

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Our earthly spiritual journey is comparable to a runner's long-distance race. We're being cheered on from the grandstands of heaven, as it were, by those who have run before us, the heroes of faith (12:1). Knowing that spurs us on. Moreover, Jesus is standing at the finish line, and so we should "fix our eyes on Him." Being with Him forever is our goal, and endurance is the key. Runners have greater endurance if they carry less weight, and similarly, we should "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us" if we want to cross the finish line in heaven.

Notice that the author mentions both sins and encumbrances that might slow us down. Encumbrances, although they may not be sinful, can be anything that slows down our spiritual progress. What we do with our time can certainly fall into this category. Wasting time, our most precious commodity, in meaningless relationships or mindless entertainment, is something that weighs down many believers in their spiritual progress. Long-distance runners don't cross any finish line accidentally. They cross the finish line because that is what they set their hearts on, and they expect to suffer on the way to their goal.

The greatest example of enduring faith in the midst of suffering is Jesus, of course. He endured the cross because of the "joy set before Him" (12:2). He believed. The Hebrew Christians were also suffering "hostility by sinners," but their sufferings were minor by comparison to His (as are ours). They had not yet shed their blood (12:4).

Some may have wondered why their loving Father, the all-powerful God, did not stop their persecutors. The author explains that, in His divine plan, God uses our sufferings to discipline us, that "we may share His holiness" (12:10). He "scourges every son whom He receives," and the reason is because He loves them all (12:6). So He permits His own children to suffer, at least at times, to call them to repentance. If we "are without discipline" that reveals that we are not truly God's children.

There are two wrong reactions to God's discipline. We can "regard it lightly" (12:5), that is, essentially ignore it, or we can "faint when we are reproved" (12:5), that is, give up in exasperation (as the Hebrew believers were being tempted to do). The fact is, when many believers are rebuking Satan in their trials, they might consider rebuking themselves for behavior that has invited God's discipline.

No one enjoys discipline, and that is the point. We learn to avoid sin in order to avoid the consequences. We associate disobedience with pain, just as do disobedient children who are spanked. God disciplines us and it trains us, which yields "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (12:11). This is no small thing, because without holiness "no one will see the Lord" (12:14). God is training us for heaven, where holiness reigns.

The author uses Esau as a poor example to follow, since he "sold his own birthright for a single meal" (12:16). That is, he didn't rightly value his birthright, and gave it up under temptation during a temporary trial. Later, when he deeply regretted his decision, the consequences of his foolishness could not be reversed (12:17). The message was clear to the Hebrew Christians and to all those who have reached a place of maturity in Christ. To abandon faith at this point is an irreversible decision (remember 6:4-6).

Finally, the author paints a picture that compares the awesome scene witnessed by the children of Israel at the giving of the Mosaic Law with the much more awesome future scene that will be witnessed by all believers who enter the New Jerusalem. Unbelieving Jews likely pointed to the former to attempt to persuade Hebrew Christians to revert to Judaism. But the Hebrew Christians need not be persuaded. God had a more awesome scene prepared for them! At the giving of the Mosaic Law, God's voice shook a mountain, but one day it will shake the earth, and all that will remain are those things that cannot be shaken, namely, what belongs to His eternal, unshakable kingdom. Believers, keep on believing, and you will be unshakable!