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“A GREAT CONFLICT FULL OF SUFFERING”:  
SUFFERING IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS IN LIGHT OF  
FEMINIST CONCERNS

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*Introduction*

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to a community of people who faced an increasing amount of persecution and who were in danger of turning away from their Christian faith. Hebrews 10:32 states that they had endured a “great conflict full of suffering,”<sup>1</sup> which involved public humiliation, persecution, imprisonment, and confiscation of their property. The epistle encourages its readers to persevere in their faith so that they will not “grow weary and lose heart” (12:3). To this end, the author focuses a great deal on the issue of suffering. The author provides examples of perseverance amidst suffering from the readers’ own history (10:32–34) and that of Old Testament figures (11:35–40). More significantly, the author draws attention to the faithfulness of Christ in the face of suffering. Christ was perfected “through suffering” (*dia pathēmatōn*, 2:10) and learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8). Further, the author encourages his<sup>2</sup> audience to view their hardship as discipline from the Father—a sign of their status as true children of God (12:5–11).

When Scripture presents pain and suffering in this light, there is a risk that suffering itself will be glorified rather than the God

1. All Scripture passages taken from the TNIV translation.
2. While the author of Hebrews remains anonymous, the masculine participle in Heb 11:32 (*diegoumenon*) indicates that the author was male.

who transforms it. Suffering can be seen as something to seek out or inflict. Or, one may be encouraged to suffer needlessly and remain in contexts of abuse. Furthermore, such texts could be, and have been, twisted for oppressive purposes to display dominance or to enforce submission. The danger of a glorification or misinterpretation of suffering has been rightfully exposed through various forms of liberation theology. One form, feminist theology, has presented strong criticism of how Christianity has traditionally viewed suffering.<sup>3</sup>

This article will approach the theme of suffering in Hebrews with the concerns and insights of feminist theology. The purpose is to avoid dangerous misapplications of the text that might be oppressive to women or sanction abuse. At certain points, aspects of feminist theology will be tested, such as a rejection of the atonement. However, the major concerns of feminist criticism will be taken up and used to scrutinize an interpretation of suffering in Hebrews.

#### *A Feminist Critique of Suffering in Scripture*

Feminist biblical criticism provides a significant challenge to how suffering should be understood in Scripture. Feminist hermeneutics are diverse in both scope and method but are commonly rooted in a suspicion that the text is not “neutral” and the interpreter is not “objective.”<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the text was written in a male-dominated culture and has been interpreted predominantly by men. Many feminists have confronted how the Bible presents suffering as well as how such teaching has been interpreted and applied. Put simply, the question raised is whether the Bible presents suffering in a way that legitimizes or potentially encourages the abuse and/or oppression of women.

In an essay entitled “For God So Loved the World?” Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker write a harsh condemnation

3. For an excellent presentation and critique of feminist theologies of suffering, see Bauman-Martin, “Feminist Theologies of Suffering” 64–65; Also, Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam’s Child*, 97–130.

4. Schneiders, “Feminist Hermeneutics,” 350.

of the portrayal of suffering in Christianity. They argue that Christianity “has been a primary—in many women’s lives *the* primary—force in shaping our acceptance of abuse.”<sup>5</sup> It has been a significant motivating factor for the victimization and oppression of women throughout the world.

Brown and Parker challenge many tenets of the Christian faith, but focus a great deal of attention on the atonement. That Jesus suffered and died for others to bring about salvation models behavior that Christians seek to follow. Christianity’s central image of Christ on the cross as savior “communicates the message that suffering is redemptive” and this message is further complicated “by the theology that says Christ suffered in obedience to his Father’s will.”<sup>6</sup> After an evaluation of six major theories, Brown and Parker conclude that any concept of the atonement must be done away with.<sup>7</sup>

Another feminist theologian, Brita Gill-Austern, warns of the damage that any glorification of suffering can cause. Like Brown and Parker, Gill-Austern writes that feminist theology “rejects the interpretation that Jesus’ death was ordained by God and required as payment of sin.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the glorification of suffering “can result in theological masochism” and an “image of God as a violent, angry, sadistic father.”<sup>9</sup> She writes that the image of the suffering servant has reinforced, for some, the belief that suffering is good.<sup>10</sup>

5. Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved,” 2.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 26. They write: “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominate image or theology of the culture is of “divine child abuse”—God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the atonement, this idea that a blood sin [is] upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. This bloodthirsty God is the God of the patriarchy who at the moment controls the whole Judeo-Christian tradition.”

