

**(Heb 12:1-17)**

Like a good dark brew (of either coffee or beer), this portion of the book of Hebrews delivers the kind of “kick in the pants” that is always appreciated when the pressures and temptations of this life have got us feeling like compromise is the only option. This was the situation of Jewish (i.e. Hebrew) Christians living in the first century – the original audience of the letter. Scholars believe it to have been written sometime in the early to mid-sixties—the same time as the Neronian persecution. Per the edict of Caesar, all those claiming to be Christian w/in the Roman empire were open game to be tortured or killed. As a result, great temptation was placed upon the covenant community to temporarily turn away from the Faith – or least hide their Faith, until things got better. For the Jewish Christians, that meant going back to their former religion (Judaism). In their minds, this was both an acceptable alternative to Christianity and an accessible safe-haven from the raging Roman storm. The author of Hebrews however knew that such compromise was not only eternally dangerous, but largely due to wrong perspective. In other words, how these Jewish Christians were interpreting their Faith and current situation was very different from the view or vantage point of God. It is here then that the author expects us to feel the jolt back to reality. If you are beginning to feel like the Christian life is too hard, or that the preservation of God’s people will (at times) require a little “letting off the gas”, now is the time to take a sip of the following dark-brewed truths:

**1. Countless saints have run the Christian race with faithful endurance until the end (1).**

The overwhelming evidence (“so great cloud of witnesses”) proves we can do it (“run with endurance the race set before us”) if we put away ghetto thinking<sup>1</sup> (“lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely”) (Deu 30:11).

**2. Jesus is the One Who establishes the standard/definition of faithful endurance expected of us (2-4).**

Contrary to the ignorant opinions of so many claiming to be Christians today, Jesus did not come to earth to run w/faithful endurance so that we would not have to (or might use Him as our excuse as to why God should let us into heaven). Instead, the author of Hebrews reveals Him to be our example. IOW: we are to be continually “looking to Jesus” (or His life) as the definition of such faithfulness – and more importantly, what God is expecting of us if we are to be identified as those winning our Christian race. In this respect, the author focuses on 4 specific attributes in relation to Jesus’ life. And given his audience’s precarious situation along w/their fragile (i.e. wimpy) constitution when faced with temptation or testing, it becomes easy to see why the author selected them (11:36, 12:12). These verses therefore also function as a sort of diagnostic tool for determining the “tensile strength” of our Christian Faith when under the pressures of temptation or testing. So (then) with Jesus as our example, here is what God expects from us. Here is what must be true of our Christian race and running:

**2.1. You will have guts for glory (2).**

Like Jesus, you will be willing to carry your cross (i.e. die to self and selfish desires) b/c you believe that the “joy set before” you far outweighs what you w/ giving up. No one said the Christian life was easy – only worth it.

**2.2. You will have no stomach for shameful things.**

Like Jesus, you also despise or treat as incredibly dirty, utterly despicable, extremely distasteful, totally disgusting, completely disgraceful, very dishonoring or disrespectful all those things God - and the world we currently live in, views as shameful.

**2.3. Closing take-aways (for sub-pts 1 and 2) (DISCUSSED)****2.4. You will not care what the ignorant/unbelieving think or how they treat you.**

**(3) Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”** = The fact that Jesus is the One we are to be deferring to when it comes to understanding what God expects of our faithful endurance is (again) confirmed not only by the call to “consider Him” (lit. “reason w/careful deliberation”), but also the stated reason for such consideration (“so that you may not grow weary of fainthearted” – IOW: by considering His life or sufferings, we are protected from thinking we are on the wrong path and become discouraged – 1Pe 4:12-14 w/5:12). The phrase in the middle (“who endured from sinners such hostility”), would have been especially relevant to the author’s audience since they (like Jesus), had already suffered persecution at the hands of unbelieving “sinners” (10:32-35 w/Act 18:1-2)<sup>2</sup>. That being said, the Greek word translated “hostility” (here) implies more than a disposition to do physical/bodily harm. The word actually has more to do w/mental or emotional harm (ἀντιλογία = lit. “words [logos] against [anti]”; rebellion/opposition expressed in words; Heb 6:16, 7:17; Jud 1:11 w/Num 16:1-3).

