

## What Gets You Through Suffering

Hebrews 12:1-3 | Jonathan K. Dodson | November 23, 2014

We are taking a break from our series, Saints Together, which we will resume next year. Before we start with the very exciting Advent, I'd like us to think about suffering. There are different types of suffering: some because we've done something bad, other because we've done something good, and some from difficult circumstances. We're gonna focus on how we respond to difficult circumstances. *How we suffer says a lot about who we are.* As you move into the holidays (more time with family), reflect on the year (it hasn't been quite what you'd hoped for), or deal with some difficulty right now, how can you suffer well? Let's look at the *example* of Jesus' suffering (Christ), examine how we typically get through suffering (coping strategies), and what might need to change to *thrive* in suffering.

### Consider Christ

Let's look at Jesus' example. Hebrews 12:3, "[Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.](#)" If we want to thrive, to not grow weary in suffering, we *must* consider Christ. The word "consider" means "to reason with careful consideration," and contains the root word for logic. If you want to suffer well, you have to keep your head. You can't just check out and surrender entirely to emotion; you'll get trampled. What are we to consider? Consider *Christ*. What are we supposed to see? His **endurance**, "[who endured from sinners such hostility against himself.](#)" Consider Christ's endurance. Endurance is a major theme in Hebrews. The prior chapter is filled with people of faith who endured great suffering, which climaxes with Christ: "[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](#)" (Heb 12:1). As we consider the saints who finished well, we are

summoned to join the race and run with endurance. As creatures of comfort, endurance doesn't come easy. If someone disapproves of us, our week might be turned upside-down. If the store is out of our brand of toothpaste, we're frustrated or if our meal takes too long at the restaurant, we're angered. So when *real suffering* comes we are easily knocked off our feet. **A culture of comfort creates a low threshold for suffering.** What if instead of being knocked off our feet, we were able to stand firm, become wiser, deeper, enduring people? I think of Louis Zamperini from the book *Unbroken*, who trained his body to run the half-mile. In a qualifying race in the NCAA Championships, a competitor runs up next to him and drives his cleat right through Louis' shoe into his foot. He fights through the pain. His body strained. His muscles tight, the lactic acid shooting through his body, his lungs heaving, he powers through the race to qualify. Endurance requires grit, hudsba, determination, in the face of obstacles, like a cleat through the foot or spikes through the hands. You have to keep your head to endure, or you'll spin off the track. And it can be exceptionally hard *because suffering is disorienting*. The film *Fury* follows an Allied Sherman tank crew, as they close in on the Nazis occupied Europe, depicting how they endure the disorienting trauma of war. They shoot, stab, run, hide, sweat, bleed, scream, yell, and fight to keep their heads. In the opening scene, the creaky Sherman tank, with fury painted across its barrell, returns from the battlefield to the allied camp. The Fury crew has to pull one of their dead friends' bloodied body from the tank. They smell like war. Wardaddy, Brad Pitt's manly crew leader dismounts, walks around a corner and his face winces in pain, he gasps, and buckles from the trauma. He quickly pulls it together and they go right back out into the battlefield. Does endurance allow for emotion when we suffer? When news of a miscarriage comes crashing home? The loss of a job? When loneliness grips your heart? Or people mistreat you? Wardaddy stuffs the emotion away. Is this the biblical picture of endurance? *Consider Jesus*, who in suffering

psychological and physical trauma, weeps and agonizes the night before his crucifixion saying, “*Father, let this cup depart from me.*” On the cross he’s raw enough to say, “*Why have you forsaken me?*” Jesus shows us emotion is okay. He wasn’t divinely insulated from suffering. God grants him—us—the full range of human emotion in our suffering. He doesn’t condemn you for feeling despair, anger, or frustration. Cry it out don’t cover it up. Include God in your suffering. He has already included you. When we consider Christ, we don’t discover an emotionless sufferer. *So* how do we express emotion without losing our head? How do we suffer well?

### **Coping in Suffering**

Verse 2: “[looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.](#)” The word “look” means to fix your eyes on something without distraction. Aiming at a target, staring at a screen, like a hunter’s eye trained on the deer, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. How does this help? The text tells us how, “[who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross](#)” (Heb 12:2). How did Jesus endure the greatest possible agony? By fixing his attention on the joy set before him. **The way you get through suffering without losing your head is filling your heart with joy.** The trouble, of course, is how do you do that? But first, we have to understand what threatens our joy—*coping strategies that keep us from Christ*. When hard times hit—miscarriage, demands at work, difficult children, finances, gossip—how do you respond? One coping strategy is **detachment**. We see this in Brad Pitt’s character. Suck it up. Harden yourself. Face the gun. Stuff the emotion. Gut it out. *The problem with this strategy is that buried pain eventually blows up.* When I counsel couples who have tension in their relationship, one of the major causes is buried pain. One or both spouses have been unwilling to address hurt over the years, so they bury it and it blows up. It might take months or years, but eventually detachment

