

Throughout the letter, *Hebrews* exhorts his audience to follow the example of Jesus as they endured suffering. They had already endured public abuse and the plundering of their possessions for their Christian convictions (10:32-36). There is every likelihood that they would suffer even more in the future. The prospect of further persecution had wearied them and caused them to doubt their commitment. The main thrust of the last section of the letter (12:3-13:25) was to motivate them to persevere in the midst of such adversity.

Hebrews regarded the suffering of the Christians to whom he was writing as divine discipline God was using to strengthen their faith. The question this raises for us as modern readers is whether or not *Hebrews* has an adequate solution to the problem of evil in our day.

The perspective on suffering *Hebrews* envisioned looked to Jesus as the model for endurance to be emulated. This has been a very significant part of the Christian tradition through many centuries. It is helpful to read the *Catholic Encyclopedia* which begins: *The sufferings of our Lord which culminated in His death upon the cross seem to have been conceived of as one inseparable whole from a very early period.* The article goes on to note that all English versions of the NT have used the word *passion*, adopted from Jerome's 5th century Latin of Acts 1:3.

On the other hand, from early times many theologians have struggled with the concept of the physical suffering of the cross. Jesus' death as a political criminal was, as Paul said, rejected by both Jews and pagan Gentiles. To them such ignominy was incompatible with the nature of God. Many Christians have preferred to emphasize the mercifulness of Jesus exemplified by the image of the Good Shepherd. Instead, the cross became the symbol of triumph and exultation, not of extreme pain and misery. In Roman Catholicism, the crucifix instead of the empty cross was the preferred image. Yet the suffering of the

crucifixion has never disappeared from Protestant thought as much art and many of our hymns reveal.

Hebrews used the model of discipline through suffering as the means by which Jesus and his followers learned obedience to God's will. The purpose of this discipline is so that we may share God's holiness (12:10). Frances Taylor Gench wrote:

We ought not to think that Christian faith shelters us from adversity. On the contrary, suffering and being a child of God go hand in hand. Those who are guided by the vision and standards of God's eternal world inevitably encounter opposition and maltreatment, for the world is threatened by those who do not share its values, and it lashes out at them.... In many instances, suffering comes our way not in spite of the fact that we are disciples, but because of it.

Gench also realizes that such a disciplinary approach also has its difficulties. Not all suffering, from chronic or fatal illness, for instance, can be viewed in this light. "Hebrews speaks not of suffering in general but rather of suffering that comes our way as a direct result of obedient discipleship and Christian witness in the world."

Such witness tends to make faith stronger and empowers even greater witness. So *Hebrews* exhorts his audience to be bold in the face of the persecution they are experiencing (12:12). The martyrdom of the many saints has been honoured in different ways through the centuries, not least by naming churches after them. The Greek word behind our English word *martyr* simple meant *witness*. When *Hebrews* was written, the apostles were all gone. Tradition records that most if not all of them died as martyrs for carrying the Gospel to the world.

As one commentator wrote, "Is it a greater punishment, "when God lets us alone in our sin by treating us as unteachable?" But is it? Does punishment ever teach?"

OPENING PRAYER

We have all suffered in some way, our God. Yet we still need to know why there is so much suffering in this world. Help us to endure whatever may be our lot that we may know the truth and worship beneath the cross that reveals the suffering and victorious love.

AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you try to explain why people suffer?
2. The Hebrew scriptures trace suffering to the first humans - Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. These myths imply that suffering has been part of life from the beginning of human consciousness and cannot be avoided. Is this a satisfactory way to understand all human suffering?
3. Jesus' death on the cross is often said to have been the greatest evil ever committed. What do you think was the greatest suffering Jesus endured? Was it the physical pain of the crucifixion or the earlier awareness in Gethsemane that he could not avoid dying in that way?

CLOSING PRAYER

Your love, Lord Jesus, not your pain and suffering, is what matters to me. Grant me grace that I may always give thanks for your love victorious over all suffering and death itself.

AMEN.

16 – A PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING

Hebrews 12:3-13

The cross as suffering love.



The cross as victorious love.

