

**(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 w/faithful endurance until the end (1).**

The overwhelming evidence (“so great cloud of witnesses”) proves we can do it (“run w/endurance the race set before us”) if we put away ghetto thinking (“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. As such, when asking the question, “Am I being faithful?”. It is not others in the church we are to be comparing ourselves to – but (again), Jesus. Are we imitating His life by the way we respond to the situations in our life?

**3. One of the biggest reasons we fail to faithfully endure is b/c we have the wrong perspective on trials.**

Oftentimes our reaction to trials is to view such things as possessing no value or benefit to our lives. As such, we do everything we can to alleviate the difficulties we face - believing that the less challenges we have to deal w/(or stand in resistance to), the better or more fulfilling our lives will be. This by the way, is also the propaganda promoted by popular psychology. This (we are told) is to especially true when it comes to matters of right and wrong. It is both unnecessary and unhealthy to be burdened by challenges which are moral in nature (e.g. Sexual identity, orientation or activity are no longer to be considered as moral categories. Resisting certain desires for moral reasons only promotes poor mental health -even the possibility of physical harm; “I would rather love my son as a girl than mourn his suicide”). This mindset however is not unique to the pagan- psychologized culture we live in. It has seeped into the (so-called) churches of our country as well. Though at first it may not seem like it, they (too) preach that the pressure associated w/moral trials (i.e. temptation to sin) is not something God expects us to faithfully endure/resist. Think about it: The bona-fide position of the Evangelical Church is that what we do has no bearing our eternal standing/state w/God – we are eternally secure in faith alone (e.g. “He will never stop loving us – no matter how many times we fail” – Pro 24:16 and 2Ti 2:13 = Evangelicals interpret these as God’s commitment to save us no matter how unfaithful we become.<sup>1</sup>). Since that is the case, then the pressure or pain afforded to us by our resistance to the sin solicited thru the various situations we inevitably end up in, is completely unnecessary and unhealthy. Why put ourselves through such pain if it really doesn’t eternally matter what we choose to do anyway? Likewise, why would God choose for us to faithfully endure thru anything that (in the end) has no real value/bearing on our relationship w/Him? If (once more) our eternal place/position w/Him is secure, then how we respond to the trials of life is more a matter of our own comfort than anything else. As such, the Evangelical church inevitably ends up in the same camp as those in the world – avoidance of difficulty at all costs, comfort over doing the right thing. Some Evangelicals go so far as to say that at times it is necessary to give in to the pressures to sin, so that we can “experience afresh the grace of God”<sup>2</sup> or that there are times when sin is the only option (e.g. women have to step up and be pastors in those places where the men refuse to do it otherwise people won’t hear the gospel). Such a view/perspective on trials was completely foreign to the author of Hebrews. According to him, trials – or more importantly, our successful response to them, is incredibly vital to our Christian growth and salvation. Consider:

**3.1. Trials are God’s disciplinary tool for training us in the kind of righteousness needed to get to heaven.**

**(5) “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”** = These words are to be seen as an addendum to the author’s previous point (v5 – “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your own blood”). They are a call back to what we can assume were familiar OT verses to his original Jewish audience (Pro 3:11-12) – a text ripe with instruction as to what our perspective should be regarding trials. **“My son, do not regard lightly** (i.e. treat as of no value or benefit) **the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.”** = Though the word trials does not appear (here – or in anything that follows) that nonetheless is what he is getting at by the phrase, “discipline of the Lord”. The word (“discipline”) literally means “training” (e.g. 2Ti 3:16) which in this case, refers to the training God imposes upon us thru life’s trials or difficulties. It is divine training thru trials. This (then) is what is also meant by the phrase, “reproved by Him”. What (then) is God’s purpose in such training? What He is attempting to produce in us thru such trials? The answer according to verse 11 is a special kind of faithfulness—the kind that can only come thru trials – or when we faithfully endure/respond righteously to them. It is the kind of faithfulness that makes us worthy of receiving that identity on the day of judgment (11:37-39 = The OT saints faithfully endured trials to earn/be commended in the end as worthy of the title, “Faithful”, a title not given to those in the world – or to those who are moral wimps when the going gets tough). **(11) “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant** (trials are not fun and can – as a result, give the impression they are again, of no benefit ~ “Why do I have to put up w/this? What’s the point?”), **but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it** (γυμνάσιον ~ gymnasium).” = Similar to now, ancient gyms were not only the place where men went to gain physical strength and size thru the use of painful exercise (i.e. trials), but also to

<sup>1</sup> The popular mantra w/in Evangelicalism is that the only way a person professing Christ can ever be outside the realm of salvation, is thru their deliberate choice. IOW: Only they can choose to have God no longer save them. This they consider to be what Jesus is referring to in Mat 12 as the unforgivable sin (i.e. apostasy). This is similar to saying that the only way my wife can divorce me is if I choose for her to no longer be married to me.