8. Gill-Austern, “Love Understood,” 308.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

Julie Hopkins voices similar concerns over the Christian concept of the atonement. "It is morally abhorrent to claim that God the Father demanded the self-sacrifice of his only Son to balance the scales of justice."<sup>11</sup> Hopkins acknowledges that those who suffer may find great comfort in identifying with Christ's suffering, but warns of the tendency to place blame on the victim.<sup>12</sup> Along with many other feminist theologians, Hopkins understands the crucifixion as an act of evil upon Jesus that in itself has no redeeming quality. Unique to her writing is a strong emphasis that God was present at the crucifixion and is "actively sharing with the victim in a solidarity of suffering and grief."<sup>13</sup>

Rosemary Ruether describes how Christians have responded to suffering as two-fold.<sup>14</sup> First, Christians regard themselves as ultimately guilty for their suffering since humankind, the female sex specifically, introduced sin into the world. Second, "we become Christ-like by enduring suffering like Christ, who, though innocent, suffered for our sins."<sup>15</sup> Both of these responses to suffering are detrimental to women.<sup>16</sup> Her response is to take the focus off of Christ's suffering and place it on his life and teaching. Jesus did not come to suffer and die, but rather to promote liberation and abundance of life.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Ruether argues that divine goodness and divine omnipotence cannot be reconciled as the theology of atonement attempts. "If God wills Jesus' death, if God wills the unjust violence of poverty, sexism, racism and anti-Semitism, then God is a sadist and a criminal."<sup>18</sup>

11. Hopkins, *Feminist Christology*, 50.

12. *Ibid.*, 54.

13. *Ibid.*, 56.

14. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption*, 98.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 100. She writes: "This double bind of deserved suffering for guilt and the promise of becoming a Christlike agent of redemption for one's victimizers through innocent suffering has been such a powerful message that Christian women have found it very difficult to challenge."

17. *Ibid.*, 104-5.

18. *Ibid.*, 106.

Such criticism does not represent all feminist theologians but it does demonstrate feminist theology's strongest attack on suffering in Scripture. A few major issues present themselves and need to be addressed. First, there is a concern that the doctrine of the atonement communicates that suffering is redemptive. It is argued that suffering is never redemptive and that such an understanding leads to actions that accept and encourage abuse. Second, the biblical concept of the necessity of Christ's suffering leads to an understanding that the disciples too must suffer if they are to follow his example. This can lead to a believer looking for or remaining in unjust suffering needlessly in order to be "Christ-like." Third, the concept of the Father sending his Son to suffer and die can be interpreted as a portrayal of divine child abuse with justification for earthly parents to follow suit.

*Suffering in Hebrews in Light of Feminist Concerns*

Hebrews finds itself at the center of this critique from feminist interpretation. The epistle focuses numerous chapters on the concept and imagery of Christ on the cross as sacrificial atonement. Hebrews presents Jesus as the one "who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, [to] cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death" (9:14). Also, the epistle repeatedly presents Jesus as a model for Christians to follow, especially in relation to how they respond to suffering and persecution (2:9; 4:15; 12:2). Finally, the critique of attributing divine child abuse to God is complicated by the section connecting suffering to divine discipline (12:5–11). Mary Rose D'Angelo writes of this section, "Unchallenged, it collaborates with the images of a father who 'perfects' his son 'by suffering' (2:10) and a 'son [who] learns obedience through what he suffered' (5:8)."<sup>19</sup>

