

Hebrews 12:1-11: How to See Your Suffering Positively...What?!!

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I. Introduction

People avoid negative things in their lives. They only want positive, uplifting things, things that focus on how great they are or how great they can be. Because negative things bring you down. People only want things that make them better, take them forward not backwards. Is it possible for suffering to take you forward and not backward, to make you better not worse?

II. Hebrews 12:1-11: Do You See the Father's Love and a Better You in Your Suffering or Just Pain?

Having given a long list of heroes and heroines who remained faithful, who stood their ground in the face of opposition, the author wants his audience to likewise endure as he points to the greatest example of faith and obedience in the face of tremendous suffering: Jesus.

12:1-2, the long list of individuals who had judged God faithful to His promises are now to serve as witnesses for the author's audience. A witness can do one of two things: witness an event or testify to an event. The author doesn't mean that these heroes, who are now dead and gone, can observe the living suffer. What he means is that their life of faith serves as a testimony to his audience that remaining faithful and obedient to God during tremendous suffering is not only doable but greatly beneficial. That's why giving in to the sin which so easily impedes us (in their case returning to Judaism) is foolish. They must not give in; instead, they must lay whatever sin aside and run with endurance through the suffering that is set before them. And although the men and women of faith he mentioned are examples to follow, none of them are as great as the supreme example of faithful endurance as the one who authored and completed/perfected the life of faith: Jesus. His audience doesn't have to be made up of trailblazers. Jesus has already blazed the trail and removed the ultimate obstacles that could crush them: sin and death; He will also enable them through His Spirit to endure (2:14-18; 4:15; 5:7-9). As Jesus looked at the brutal Cross that would end His life, He wasn't shaken by it. Because the joy that was set before Him removed its horror, the joy of saving mankind (Isaiah 53:11) and sitting next to His Father.

12:3-11, there are two things that will help this audience endure their suffering: (1) they need to think seriously about Jesus' suffering because His was worse and He took the ultimate penalty of suffering away: death *in all its forms*, and (2) they need to realize that as a Loving Father, God is using their suffering for their benefit, to strengthen and mature them, and for them to share in His holiness. That's why they need to consider Jesus' suffering: His battle against sin brutalized Him and took His life, but He defeated death in the process. This should encourage them because the worst thing that could happen to them has been removed (2:14-15).

They also need to understand what suffering is and does. Suffering in this world is not by accident nor is it meaningless and debilitating. If God brings or allows suffering into your life, it's not because He's forgotten about you or has disowned you or because He hates you. To the contrary, it is because you are His child and He loves you that He allows suffering into your life. They must remember what God said about suffering as it relates to His children in Proverbs 3:11-12—life and peace despite suffering, Proverbs 3. God uses suffering to discipline, i.e., to guide, train, and instruct His children so that they will be strong, wise, godly children. And this is born out of His love not anger, frustration, or anything else. It is always an act of His love for us (Proverbs 13:24).

Therefore, they should not think little of nor become weary and give up due to God's discipline via suffering. Because it's both a sign of His love and the fact that they are His children. This is not a strange concept to grasp. Every child whose father disciplines him understands this; only those who are not the father's children are the ones who are not disciplined. Additionally, if we rightly grant our human fathers respect when they correct us, how much more should we appreciate and respect our Heavenly Father who is the Author of spirit beings and enables us to live through and beyond our suffering even if it means their death? In fact, there's a colossal difference between our human fathers and our Heavenly Father. They disciplined us as best as they could, i.e., they sometimes or often got it wrong. Instead of correcting us in love, they did it in anger, frustration or retribution. However, our Heavenly Father only does it in love and it's always for our benefit, i.e., He always does it so that we may partake of His holiness, which leaves us perfect, complete, lacking nothing (2:10-11; 10:14 cf. James 1:2-4).

God understands that our suffering brings with it pain. Thus, discipline via suffering is never fun while we're going through it. But if we allow it, if we endure and let God's discipline train us, mature us, complete us, then it will yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness. That is, instead of being anxious and stressed out about life, we'll know peace. Instead of possessing a stubborn demeanor, we'll know and possess a submissive spirit. Instead of producing unrighteous deeds (anger, frustration, depression, arrogance, etc., which lead to sinful reactions) that curse us and others, we'll produce righteous deeds (perseverance, love, joy, peace, faithfulness, etc., which lead to godly reactions) that bless us and those around us.

Do you see God's love and a better you in your suffering or just pain? People react differently to suffering: some tough it out, others freak out, still others accept their brutal hopeless reality and give up. If God comes to mind, they get angry and say, "There is no God!" None of these reactions can see a reason for suffering. It seems like a random, chaotic universe where you suffer then you die. But we don't have to tough it out, freak out, or give up. There's a better way. God explains what suffering is and why it's there. First, Jesus paid suffering's ultimate penalty. He suffered to take all suffering away and the worst that suffering can do is brutally take your life, but Jesus overcame death so even this can't hurt you. Second, whether God uses suffering as a course correction (for behaving badly) or to mature you from adolescence to adulthood, God always does it out of love and for your benefit. Suffering in God's hands becomes a positive not a hopeless negative. So how do we endure it? What's your focus, the pain or the One who defeated the pain: Jesus? You say, "I've tried focusing on Jesus, claiming His promises, but I'm still suffering!!" Were you looking at Jesus as your on-call, 24/7 pain pill or as the One who showed you how to defeat the pain He already defeated? Jesus already paid the cost, all you have to do is walk through the giant hole He's punched through sin and death and you'll know peace and joy, even in the midst of the most excruciating suffering (Hebrews 4:16; 1 Peter 2:18-25, cf. Lamentations 3:22-26).

III. Conclusion

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."