The Discipline of Suffering

Christ’s perfect sacrifice calls for His followers to remain faithful regardless.
The cheetah is recognized as the world’s fastest land animal. A motivated cheetah can accelerate from zero to 60 miles per hour in three seconds. It can hit top speeds of 70-75 miles per hour. However, it can run at that pace for only about 500 yards. Then it must stop, lie down, and rest.

Compared to a cheetah, the fastest humans would be left in the dust. Usain Bolt of Jamaica maxed out at just under 28 miles per hour in his world record-breaking 100-meter dash several years ago. On the other hand, we human beings—with training, of course—are much better endurance runners than animals. According to findmymarathon.com, over 700 marathons were held in the U.S. and Canada in 2013, with over 400,000 finishers. That’s more than 10 million miles logged by a tiny fraction of the world’s human population—all in just one year!

Scripture teaches us that the Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint. The key measure is endurance in faith. The goal is to finish well. And the prize is to hear the Lord Jesus Christ say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” But running the race of faith isn’t easy. We must train diligently and practice daily. We must embrace God’s discipline. We must keep our focus on Jesus. This was the “pep talk” of faith that the writer of Hebrews delivered to his first readers. It’s also an urgent word of Scripture for us.

“Life is about doing hard things that you don’t want to do because you believe the result of doing those hard things is going to create great joy and great good—not only for you and for others, but most of all for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

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Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,

keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God’s throne.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won’t grow weary and lose heart.

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

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons: My son, do not take the Lord’s discipline lightly or faint when you are reproved by Him,

for the Lord disciplines the one He loves and punishes every son He receives.

Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

As we’ve seen throughout Hebrews, the writer combined explanation and encouragement to persuade his Christian brothers and sisters to cling to Jesus and grow in their faith. God’s Son is the final and ultimate Word from God; therefore, salvation in Him must not be neglected. Jesus is our Great High Priest; so then, we must stop acting like spiritual babies and go on to a mature faith in Him (6:1). Jesus established the new covenant in His shed blood on the cross; therefore, we can draw near to Him in faith, holding to Him in all situations as our true Hope (10:22-23), and encouraging one another in the fellowship of the church (10:24-25).

Hebrews 11 is a roll call of Old Testament individuals whose lives defined literally what it means to live by faith. These were God’s people who lived under the old covenant, yet they showed through their actions that they believed God one day was going to do something new (11:10,19,26). They looked forward to the fulfillment of God’s promise, though they didn’t see it in their lifetimes (11:39-40).

The readers of Hebrews, however, lived in the age of gospel fulfillment. Jesus had come, given His life on the cross, and been raised from the dead to enter God’s heavenly sanctuary once and for all. These readers professed faith in Christ, and they needed to realize they were surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, whose lives urged them on in the race of faith (12:1-2).

With their focus on Jesus, the readers of Hebrews could run the race and finish it well. They needed to embrace God’s perspective on their suffering. God would use their hardships and persecution as training, or discipline. In doing so, God was treating them as His children, not as outcasts. He is a loving Father who deeply wants His children to grow strong in their faith (12:3-13).
EXPLORE THE TEXT

ENDURING (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Every generation of believers is surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. One way of understanding this imagery is to picture a stadium packed with cheering fans. The “fans” are past believers, finishers, who look on and root for the present generation of Christians as they run the race of faith. Another way to understand the picture in verse 1 is to imagine the readers of Hebrews looking at the host of finishers who’ve gone before them.

Whose story of faith in the Lord, biblical or not, inspires you to keep on trusting Jesus?

In either understanding, the point was for the readers (and us) to be encouraged in their faith. They were running a long-distance race, not a sprint. They needed to keep going, to endure. To help us endure and finish well in our faith, we as Christ-followers must lay aside every weight that hinders our trust in Christ. It is the energizing work of the Holy Spirit that helps us lay aside these weights (see Philippians 2:13).

Believers also falter by falling into sin. Unconfessed sins are like lead weights chained to a runner’s ankles. Proverbs 28:13 teaches that the one who tries to conceal sin will not prosper, but the one who repents and confesses will receive mercy. First John 1:9 teaches also that if we confess our sins, God will forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Mature Christians are to help a stumbling believer seek restoration in Christ (see Galatians 6:1).

We can also endure by looking to Jesus as the Champion of champions when it comes to living by faith. Even the spiritual heroes whose portraits hang in the “Faith Hall of Fame” had times of weakness and distraction.
But not Jesus. In His time on earth, Jesus exemplified the life of faith from start to finish. He is faith’s source and perfecter.

