

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS
HEBREWS 12:1-3

In 1948, Dutch physicist Hessel de Vries began doing some research on the two daughters of a colorblind father and discovered that their eyes perceived colors differently from both their father and others with normal color perception.

Our eyes perceive color through the cones in our eyes; we have three cones that are sensitive to three frequencies of light: long-wavelength reds, medium-wavelength greens, and short-wavelength blues. The varying combinations between those wavelengths create all the different colors that we see. What de Vries discovered was that some people have a fourth cone, enabling them to see many more subtleties in colors and shades. De Vries' study was not followed up by others for about 50 years, but in the past 20 years or so there has been more research done on "four-cone" people — called "tetrachromats." Speculation is that they may be able to see and discern as many as 100 million colors.

While the condition is rare, one person that has the condition is an Australian artist named Concetta Antico. Cognitive scientist Kimberley Jameson has tested Antico and examined her art and has said,

"If you look at her **pictures of dawn and dusk**, she uses many colors." These monochromatic landscapes are portrayed in pastels; tree silhouettes are rendered in magentas and mauves, their shadows in madders and russets.

Ms. Antico insists that these spectral shades are not imagined. "The colors I paint into twilights are not artistic expression. Where you see grays, I see a rich and beautiful mosaic of lilacs, lavenders, violets, emeralds." She talks as if colors splinter beneath her gaze. "Take what you call white. You might see lead whites, ivories, chalks, silvers, warm whites, cold whites, but I see so many more subtle shades, most without a name." [\[WSJ\]](#)



How remarkable it must be to be able to perceive all those variations — to see realities that others do not see. Wouldn't it similarly be helpful to see spiritual realities that others do not see? What if we could pull back the curtain of our trials and difficulties and see what the Lord is working in us?

There are times that we can see some of those realities; but often the Lord withholds those realities from us, while still demonstrating his trustworthiness to us. We saw that last week in the final verses of Hebrews 11, where God made the promise of a Messianic Kingdom to many OT characters, yet they did not get to experience that Kingdom (**11:39-40**). They didn't receive the ultimate promise, but they remained faithful. The writer of Hebrews sent his letter to encourage NT believers who were suffering persecution to encourage them to persist in faithfulness to Christ and their salvation.

Most of us read Hebrews 11 and find encouragement from the response of these OT sufferers. But some of us miss the conclusion and final application that the author makes. (We miss it in part because of a poor chapter division between 11:40 and 12:1; the chapter more naturally ends after 12:3.)

So as we conclude this brief series, let's take one final look at the author's encouragement for how to respond when we cannot perceive the spiritual realities behind our suffering by looking at the opening verses of chapter 12. The author will say it this way:

WHEN SUFFERING, PRACTICE THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF SANCTIFICATION.

In this passage we will see that the response to suffering is no different than our response to any circumstance of life — we respond by practicing the three principles of sanctification.

1. When Suffering, **STOP**... (v. 1)
2. When Suffering, **START**... (v. 2)
3. When Suffering, **THINK**... (v. 3)

1. When Suffering, STOP... (v. 1)

- That the writer is drawing a conclusion is clear from the first word: **therefore**. It is a unique word (used only here in the NT); it is a “triple compound conjunction” — he doesn’t want them to miss that he is making an application to the readers. They are to do something in light of Hebrews 11.
- Why should they do something? Because (**since**) **we have so great a cloud of witnesses...**
 - ✓ Some have suggested that this **cloud of witnesses** includes all the redeemed in Heaven watching what believers are doing on earth and cheering for them. That’s not what he is saying. They are not looking at us — we are looking at them and their faithful living for our own encouragement.
 - ✓ The **witnesses** are those who have testified to God’s goodness by their faithful lives (ch. 11). [Interestingly, in 11:2, 4, 5, 39 God **approved** (testified, same word) of their faithfulness; with this word the writer means that they also were giving a testimony about God’s trustworthiness.]
 - ✓ To say there is a **cloud** of witnesses means that there is an uncountable number. He is not referring to the few names in ch. 11 or even the wider group in 11:33ff. He means that there is a vast, uncountable number of faithful people to the Lord.
 - ✓ And notice also that while they gave testimony with their lives, their testimony remains (**we have**) — just as Abel’s testimony persisted long after he died (11:4b).
 - ✓ Notice also that the writer puts himself in this category of needing to do something because of the examples of Hebrews 11 — **we** includes both readers and the writer. All believers have the same examples and the same spiritual resources to equip them to persevere. You and I are not at a disadvantage spiritually to either the OT believers or the early NT church.
 - ✓ How might we persevere when suffering? He tells us there are two things that we are to **put off**:
- **Put off anything that slows your growth in Christ.**
 - ✓ The word **lay aside** is the word that refers to taking off clothing. It is an athletic picture. Imagine a first century competing in a running race or wrestling match trying to run and fight with a robe down to his feet. That’s a hard task! So one option was to pull the back edge of the robe through one’s legs and fasten it at his waist under a belt. But often they would strip so that there would be no encumbrance of any kind for their movement. That’s the picture the writer is using (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8; Js. 1:21).
 - ✓ Specifically, he says to take off **encumbrances** — “weights.” He is saying “take off” anything that will distract you from the objective of faithfulness.
 - ✓ He is not talking about sin (he does that in the next phrase); he is talking about anything — even good things that are not ultimate things. (Notice the word **every** — there are no exceptions.)
 - ✓ He is vague because the weights that slow one down will be different for each individual.
 - ✓ Like the athletes that carried nothing (not even clothing) in the race, believers should “travel light.”

