

Hebrews 12

1. Read Hebrews 12:1-13. Verse 12:1 refers to laying aside “every weight and the sin that clings so closely.” What sins and weights is the author referring to? What is the goal of their race?
2. The author of Hebrews goes to a lot of trouble to present examples of suffering for them to follow, in chapter 11, and culminating in Jesus himself in chapter 12. There are many examples of people who suffer for the faith in other countries (such as Meriam Yehya, the Sudanese doctor who has been sentenced to flogging and hanging for marrying and starting a family with a Christian and for her own conversion). These examples of courage for the faith are inspiring – but can also seem remote due to the differences between their context and ours.

Can you think of one person who is more like us (e.g. American, middle-class, etc.) and who can serve as an example of casting off sins and/or facing suffering in a godly way – even with joy? (Your example need not rise to the level of Yehya or others from the majority world, and the suffering need not be restricted to persecution, but may include spiritual attack, health and financial woes, etc.)

3. In 12:1-13 the author gives the readers a way to make sense of the suffering which they have undergone in the past and are likely to face again, should they remain true to the faith. Tim Keller points out that “every culture either must help its people face suffering or risk a loss of credibility.” He summarizes the response of various cultures to suffering as follows:¹

	Moralistic (Islam, old European paganism, therapeutic deism)	Self-transcendent (Buddhism)	Fatalistic (Hinduism / karma)	Dualistic (Marxism, Zoroastrian -ism)	Secular (Western culture)
Cause	Wrongdoing	Illusion	Destiny	Cosmic conflict	Accident
Response	Do good	Detachment	Endurance	Purified faithfulness	Technique
Resolution	Eternal bliss	Enlightenment	Glory and honor	Triumph of the light	Better society

Each of these systems, with the exception of the secular Western world view, tells its members that suffering is expected, that it plays a role in the meaning of their lives, and directs them toward a response (18). How would you add a column based on Hebrews 12?

¹ *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, pp. 14, 28.

4. This section of Hebrews (12:1-13) ends with encouragement to “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees” (12), a quote from Isaiah 35. Read Isaiah 35, a passage of triumphant return from exile which shines unabashed between the dark prophecies of judgment on the nations in 34 and Assyria’s siege of Jerusalem in 36. What would this careful reference have said to the weak-kneed Jewish converts?

5. Keller also writes,

The Christian understanding of suffering is dominated by the idea of grace. In Christ we have received forgiveness, love, and adoption into the family of God... It is the present enjoyment of those inestimable goods that makes suffering bearable... Indeed, suffering not only is made bearable by these joys, but suffering can even enhance these joys, in the midst of sorrow. (29-30)

It is crucial to know how to transform suffering into a redemptive experience. The author of Hebrews coaches this skill by exhorting his readers, in the face of suffering, to lay aside every weight (v. 1), run with perseverance (1), focus on Jesus (3), value the Lord’s discipline (5), *endure* the trials (7), and cowboy up (12-13). Read *Walking With God*, pp. 80-84. What changed Kendra’s painful experiences from meaningless, painful medical events to “marks of beautify and depth” inspiring gratitude and joy?

6. On this passage, Barclay writes,

The goal is nothing less than the likeness of Christ. The Christian life is going somewhere, and it would be well if, at each day’s ending, we were to ask ourselves, “Am I any farther on?” ...If we would travel far, we must travel light. There is in life an essential duty of discarding things. There may be habits, pleasures, self-indulgences, associations which hold us back. We must shed them as the athlete sheds his track suit when he goes to the starting mark; and often we will need the help of Christ to enable us to do so. (171-173)

It can be difficult to hold in our minds, over the course of years, the ideal of this sort of purpose-focused life – so it is important to step back from time to time and ask whether this is how we are living. What might you shed to better “run with perseverance”? How much of what clings so closely is emotional and mental (shame, fear, regret), how much is the effect of the habitual choices of how you spend your time and resources, and how much are sins you don’t want to discard?

7. Regarding the two mountains, Sinai and Zion (vv. 18-24):

- a) Why could they not touch Sinai, and why can we touch Zion?
- b) What did Abel’s blood call for, and what word does Jesus’ blood speak?
- c) We “have come” to the city where our hearts can finally rest. In what ways is this in the present tense, either for the first-century readers, or for us?

Ω

Fun fact: “When [the author] speaks of resisting to the point of blood [in 12:4], he uses the very phrase of the Maccabean leaders when they called on their troops to fight to the death.” (Barclay, 174)