<sup>2</sup> During my college years as a Christian, this was also popular dogma. In particular, a housemate (and professing Christian brother) of mine used to say this every-time he felt the temptation to go do something sinful.

increase their personal value w/in the eyes of society.<sup>3</sup> The benefit gained (then) by responding righteously to/faithfully enduring thru trials (i.e. being “trained by [them]”) is that we gain the value of no longer be wimpy or “fair weather” Christians who buckle, flake and fail every time the pressure of temptation or the pain incurred thru trials come. That fickle form of righteousness is of no value (or worth) in God’s eyes (Pro 24:10 – “small” = illegitimate/ worth nothing). As such it is also not same as the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” mentioned here – since this only comes---is the “fruit” of ---is afforded to those (again) “who have been trained by it” (i.e. those who faithfully endure/consistently respond in righteousness) to the discipline/trials God has given to them as their customized plan for spiritual growth – for becoming the kind of people He wants us to be - and if we are wise enough to see it, the kind of people we want to be as well – since w/o them and the title they have the potential to earn for us, we won’t get to heaven. This no doubt, is why the author of Hebrews calls it not just “fruit” -but “peaceful fruit” since it is the kind of righteousness that gains for us permanent peace w/God (an attribute necessary to abiding in heaven w/God!) (Jam 1:1-12 = no title/crowning as champions w/o endurance thru trials<sup>4</sup>; Rom 5:1-5 = trials gain heavenly hope/are an expression of God’s love).

### 3.2. Trials are an expression of God’s love to us as His children.

**(6) For the Lord disciplines (or trains thru trials) the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.**” = As already mentioned, God - as the providential author behind all that happens in our lives, has ordained trials for His people. Not however as the means to destroying them, but rather like a good parent, to lovingly train them for success (i.e. to be “fit for heaven”). As such, how could we ever choose to view them as something unnecessary, w/o benefit – or worse, as instruments meant to lead us in the direction of sin? What loving parent would put such harmful things in the path of their children? The apostle James makes it clear that God has no part in ever encouraging us toward sin. We have only ourselves to blame for such encouragement (Jam 1:13-14 = The encouragement/temptation to respond sinfully does not come from God, but our own sinful hearts). Though God brings trials or testing (Jam 1:2-3, w/Exo 20:20) His desire is that we will resist/faithfully endure the pressures brought on by temptation (e.g. Deu 13:3). That we would be “trained by it” and grow. This is why (then) the author says, **(7) “It is for discipline that you have to endure** (i.e. it is for your training and benefit- so don’t give in/give up!). **God is treating you as sons.”** = God’s actions in this way (training thru trials) is (once again) an expression of His Fatherly love for “you as sons” – for us as His children. IOW: Thru such “training-trials”, we are receiving the kind of “tough love” all good parents afford to their children in an effort to toughen them up for the future. Hence the saying, “bad parent make better gardeners since all they produce are pansies”. The rhetorical question which immediately follows shows just how axiomatic a truth the author believes this to be, **“For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?”**. Interpretation: This is what we should expect as the expression of God’s fatherly love for us. Even Jesus received this kind of “tough love” from the Father (Heb 5:7-8)<sup>5</sup>. With this truth in mind then, consider (again) how different this is from the thinking of many claiming to be Christian today - i.e. “God’s love is not expressed in putting you thru trials (trials are bad), but rather in what He does to get you out of them –or by promising to still save you irrespective of how sinfully you choose to respond to them.” This (btw) is also considered the definition of grace (i.e. it is the “loving” hall-pass God gives so that you can fail w/o consequence). Obviously, they do not know/understand Paul’s words in (Rom 3:8 and 6:1-2)!

### 3.3. To reject such trials (thru unfaithfulness) is (therefore) a rejection God’s love for you and your place as His child.