<sup>1</sup> By ghetto thinking is meant: a mindset which values only what is easy, pleasurable, accommodating and accessible. To put it another way, if it takes work or training, requires pain, demands excellence, delays gratification, or is not accommodating and easily accessible it must be wrong/the wrong path (e.g. 1Pe 4:12).

<sup>2</sup> “The description of sufferings endured is appropriate to the hardships born by Jewish Christians who were expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD 49. We know of this experience through Suetonius, a Roman writer of the early second century AD who prepared biographies of the Julian emperors. In his biography of Claudius he mentions an incident of social disturbance in Rome: ‘There were riots in the Jewish quarter at the instigation of Chrestus. As a result, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome’. ‘Chrestus’ is a common slave name, meaning ‘the good one’. Suetonius appears to have thought that an individual of that name was responsible for the riots. Historians, however, believe that he confused the facts. His source had not mentioned ‘Chrestus’ but ‘Christus’, the Christ, or the Messiah. There were riots in the Jewish quarter which centered in the Messiah, and as a result Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Jewish Christians had apparently been evangelizing among the Jewish quarter. When they had affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, disputes had deteriorated into riots. The disturbance of the peace invited police action, and Claudius banished the synagogue and church leaders responsible for the commotion. Insult, persecution, and especially the seizure of property are normal under conditions of expulsion. If this reading of the evidence is correct, the writer prepared his sermon [to the Hebrews] for some of the Jewish Christians who had shared expulsion from Rome with Aquila and Priscilla (Act 18:1-2). They had firsthand experience of the cost of discipleship. Now however, it was about fifteen years later. These Christians are fifteen years older. When a new crisis emerges, confronting them with the threat of a fresh experience of suffering, they are compelled to face the cost of discipleship all over again. The situation now facing the community appears more serious than the earlier one under Claudius [i.e. the deadly persecution under emperor Nero].” – William F. Lane (*Hebrews: A Call To Commitment*, p.22-23)

As such, what the author (of Hebrews) is most specifically referring to is the verbal abuse Jesus suffered from His own people and religious authorities (e.g. Mat 12:24, 27:39-43; Joh 8:48-49). What not to miss (here) is the fact that Jesus “endured” it. “Such hostility” did not throw Him off His mission. And that b/c, He didn’t care. Whether it be physical or verbal abuse, neither were a threat to how He viewed Himself or His commitment to standing for the truth (Luk 9:51). IOW: how people treated Him mattered very little and changed nothing in His agenda. He could care less what people thought since He knew that it was only what God thought of Him that truly mattered (Isa 50:6-9; Joh 8:50 w/29; e.g. Mat 15:10-14; Luk 11:37-54). It is in this way then, that the author’s audience (and us) are to also understand what it means to “run with (faithful) endurance” (12:1). As Christians, God expects us to put no stock in what the ignorant/unbelieving of this world think or how they treat us. And like Jesus, this includes those professing to be God’s people whose poor understanding of/disobedience to the Scriptures cause them to condemn/speak evil of us. This was the attitude of the apostle Paul (1Co 4:2-4). Such ill treatment by the religious community was prophesied and therefore should not surprise us as Christians (Mat 10:16-25; Joh 16:1-4; Phi 1:27-30; 1Th 3:2-4). The reason the author (of Hebrews) brings this particular aspect of Jesus’ faithfulness up, is b/c it was an area of real struggle for his original audience. Having their property seized and being exiled from Rome by Claudius meant that - at least in the eyes of some, their new religion (Christianity) was still legitimately wed to their former community (Judaism)<sup>3</sup>. That all changed though, the moment their new religion was separated from Judaism and deemed a terrorist organization.<sup>4</sup> The critical voices of their former religious community suddenly mattered more or created a level of confusion where things prior had been so clear. What confirms this to have been the case among these 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians – versus simply speculation or conjecture, is the letter itself. Its focus is three-fold: the inferior nature of their former religion/ Old Covenant system, Jesus as Judaism’s fulfillment and the reality of apostasy if they were to return to Judaism. All subjects which become relevant only if there is exists some level of criticism, confusion or concern regarding Christians entertaining Judaism. There is psychological support for this position as well. Researchers have observed that oftentimes when human beings are placed in a stressful or dangerous position, one of first things to happen, is our thinking gets cloudy – or things which at one time were clear, become confusing. The reason such cloudy/confused thinking happens (we are told), is b/c we care about the person/thing now under threat and are fearful if we maintain the same course or way of thinking, we will lose that person/thing. In the case of these Jewish Christians (the author’s original audience), this confusion was due (as discussed) to the threat of deadly persecution and the danger of losing their life. Confusion (then) is a valuable sign for determining when we (too) may have stumbled in our attempt to run w/faithful endurance. It means that we may be guilty of caring what unbelievers/ignorant think or how they treat us - i.e. those that shouldn’t matter b/c what they believe or think is false (e.g. your attempts to share the gospel w/your false Christian family or friends ends in total disagreement and rejection. You fear this will mean separation. All of sudden, you are “confused”). (BTW) growing “weary or fainthearted” is also a by-product of such confusion (i.e. we get confused and then lose hope/heart/motivation in maintaining the course – Pro 29:18). Jesus was neither confused nor fainthearted. And that b/c (again) He didn’t give a hoot what others thought/said (or ultimately threatened to do to Him). Bo Shembechler (one of the greatest coaches in college football history) was fond of saying, enduring your critics means ignoring your critics. No football game was ever won by listening to them. In Christian life, it is the same. Enduring means ignoring (caring very little) what others say or do since who determines whether we win is (once more) not them (but Jesus). We run for an audience of One (and so we sb “looking to” Him – i.e. only caring about what He thinks and considering how He ran His race as the model for ours).