catches up with you. Another coping strategy is **distraction**. Work is hard so I'll drink a couple extra beers. Relationships are tense, so I'll get out of town for the weekend. Marriage is no fun so I'll stay late at the office. You distract yourself from your suffering. In *Fury*, the soldiers win an Austrian town and then take a reprieve. Most of them start drinking, chasing women, and carousing. They're coping with suffering, desperately trying to relieve the gnawing sense of confusion, pain, suffering. There are two exceptions. Wardaddy slips away to an apartment to have a proper meal, cutlery, napkins, table and chair. He washes up and asks the Austrian women to cook him eggs, which he's been hiding for who knows how long. He's trying to impose peace in the midst of war. He's *distracting* himself from the carnage, MRE meals, and silly carousing, but it doesn't work. His drunken crew busts into the room and absolutely ruins it. He loses it. No peace. The pain is still there, no matter how hard you try to distract it or impose on it. Peace has to come from the outside. Boyd, "the Bible" Swan, Shia LeBeouf's character, quietly sits in the town square. He has something the others don't. Another coping strategy is **addiction**. Negative things: smoking, drinking, pornography, or positive things like sports and hobbies. My wife has to fight off retreating to her sewing room. For me, it can be movies. For Ernest Hemingway, it was horse racing. He turned to racing when writing was hard and looking back, called racing "a demanding friend." Why a friend? Because it seems like such a help, in the moment. Why demanding? He remarks: "[When I stopped working on the races I was glad but it left an emptiness. By then I knew that everything good and everything bad left an emptiness when it stopped. But if it was bad, the emptiness filled up by itself. If it was good you could only fill it by finding something better](#) (Moveable Feast, 62)." What's he saying? He's saying that bad addictions leave an emptiness that fill up because they're not good for you in the first place. Substance abuse is obviously a bad friend. But what about when you've used something good, like sewing, movies, or horseracing? Eventually you

have to move on and find something better, more thrilling. Why? Because we're made for more than addiction and distraction; we're made for *joy*. A reliable friend. Do you have a demanding friend? Will you trade it out for the reliable friend? You'll have to do it more than once. Will you consider Christ, fixate on Jesus, turn to the thing that doesn't ring with emptiness but fills up with joy.

### The Hidden Joy

Let me show you why Jesus offers more than coping strategies. We're told he endured the cross *for the joy set before him*. That "for" can be interpreted a couple ways, like a hinge, that gives us a long view and immediate view in suffering. The **long view**. Jesus looks down the barrel of the cross and sees on the other side of his agony, unparalleled joy—reunion with God, where he "[is seated at the right hand of the Father](#)." He sees beyond his suffering to the promised joy of fellowship within the holy Trinity, the perfect community of joy, the fellowship of unending felicity, the very fountain of true Happiness. Like those before him in Hebrews 11, he endures to lay hold of that joy. And in this reunion he will preside over suffering not exist in suffering. The same is held out to those who endure in faith, *a promise that suffering will end, and in its place, a happiness that does not*. Real hope held out to those who follow Jesus. This week, in some of my pain, I've been lifted by the thought of dancing in the new creation, where the sound of adult laughter carries over rivers and across mountains in the presence of the Lord and all his perfected people. No more sin. No more suffering. That's the long view. But there's an **immediate view** of joy that gets you through suffering, translating the "for" as "instead of." So the idea would be that *Jesus endured the cross "instead of the joy set before him."* What does this mean? That he exchanged a superficial joy for a deeper joy. Perhaps he's thinking of replacing the temporal joy of not dying for the eternal joy of obeying. In the Gospel of Matthew he teaches, "[Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and](#)

utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (5:11-12) What’s the reward? In Hebrews we’re told that God is “a rewarder of those who *seek him*” (11:6). The psalms teach us that weeping may last of the night but a shout of joy comes in the morning. *The immediate view shows us that there is a present joy in suffering that foreshadows our future joy.* In other words, it is possible to suffer and experience *now* the joy of a Reliable Friend. It isn’t a flippant joy, full of emotion; it is the deeper joy of a constant companion. Frodo’s Samwise, Sherlock’s Watson, Hamlet’s Horatio, and in *Fury*, Wardaddy’s Boyd, the Bible, Swan. Boyd is the anchor character in *Fury*’s crew. Everyone else copes but Boyd *endures*. You know what he was doing in the town square when everyone else was carousing? Fixing his eyes, there on a stool, quietly amidst the chaos, glasses on, head down, reading Scripture. Director David Ayers comments on Boyd, “**it was important to me to show how someone can lean on Scripture and their relationship with Christ in an environment where they’re seeing this much inhumanity and destruction.**” In his suffering, Boyd fixes on Jesus, and this allows him to suffer well—with emotion, and with joy. His companion is Christ, the Reliable Friend. Suffering is a setting to know the Central Character of story we call life. There, in the darkness of the prayer closet we uncover the brightness of his glory. In the difficulty of the unknown we discover what it’s like to be truly known. In the emptiness of pain, we find the fullness of something better, the hidden joy of Christ. **The hidden joy of Christ eclipses the coping strategies of man.** Consider Christ, look to Jesus, and *seek* the Joy set before you.