



“Suffering in the presence of God”

• Hebrews 12:1-24. Rev. Bruce Stanley
Sermon audio and text available at www.waitara.anglican.asn.au

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• When life is difficult:

What trials are you facing right now? What difficult times are you in the middle of? Financial? Relationship? Health? A tough time at work, or with the kids, or maybe you're just tired. Maybe everyone around you seems to have a life that's better than your and maybe you're a little envious, or jealous. Maybe you feel like people take advantage of you. Perhaps there are close friends or family who are struggling at the moment.

When we face trials, we can often have one of these two reactions – (not always, but sometimes)

- **DESPAIR**

We can despair. We can worry and lament and cry out, perhaps saying things like “It’s not fair!” We face illness, or a close friend does, and we ask: “Why is this happening?”

- **COMPARE**

Or when we face trials, we might react by comparing, saying something like: “Well, other people are going through much worse than me.” At least I’ve got good friends to support me. This will pass – I just have to push through this difficult time.

Two very appropriate reactions to suffering or facing trials in our life. We *despair*, or we *compare*. They’re very human reactions, human responses to things going wrong in our life or the lives of those around us. And probably nothing will stop us from reacting in those sorts of ways.

But let me suggest that there is also a response the Bible encourages us to have when we face trials in our life. What Hebrews 12 offers us is another way to evaluate our struggles in life. Let’s take a look at verses 1-3:

- **What Jesus teaches us**

1...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The chapter starts by reminding us of what we've been hearing all through Hebrews. Jesus is better! Jesus is superior. HE is the one we are to focus on, especially in difficult times. He is the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. He is the one who has taken away our sin and made us perfect before God, so we can live in his presence forever. Jesus is our focus. And Jesus is our encouragement.

And the writer of Hebrews knows that life is tough. That's why he's telling us these things. He's encouraging us that when life gives us opposition, when we face struggles, the strength to persevere comes from focusing on Jesus. By focusing on him, we will not grow weary and lose heart.

In particular, we're called to focus on what Jesus has done on the cross. He endured the cross. And as we come to the end of this great book, what a great thing to be reminded of. Remember the cross! Remember the humiliation and scorn, the opposition, the hatred that Jesus faced. And why? So he could take our sin upon himself. He did it for us. By choice.

Focusing on Jesus is the number one thing we are to do when we face trials and struggles and suffering.

So first of all, WHAT do we focus on?

- **1. Jesus suffered.**

4In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Don't forget all Jesus went through for you. By choice. He chose to suffer in your place. But most importantly, don't forget that he knows what it is to suffer. He knows what it is to face the most difficult trials. We don't have a God who is distant from us. We don't have a God who likes to see us suffer. We have a God who became human and who **knows** what it's like to suffer,

and he has faced it's most extreme form. We have a high priest, Jesus, who has been through it himself.

It's comforting to know Jesus understands what we're going through. But now we ask WHY God allows it to happen to us. Verses 5-7

- **2. Trials are discipline.**

5And have you 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, 6because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." 7Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.

God allows us to face trials and he calls it an encouragement! Why would God allow us to face difficult times? Why not KEEP us from difficult times? Doesn't he love us? And the answer is: Yes, he loves us **like his children**. **THAT** is the encouragement. Our trials are discipline from a loving Father. It is precisely BECAUSE he loves us as children, that he **allows** us to face trials.

But we have to be careful here that we don't misinterpret this.

He is NOT saying that we are being disciplined as a punishment for our sin. How do we know that? Because Jesus has taken the punishment for our sin. Why would God punish us when Jesus has already taken our punishment? Isn't his death on the cross enough? Of course it is! So our discipline is not punishment for sin.

So what do our trials teach us?

- 1. It's about **sharing in God's holiness** and producing righteousness and peace.

Verses 10-11: *... but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* In other words, it's about being right in our relationship with God (that's righteousness). Trials and suffering – all that God allows us to go through – he allows it to happen **so we may draw closer to Him**. So we learn to trust him, knowing that he loves us as his children.

- 2. It's about passing on that peace to those around us – SO THAT people will be able to see God through the way you face difficult times.

Verse 14: *“Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”* The way we respond to trials and suffering is a **witness** to those around us – a witness to our trust in God – a witness to the fact that we have a hope **beyond** this world. I remember at the funeral of a young girl, the Christian parents mourned, and wept, but they also celebrated. They celebrated her life as a child of God. That funeral was THE greatest witness of God's hope I have ever seen! They trusted God, even in facing their greatest trial. That trust was a witness to the people around them. People saw that they followed a God who could be trusted, even in the most difficult circumstances. See to it, verse 15: *“that no one misses the grace of God.”* Let them see his grace in your life, even in the difficult times.

- 3. It's about God being tough, not about us being tough.

Verse 22-23: *“you have come... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood...”* When we face difficult times, they are the times to remember that we live in the presence of God. And we suffer in the presence of God. We have not come to a distant God who doesn't care. We have not come, like in the Old Covenant, to a scary mountain burning with fire. Under the New Covenant, we have come to Jesus, the one who shed his blood for us. The one who suffered for **us**. Every trial we face is a time to remember that, as Christians, we have **nothing** to worry about. **Nothing**. Because God suffered so our future could be guaranteed. We live now and forever in the presence of God, because Jesus endured the cross for us.

Facing trials is not about being tough. It's not a case of “what doesn't kill me makes me stronger.” It's about us recognizing that **God** has the strength we need.

I want to finish this whole book of Hebrews by just reminding us of one verse: Hebrews 5:8 – a verse that focuses us back on Jesus – a verse that gives us the perspective we need when we face difficult times:

- *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”*

Just like Jesus, our trials can move us **closer** to God, in obedience, and remind us that our present AND future is in the presence of God himself, through Jesus, who died for us. Let's pray.