

Jesus is Greater **Hebrews 12**

Three types of suffering:

* common suffering (because I'm human)

* carnal suffering (because of sin)

* Christian suffering (because I'm a believer)

1. Perspective in persevering faith

- Hebrews 12:1-11; Romans 8:28; Proverbs 3:11-12

2. Perfection in persevering faith

- Hebrews 12:12-17

Three essentials to a holy life:

* holiness in life

* holiness in heart

- Matthew 5:8-9

* holiness in church

- Thessalonians 4:3

3. Permanence in persevering faith

- Hebrew 12:18-29

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Hebrews: Jesus is Greater

Chapter Twelve¹

This obviously is a rubber band. And God created you and me to be something like a rubber band. You see, a rubber band is made to stretch. When it is not being stretched, it is small and relaxed, but as long as it remains that way, it is not doing what it was made to do. When it stretches, it is enlarged; it becomes tense and dynamic, and it does what it was made to do. There is strain on the rubber band, but there is now also great energy – energy to hold things together, or energy to go in a direction I choose (shoot it). God created you to stretch so he can use you to pull things in this world together and to be a source of His energy as you go in the direction he sends you!

That is very much the message of Hebrews chapter 12. Today we continue in our series in Hebrews, called “Jesus is Greater...” Today and next Sunday will conclude this series. I want to say thank you to our pastoral staff for preaching this summer through some very challenging and difficult passages of Scripture and theology. I know it wasn’t easy! I’ve listened to all the Sundays that I was gone, so I’ve been taking the journey with you, even though we were not here. I hope you’ve been reading along in the chapters in advance of the Sundays as we invited you to do when I started this series with you back in June. But for today, take your notes out of your worship folder or open the church app on your smart phone and jot down what you want to remember today.

We’ve learned that Jesus Christ has done for us all that we need by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. He is the perfect High Priest and has fulfilled what the Old Testament with all of its rituals and laws was pointing to and hinting at all along. Because of that, we can be saved from the guilt of sin and be God’s children, but we also can enter into a life of rest and peace through living a holy life, by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in His temple, which is you! Last week we saw great examples of heroes of faith from the Old Testament. Now, in this chapter, we are challenged by their lives to live that same life.

Hebrews is a book of “therefores,” isn’t it? The writer starts chapter 12 with maybe the biggest “therefore” in the book (there are three of those in this chapter alone!). It ties into chapter 11, and combined with chapter 13 brings us to the conclusion and application of the whole book. Since we have such great examples of faith in

¹ Sources: Kevin L. Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2013). Ray Stedman, *How to Live What You Believe: A Life Related Study in Hebrews* (Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 1974). John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Hebrews* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008). Gareth L. Cockerill, *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998). Philip H Hacking, *Opening up Hebrews*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006)

chapter 11, we can be inspired to persevere in *our* faith, which is what the author describes in chapter 12.

Remember we've said that the people this letter was first written to were being persecuted for their faith – they were facing the decision to either hold on to their faith and be tortured and killed for it, or deny Christ and go back to being a Jew. This was an important issue for them to face, because if they denied Christ, they would have committed a sin from which there would be no turning back. So the writer here is doing two things: one, he is encouraging the believers to persevere in their faith no matter what the circumstances. But he is also doing something else: all through this book there is a strong and swift running undercurrent of something called holiness – God's holiness, to be sure, but also *ours*. You've read of the constant comparisons of how the old sacrificial system was inadequate in making us holy, but now because of Christ there is a holiness that we can live in and experience and rest in. So not only is the writer encouraging persevering faith in suffering and difficult circumstances, he is showing us what this life of complete surrender to God, this life of holiness, looks like.

Now, before we look at this, I think it's important to understand what kind of suffering the writer is talking about. A pastor friend of mine recently preached on this, and I think he's right on.

There are **three types of suffering** that we face in this world. One is...

- **Common suffering (because I'm human)**

The fact is that we live in a broken down world, and so all of us face suffering. There is sickness and disease and difficulty and death. No one is exempt from this, whether they are Christian or not. Right? Nowhere does the Bible say that God's people are exempt from common suffering – at least not in this life. In fact, it says the opposite.

There is another type of suffering, and that is...

- **Carnal suffering (because of sin)**

There is a suffering that people experience that is the result of sin in their lives. These deal with the consequences of sin. For example, if you are sexually promiscuous, you will increase the possibility of getting a disease. If you abuse drugs or mistreat your body you will destroy your health and cut your life short. If you sin in your anger you will destroy relationships with your children and spouse and friends and coworkers and you will be alone. Do you understand that? There are consequences we may face, and they are difficult and bring about suffering in our lives.

