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# HEBREWS

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## *Enduring Through Pain*

### *12:1-17*

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*“... let us run with endurance. . . .” (12:1).*

Anyone who has ever watched athletes run a marathon will recognize this event as one of the most demanding contests ever devised. It is a test of endurance and speed. The brisk pace which Olympic runners maintain for the entire twenty-six miles amazes us. And the incredible endurance of the athletes also amazes us. To be able even to run the marathon is the result of painful hours spent acquiring the necessary stamina. But even experienced runners hit the “wall of pain” during the marathon. This moment may come around the twentieth mile, when the runner still has a long way to go. His capacity to endure is most severely tested at this moment. The pain is discouraging. He may wonder if he can finish the course, and he begins to consider dropping out. If he finishes the course, it is because of his capacity to endure the “wall of pain” to the very end.

According to several witnesses in the New Testament, the Christian life is like an athletic contest. It may be compared to a fight (1 Corinthians 9:26, 27) or distance run (1 Corinthians 9:26; 2 Timothy 4:7). The author of Hebrews uses the image of the athletic contest when he says, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (12:1). It was an appropriate illustration to use for this Christian community, whose life had already been compared to a pilgrimage (chapters 3, 4). Like the distance

runner at the end of the course, they were fatigued. They had “hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble” (12:12). They had reached their own wall of pain. They had begun the Christian pilgrimage long ago, but now they were discovering that the Christian life was a distance run and not a sprint.

“You have need of endurance” they were told (10:36). To have faith means to hold on in the midst of pain, doubting moods, and promises that have not been realized (11:13). Some of the readers were dropping out of the race and neglecting and despising their great hope because they, like the distance runner, were discouraged by the presence of pain.

The illustration of the distance run may not be popular today because our culture seems to expect a life without pain. It is popular to expect pills for our stress, a drink in the evening to settle the nerves, and drugs to dull the senses. It is little wonder, then, that the Christianity often advertised is expected to be painless. We often hear of a Christianity that acts as a magic wand to take away our pain. It is supposed to open new doors that make us rich and popular. Or it is like magic that lifts us up out of a situation of stress and promises relief from pain.

But the Christian life does involve pain and discouragement and makes us wonder if we can finish the course. The first sign of pain could be devastating, especially if we have been led to believe that our Christianity will bring only relief from stress.

Paul experienced pain in his Christian life. The thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7ff.) was

a chronic ailment with no relief. We also experience pain because of our faith. The readers of Hebrews experienced it. Just after their baptism they “endured a great conflict of sufferings.” They had been held up to public abuse and scorn, and their property had been plundered (10:32-34). Many of the readers had begun to ask, “How long can we go on?” The struggle was discouraging.

How do you endure when you hit the “wall of pain” in your Christian life? The author of Hebrews never suggested that Christianity would relieve pain. Instead, he reminded a tired community that we are all involved in a great athletic contest we must endure to the end. The word for “struggle” (*athlesis*) in 10:32 is the term for an athletic contest. Then in 12:1 he says, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

## THE HERITAGE OF PAIN

How shall we continue in a race when we are tired? The author of Hebrews pictures for his readers a great stadium where we have “so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (12:1). It is as if the church is on the field. The dense mass of people look like a cloud above them in the stadium. The witnesses are not merely neutral observers. They have come to cheer us on. We are strengthened in the moment of pain by the encouragement of the partisan crowd.

And we should be encouraged by this partisan crowd. These witnesses are our predecessors. Before the author encourages his readers to run the race, he describes the heroes of the past who had “gained approval” by their faith (11:39). The Greek word for “witnesses” (*martus*) appeared in chapter 11 (vv. 2, 4, 5, 39) to describe people whom God has approved. These men and women of the Old Testament knew their share of frustration (11:13), risk, and pain in believing. The author concludes,

... For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. . . . others were tortured, . . . others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, . . . being

destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), . . . (11:32-38).

We have, therefore, a heritage of pain. To be faithful is to hold on despite pain. Others ran the race before us like noble, disciplined athletes. They, too, considered giving up, but they completed their course. And now they depend on us to finish the course, for without us their work would be incomplete. “. . . apart from us they should not be made perfect” (11:40). So the great “cloud of witnesses” urges us to be faithful in the midst of pain.