#### 2.5. You will give blood before you give in (to compromise).

**(4) “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”** = Though it can be accurately surmised that there were Christians “shedding” blood (i.e. suffering bodily harm or death b/c of their Faith) in the empire, such was not currently the case for these Jewish Christians. The most likely reason for this is b/c of where they now lived. Based on the book’s final salutations, they resided somewhere outside of Italy – the epicenter of Nero’s persecution (see 13:24). What (then) was happening elsewhere had not reached their doorstep. As such, their “struggle against sin” – in this case, continuing to stand up for the truth and the Christian Faith - versus committing the sin of apostasy thru denial of Christ and desertion back to Judaism, had yet to be truly tested. That would come only when such resistance (on their part) was “to the point of shedding (their) blood.” Like Jesus - and the countless saints who were currently suffering or had in the past, this (too) then is what must define the Christian and his spiritual running. This (also) is what it means to “run w/endurance (the race that is set before us)”. It means you will give blood before you give in (to compromise). Important not to miss (here) is the additional truth established by this - especially since so much in Christianity today and even the mindset of modern Americans is diametrically opposed it. That additional truth is this: No matter how bad your situation is (or you think it is), God will never be sympathetic to or understanding of, or willing to excuse your sin – or treat it as necessary (given the circumstances). There is absolutely never a time when you must sin, that the option to be faithful in obedience is somehow impossible. IOW: you will never be a victim of your own sin (always rather, it perpetrator).

#### 2.6. Closing take-aways for sub-pts 4 and 5:

2.6.1. Caring about what the ignorant/unbelieving think when it comes to our Christian race is not only a sign that I lack the faithful endurance God expects, but also that I fear man (more than God Who tells me not to!). Such fear is a guaranteed snare (Pro 29:25).

2.6.2. Your morality will never be a “lesser of two evils” (1 Co 10:13).

2.6.3. Living an abundant, fulfilling, happy life now, does not require the absence of suffering/temptations or testing. It instead requires them –and that you conquer them, if you expect the same abundant, fulfilling and happy life without them, in eternity (Psa 34:1-22; Mar 10:29-30; Jam 1:3-12).

<sup>3</sup> It was during this time also that Jewish Christians were still meeting in the synagogues w/the rest of the Jews (e.g. Act 9:2, 18:8, 26).

<sup>4</sup> Christians were blamed for the fires that destroyed Rome in 64 AD. According to ancient historians Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, Nero was the real culprit in setting the blaze and used the Christians as his scapegoat per the advice of his Jewish wife.