

Enduring Hardship

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[0 : 0 0] to grab your Bibles again and turn to Hebrews chapter 12 as we continue our series through this letter. Well as many of you have heard, I had a cycling accident last month and it happened on the first day of our holidays, which was not ideal. I spent it in emergency, my first day of holidays in the emergency ward in the hospital. But when I got back home where we were staying, the place we were staying at at evening time, I was there standing in the kitchen with my arm in a sling, my shoulder bruised and missing a fair bit of skin, my ribs cracked and I was just getting some painkillers when my daughter came in all upset. And I quickly asked, what's wrong? And she says, I never get anything. Tim got lollies, Kate got a bigger bike than me and you even got to go in an ambulance.

It's the worst day ever. To which I replied, yes, sweetie, we all face our own trials.

But we do, don't we? We live in a fallen world and suffering often falls on top of us. And I know there are many here who are experiencing it even now. For our readers though, it was specifically linked to being a Christian, you might remember. Some lost their homes, some their jobs, some their freedom as they were put in prison. Others were rejected by their synagogue, by their family, by their society as they were publicly insulted. And now it seems it's happening all over again.

So some were even tempted in light of this to give up on Christ and go back to Judaism with its Old Testament sacrifices and priests and temple. And so as we've seen through our series of Hebrews, the writer begins by showing them the glory of Christ, what they would be giving up if they were to turn from him. And the beginning chapters of Hebrews, the writer says that Jesus is greater than the Old Testament prophets, for he is God's full and definitive word to us. He says Jesus is greater than the angels because he is God's son and king. Indeed, Jesus is God himself. And then towards the later, the middle part of the chapters, the writer spends quite some time saying that Jesus is the better, the great high priest, the better sacrifice, the better, well, everything.

And now having shown them the greatness of Christ from chapter 10, verse 19 onwards, he starts to really push them to persevere. Perseverance has been the underlying theme for the past two weeks and is again so for today. In fact, the word for persevere or endure, it's the same word in the original.

[3 : 1 0] It only occurs in Hebrews from chapter 10 onwards. And so on the next slide, I think I've got it there, just to give you a big picture view. From chapter 10, 19 to 39, he's basically saying persevere and don't shrink back. Peter Adams spoke to us about that. And last week he was saying persevere like the Old Testament saints and like Christ himself. And this week he'll say persevere through trials.

They had to persevere or endure with Christ. That's the writer's big picture or big point since chapter 10, verse 19. But the question then becomes how? How are they to endure through trials? I mean, it is easier said than done, is it not? Well, firstly, he says, by remembering others who've endured even to death. So point one, verse four, chapter 12, verse four, he says, in your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. In other words, there's still more to go.

He says, here, their struggle against sin. It could refer to their struggle, their personal struggle against personal sin, as in verse one of chapter 12. But given it follows immediately from verse three, where verse three refers to Christ's struggle against sinners, then I suspect that's what it's talking about in verse four. The writer says, endure your trials against sinful people who are persecuting you just as they persecuted Jesus. And you're to endure by remembering others who endured even to death, to the point of shedding their blood. Now, the writer has already given them a whole chapter's worth of people who persevered in faith right up to their death. But he even lists some examples where people endured persecution till death. So if you have a look at chapter 11, verse 36 and 37, chapter 11, 36, he says, some face jeers and fogging and even chains and imprisonment. Well, they've experienced that, but they haven't experienced verse 37 because some were also put to death by stoning. Horrible way to go. They were sawn in two. Imagine that. They were killed by the sword. And the Hebrews, well, they haven't yet resisted to death like these people have.

So keep going, he's saying. Of course, verse four really has Jesus in mind. He is the supreme example of endurance unto death. So chapter 12, verse one, halfway through verse one, he says, let us run with perseverance or endurance. Same word, the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith for the joy set before him, the joy of glory and heaven after the cross. He endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who again endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. He's saying endure trials by remembering others, particularly Christ who endured unto death.

For you readers have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your own blood. Unless we think that such examples are all ancient news, we only need to remember our news from February this year, do you remember, where we saw 11 Coptic Christians beheaded because they believed in Jesus. Do you remember that?

[6 : 53] It was only February this year. They were given a choice to reject Jesus and live, but they endured to the point of shedding blood. It was only this year that I conducted funerals for people from this church who endured great sickness, who could have become angry at God and walked away from God, yet endured with God unto death. And the writer's point is, if these people can do it, then so too can you with God's help. Remember those who have endured unto death and do likewise, he's saying. And can I say, I see people here, people from this service, who are doing just that. You are enduring your own trials, many of you, and you refuse to stop trusting in the Lord Jesus. And so thank you for your godly example.