The third type of suffering that we face is...

- **Christian suffering (because I'm a believer)**

There is a kind of suffering that is unique to Christians living in this often evil world. The Bible speaks many times about the suffering we will face, from mild to severe to even fatal, for being Christians. Do you understand that?

This chapter is encouraging us to have persevering faith in the midst of both numbers 1 and 3 suffering (but not the second kind). If you are dealing with the second kind, you need to confess it to God, and allow Christ to change your life. But if you are suffering in the first and third kind, you *can* persevere. *That's* what this chapter is telling us.

So in this chapter there are three main thoughts regarding true persevering faith that the writer shares with us. To begin with, the Scripture wants us to have the right...

1. Perspective in persevering faith

Suffering can sometimes cause us to lose perspective, or have the wrong perspective. So in verses 1-11 the writer wants us to keep the right perspective when we face struggles and difficulties – even extreme ones – as we persevere in faith. I want us to pay attention to what this chapter says in those first eleven verses, so let's honor God's Word to us be standing as I read it. It's a lengthy passage, so we're not going to print it on the screens, but you can follow along in your Bibles or apps, and please listen attentively:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And 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, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 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. No 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. (Hebrews 12:1-11, niv)

Thank you for standing; you can have a seat.

Whenever you are being stretched through common suffering or Christian suffering, keep in perspective that God intends to use it to strengthen your character so that you will persevere through it and grow.

You know, when it comes to sprinting the 100 yard dash, some people are great at running the "ninety-five-yard dash." But that doesn't do a lot of good, because if you don't have the last five yards, then the first ninety-five are pointless. And sometimes, it's like a marathon. A full marathon is 26 miles and 385 yards. Can you imagine running 26 miles, 285 yards and then quitting a hundred yards short?

In our journey of Christlikeness, or holiness, persevering faith means we are willing to run the *entire* course, not just sprint the first 95 yards and quit or stop 5 yards or a hundred yards short of the finish line. The prize isn't for the good *starters* – it's for the good *finishers*. And the great thing is, the winner isn't just the first to cross the finish line; *everyone* who crosses the finish line wins.

Then we are reminded that if we are going to make it through to the finish, we have to run unencumbered – we can't be weighted down with sin. That's why the author encourages us again to throw off the sin that tangles up our feet as we try to run this race. It will do you no good to persevere through carnal suffering; the only solution to that is to stop sinning! Be forgiven and set free! And the great news is that you don't have to run this marathon of life in Christ continually tangled up by sin. You can stop! Why would God tell us in this passage to throw off sin, if it could not be done? OK then, how do we? By fixing our eyes on Jesus! He is the source of this faith we need, and he is the finisher or perfecter of our faith. Our perspective needs to be keeping our eyes on him, always. Because of the suffering that *He* went through for us, *we* can finish the race – if we trust Him and run in His strength, not our own. Stop striving in your own strength and start surrendering to the strength of Christ.

And since he endured so much for us, we can endure whatever we are going through, because regardless of what it is, it doesn't come close to what He faced for us. In fact, our perspective is not just to endure suffering, but – here's the amazing thing – we can actually see those difficult times as for our own good! God wants to use them to perfect our character. That's what God meant when He said:

“We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purposes.” (Romans 8:28, ceb)

There is no condition on that Scripture; God will work in all our circumstances and suffering, if we faithfully follow him and love him.

The writer of Hebrews makes his point by calling the readers' attention to Proverbs 3:11-12 –

“My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” (Proverbs 3:11-12, niv)

Let me talk just a minute about that word “discipline.” When we think of disciplining our children, we automatically think that it is similar to “punishment.” But that’s not what the word means. In the first century Greco-Roman culture it called to mind “athletic imagery.”² That makes sense, because the writer already used the analogy of running a race, right? It’s all throughout this chapter. For the writer and those originally reading it, the word “discipline” was about “the process of training or educating youth to become responsible citizens in (that) culture...The process included both mental and physical training, as in a gymnasium.”³ You might remember that in chapters 5 and 6 the writer wrote about education and athletic training to make the point of reaching moral maturity.

In Proverbs 13 God says that if we don’t discipline or train our children then we don’t really love them; so in Hebrews God is reminding us that he deeply loves us, and that suffering is a means of helping us reach maturity.

That leads to the question, does God actually *cause* difficulties and suffering in our lives in order to discipline us? That is a *very important* question to ask, so if you are not asking it, you should be. So ask it (*together*). I’m glad you asked!