19. D'Angelo, "Hebrews," 457.

*Concern 1: No Suffering Should Be Understood as Redemptive*

Mary VandenBerg responds to the feminist criticism of the atonement by arguing that redemptive suffering is unique to Christ and that human suffering should not be understood in those terms.<sup>20</sup> She correctly sees the danger of rejecting the doctrine of the atonement and provides a strong, feminist criticism of suffering in Scripture by emphasizing the unique nature of Christ's redemptive suffering. An important point that VandenBerg articulates at the end of her article is that to "glorify suffering is to misunderstand the overall mission of Christ on the cross."<sup>21</sup> She notes that Scripture repeatedly points toward the hope of no longer suffering.

Does the author of Hebrews present the suffering of Jesus and of believers along these same lines? While VandenBerg looks only briefly at Hebrews,<sup>22</sup> her conclusions help us to understand suffering in the epistle. Jesus' suffering is understood in terms of its redemptive nature and this is unique to him alone. A major way in which the author of Hebrews presents the suffering of Christ is by its *vocational* purpose.<sup>23</sup> Suffering prepared Jesus to be a sympathetic high priest and to identify with human weakness and temptation (2:17–18; 4:15). Furthermore, Christ's suffering is connected to what it accomplishes: bringing God's children to glory (2:10), becoming the source of eternal salvation (5:9), and making people holy (13:12). This is unique to the suffering of Jesus and highlights its *redemptive* purpose. Christ's suffering is distinguished from that of believers' in that it accomplished something completely unique.<sup>24</sup>

The author of Hebrews has no reservation about discussing Christ's suffering in redemptive terms. In fact, Jesus' suffering

20. VandenBerg, "Redemptive Suffering."

21. *Ibid.*, 409.

22. One paragraph uses Heb 9:12 and 15 to demonstrate the epistle's understanding of Christ's suffering as redemptive (*ibid.*, 403).

23. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering*, 58–68.

24. Kittredge further points out that what Jesus suffers in Hebrews is not parallel to what the believers suffer: "Although, Jesus' endurance is the model for Christians' endurance, what Jesus endures is not parallel to what Christians endure." (Kittredge, "Hebrews," 448).

and death is primarily understood in the epistle to have a redemptive purpose, Christ achieving for others the salvation that they could not achieve for themselves.<sup>25</sup> Jesus suffered death “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9). He was made like his brothers and sisters in every way so that “he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17). He is the “source of salvation” (5:9) and “eternal redemption” (9:12). Believers are made holy through the sacrifice of his body (10:10), which opened up a “new and living way” (10:20). All of this was accomplished through Jesus’ suffering and death. In 9:15 the author writes: “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” It is obvious in Hebrews that Christ’s suffering was redemptive. To deny this is to strip the epistle of a major theme.

Nowhere in Hebrews is there a hint that the author believes that the suffering or death of the believer can accomplish what the death of Jesus did. Jesus’ death is not portrayed as that of a martyr or as something to be replicated, but rather as a sacrificial offering.<sup>27</sup> Christ’s sacrifice occurred “once and for all” (9:26) and that one-time sacrifice “took away the sin of many” (9:28). “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (10:14). Furthermore, there is no need for any more sacrifice after that of Jesus: “Sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (10:18).

When the author of Hebrews discusses the suffering of believers, there is no sense that it is redemptive.<sup>28</sup> Hebrews

25. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 175.

27. Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews*, 10.