Well, the first point here, the way to endure trials is firstly by remembering others who have endured to death. And secondly, we are to endure trials as loved children or loved sons of God.

Point to verse 5, he says, and you have completely forgotten. It's actually a statement, not a question. You have completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son. It says, my son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Here the readers have forgotten the word of encouragement from scripture, which was from our first reading in Proverbs. By the way, it's a good reason to keep reading your Bibles, not just on Sunday, but during the week, is it not? So that we don't forget God's words of encouragement. But what is this word of encouragement they've forgotten? Well, it's Proverbs 3 that says that trials are actually a sign you are loved by God. Did you realize? I mean, you wouldn't have thought so, but trials, it says, it's actually a sign that you're loved by God. How does that work?

Well, he explains in verse 7. He says, endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as his children. How? Well, for what children are not disciplined by their father? And if you are not disciplined and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it.

How much more should we submit to the father of spirits and live? They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share in his holiness. Of course, no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who've been trained by it. Verse 11, the writer is very realistic. He acknowledges that no discipline in whatever form it takes, whether it's persecution or illness or loneliness, whatever it is, no discipline is pleasant at the time. And we all know that, don't we? I remember when I was younger getting in trouble from my mom and she said, wait until your father gets home. Well, I'll tell you what, I wasn't going to wait. I was going to prepare.

[10 : 25] And I was about six or seven. And so I put on every pair of shorts I owned, one over the top of the other, and then some track pants over the top so that I would have protection when the smack came.

Of course, it failed because my father didn't smack me and said he took away my favorite teddy or something or other, and which hurt even more than a smack. But either way, discipline is not pleasant. I mean, we all know that. But do we remember that it is necessary? Do we remember it is necessary?

You see, why did my father discipline me? Well, so that I would learn and remember what is right and wrong. In other words, so that I might grow in maturity. That's the purpose of discipline.

It's not to punish that may involve that element. The purpose of discipline is ultimately to shape us, to train us, you could say, as an athlete disciplines themselves and mold us into maturity.

And why did my father want me to grow into maturity? Well, because he loves me. He wants what's best for me. Verse 10 says, though, our fathers disciplined us as they thought best, which means they didn't always get it right.

[11 : 39] But, he says, God does get it right and he disciplines for our good. What good? Well, that we may share, verse 10, in his holiness.

In other words, God disciplines us so that we may grow as Christians and persevere to heaven.

You see, when we suffer trials, we can be tempted to think that God has abandoned us or that he no longer loves us. But, the writer uses Proverbs 3 to actually show that, believe it or not, it's a sign that God does love us.

Because, as a loving father disciplines his children for their good, so too our lovingly Heavenly Father uses these trials that come up because of a fallen world. He uses these trials to discipline or train us for our ultimate good, that we may share in his holiness, that we might produce the fruit of righteousness and peace, both now and later in heaven.

You see, if God never let us suffer, then it would actually be unloving, do you realise? Because it would mean we would never be forced to exercise our faith under pressure and grow.

[13 : 02] I mean, muscles that are never exercised never grow. Muscles that are never stretched, just shrivel. I said to Michelle, my wife, the other day, that I think I've lost quite a bit of my shoulder muscle because I haven't been exercising it after my accident and my wife laughed because she hadn't noticed any difference.

But muscles that are never exercised or stretched, they never grow, they shrink and shrivel. So too, faith that is never exercised or stretched by hardship never grows, never strengthens, never perseveres.

Instead, it shrinks and shrivels. And so, God allowing us trials and using those trials is a good thing. It's a sign he loves us because he is training us, forcing us to exercise our faith, to grow our faith, to strengthen our faith.

And so, verse 7, we are to endure hardship as a chance to be disciplined, to be trained, to be moulded into maturity as God's loved sons.

Though having said all that, when I was in hospital, the emergency room, with my cracked ribs and torn muscles and blood dripping from my shoulder and hands, I remembered verse 6 that said, the Lord disciplines those he loves and I thought, God, perhaps you could love me less.

[14 : 24] And for others here who are currently enduring chronic illness or cancer or unrelenting pain or loneliness, it is understandable to think, God, how much more training do I really need?

And the bottom line is, we don't know why God allows some to experience the suffering of this fallen world more than others. But we do know that when Paul asked God three times to remove that thorn in his side, God's reply was, my grace is sufficient for you.

And so I take it, God will never give us more than we can bear, but he will always give us the grace we need to bear it.