**(8) “If you are left without discipline (i.e. If you have rejected God’s training thru trials by responding to such trials unrighteously/in disobedience), in which all have participated (all who are God’s children have been exposed to such training thru trials), then you are illegitimate (νόθος ~ nothing, of no value) children.”** = In ancient times, this meant you were born a bastard child; a child w/o a father claiming you as his son. It meant you possessed an illegitimate origin. A devastating situation for those in that state, since (in those days), one’s birth (or family origin) determined your initial value within society – slave/free, royalty/common (e.g. Matthew begins his gospel w/Jesus’ genealogy for this very reason to show His status as royalty). With this in mind, verse eight’s bearing on our spiritual birth - or as it relates to God continuing to claim us as His son (or as a part of His family), should be apparent. Just as our deeds w/b considered as illegitimate/nothing if we do not faithfully endure /respond righteously during trials, so also will our standing w/God. Illegitimate responses will (in the end) identify us as illegitimate children. Our rejection of His training/discipline - which once more, is what we are guilty of doing when we constantly fail in the face trials/temptations, will mean rejection of not only His love (expressed thru such training/discipline) BUT ALSO (and maybe more importantly) our place as His child. We instead (according to the author) become bastard children – children w/o a heavenly Father. God will no longer sees us as His – nor the saving work of His Son (Jesus) applying to us. And this for all eternity. IOW: It is not the temporary loss of family standing (or justified state) the author has in mind, but rather the permanent kind known as apostasy. This we can certain as the author’s conclusion, given where his instruction in this section of Hebrews ends (verses 15-17 – “no chance to repent, though he sought it w/tears” = permanent loss of justification or possibility of salvation).

So then, what value do our personal trials/temptations possess and how important is that we endure them faithfully/responding to them in a righteous way? More than most (of us) probably realized prior to our consideration of these verses! They are the means by which God trains us, loves us – and assesses us for fitness in relation to heaven. Failing such trials is therefore one of the worst things we could do (i.e. we stand when the going is easy and fall when it gets tough). The author of Hebrews knew that such failures were as much the result of ignorance (in relation to trials) as anything else—and so, under the Holy Spirit, attempts to shore that up for his listeners (including us) thru this OT reminder. And like them, we (too) then need to take its “exhortation” to heart.

### 3.4. What that looks like (some practical examples):

3.4.1. Not doubting God’s love when trials come into our life (Psa 34:19).

3.4.2. Not doubting God’s law when temptation comes into our flesh.

3.4.3. Realizing that responses are eternal not experiences.

3.4.4. Remembering trial/temptation reveals your true self (metal is made/lost in the crucible-Pro 17:3).

<sup>3</sup> The ancient Greeks considered their gyms and its rigorous training as necessary to a person achieving nobility or a high standing (or value) among others. Such historical insight, gives new appreciation to Paul’s words in (1Ti 3:7-8).

<sup>4</sup> Some will contend that such thinking implies a merit-based salvation. Not necessarily. Being counted worthy of something (in this case, heaven) can function as the acknowledgement of one’s faithful maintenance of their prior (and graciously extended) place of worthiness. This is the clearly how Jesus uses the word (e.g. Mat 22:8-14). Consider also how trials in this respect play into the final judgment. It w/b our trials that carry the most weight in our assessment and the determining of whether we are truly worthy of the title, “Faithful”. Hence why it is so important for those once under discipline (for utterly failing in such trials) to “make proper compensation” in the lives they lead once restored (since this trial-based failure will weigh more in the scales of God). For those doubting final judgment will mean weighing our lives (i.e. our good and bad) “in scales” consider (1Sa 2:1-3; Dan 5:27; Job 31:6; Pro 16:2, 21:2, 24:12; Rev 20:11-13 – “judged according to what they had done” = assessing good deeds v. bad deeds to determine which “weighed” more).

<sup>5</sup> The fact that Jesus also “suffered” thru such disciplinary measures supports the fact that what the Bible is referring to when using this term (“discipline”) is not always that which is for the purpose or punishment (since Jesus was w/o sin). Parents need to adopt the same view when considering Paul’s words in (Eph 6:4). IOW: punishment is not the only time you sb presenting your children w/difficult situations that you expect them to respond to righteously. For their benefit, life under your roof sb filled w/plenty of “positive trials” as well (e.g. Jesus’ 40 days w/o creaturely comforts).