I want you to listen closely to this answer: **no**. *It is against God’s loving nature to create or cause suffering in your life. (repeat)* But God knows that we live in a broken down world filled with the consequences of humanity’s free will, and we’ve freely chosen sin. So it is inevitable that we will experience *common* suffering. That’s not what God intended in the Garden of Eden, but that’s what we chose. It’s inevitable. God also knows that, if you and I are going to follow him and be like him in this sinful and evil world we live in, we are going to experience *Christian* suffering. So because God knows that, and he loves us, he is determined to turn our suffering on its head and use it not as punishment but as a means of growth. So if you are experiencing in your life common suffering or Christian suffering, there is *no question* God wants to use it to make you better. In other words, in God’s great wisdom and providence and in obedience to his own rule of free will, He allows suffering, but He wants to use it. God is most interested in your perfection – in you becoming more and more like His Son Jesus Christ. And if Jesus was perfected in suffering, then what makes us think we can avoid it? You know, sometimes we need suffering for the good of our souls more than healing for the good of our bodies.

So keep perspective in persevering faith – submit to God in your suffering and he will use your difficult times to share in His holiness – see in verse 11 – becoming more like Jesus as it produces righteousness in us.

And that’s the next thing for us to realize; we grow in...

² Anderson, *Hebrews*, page 315

³ *ibid*

2. Perfection in persevering faith.

God wants to bring us to completion or perfection in our Christ likeness, helping us to become all that he has dreamed and purposed for us to be.

A man stopped to watch a Little League baseball game. He asked one of the youngsters what the score was. "We're losing 18-0," was the answer.

"Well," said the man. "I must say you don't look discouraged."

"Discouraged?" the boy said, puzzled. "Why should we be discouraged? We haven't come to bat yet."

The author is telling us that difficulties are not a reason to be discouraged; they are a reason to be excited, because you are going to get to see God work in your life!

In this next section, there's another "therefore", and the author is saying that, because we know God is always working on our character, we can live the life that He promises.

Listen to verses 12-17. Would you mind standing again? It gets blood to your brain and helps you concentrate!

"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 all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears." (Hebrews 12:12-17, niv)

Now there is some important stuff here, so let me try to unpack it for us.

There are **three essentials to a holy life** that are pointed out here, and the first is...

- **holiness in life**

In that first phrase we read in verse 12 the writer is basically saying in the original language, "Snap out of that posture of discouragement! Lift up your hands in praise because God is not only working in your life, but there is work to do – your life is either making the paths of others easier or harder, so get to work. There are Christians who are struggling that are watching you, and non-Christians who are watching you. How you handle yourself in difficulties will help heal *them* and keep *them* from being spiritually disabled." In a way we are being told, "Quit feeling sorry for yourself and start thinking about the people around you who need you. Live the life of holiness that is an example to others, because they are watching and depending on you!"

Second is...

- **holiness in heart**

In verse 14 we see that if our hearts are to be holy – that is, like God’s heart, then it begins in our relationships with others. So we need to make every effort to live in peace.

Can I just tell you something: you don’t make peace with your friends. Peace is made with *enemies*. Who are your enemies? Who do you dislike, have a bad attitude about? Who mistreats you? Remember that Jesus said that the greatest commandment is that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then the second command is *just like it* - to love our neighbor as ourselves – no matter who they are. If we are to be like God we *must* love others – and that’s ALL others, no exceptions. Period. The writer says that without this, we will not see the Lord. Remember what Jesus said?

“Blessed are the pure in heart (or the holy), for they shall see God. And blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Sons of God.”
(Matthew 5:8-9, niv)

We must ask God to make us perfected or pure in heart and we must live in peace with others.

Then we see that this persevering faith means we must also have...

- **holiness in church**

Let’s take these verse by verse. First, in verse fifteen, we are warned about the deadliness in the church of bitterness. I see so many Christians bitter at other Christians. Bitterness is not just a bad taste in our mouths; it’s a poison in the church. Are you holding onto bitterness against someone? Stop justifying it and stop nursing it and get rid of it. The truth is, being bitter is just plain stupid. If you are bitter it is because *you are a bad taste to others!* Bitterness poisons the person who is bitter, and it spreads to others. Someone once said that bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. Shall I say that again? Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It makes no sense! It’s just plain stupid.