However, the greatest example of faithfulness in the midst of pain is Jesus, the “author and perfecter of faith” (12:2). The “author” or “pioneer” (RSV) (*archegos*; 2:10; 12:2) was the “trail-blazer” or founder who opened the way. Jesus first traveled the way we now travel and demonstrated that it was possible. He has run the race before us and faced our pain, frustration, and disappointments. He “endured the cross” when the struggle seemed to be futile. Indeed, the Christian faith had its beginning in the struggle to endure pain. Jesus is the pioneer to whom we look for a model for endurance. Consequently, the author says, “Fixing our eyes on Jesus. . . .”

The athlete distracted away from his goal is destined to become discouraged and drop out. His only hope of maintaining his determination is to keep his eyes intently on the goal. Likewise, discouraged Christians are told to look to Jesus. He has traveled the road ahead of us, and He has reached the destination.

George Buttrick reminds us that Christ never sought escape from pain.

One wonders if our all-too-easy cult of “personality” and success, though it is preached in some churches, ever remembers that the Jesus (whom it is supposed to preach) was nailed up by the hands and died as a common criminal. . . . He walked with open eyes straight into pain, and refused any opiate. . . . He thus told us that the secret of pain is not on this side of pain, least of all for the man who tries to sidestep it, but clean through pain—on the other side.<sup>1</sup>

Thus neither Jesus nor the author of Hebrews offered an opiate for pain. There was no promise of a quick solution or easy victory. Faith was not the immediate release from physical or emo-

<sup>1</sup>George Buttrick, *God, Pain and Evil* (New York: Abingdon, 1966), 150.

tional agony. Indeed, faith could even mean the beginning of pain. It can involve living with physical ailments, as Paul did, or bearing abuse from others, as Jesus did.

There is a scene in George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan* where the bishop tells Joan of Arc that he fears that she is in love with religion. "Is there any harm in it?" she asked. "No," said the bishop, "but it could be dangerous." He remembered that Christianity began with a cross.

When the athlete hits the wall of pain, there is nothing he can do but endure it if he intends to finish. People in our culture do not want to be told to *endure* anything unpleasant. But the story of the cross is the one great story of endurance. Jesus "endured the cross" (12:2), and He "endured such hostility by sinners" (12:3). The cross reminds us that pain is not taken away instantly. The Greek word for "endurance" (*hypomone*) in 12:2 is the same term which is used for the endurance of Jesus in 12:3.

Job and Paul displayed different attitudes about suffering. In the Old Testament, Job never renounced God, but he at least questioned His fairness. Sometimes he begged for an umpire between himself and God (Job 9:33), and he doubted that God cared. But Paul could approach suffering with far greater equanimity, even daring to rejoice in his sufferings (Romans 5:2; Colossians 1:24). But why the difference between Paul and Job? Could it be that Paul had the advantage of having seen in Jesus Christ that suffering has meaning? He realized that God shared in our suffering through Jesus. We must also look to Jesus to recognize that we do not suffer alone.

There is hope for the Christian. The Christ who "endured the cross" now is "seated at the right hand of God." We can face the wall of pain because there is a goal ahead.

## THE EDUCATION GOD PROVIDES

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's commencement address at Harvard in 1978 described the vast difference in the affluent people of the Western world and the people of Eastern Europe. "It has become possible [in the West] to raise young people according to these ideals [of material well-being], leading them to physical splendor, happiness, possession of material goods, money, and leisure, to an almost unlimited freedom of enjoyment." Yet, he says, there is a danger in such

constant freedom. "Even biology knows that habitual extreme safety and well-being are not advantageous for a living organism." Human beings who experience no pain become weaker.

On the other hand, Solzhenitsyn said, imagine the deprivation of those who do not live in a free country and who expect no right to a life free from struggle:

Six decades for our people and three decades for the people of Eastern Europe: during that time we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger, deeper and more interesting characters than those generated by standardized Western well-being.