28. One could possibly argue for this in 10:36. After he lists the specific sufferings in his audience’s past, the author exhorts them to endure in their present suffering so that they will “receive what he [God] has promised.” It should be clarified that receiving God’s promise is not a result of suffering but of perseverance—which is tied to doing God’s will in this passage. However, suffering may come as a result of perseverance. As F. F. Bruce writes, “Their [the believers’] Master came expressly to do the will of God, as they have been

12:5–11 encourages the audience to understand their suffering as divine discipline and training from the Father. The suffering is a sign that they belong to the Father. Nowhere does the author connect their suffering to their own salvation or perfection. Rather, he points to their need to endure suffering and the benefit of that endurance.<sup>29</sup>

Commenting on the function of suffering in Jesus' experience compared to that of the believers, David Peterson warns that "we cannot draw the parallels too closely."<sup>30</sup> Another way in which Jesus' suffering is unique in the epistle is that the author understands Jesus' suffering as part of his process toward perfection. Hebrews 2:10 states that Jesus was made perfect "through suffering" (*dia pathēmatōn*). Also, the epistle states that Jesus experienced temptation in suffering so that he could sympathize with those to whom he ministers as high priest (2:18; 4:15). The perfection of believers is not presented in the epistle as the same process that Jesus passed through. Peterson writes, "Although the perfecting of Christ is a process, necessitating his learning obedience through suffering, his death and exaltation, a simple parallel cannot be argued with respect to the perfecting of believers." Rather, believers are perfected by the "very actions and accomplishments that perfect Christ, not by any actions of their own. Believers are perfected by the perfecting of Christ."<sup>31</sup>

However, this is not to say that the epistle argues that there is no meaning or significance in the believers' suffering. While suffering is seen as an obstacle within the race imagery of the epistle (12:1–3), it is also presented as an opportunity for growth or training (*paideia*, 12:5–11). In her wonderful analysis and critique of feminist interpretations of 1 Peter, Betsy Bauman-Martin points out that much feminist overemphasis on liberation and avoidance of suffering simply does not match reality. She writes, "Sometimes there is no realistic hope of the complete

told already (10:7, 9f.), although the doing of that will involved suffering and death for him; his servants can expect no easier path as they in their turn do the will of God and await the promised bliss" (Bruce, *Hebrews*, 272).

29. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 176.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 175.

liberation from oppression, and a woman can only create meaning in the context of suffering.”<sup>32</sup> That is the context we find addressed in Hebrews. The community is facing increasing persecution for their faith and the author is encouraging them to persevere in the midst of conflict. While liberation is the eschatological hope, the believers are encouraged to create meaning in their suffering and see the good that can come out of times of trial.

*Concern 2: Jesus as Model of Suffering Encourages Believers to Seek Suffering*

A second major concern from feminist theologians is that the necessity of Christ’s suffering communicates to believers that they too must seek and/or remain in suffering. Brown and Parker write that Christianity commends suffering to the disciple. “The Christian is to ‘be like Jesus’—and imitation of Christ is first and foremost obedient willingness to endure pain.”<sup>33</sup> Imitation of Jesus Christ is a repeated theme in the epistle to the Hebrews, especially in relation to how one should respond to suffering. Jesus is presented as the “pioneer” (*archēgos*, 2:10; 12:2) designating his position as leader and trailblazer.<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 12:2 encourages believers to fix their eyes on Jesus as they run the race marked out for them. The following verse encourages believers to consider the endurance of Jesus in the face of opposition so they might not grow weary and lose heart. Also, 13:13 exhorts the believer to follow Jesus outside of the camp—the place of his crucifixion and shame.

Feminist theologians are correct to argue against any interpretation of the image of Jesus as a model for believers in suffering that encourages one to seek or remain in abuse. Such

32. Bauman-Martin, “Feminist Theologies of Suffering,” 77.

33. Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved,” 24.

34. ἀρχηγός is a word rich in nuance and any translation can capture only some of its aspects. The most common uses, however, can be translated “leader” and “founder.” The translation “pioneer” plays on both of these aspects (Koester, *Hebrews*, 228; see also Johnson, *Hebrews*, 96).

interpretations certainly do exist and have influenced pastoral care to those, especially women, who are in the midst of needless suffering. In response to dangerous misinterpretations of this theme, feminist scholars emphasize Jesus' suffering and death as an "unjust act, done by humans who chose to reject his way of life and sought to silence him through death."<sup>35</sup> Jesus' choice to live in obedience and faithfulness is the reason he should be followed, not that he experienced suffering.