When runners get distracted during a race, they can lose focus. They get off track or forget their game plan for reaching the finish line. Similarly, Christians who get distracted in life—who fail to keep their focus on God’s plan for them—often get off track spiritually.

For this reason, Jesus deserves our complete attention. He is the Original Author of our faith. Moreover, He perfected faith. He completed it. He lived by faith in the Heavenly Father from start to finish. Therefore, we as Christ’s followers gain strength for endurance as we keep our eyes fixed on Him.

What specific situations cause you to become spiritually distracted? How can you avoid getting off track?

Jesus endured unthinkable suffering on the cross not because of any wrongdoing by Him but as the atoning Sacrifice for our sins. Providing the way of salvation for us was the prize, the joy, that was His focus when He poured out His heart in the garden; when He stood accused and condemned by religious leaders; when mallet blows drove spikes through His hands and feet, pinning Him to the cross; and when with a final breath He cried out, “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

The faith by which Jesus laid down His life on our behalf was a victorious faith. He arose from the dead! He utterly defeated sin and death. And now, as the believer’s Great High Priest, He is seated forever at the right hand of God’s throne. His victory guarantees the victory of all who run the race of life by faith in Him.

The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to think seriously and carefully about Jesus and what He endured for their sake. Were they experiencing hostility, opposition, or hardships because of their confession of Christ? Were they growing weary and fearful? If they focused on Jesus, they would know that He understood the cost of
discipleship more than they ever could. They would also realize that all power in heaven and on earth belongs to Him, and that He strengthens His followers so they can endure any hardship or persecution.

**How would you describe what it takes to finish well in life?**

**DISCIPLINED (Hebrews 12:4-7)**

Olympic athletes don’t wait until the Games to start training. Most of them have trained since childhood, practicing hours a day every day—sweating, exercising, studying, focusing, eating right—just for the moment they compete on the world stage at the Olympics.

Staying focused on training requires discipline. Likewise, discipline is required in our training as champions of Christ. The writer of Hebrews addressed this requirement with his readers. Some of them were faltering in their faith and struggling against sin, however none of the readers had yet suffered to the point of martyrdom. If martyrdom occurred in the future, they should remember that Jesus endured the cross, and He holds the crown of life (see Revelation 2:10).

**What kinds of training do Christ-followers need? How does discipline fit in?**

The writer turned once again to the Old Testament Scriptures to exhort his readers. They were suffering hardships, but what was their attitude about their suffering? Were they losing heart or growing bitter against God? Did they understand the positive value of seeing their situation as divine discipline? The writer used Proverbs 3:11-12 to show that God’s discipline—even His corrective chastening—was evidence that they were God’s children.
The stated purpose of Proverbs is to provide God’s people with training in righteousness (see Proverbs 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). In Proverbs 3:11-12, Solomon taught his son the reason to value God’s corrective discipline. The writer of Hebrews knew that his readers also needed to hear that message.

God’s corrective discipline has a positive purpose. It is meant to help us stay on track and strengthen us, so that we will love and trust Him more. God uses it to build our spiritual endurance.

In what ways has God been nurturing your faith in Him?

What role has adversity played in His nurturing?

Children have a tendency to be excellent observers but poor interpreters of what’s going on around them. God’s children often suffer from a similar tendency. If we’re not careful, we can allow ourselves to believe that God has allowed turmoil to overwhelm us because He’s spiteful or simply doesn’t care what happens to us.

But God isn’t spiteful; He loves us. He prepares us through discipline so that we can endure and overcome adversity, not just simply escape it. His discipline underscores the depth of His love for us and the authenticity of our faith in Him.

How does trust in God and His discipline impact your view of difficult situations?
Christians are called to live out their faith consistently throughout their lifetimes, striving to finish well. Running the race of faith may include physical suffering for the sake of Christ. The believer can find strength in Christ to endure adversity and to be strengthened by discipline.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “poor” and 10 being “excellent”), how would you rate your faith in God? What steps can you take this week to remove any weights and finish strong?

In what ways is God using a difficulty to shape you and grow your trust in Him? How can you use what you’re learning to help someone else?

Identify fellow Christians throughout the world who are being persecuted for their faith. How can you and your Bible study group encourage and learn from persecuted believers?

The Lord disciplines the one He loves and punishes every son He receives. — Hebrews 12:6
Use the space provided to make observations and record prayer requests during the group experience for this session.

**MY THOUGHTS**
Record insights gained and questions to discuss during the group experience.

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**MY PRAYERS**
List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.

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**MY MISSION**
Acknowledge ways you will obey God’s Word this week.

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