The onslaught of pain which makes us wonder about our existence may, in fact, be the very thing which develops our character. The author of Hebrews makes this observation. Just as his readers, like tired runners, started to wonder about their future, he answers in 12:5, 6 with an "exhortation" from Proverbs: "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by Him. For the Lord disciplines him whom He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives" (Proverbs 3:11, 12).

We cannot tolerate suffering without purpose. But we can accept suffering if we are assured that God is our Father, and that He is working out His purposes. Alan Paton wrote in *Creative Suffering* that it is almost as if we said to God, "Some say you are cruel, and we confess that the cruelty of the world troubles us, so that we have moments of doubt; but of your goodness we have no doubt, having seen it in the life of Jesus; therefore we put our lives in your hands, so that you may use them for the sake of others."<sup>2</sup> The Christian who has come to the wall of pain need not give up on God. He knows that God is dealing with us as sons (12:5). Even Jesus, the unique Son, "learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (5:8). So it is natural that we, His brothers (2:12), also learn through suffering.

Ancient people knew neglected and illegitimate children never received a sound education. But fathers who genuinely loved their children exercised discipline on them. Education that did

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<sup>2</sup>Alan Paton, *Creative Suffering* (New York: Pilgrim Press), 17.

not include corporal punishment was unheard of in ancient times (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:12-14). The Greek word *paideia* means education, discipline, and chastisement because education included correction. Consequently, the author of Hebrews tells his discouraged readers, "It is for discipline that you endure" (12:7). Suffering does not mean that God has ceased to care for us; it may be the training that is provided by a caring Father.

Many things along the Christian pilgrimage cause us pain. In addition to physical pain which tests us, there may be psychic pain from maintaining our Christian commitment in a world which disdains our values. There is the pain of the many crises which face the church and the struggle to be patient when these crises make life unpleasant. The easiest thing for us may be to

drop out and avoid the pain. Certainly we are not prepared for it if we expect Christianity to offer only perpetual "victorious living." But the history of salvation shows that Christianity was born with a Savior who endured the cross, and that it has continued because of the perseverance of those who chose to endure God's discipline (12:7).

God chooses not to remove pain from His believers. If He did, we might serve Him for the wrong reasons. But neither has He left us to fear that our suffering is useless. He has demonstrated in Jesus Christ that we are His sons, and that our elder brother has already "endured the cross" and moved through the barrier of pain to the right hand of God. We, too, know that we can finish the course because Jesus endured without giving up.

—James Thompson

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## *Applying Scripture to Life*

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### *Unfit for Victory*

Ralph Connor tells of a great football game between the two leading universities of Canada. The outstanding star on one of these teams was a brilliant player, named Cameron. Cameron was the hope of his university and his team. But the night before the great game, he broke the training rules and got drunk. His friends sobered him, and he went onto the field, seemingly his old reliable self. But his eye was not quite so quick, his touch not quite so sure. He fumbled at a moment of crisis, and the victory went to his foes. The game came to be known in later years as the game that was lost because Cameron was not fit.

### *Peace*

The word *shalom* is a rich part of the Jewish vocabulary.

The greeting is used by Jewish people the world over. It is the Hebrew word for *peace*. It means more than the mere absence of evil and strife, as is sometimes associated with our word *peace*. It is a wish for all the good things that contribute to happiness.

### *Listen*

You remember David Hume's reply to the wits who accused him of turning saint because he was accustomed, when at home, to go to hear a certain old minister preach. "I do not go to hear him because I believe what he says," Hume declared with profound respect; "I hear him because he believes what he says."

### *Ingratitude*

In the *Arabian Nights* a gentleman, out of sheer kindness, took a feeble old man on

his shoulder to give him a lift; but once there, the old man refused to dismount. He was the Old Man of the Sea, and he became a crushing weight upon the shoulders of the one who had sought to befriend him.

### *Bad Company*

An old parrot flew out of a farm house and joined some crows in a watermelon field. The farmer, not knowing this and wanting to protect the fruit of his labors, blasted them with his shotgun. The results were three dead crows and one ruffled parrot with a missing toe.

The farmer tenderly took him home where the excited children gathered around and asked, "What did it?"

"Bad company! Bad company!" answered the parrot.

He spoke wiser than he knew. His foolish choice of associates had endangered him.