Then the writer warns us about sexual immorality. This is another area, like bitterness, that infects the whole person and prohibits this holy life that God wants us to live. That’s why the Bible says:

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified (or holy); that you should avoid sexual immorality.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3, niv)

That Scripture is about more than sexual sins, though; it implies *any* sin of self-indulgence, which includes sexual sins. Really, all sin is selfishness, isn’t it? But God’s heart is not selfish at all; God is totally selfless in his love for others. He doesn’t neglect self, but he’s not selfish – at all. *We* are selfish, and that’s why *we* need a change of heart. That’s the kind of perfection we need and that God wants us to have. That’s why the writer talks about Esau’s sin. If you don’t know the story it’s in Genesis 25. Instead of pursuing what God wanted and being the man God had

intended Esau to be by receiving his father's blessing, in his selfishness he sold his birthright – traded his destiny for a bowl of soup because he was selfishly hungry. We too can forfeit or trade our destiny out of our own selfishness.

Some of us are in this church, maybe have been for years, maybe not, but we have deeply rooted bitterness and selfishness. I can't tell you how dangerous that is to yourself and to the rest of us.

You might act like a Christian, but that bitterness and selfishness will eventually show itself.

I'm reminded of a news story from the Associated Press: Justin John Boudin, a 27-year-old man from Minnesota, pleaded guilty to fifth-degree assault charges for violently losing his temper. Here's the irony: he was on his way to anger management class when he committed the crime.

According to the criminal complaint, Boudin was waiting at a bus stop when he started to harass a 59-year-old woman. Witnesses say he yelled at her over what he felt was a general lack of respect. When she took out her cell phone to call police, Boudin punched her in the face. When a 63-year-old man tried to stop him, Boudin hit him with a blue folder that held his anger management homework. Police tracked him down by using the papers inside.⁴

How about you? As you realize your need for perfection in persevering in your faith; do you need to deal with bitterness or selfishness?

You really ought to, because if you don't, God *will*. Count on it. That is the point of the last part...

3. Permanence in persevering faith

Our faith *in* God is far more permanent than whatever suffering or struggle we are going *through*.

Let's look at that past part of chapter 12. Would you stand one more time while I read it?

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous

⁴ http://www.nbcnews.com/id/23421960/ns/us_news-weird_news/t/man-hits-woman-way-anger-control-class/#.W38ScS2ZNhE

made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:18-29, niv)

How can you read that and not sense the awfulness and awesomeness of God and how serious this Christian life is!?

The writer is describing the awful fear that the Israelites must have had when they were at Mount Sinai – the thunder, the lightening, and the power of God. If they even touched it they would die. Then when Moses came down from the mountain and found the Israelites committing all kinds of sexual and selfish sin, God split the earth open and consumed them. Now as terrible as that is, we are not dealing with Mount *Sinai*, where Moses was. We are dealing with Mount *Zion*. Mount Zion is where the Temple Mount is geographically – it is where the Temple of God was before it was destroyed in 70AD, and it is what to this day Jews want to rebuild. But this passage is not talking about a geographical location of Zion. This is talking about the presence of God himself, through the Holy Spirit, living in the Temple of our hearts and about us being in the Kingdom of God – the heavenly Zion. Now if God's people at Sinai should have feared Him that much when they received the imperfect law, shouldn't we at Zion take God that *much more* seriously, since Jesus Christ is greater than *all* the Old Testament law and promises? There is a beautiful picture here of what we have come to in verse 22-24, and that is the reality of what we have in Christ. It's incredible. But we also need to take Christ *far* more seriously and listen to what He tells us – that is what verses 25 to 29 say.

Now I have to tell you that those last five verses are some of my favorite in the Bible. They are some of the hardest, too. They are saying that God will shake everything that has been created – everything – including you and me. Let me ask you: what has NOT been created? Only God is "uncreated". So (listen to me, church!) God wants to shake everything in your life that does not involve or include Him. He will do that so that only what cannot be shaken – which is God Himself – will remain in your life. If God spoke out of the fire on Mount Sinai, you can bet He will be an all-consuming fire in the Mount Zion of your life now, today, and his presence will burn away everything impure. Fire in the Bible always represents purification. And God wants to purify you – burn away what is unclean in your life. Because persevering faith depends on the only thing that is permanent, and that is God Himself. That's our perspective, our perfection, and is the only thing that's permanent.

How will it be today? Maybe you are going through a difficult time. Are you suffering because there's some sin or bitterness in your life? Why don't you come ask God to work in you? Are you suffering because life is hard? Why don't you allow God to work in it for your faith? Are you feeling like you are a target simply because you are Christian? If you are suffering, whether in small or big ways, come pray and invite God to use it in your life to train you and create a pure heart in you. Maybe it is time for you to surrender to God's shaking fire and give up everything – except Him. Give it all – all of yourself: your possessions, your relationships – everything to Him. Will you allow God's refining fire to cleanse you? Come and pray before we close in song.