As the writer of our hymn, we're going to sing shortly, he says on our next slide, when through fiery trials, your pathway shall lead, his grace shall sustain you with all that you need.

The flame shall not hurt you. God's only design, your dross to consume and your gold, your faith, to refine. Now part of that gracious help that God gives us is not only his spirit, but actually each other.

[15 : 54] God gives us each other to support one another through trials, and I've seen it here at HTD. It's brilliant. But God gives us each other not just to support one another, but also to help each other push on in the faith, which brings us to point three in verse 12.

He says, therefore strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees, make level paths for your feet so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See to it that no one is sexually immoral or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance, writes, as the oldest son.

Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit his blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done. Here the writer doesn't want them just to bunker down and weather the storm.

He wants them actually to push on in the faith. You see, the trial of persecution has knocked some of them down, has winded them severely. But the writer is saying, don't stay down.

[17 : 10] Strengthen your feeble arms and your weak knees. Get back up on your feet onto the straight path of following Jesus, back into the race of perseverance.

Verse 2. Otherwise, the lame, those who have been knocked down, may become disabled and not healed. You see, any physio will tell you that to get better, you have to do your exercises.

Because if you don't exercise those muscles, they could permanently seize up and you could become disabled rather than being healed. So too, they must be back up, back exercising their faith, back to trusting in Jesus so that they may be healed.

You see, enduring trials is much more than just bunkering down and trying to weather the suffering. Now it's actually pushing on in the faith, continuing to follow Jesus.

For in the Bible, faith that is not moving forward is very often moving backward. And so he says in verse 14, make every effort to push on.

[18 : 14] Literally, pursue peace and holiness. In verse 15, they are to see to it that no one falls short of God's grace, that no bitter root grows up, that is, bitterness against God, which can infect others and cause trouble.

Verse 16, see to it that no one is sexually immoral or godless, literally worldly, as Esau was. You see, they are to endure trials, not only remembering others who have endured unto death, not only remembering that they are actually loved children of God, loved sons, but also by pushing on in the Christian life.

For faith that is not moving forward is very often moving backward. But do notice, they are to do it together, helping each other. Do you see verse 15 and 16? It does not say, see to it that you, dot, dot, dot.

It says, see to it that no one, dot, dot, dot, none of you. In other words, they're not just to look out for themselves, they are to look out for each other. Help one another walk the straight path of following Christ, so that no one will miss out on the grace of God, so that no one will miss out on the inheritance we'll receive as God's sons.

And I think that's why the passage is talking about sons and why it mentions Esau at the end. In verses 5 to 11, the word sons comes up quite a bit, even more than our English translation has it actually.

[19 : 39] And it's not a sexist thing, it's an inheritance thing. You see, in ancient times, it was the oldest son who received the inheritance, wasn't it?

And so to be called God's loved sons, equal with Christ, means we will not only share in God's holiness, but also his inheritance as co-heirs with Christ.

And that's why I take it Esau is mentioned at the end. I mean, it's a pretty random example to throw in there. But the writer is saying, don't give up on following Jesus and become worldly, because then you'll miss out on your heavenly inheritance as God's sons.

Just as Esau missed out on his inheritance as the eldest son. No, no. Endure trials by remembering others who endured unto death.

Endure trials by remembering that we are actually God's loved sons. and endure trials by pushing on together so that we will finish the race, receive our heavenly inheritance, and then no longer have to endure, but only enjoy life together.

[20 : 50] On the next slide is a picture of Horatio Gates Spafford. Some of you may have heard of him before.

He lived in the States in the 1860s in Chicago. He was a prominent lawyer, a senior partner in a large and thriving law firm. But in 1871, the great fire of Chicago reduced the city to ashes, including his law firm and including much of his sizable investments.

And so he lost quite a lot of money. He still had enough money, though, because two years later he decided to go on a trip with his family, but he sent his wife and four children ahead of him so he could finish some work behind.

And while his wife and four children were on the ship, it collided with another ship and his four children drowned. Only his wife survived. After that, they reunited, they had more children.

Yet again, his son, at age four, died of scarlet fever. And it was through these trials that he penned the hymn, It is well with my soul.

[22 : 05] Do you remember that one? Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blessed assurance control that Christ has regarded my helpless estate and has shed his own blood for my soul.

See, throughout his trials, he kept his eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus. He remembered all that God had done and that yet, despite these trials, he was still God's loved child.

And he persevered in the faith unto his death four days before he turned 60. We are to endure trials, remembering those who endure to death.

We are to endure trials, remembering that God uses them to grow us. We are to endure trials by pushing on in the faith. May God help us to do this.

Let's pray. Let's pray.