they had before. But the truth is:

- 1) Every believer in the Bible has had to run a tough race (Heb 11)
- 2) No one has endured more suffering than Jesus (Heb 12:3). He's our model for the life of faith.
- 3) No one will be left unchanged by God (Heb 12:7).
- 4) Change is painful (Heb 12:10)
- 5) God uses this pain to train us like a father trains his children, until we become like Him (Heb 12:10, 11)

Sources of Trouble

The author of Hebrews is talking about persecution and the trails we face when we obey God. He is not saying God is the source of all our troubles—that He sends all forms of adversity to discipline/scourge His children—because that's not true, God does not send most of the suffering we face. It comes from other sources (see below). But walking in faith does bring certain predictable kinds of suffering. We can see that from the life of Jesus. Obeying God brought Him: persecution, temptation, oppression, great self-denial and even death. And these are the kinds of suffering the author is referring to here when he talks about God's “discipline.” To clarify this let's distinguish between four sources of suffering:

- 1) God bring us suffering by:
 - a) Filling us with Jesus who the world hates (Jn 15:18-21)
 - b) Teaching us to obey His Word which the devil hates
 - c) Causing us to become holy which our flesh hates



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- 2) The Devil bring suffering by: persecution, illness, temptation, doubt, oppression/depression, false doctrine, death
- 3) I bring suffering upon myself by my own bad choices whether made through ignorance or rebellion.
- 4) This fallen world (damaged creation, sinful people) bring suffering to me by:
 - a) Bad choices of others (families, companies, neighborhoods, cities, nations)
 - b) Damaged nature (weather, genetics, air, food sources, disease-causing viruses and bacteria, stress...)

This last category originated from the devil and sin but these forces strike people indiscriminately. Trouble does not necessarily mean a person sinned and is being punished by God or is being attacked by a demon. Our society at large has welcomed demonic activity and that bring with it oppression, harassment and disease.

Though our obedience to Christ will produce certain kinds of trouble, it will also greatly reduce most areas and provide a place of safety.

The Danger: Confusing the Source

- 1) Assuming God is the source of the devil's work.
"God must be punishing me"; illness; "I must have offended Him, but I don't know how"
- 2) Assuming God is the source of an adversity caused by a damaged creation.
"Why did God let this happen to me?" (floods, earthquakes, fires, illness, genetic defects)
- 3) Assuming the devil's "arrows" come directly from my spirit (temptations, doubt, oppression).

The greatest danger from such confusion is that we stop praying or pray wrongly.

- We become angry (I don't deserve this!)
- We become fearful (He's my enemy, not my friend)
- We become condemned (I must have done something wrong)
- We become judgmental (You must have done something wrong)
- We become isolated (Where's God? He left me in my time of need)

Application

Yes, the author of Hebrews is telling us to patiently endure the kinds of suffering which walking in faith brings to us. We are not to grow bitter at God for allowing us to suffer persecution, temptation, oppression, self-denial and even death—because God actually uses these things to train us as His children. But we are also to be discerning, knowing that God wants us to fight in the Spirit against most forms of suffering, not endure them. That's why He's equipped us with: authority in prayer; the gifts of the Spirit; the Body of Christ; worship; healing; deliverance; setting the mind (Ro 8:5, 6); prayer; forgiveness.

So, this passage is meant to help us run the race with endurance, not passively accept whatever trouble comes along, believing that God must have sent it. We're supposed to be an army fighting against the devil's work and the brokenness of a fallen world. But the author wants us to remember it's a real war we're fighting and we will get hurt, but when that happens never for a moment has God stopped loving us or forgotten our pain. He's simply treating us like His own Son.

Questions

- 1) Have you ever blamed God for trouble the devil brought to you? Tell us about it and how you discovered its true source.
- 2) Have you ever experienced persecution for your faith? How did God protect you?
- 3) Name an area where obeying God has required you to endure like an athlete?