

I Am Suffering!

VOLODIA WAS A RUSSIAN CHRISTIAN. He was in his last year of medical school, when school officials discovered that he was a Christian. Volodia was threatened with expulsion from the school. “You choose - either God or a diploma,” was the demand. They tried to convince Volodia, the best student in the class, to choose graduation. For several months they conducted indoctrination sessions designed to force him to renounce his faith. One day, unannounced, a Communist party official visited Volodia’s class and declared, “Strange things have been happening in our university. There is a rumor that some students are trying to believe in God. We want to know if this is true.” the official said. Volodia understood. He was being given a final chance to renounce his faith. For twenty minutes Volodia told his fellow students about Christ. Volodia was soon expelled from the university.

AVOIDING IT. Would you have been willing to be expelled from the university? How do you handle suffering? Does it cause you to want to escape your situation? The group of people to whom the book of Hebrews was written wanted to escape. They were physically and verbally suffering. They had suffered because they called themselves Christians. They had suffered

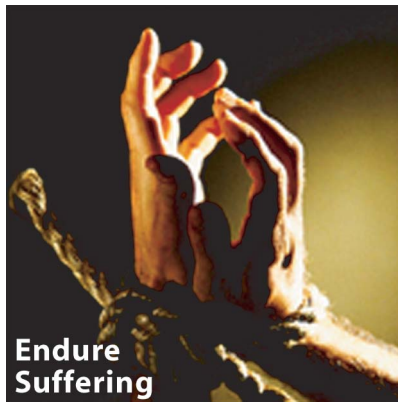
... a great conflict of sufferings ... made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated ... accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. (NASB) Heb. 10:32-34

But now they wanted to avoid the suffering. Pain motivated them to think they must have made a mistake in leaving Judaism and that Christ was a mistake. When suffering comes, most of us wonder what we did wrong. Do you?

EYES OF FAITH. But they were wrong in their conclusion, and God responds by warning them that leaving Jesus would be a tremendous mistake. Jesus was the true God, their only Savior, and their eternal, faithful High Priest. He reminds them the obsolete Mosaic law, sacrifices, priests,

and the tabernacle were predicted to pass away.

In Hebrews 11 we saw that God also reminded them of some men and women who were examples of great faith. These were Old Testament saints who trusted in the invisible, had confidence in His Word, knew that God is, sought after Him, and suffered for Him. Their eyes of faith were not just looking at Jesus; their eyes of faith were fixed on Jesus. These Old Testament saints suffered more than you and I have or even the readers of Hebrews had. Here is what happened to them.



Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ... (NASB) Heb. 11:35-37

They knew that the invisible God and the unseen heaven existed. They had no doubts. But that was true of the readers of Hebrews. The main message that God has sent these readers for eleven chapters is that their faith in God was

weak or missing. That is the message for us. Faith is the key to surviving suffering. Confidence in Jesus. Confidence in our future home - heaven - is real. How do you react when problems come to you as a Christian? Most of us doubt God.

HOW TO SUFFER. The first readers of Hebrews did not know why they were suffering. Had they forgotten that Jesus said,

If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you . . .
(NASB) John 15:20

It appears that they did not believe the suffering should continue so long. The readers of Hebrews misunderstood why they were suffering, and they did not know how to suffer. So God gives us the answer. First, how to suffer.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin . . . (NASB)
Hebrews 12:1-4

The Holy Spirit starts with an illustration of a runner who must focus on winning. A serious Olympic runner wears the correct clothes, trains aggressively, and then focuses on winning. He/she loses excess weight and wears very lightweight clothes and state-of-the-art running shoes to improve his/her speed. That is the picture we see here, “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us.” In the spiritual realm, our desire for comfort and acceptance - our sins - “slow us down.”

The Christian life is illustrated as a race already in progress. The one who runs the Christian race must be will-

ing to suffer pain in order to win. The Greek word for “endure” is HUPOMONA. It is a compound word of two Greek words: HUPO and MONOVA. The first Greek word means “under” and the second one means “stay in place” or “remain.” Together the word means to “stay under.” That is endurance. The runner who wants to win must be willing to “stay under the pain.”

People who leave the race are not Christians. This is a spiritual test. This happened in the early church. Philip Schaff in talking about men and women who left Jesus says,

. . . the moment the storm of persecution broke forth, [they] flew like chaff from the wheat, and either offered incense to the gods, procured false witness of their return to paganism, or gave up the sacred books (traitores).

Men and women who gave up their Bibles were called traitors. What a name the early church used for people who once claimed to be Christians! Have you ever wondered if you would stay in the spiritual race during suffering?

Olympic runners have been encouraged to look ahead into the distance in order to run straight and not lose time. Runners have lost the race by looking back over their shoulder to see how near their competition was. One who runs the Christian race must fix his or her eyes of faith into the distance – on Jesus – and run

hard. Our eyes must be fixed on Jesus - the prize. Every saint must be willing to suffer as the Old Testament saints and Jesus did. They need eyes of faith fixed on Jesus.

WHY DO WE SUFFER? But the Hebrews were missing a piece. They did know why they were suffering.

. . . and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without disci-



pline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them . . . (NASB) Heb. 12:5-10

God was using the very thing they wanted to avoid – suffering - to train them. God’s discipline does that. The Greek word for “discipline” is PADEIA. It means “education, training, instruction, correction, and suffering.” It is a general word that refers to training someone. As a child, all of us have suffered “pain,” if our parent(s) disciplined us. Our parents may have told us how we should have behaved, denied us privileges, or may have spanked us. PADEIA includes all of these forms of “discipline.” We can suffer in a number of ways: when He speaks to us from His word, when He denies us privileges, when He brings hardship into our lives, or when He causes us to be physically ill or allows tragedy. He trains only real Christians. When we suffer, it is proof that we are His children. But why does God discipline His children?

. . . He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (NASB) Heb. 12:10-11

God has one major motivation for our suffering - our holiness. He is more interested in our holiness than in our comfort. He wants us to be like Him. He is a holy God. Every runner knows that eventually the hands, knees and feet grow weak in the race. So He says,

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. (NASB) Heb. 12:12-13

KEYS TO VICTORY. How do we run the Christian race? We must have faith in Jesus; then we need to be willing to endure suffering until we reach heaven. We must not be angry with those who cause us to suffer. We must not become bitter while “staying under” our suffering.

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (NASB) Heb. 12:14-17



We must fix our eyes on the prize - Jesus and heaven and run hard.

CONCLUSION. Successful Olympic runners do not focus on their pain but on the prize. They know the prize is real - it exists. They have no doubt. Why else would they train and endure suffering?

The reason they are running is for the prize.

How are you running? Is the prize real? Do you have doubts? You will not run well if you doubt the prize is real and is worth the suffering. If you believe the invisible prize is real, then you will run with confidence and be willing to suffer. Fix your eyes on the prize, Jesus; endure suffering, and run!