- ✓ What kinds of things? It could be relationships, friendships, jobs, civic duties, hobbies and activities done in discretionary time, entertainment, education (reading!), sleep (too much or too little), or vacations. He is thinking about anything that will keep us from being faithful to our calling to Christ.
- ✓ It can be helpful to periodically account for all our time/resources for a week/month — what we do with our time and money will reveal what we love and desire. Do those things help or hinder?

- Put off every sin — because every sin is a snare

- ✓ He also says to put off *the sin which so easily entangles us*. He uses the article (*the*) to refer to a particular class of sin — *entangling* sin.
- ✓ Commentators debate about what the entangling sin is — which sin is “the” great sin that causes great problem? All of them do. I have never committed a sin and later said, “well that one was ok — it didn’t create any problems and it was actually good for my soul.”
- ✓ The nature of sin is that it ensnares and enslaves (Rom. 6:12-14). These readers were particularly struggling with doubt and a desire for easier lives (sound familiar). But all sin is a trap.
- ✓ So he means, put off *all sin*. All sin cripples us and hinders us from running effectively.
- ✓ Many years ago, our wood shed developed some rot from rain water and then some holes were expanded by rodents. When we walked in the shed there were not only scurrying noises, but also eyes looking at us from the recesses of the shed. I knew it was a real problem when one evening RJ asked me “would you go to the shed to get...” “No way! I’m not going out there!” (Yes, my man card was in question, and I didn’t care.) Soon after that, we stripped the shed to the studs and exposed all the rat, mouse, and snake nests (which the dog loved!). Every access point was removed and reconstructed and we put in windows and electricity and lights to see in the shed. Radical change.
- ✓ Whatever sin we are excusing (and we *all* tend to excuse some of our sins) and whatever sin we are not addressing is keeping us from faithfulness to Christ.
- ✓ APP: Our doubts about Christ and our weariness in the spiritual life may well be connected to our inattentiveness to our habits (even “liberty” habits) and indulging in our sinful temptations.

- Put off every entanglement and sin — because we are in a race!

- ✓ Why should we be attentive to putting off these things? Because we are in a *race* — an “agony.”
- ✓ And notice that the race is *set before us* — that is, God has put us in the race (“paid entry fee”).
- ✓ And the race is not a sprint — it is a marathon that demands endurance (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7).
- ✓ Some of us have come to Christ and thought we signed up for a two-week cruise ship trip with different exciting excursions every day. Nope, we are in a race that is a “struggle” (agonizing).
- ✓ It’s tempting to quit — the writer is exhorting not to give up because the cost of quitting is high and the reward of persevering is great (10:35-37; 11:6, 16, 39-40).
- ✓ I know some of you are weary (I am too, at times); is the weariness from effort (that’s ok), or because of inattention to things that hinder us? Let’s be attentive to all hindrances.

2. When Suffering, START... (v. 2)

- How can you stop sinning? Sometimes even the effort we put to stopping sin reminds us of the sin and entices us to re-engage with that sin. We need a righteous replacement to our sinful activity.
 - ✓ The writer gives us a righteous replacement: **fixing our eyes on Jesus...**
 - ✓ The way to “run” the marathon of the Christian life is to keep our attention fixated on Christ. Looking around at other things will keep us distracted and lead us to stumble and fall.
 - ✓ Common phrase for teaching children how to hit a baseball — “keep your eye on the ball.” For the believer, we keep our eye on the prize of Christ. Don’t get trapped by looking away from Him.
 - ✓ In fact, the verb is something like, “looking away from” — it has the sense of looking away from anything of lesser value and maintaining focus (present tense) and attention on Christ (**Col. 3:1ff**).
 - ✓ A few months ago we were driving across a bridge near our home and RJ said, “they are just about finished building that house...” “What house???” A home had its foundation poured and two stories and constructed and enclosed with a boat dock for two party boats and two jet skis and I had never noticed it because whenever I cross the bridge I’m watching traffic, preparing to turn...
 - ✓ Look at Jesus persistently, relentlessly, and confidently. (Purposefully think about and talk to Him.)
- Why be attentive to Christ?
- **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus because of who He is**
 - ✓ He is **the author and perfecter of faith**. That is He is the “Captain” the “Leader” of faith. He is the pre-eminent example and Ruler of faith (e.g., **4:15**). He always trusted the Father and produced the faith — not *our* faith, but objective faith that is the good news of our salvation (**5:9**).
 - ✓ He is also the **Perfecter** — the One who brings all faith to its complete and final end (**10:37**).
 - ✓ As the Captain and Perfecter, He is also the prime example (**6:20**).
 - ✓ He is also the supreme provider as our Head (**Eph. 1:20-21, 23**). Where else will we turn for help?
 - ✓ Recently I texted a friend (outside our church body) who is going through a difficult season and told him I was praying in a particular way for him. His response quoted John Newton: “Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come. Tis GRACE hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead home. Grace, Grace, Grace. My life is ALL His grace. Then let me boast with holy Paul, I am nothing, Christ is all.” He was practicing the principle of Hebrews 11:2.
 - ✓ You and I will not get the leadership we need or the end we desire apart from Christ. Look to Him.
- **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus because of how He endured**
 - ✓ Notice the phrase **for the joy set before Him**. “Set before” is the same verb as in v. 1 where it refers to God, who has set a spiritual race before us. Joy was set before Christ, but it went *thru the cross*.
 - ✓ The reminder of the **cross** is a reminder of at least three realities:
 - The suffering of Jesus far surpasses the hurt/harm and difficulty of the Hebrews.

