

Explore: The discipline of suffering

November 2, 2014

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Nov. 16 focuses on Hebrews 12:1-7.*

As a camp counselor one summer during college, I cheered on my cabin of 11th- and 12th-grade girls as they pushed their bodies through a grueling challenge course. The course was difficult, and their energy and endurance were waning quickly, and I could see in their faces how much they longed to quit. Part of the course included a group trail run while carrying an enormous wooden cross, a reminder of the pain and sacrifice our Lord endured on our behalf.

To encourage them to press on, we quoted Scripture passages about suffering and endurance, culminating with these words from Hebrews 12:1-3: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

As perspective sank in, their momentary obstacles began to shrink, and the enormity of Christ’s love and sacrifice on their behalf loomed large. The girls mustered up a final burst of energy and teamwork and finished the race proudly.

Persecuted for their faith

As I reflect on this passage today, my mind focuses on a much more serious

experience of suffering—the plight of Christians around the world who are persecuted for their faith. I hardly can stomach reading the news reports, and my heart aches for the mothers, pastors and all who endure such tremendous suffering and grief. When I consider how easily I grow discouraged by daily obstacles and frustrations, I cannot fathom persevering under the pressures and hardships they face.

In fact, when I read this passage, at first glance, my heart swelled with objections. How could the writer of Hebrews compare his congregation's suffering with God's discipline? When faithful Christians are persecuted, when vulnerable children are exploited, when the bodies of our loved ones come under attack from devastating illness or disease, they are not to blame. God did not wish this upon them. If we don't know this to be certain in the very core of our beings, we will have trouble reconciling such suffering with a loving God.

Now, certainly our sinful actions bear consequences. But as we step back to look at the big picture, suffering is a painful and tragic result of a fallen creation. When sin entered the world, it brought its closest companions, pain and death. And they are not always linked in a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Suffering is an inevitable part of life, but suffering does not have to have the final word. Thanks be to God; we worship a great Redeemer.

Training that molds us

As I dove into the commentaries and studied the meanings from the original Greek text, I finally realized I had at first misinterpreted this passage with its focus on discipline. My objections finally began to subside as I remembered the word “discipline” carries two connotations. Discipline is not limited to punishment and rebuke for broken rules and bad behavior. Discipline also can be training that molds and shapes thoughts and character.

Think about an athlete who goes through disciplined training to prepare for a race. Remember Richard Foster and others who encourage us to pursue spiritual disciplines that will help shape and mold us into the image of Christ.

That is the gospel truth that bears hope in this passage. God can redeem our suffering and pain and use it to transform us. God is our coach who is training us with great discipline to endure suffering and pursue joy. As we submit our thoughts, attitude and will to Christ, God's Spirit sows a harvest of righteousness and peace within us. As we focus on Christ's great love and sacrifice, God gives us strength and endurance to persevere, "so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (v. 3).

Comfort and encouragement

So as I think of the congregation in Hebrews facing persecution and suffering, and those around the world today who are enduring the same, I picture the Holy Spirit fiercely whispering in their ear: "Consider those who have gone before you. What you are facing is enormously difficult and painful, so cast off anything that blurs your view of Jesus. Jesus has gone before you; he endured torture and humiliation; and he achieved the ultimate victory over pain and suffering. He goes with you now, to encourage you, comfort you, and give you strength. You can't do this alone, and you won't. But God is redeeming this unjust suffering by training you in righteousness, strengthening you for this journey, offering you peace and joy."

Whatever you are facing, whatever struggle you are enduring, fix your eyes on Jesus. Consider his victory over suffering and shame and his place of triumph at the right hand of the throne of God (v. 2). He is with us now to strengthen us and guide us, and he will welcome us one day into glory. As the old hymn reminds us: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light

of his glory and grace.”