Tracing the theme of suffering in Hebrews, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner argues that the point of the epistle's exhortation is not that one should remain in suffering but that one should resist evil.<sup>36</sup> She looks to the example of Moses in 11:26–27 to make this point: "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible." The author of Hebrews presents Moses as an example of one who did not seek suffering but experienced suffering because he chose to reject evil. "He did not acquiesce to evil . . . He chose defiance over deference to the king, proactivity in leaving Egypt over passivity in remaining."<sup>37</sup> When one chooses to resist evil, as Moses did, there will be suffering. Stevenson-Moessner stresses that the message to women in abuse is not to remain in that abuse. "The call is to resist evil, even though resistance, in some cases, may cost our life."<sup>38</sup>

The author of Hebrews never presents Jesus as a model of choosing suffering but rather of living a life of obedience. Such obedience goes against the tide of a sinful, fallen world. Jesus' life showed that living in faithful obedience will result in opposition from the outside world. Jesus modeled for the believer how to continue in that obedience even in the face of suffering. This is how he is understood as the "pioneer" of faith—he leads the way. Using athletic race imagery, the author encourages

35. Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved," 27.

36. Stevenson-Moessner, "Road to Perfection."

37. *Ibid.*, 288.

38. *Ibid.*, 289.

believers to throw off all sin and fix their eyes on Jesus. He ran this race, endured through suffering, remained faithful to God, and finished strong.

Believers can look to Jesus as a model of endurance in suffering because he experienced the same type of suffering they do and remained faithful to the Father. Jesus and believers are understood as having similar experiences of suffering but to different degrees of severity. William Lane writes that there is both a “qualitative and a quantitative difference between the sufferings endured by Jesus and those experienced by the Christians addressed.”<sup>39</sup> In many ways, the author connects the suffering experienced by believers to that of Jesus to present Christ as a model of endurance. Christ’s suffering is often revealed as more severe than the believers’ as a further reason to look to him as an exemplar in the face of suffering.

One major point of connection is that the suffering of both Jesus and believers involved shame and ridicule. The author remarks that the Christian community had been “publicly exposed to insult and persecution” (10:33). Such experiences were examples of a hostile society attempting to shame Christians back into conformity.<sup>40</sup> Jesus Christ is also presented as experiencing shame and disgrace as a part of his suffering. This is made clear in chapter 13, which states that Jesus suffered “outside the city gate” (v. 12), and believers are encouraged to bear the disgrace Jesus bore (v. 13). The shame of Christ is connected to his crucifixion. This was made clear previously in 12:2, which states that Jesus “endured the cross, scorning its shame.” However, the shame that believers are called to share is not the shame of crucifixion but that of association with Jesus.<sup>41</sup>

A similar dynamic is present in regards to the physical suffering faced by both Jesus and the Christian community. Jesus is understood as having endured a far greater amount of physical suffering, which is used by the author to encourage his audience to endure. That the believers endured physically is not stated

39. Lane, *Hebrews*, 429.

40. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 359.

41. Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 718.

directly in 10:32–35. However, *thlipsis* in verse 33 may signify physical persecution such as being whipped or beaten with rods.<sup>42</sup> That Jesus suffered physically is made clear at several places in the epistle by focusing on the greatest of his sufferings—his sacrificial death on the cross. Hebrews 2:9 tells us that Jesus “suffered death.” His sacrificial death is emphasized in the discussion of his priesthood in chapters 7–10 (7:27; 9:12, 15, 26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14). That Jesus suffered physically to a greater extent than the Christian community is made clear in 12:4: “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

*Concern 3: Jesus Sent to Suffer Equals Divine Abuse*

Another critique by feminist theologians is that the doctrine of the atonement presents God the Father demanding his only Son to suffer death in obedience to the Father’s will. Brown abbreviates her chapter with Parker to form an article for *Daughters of Sarah* with the provocative title “Divine Child Abuse?” The title draws attention to the concern that the atonement justifies victimization and abuse. Brown writes: “And when parents image God as righteously demanding the total obedience of his son, even obedience to death, what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse?”<sup>43</sup>

