

How Much Suffering Can You Take?

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Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." (Hebrews 12:3-4)



You have suffered — some — if you are among the godly followers of Jesus. The suffering that is described in the passage above is not the kind that comes with cancer or car wrecks, but that which is associated with adverse reactions to your beliefs. It is persecution. Since martyrdom worldwide for the sake of Christ is at an all time high, we can be sure that persecution of all kinds is growing as well, and in all corners of the globe.

What you have experienced may have been marginal to this point. It may be that people talk about you or even ridicule you to your face, for your loyalty to Christ. Perhaps you have been overlooked for a promotion or rejected by a friend for your convictions. Perhaps a child has chosen to confront you about his or her disassociation with your active love for Christ. All of this is so uncomfortable. It is true suffering, but we all know it could get worse.

The people who received the message above were being persecuted more severely than many of us. In fact, early in their walk with Christ some went to prison; some had their houses absconded; some lost friends and family because of Christ. A dripping faucet, however, may be more aggravating than water dumped on the floor all at once. Similarly, they were struggling with *chronic* hostility, the pounding constant pain of it all, the fuller realization over time that they had lost a lot and were losing more all along because of their choice to follow Christ. They were tempted to turn back to their friends and family, to their Jewish religious roots, to reunite in the community with all the rest of their former friends in the city. They were “weary and fainthearted.”

The Apostle Paul, having suffered so much himself, said this:

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:12-13)

This concept is worth pondering. The godly are persecuted by “evil people” without, and from “impostors” within. But, there is more to this aggression. Those very people are going “from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” If the people who persecute become worse, what is next for those whom they persecute? This is an unsettling prospect for all on the front edge of persecution.

Where to look for courage

Read again what has been written to people who are persecuted:

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Hebrews 12:3-4, emphasis mine)

Should we be surprised about this prescription, “Consider him”? Consider *Christ*. Christ is the example for all suffering people and the cross is the ultimate in suffering. However, the physicality of the cross was not where the most pain was suffered. Rather, Jesus faced the shame and the pain of identifying with our sin, and especially the resultant forsaking from his Father as he bore the guilt of all those who would believe in him. He faced the vehement hostility of Satan and his demons as well as earthly counterparts who were seeking to kill him as he died in our place. The physical aspect of dying at the hands of hostile people in his crucifixion is a marker, and is not one that you or I have yet succumbed to for the sake of obeying the Father. He fought sin by death, for our sake.

Persecution can be worse. It can involve the loss of life at the hands of hostile people for the cause of Christ. And, like these people the writer is addressing, “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood,” — you have not died in the battle against sin and sinners, like Christ did, when he died as our substitute.

That you may not grow weary and fainthearted

Obviously, God wants you, by looking at and to Christ, to stay in the battle. Don’t give in by disobedience. Don’t acquiesce to the pressure to give up. Don’t lose your fervor for Christ. As the temptation to revert to the old life presses you from various sides, continue to “run the race set before you” with endurance, not looking back.

When we grow weary, we are weaker. When we are fainthearted, we can be more easily convinced to give up. But our weakness is a call to look to Christ to gain faith — the power he can provide to go all the way to death if necessary to follow him.

There are others who have persevered well. Learn from them. They are like a crowd of witnesses to God’s faithfulness. With your imagination, look up into the grandstands to see them cheering you on. Jesus has gone before us. He endured extreme hostility and ultimate death. He looked beyond the death, thinking little of the shame it caused, because of the joy set before him. Looking to him inaugurates our faith and bolsters it to the end.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)