

How do we know what we believe? Will our faith sustain us when times are tough?

Well, the author of Hebrews sought in part to address question like these to a group of Christians that had grown weary with the faith. These early Christians once bubbling with enthusiasm grew stagnant as time passed. And a storm was brewing all around them. Persecution and suffering threatened to drown this disillusioned faith community. They couldn't shelter themselves from the storm forever.

These tired Christians questioned whether faith was worth living for, much less worth suffering for. So, our author writes to awaken them again to Jesus, the high priest, the one who empowers us to experience God's loving presence in a real and enduring way. The author's situation feel somewhat familiar. We 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians face stagnation in the church as well. And while it doesn't cost to be a Christian in the way it did in those first centuries of the church, *at least not in this country*, there's still a price to be paid for faithfulness. And many in our culture have forgotten or ignored this hard truth.

Like those the author of Hebrews addresses, most of us like the way of faith to be enjoyable, a rose garden without thorns. But, faith isn't always pleasant and rosy. Those who believe Jesus' message and seek wholeheartedly to follow in his footsteps often learn that the beginning of faith is suffering.

Now, I'd like to elaborate on the kind of suffering the author of Hebrews is talking about in our passage. What helps us to understand the author's meaning is the connection he makes between obedience and suffering in verses 8 and 9. He says, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

So, in suffering, a word that can also be translated "enduring," Jesus learned obedience or

acceptance. And in Jesus' enduring, he was made perfect, a word which can also mean "whole." Jesus thus becomes the source of wholeness for all who would follow him in that path.

So, the way the author of Hebrews highlights Jesus' enduring let's us know that he isn't talking about suffering that results from illness, or tragic accidents, or transgressions. The author is talking about suffering that comes from being faithful to God. When our lives are grounded in God's values instead of the world's values, we can expect some opposition and suffering. And, the obedience the author talks about is more complicated than doing what is good, and not doing what is evil. True obedience is about embodying a paradigm shift. It's about a life so captured and transformed by God's love and faithfulness in Christ that *all* of existence takes new meaning. Every thought, every action, every relationship becomes grounded in God's love and then reflects God's values.

Suffering and transformation are spoken about elsewhere in scripture. In Romans 5:3-4 the Apostle Paul says: "...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." In Philippians 3:8-9 Paul says: "I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith." Wholeness, endurance, character, hope, righteousness - these are treasures of faith, but they are not treasures easily obtained.

In many places in scripture we're told that we must stand firm in the face of suffering. That doesn't mean we need to go looking for trouble, or that we have to throw a party for suffering when it comes knocking on our doors. It does mean, however, that we're not supposed to run and hide from it, because standing firm in the face of suffering is one of the most powerful

ways we grow in Christ's image. I came across a story that I think helps to illustrate this point.

Clarence Jordan was a man of unusual abilities and commitment. He had two Ph.D.s, one in agriculture and one in Greek and Hebrew. He was so gifted that he could have chosen to do anything he wanted. He chose to serve the poor. In the 1940s, he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, and called it Koinonia Farm. It was a community for poor people of any color. As you might guess, such an idea didn't go too over well in the Deep South of the 1940's. And, all kinds of people, including people in the church, tried to stop Clarence. They boycotted the farm, and slashed workers' tires when they came to town. For fourteen years, they tried all sorts of things to stop him.

Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan had enough of Clarence Jordan, so they decided to get rid of the farm once and for all. They came one night with guns and torches and set fire to every building on Koinonia Farm but Clarence's home, which they filled with bullets. Clarence recognized the voices of many of the Klansmen during this attack, and as you might guess, some of them were church people. Another was the local newspaper's reporter. The next day, the reporter came out to see what remained of the farm. The rubble was still smoldering and the land was scorched, but Clarence was in the field, digging and planting.

"I heard the awful news," he called to Clarence, "and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing." Clarence just kept on digging and planting. The reporter kept prodding, kept poking, trying to get a rise from this quietly determined man. So, finally, the reporter said in a haughty voice, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them Ph.D.s and you've but fourteen years into this farm, and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?" Clarence stopped working, turned toward the reporter with his penetrating blue eyes, and said quietly but firmly, "About as successful as the cross. Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness." Clarence and his companions rebuilt Koinonia, and the farm is going strong today.

Many of us don't pay exactly the same kind of price Clarence Jordan paid for being faithful, but it does cost us in some way. When we choose to live a life grounded in love in the midst of a world grounded in fear, when our faith in Christ is the foundation of our ethics and our choices, there's a price to pay. Maybe being faithful costs us

our jobs, because we refuse to work in places where our integrity is compromised. Maybe being faithful costs us shopping at stores that are convenient and inexpensive for us, because we recognize how dearly these places cost their workers and the environment. Or, maybe being faithful costs us our physical safety as we travel to other parts of the world to stand with others against horrific injustices.

We pay a price for being faithful, but we *always* gain something far greater in return; we grow in Christ's image. The author of Hebrews describes our growth as wholeness. Paul talks about it as endurance, character, hope, and righteousness. However we choose to describe growth, what is certain is that our lives are remarkably transformed by enduring faith.

In closing, I want you to know that I don't believe that God wants us to be persecuted, anymore than God wants us to inflict that kind of pain on others. But, suffering is a consequence of being faithful to God. As Clarence Jordan so poignantly put it, "What we are about is not success, but faithfulness."

Go in peace, and be bold. Know that enduring faith empowers us to grow in Christ's image.  
And, as we grow, we serve to make this world a kinder more thoughtful place.