Before moving into the text of Hebrews, it is important to challenge Brown’s provocative title. The charge that any doctrine of atonement conveys a sort of cosmic child abuse disrupts the unity of the Trinity and infringes upon Jesus’ humanity. In a response to “Divine Child Abuse?” Margo Houts points out that Brown’s critique of the atonement severs Jesus from the Godhead so that he is made an object of divine action against him.<sup>44</sup> Brown’s critique seems to strip Jesus of his divinity and the unity in the Trinity. I. Howard Marshall writes:

There is an indissoluble unity between Father, Son, and Spirit in the work of redemption. The recognition that it is God the Son, that is to

42. Koester, *Hebrews*, 459.

43. Brown, “Divine Child Abuse,” 26.

44. Houts, “Atonement and Abuse,” 29–32.

say quite simply God, who suffers and dies on the cross, settles the questions finally. This is God himself bearing the consequences of sin, not the abuse of some cosmic child.<sup>45</sup>

In another response, Reta Halteman Finger comments that Brown violates Jesus' humanity as well.<sup>46</sup> She writes:

At his death Jesus was not a child without power and without choice. He was an adult who made choices and understood their implications. As we see in Gethsemane, Jesus had no more desire to suffer simply for the sake of suffering than any of the rest of us. Suffering was simply the result of a life spent challenging the powers of evil.<sup>47</sup>

Brown's title highlights the fact that some theories of the atonement present God as an oppressive father, but, as Halteman comments, "the term does not critique anything remotely biblical."<sup>48</sup>

Does Hebrews present a view of suffering that sanctions abuse? The author repeatedly speaks of Jesus as a faithful son whose obedience leads to suffering (3:2, 6; 5:8). This image is further complicated by 12:5–11, which connects suffering to divine discipline.<sup>49</sup> "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children" (12:7a). Furthermore, godly discipline is closely related to that of earthly parental discipline: "For what children are not disciplined by their father?" (12:7b). D'Angelo calls Heb 12:4–11 an abusive connection of punishment and love. She writes, "Hebrews' counsel puts a divine sanction behind the abuse of women and abusive child rearing."<sup>50</sup> Philip Greven refers to 12:5–11 as "the key text in the New Testament

45. Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 56.

46. Finger, "Liberation or Abuse?"

47. *Ibid.*, 38.

48. *Ibid.*, 37–38.

49. Although, as Kittredge ("Hebrews," 448) makes clear, 12:4–11 does not have Jesus in mind as the subject. While the child/parent metaphor is used in both places, the author does so for different rhetorical purposes.

50. D'Angelo, "Hebrews," 457.

cited in favor of harsh physical discipline of children”<sup>51</sup> and justification for corporal punishment.<sup>52</sup>

While this passage in Hebrews can be grossly misinterpreted to support victimization and sanction abuse, such an interpretation does not seem to be warranted by the text. Clayton Croy writes: “It would clearly go against the implicit message of the text to suggest that the author condones the ongoing oppression of the readers, or of modern Christians, by calling them to endure.”<sup>53</sup> With the imagery of the race (10:32; 12:1–13), the author views suffering as an obstacle to be overcome. The readers are called to “strengthen your [plural] feeble arms and weak knees . . . so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (12:12–13).

It is important to note here another significant theme in the epistle: the author repeatedly calls his listeners to be community-focused. Here in 12:13 it becomes clear that they are to strengthen their feeble arms and weak knees (12:2) so that *others* may not be disabled but healed! This theme is present throughout the text. In 3:13, the author exhorts the readers to “encourage one another daily” so that “none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Hebrews 4:1 encourages them to enter God’s rest by saying, “be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.” Further, in 10:24 the community is called to “spur one another on.” The context of this passage on divine discipline is concern for the community and their progress as a whole. Construing 12:4–11 to sanction abuse is exactly the opposite of this community concern, which is found throughout the epistle and this passage.