- The suffering of Jesus far surpasses the injustice endured by the Hebrews in their suffering. He was right in everything He did and the Jews sinned in everything they did against Him.
- The suffering of Jesus was far more “shameful” than any suffering endured by the Hebrews. The cross was the most disgraceful punishment; Romans were exempt from execution on the cross. It was considered vile and for the lowest and basest of criminals.
- ✓ Yet Christ endured the cross willingly and persisted in going to the cross (Lk. 22:41-42). Why?
- ✓ He persisted because of *joy*. That is, He knew the end of the cross — that it would bring a redeemed people to Heaven. And He loved and delighted in those redeemed sinners and so he endured.
- ✓ Notice also that because of the final joy He *despised the shame* of the cross. That is, though the cross was “shameful,” He “looked down” on that shame and was unconcerned with it. He scorned the shame of the cross and turned that shame into His glory (1 Cor. 1:18ff).
- ✓ How glorious did He make the shame? *He has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*
 - The One who experienced the greatest earthly “shame” is now in the most exalted position.
 - He (even now) is serving as co-regent with the Father in Heaven. (The verb indicates that He sat, having finished His work, and He continues to sit in the greatest position in Heaven.)
 - Notice this: while He endured “shame” on the cross, it did not diminish His ultimate position in Heaven. Likewise, the believer can be encouraged that whatever “loss” we endure on earth, it does not diminish what the Father is keeping for us in Heaven (1 Pt. 1:3-6).
 - The implication is that the readers (and we) are not to be ashamed of anything we will endure but to think instead with joy and anticipation of what will be experienced in eternity at the culmination of our salvation.
 - Look at Jesus’ exalted position and anticipate the joy of what He will give us in Heaven.

3. When Suffering, THINK... (v. 3)

- The process of sanctification is to put off sin, put on righteous replacements, and renew our minds.
- Verse three offers a new way to think about our suffering: *consider Him* — that is “add up” or “calculate” the person and work of Christ. It is a reminder that He is to be the object of our meditation.
- What should we think about when we think about Christ?
 - ✓ *Consider* all the *hostility* that Christ willingly *endured*. The hostility included the words and the physical suffering. (Think about the cross and the verbal mocking and physical pain.)
 - ✓ And everything He endured (He persisted and kept moving forward under its weight) came from *sinners*. Everything He experienced was unjust (unlike some/much of our suffering). Everything Christ endured was unfair and inappropriate. And He never wavered in unbelief (1 Pt. 2:23).
- Why should we think about Christ? So that *we will not grow weary and lose heart* (soul).
 - ✓ The writer does not discount the reality of difficulties and suffering in this life.

- ✓ And those difficulties do tempt us to become soul-weary and even despairing to the point of considering giving up on Christ.
- ✓ But if we want to have inner courage and strength, we must stop looking at the difficulties of the trials and begin looking at the greatness of Christ.
- ✓ Weary hearts may be evidence of not looking sufficiently at Christ.
- ✓ If we “fight our difficulties in our own natural strength, we will quickly grow weary. This is where all spiritual decline starts, namely, in not exercising faith...” [John Owen]

CONCLUSION:

Maintaining faithfulness to Christ when suffering starts here. We need to think about our suffering in a new way and put it in the perspective of Christ. (Unlike those few who have four cones to see the world in more dazzling color, every believer has the expanded ability to see our trials in new ways):

- ✓ The temptations that entice us away from Christ when we are suffering will only leave us weary.
- ✓ Christ has endured and His righteousness imputed to us enables us to endure.
- ✓ We will endure by looking at, desiring, and pursuing obedience to Christ, even as Christ pursued obedience to the Father.
- ✓ We endure by looking past the trials to the reward we will receive in Glory. He will keep His promise to us and take us to a heavenly reward (10:37).

BENEDICTION: Hebrews 13:20-21