

# ATTITUDE THE KEY TO ENDURANCE

Hebrews 12:3-17

We were running stride for stride when we hit the sand dune. By the time we came out of the dune my opponent had dropped back 40 yards and in the half mile to the finish line was unable to recover. That day, as a high school freshman cross country runner, I came to value more deeply my coaches and the training they required of us.

In a workout earlier that week our coaches had us run sprint repeats across that sand dune. It was an incredibly hard workout; I distinctly remember tasting blood from my throat through the last several sprints. But the results on race day made the pain of that workout worthwhile.

We are running the race of faith (Heb. 12:1-2). Our race includes pain and suffering at many levels and in many ways. That is why we must run with patient endurance. And the key to patient endurance is *attitude*.

The point of my running story is that my *attitude* changed. My attitude prior was not bad. But on that day my belief in the value of our workouts and my commitment to endure the pain of our workouts increased. Rather than thinking, "Oh no, what are they going to make us do today?" my attitude became "Bring it on, let's do this!"

In Hebrews 12:3-11 the Preacher speaks to the *attitude* of the Hebrew Christians towards their suffering. Whether they become bitter or better will be determined by their attitude towards the suffering which God was allowing them to suffer.

The key word in 12:3-11 is *discipline*. It refers not to punishment nor church discipline but to child rearing. A better word would be *training*. The Preacher has in mind the parenting process by which a child is brought to maturity. As any good father (and mother) trains his children so also God trains His children.

In 12:3-11 the Preacher shifts from the metaphor of a race to child rearing. Just as a good Father requires hard things of his son in order to bring him to maturity, so God uses suffering/persecution to bring His children to maturity. Though some of us may not have had a father or a good father, we can relate to the comparison through a good coach or teacher who required hard things of us in order to bring us to maturity.

Hebrews 12:3-11 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> 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 reproved by him. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It 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? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 3:11, Septuagint (LXX)

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? <sup>10</sup> For 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

Verse 7 is the key to the passage. The NET Bible gives a much clearer translation than the ESV:

Hebrews 12:7 (NET)

<sup>7</sup> Endure your suffering as discipline....

He is not saying to the Hebrew Christians, “Endure your suffering as *punishment*...” He is saying, “Endure your suffering as *training*.”

It is all about having the right attitude toward their suffering. God is using their suffering to mature them; to accomplish good things in their lives.

First, His *training through suffering* proves they are His children.

Hebrews 12:7-9 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> (Endure your suffering as discipline;) God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides 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?

Second, His *training through suffering* is developing in them righteous character.

Hebrews 12:10-11 (ESV)

<sup>10</sup> For 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

Righteous character is of great benefit. My earthly father trained us to respect authority, to be honest and trustworthy, to be hard workers, to value family. My father instilled in us a high view of the Church; we were in church every Sunday and not only that, Mom and Dad always served somewhere in the church. Because of his training, my sisters and I have enjoyed the “peaceful fruit of righteousness”.

Similarly, God uses suffering in our lives to train us and develop in us righteousness of character. Writing from a prison cell, the Apostle Paul manifested a very clear view on his life’s purpose:

Philippians 1:21 (ESV)

<sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Later, in the same letter, Paul testified how training through suffering had taught him contentment and reliance upon Christ.

Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV)

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup>

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.<sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

God uses trials to test and strengthen our faith and to make us perfect and complete (mature).

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

It is critical we have the right attitude towards suffering else we fall prey to bitterness (12:15). It is also important we understand that we choose our attitude towards suffering; we are not victims of our feelings. If we are not able to choose our attitude then the Preacher's instruction is all for not. But we can and must choose a right attitude towards suffering. We need to embrace the value of suffering as we value the hard things our fathers required of us that caused us to mature.

It is going to be harder for some than for others to choose the right attitude towards suffering. In the church to which the Preacher wrote some were wore down by persecution and were seriously considering quitting Christianity to return to Judaism to get relief. These are the "lame" and the ones needing to "obtain the grace of God" in verses 12-17. These are the ones that the church family especially needs to help lest they fall into bitterness.

Hebrews 12:12-17 (ESV)

<sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> 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.

The Preacher is calling the church family to buck up and to conduct themselves in a manner that is helpful to the saints, especially the struggling. One writer provides this translation that makes verses 12-13 clearer:

*"Make straight and level paths, that the lame may not be driven to turn aside into other paths, but may be healed", i.e., that those who are wavering in faith may not be led to turn away, but rather be brought back and established.*<sup>2</sup>

How does a church make a "straight and level path" so that it's not tripping up its family members?

- *Strive for peace with everyone.* By training the family to genuinely resolve conflict and be at peace with each other.

<sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

- *Strive for... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.* By discipling the family in practical holiness – doing what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord. When he says, “...without which no one will see the Lord.”, he is referring to our positional holiness in Christ. We possess this holiness and will see the Lord. The Preacher’s concern is that our positional holiness be expressed in our practical holiness.
- *See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.* By being sensitive to those struggling in their faith and helping them receive God’s grace in the midst of their suffering. We can only do this as we develop loving relationships with each other in the church family. When a brother or sister is struggling we come alongside and encourage them from the Word and draw near with them to the throne of grace in prayer. We love on them. We serve them. We show them grace. In these ways we help each other “obtain the grace of God”.

If we don’t help each other “obtain the grace of God” we are setting each other up for bitterness. A bitter brother or sister can do great damage in a church family. And their bitterness over time can lead to spiritual contempt.

Notice the downward spiral in verses 15-17:

Hebrews 12:15–17 (ESV)

<sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> 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.

The brother who fails to obtain God’s grace becomes bitter; his bitterness spreads to others in the church family. That bitterness towards God can lead to spiritual contempt. Esau showed contempt for his birthright as the firstborn son. He traded his inheritance for a bowl of soup. Once sold, it was gone. A bitter believer can become spiritually contemptuous of their salvation and their future inheritance considering these to be of little to no value.

In summary, worn down by persecution some of the Hebrew saints were struggling with their attitude toward suffering; they were at risk of becoming bitter, spiritually contemptuous and ultimately of recanting their Christian faith and returning to Judaism. These who were “lame” needed their church leaders and church family to come along side and help them receive God’s grace in the midst of their sufferings and so be strengthened to continue to endure in the Faith.

For ourselves we learn that:

*We need to have a right attitude towards suffering.*

Contrary to the health-wealth-prosperity gospel, faith in Jesus Christ does not guarantee health, wealth or prosperity. We should not be surprised or angered by persecution or trials. Consider the message of Paul and Barnabas to the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch:

Acts 14:21-23 (ESV)

<sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. <sup>23</sup> And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Rather than being surprised we should be prepared for suffering by our study of passages such as Hebrews 12:3-17 and James 1. Rather than “Why are you doing this to me God?” our attitude and prayer should be “Lord, please use this trial to make me more like Christ.”

*We are responsible as a church family to relate to God and one another in a manner that does not hinder, but helps people to endure in the faith, especially those undergoing trials.*

Hypocrisy, conflict, pride, bitterness, lack of love, lack of grace, poor teaching – these kinds of things in the church family are really damaging to people’s faith. We want to continue to develop into, not a perfect family, but a genuine family marked by a sincere desire to be at peace with one another. We want to live holy lives doing what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord. We want to build loving relationships with one another such that in times of suffering we can help each other receive God’s grace. This is for all of us, not simply the staff or the Elders or the Deacons; we are all called to strive for peace and holiness and to help one another experience God’s grace especially in times of suffering.