Endurance is not a call to passiveness, as some theologians have claimed. Marie Fortune writes:

Personal violence presents a victim with two options: endurance and acceptance of continued suffering, or an occasion for transformation. Endurance means remaining a victim; transformation means becoming a survivor. In order to become a survivor and transform one’s

51. Greven, *Spare the Child*, 52.

52. *Ibid.*, 53.

53. Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 221–22.

suffering, persons must use their strength and all available resources within themselves and from others to move away from a situation in which violence continues unabated.<sup>54</sup>

The endurance that Fortune describes does not correlate with how Hebrews understands it. In Hebrews, endurance is an active movement toward God no matter the cost. Further, a major theme of the epistle is the exhortation to continually move toward God. The epistle reinforces this exhortation in a variety of ways with the goal of approaching God and completing the race of faith.<sup>55</sup> The call by the author to endure suffering is closer to Fortune's option of transformation than "remaining a victim."

### *Conclusion*

The question remains as to whether Hebrews glorifies suffering. Brown and Parker declare that "the glorification of anyone's suffering allows the glorification of all suffering."<sup>56</sup> Our examination of Hebrews has presented suffering as a significant theme for its theology and context. However, the author is writing a pastoral "word of exhortation" (13:22) and not a theology. Therefore, the epistle should be understood first and foremost as an encouragement to its listeners and not as a theodicy. The emphasis on Jesus' suffering should be understood in a way that would encourage the readers. The author's goal was to show that

54. Fortune, "Transformation of Suffering," 145.

55. This theme of constant movement forward is reinforced throughout the epistle: "make every effort to enter [God's] rest" (4:11), "approach God's throne" (4:16), "move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity" (6:1), "enter the Most Holy Place" (10:19), "draw near to God" (10:22), "spur one another toward love and good deeds" (10:24), "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (12:1). Westfall (*Discourse Analysis*, 136) develops this theme more clearly by drawing attention to the repeated hortatory subjunctives for believers to *hold on*, *draw near*, and *move forward* in the thematic peaks of 4:11–16 and 10:19–25. She identifies a theme of "movement-toward-the-goal," which is "repeated in hortatory subjunctive exhortations throughout the discourse."

56. Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved," 23.

suffering is part of the human life and is not a sign that God has abandoned the readers. Furthermore, since the gospel goes against the values of the society in which they live, they should expect to suffer as a result of their relationship with Christ and their obedience to God.

The death of Christ is an important theme in the epistle, but to understand the author's words as a glorification of suffering is to misconstrue them. The epistle never presents Jesus as encouraging suffering or eagerly seeking it out. Rather, he is portrayed as offering up "prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (5:7). VandenBerg writes, "Christ did not come to glorify suffering but to overcome suffering, sin, death and the power of evil through his suffering."<sup>57</sup> The epistle declares that Jesus "shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (2:14–15).

Jesus' death and resurrection give believers hope for the suffering in their lives. "Jesus' crucifixion does not sanctify suffering . . . It is not a model of how suffering should be borne but a witness to God's desire that no one should have to suffer such violence again."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Hebrews presents Christ's priesthood as having a present reality in our lives. "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (7:24–25). "It is not a matter of enduring suffering and sacrifice now because we are promised that things will get better in the future, but precisely the truth that things are better now because Christ has risen, and Christ's ongoing transformation of the world calls us to active participation."<sup>59</sup>

Jesus' suffering and death also give us great hope in our own suffering. Since he suffered and was tempted just like us (2:18) and yet endured, we find hope that we too can endure. Since God

57. VandenBerg, "Redemptive Suffering," 409.

58. Fortune, "Transformation of Suffering," 145.

59. Gilliss, "Resurrecting the Atonement," 133–34.

used the suffering in his life to grow and develop him (5:8), we know that God can do the same for us (12:5–11). That God can take evil and use it for good purposes does not glorify evil, but glorifies God. Hebrews points to the reality of suffering in our lives and affirms that God uses such things for good purposes.

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