

Mar 8, 2026 – Leader’s Guide

Hebrews 12:1-13 - “Formed as Citizens of the Kingdom”

The preacher to the Hebrews describes life as a race using the Greek word “agon,” from which we get the word agony. Life, he suggests, is an agonizing journey through a broken world. Yet he invites us to see these agonies through a governing metaphor drawn from the ancient Greek gymnasium. In that world the gymnasium was not merely a place for exercise but a place where citizens were formed through resistance, discipline, and instruction.

In the same way, the preacher suggests that the agonizing realities of life can become God’s training ground, where he forms us as citizens of a new city, his coming kingdom, enabling us to live the life of that future now.

In this study we’ll explore how the scriptures 1) invite us to live within the mystery of suffering, 2) that God forms us in the agonies of life to lay aside sin and every weight, and 3) we can endure as we fill our vision with Jesus and hear the cheers of those who’ve gone before.

Read Hebrews 12:1-13

1. The preacher describes life as a race that requires endurance. What do you notice about how this race is described, and why do you think endurance is emphasized?

The preacher describes life using the language of athletic struggle—the Greek word agon, suggesting an agonizing contest or struggle. Life in a broken world inevitably involves hardship, suffering, and struggle.

The point of the passage is not how to avoid hardship, but how to endure it faithfully while holding onto Jesus.

Read Genesis 50:20

2. The sermon pointed to the story of Joseph as an example of living in the tension of a mystery. Holding onto both human responsibility and God’s sovereignty without compromising either, without pitting one against the other. Why is it important that we hold both together when thinking about suffering?

Joseph’s words—“You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good”—capture a central biblical tension.

Scripture refuses two simplistic conclusions:

Error 1: Everything that happens is directly caused by God.

Error 2: Suffering has no meaning or purpose at all.

Instead we are invited to live within the mystery that human beings are responsible for evil while God can work even through broken situations for good.

This allows Christians both to fight what is wrong and trust God to form us through it.

3. The word “discipline” appears repeatedly in this passage. What do you think the author means by this word?

The Greek word paideia refers to formation or training, similar to how children were educated and formed into citizen in the gymnasium. From this word we get our word pediatrician, someone who cares for children in order to may them healthy and whole.

By using this word the preacher is saying that God uses the realities of life—including suffering—to form his people into citizens of his coming kingdom - to make us healthy and whole..

This formation is not punishment but loving training intended to produce righteousness and peace (vs. 11)

4. Hebrews calls us to “lay aside every sin.” How can the agonies of life sometimes reveal sinful patterns in our lives or in the world around us?

Suffering often exposes the brokenness of our world and of our own hearts.

The sermon highlighted how life’s struggles can reveal:

*patterns in families
broken systems in society / work
personal patterns of sin*

In those moments we face a decision: continue in those patterns or lay aside sin and turn toward God’s design for life.

The quote from proverbs helps here. Proverbs is wisdom literature rooted in the core conviction that God has knit a pattern, a fabric into every aspect of life that we ignore to our peril. When we live in step with the pattern lives tend to flourish, when we do not we crash against the rocks of reality. God can use those “crashes” as course correction, inviting us to live in step with the pattern.

5. The passage also calls us to “lay aside every weight.” What might be the difference between a sin and a weight in the Christian life? Have the agonies of life exposed in you any weights? How might the Spirit be inviting you to lay it aside?

Athletes in the ancient gymnasium trained naked, so that nothing would hinder their movement.

A weight is not necessarily sinful. It is often a good thing that has become ultimate— something we rely on for identity, security, or worth instead of God - that in the end will fail us - in the end will hinder us from running the race.

The agonies of life often reveal these weights so they can be laid aside. In the sermon Tim referenced Tim Keller's diagnostic tests that reveal these "ultimate things":

There's the test of anger – we'll get angry if someone or something gets in the way of a good thing we're pursuing – but if we've made it ultimate - inordinate rage.

The test of fear – if something good in life is being threatened, we'll be rightly worried – but if we've made it ultimate – paralyzed with fear.

The test of grief – if we lose something good in life it'll take time to grieve – if we've made it ultimate – we may very well consider ending it all...

The test of criticism – if you're criticized for something good in life it'll take time to let go of the hurt – if we've made it ultimate - those words will likely plague you for a lifetime...

These reactions can expose the places where we have rooted our identity in something other than God. Help your group reflect on this personally - what has come to the surface through these tests? Through the agonies of life? How might we lay them down?

6. The preacher calls believers to "look to Jesus." Why do you think fixing our vision on Jesus is essential when we are in the middle of suffering?

Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before him." We are the joy that was set before him, the joy of drawing us into new life, new relationship, a new future.

In suffering we look to Jesus because:

he understands suffering

he endured it faithfully

he reveals the love of God even in agony

Looking to Jesus gives us perspective and hope in the midst of hardship.

7. The passage says we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses." What encouragement might that bring when life feels overwhelming?

These witnesses refer to the faithful people described in Hebrews 11.

They are not pointing to themselves but to God's faithfulness in their lives.

Their witness says: "Look at my life and see that God is good, trustworthy, and faithful."

8. Looking at the passage as a whole, where might God currently be inviting you to:

- endure in the race
- lay aside sin
- lay aside a weight
- fix your eyes on Jesus?

The preacher concludes by reminding believers that discipline is painful in the moment but produces the fruit of righteousness and peace.

The central encouragement of the sermon was this:

God is not absent in the agonies of life.

He is present within them, forming his people into citizens of his kingdom who live the life of that future now.

Encourage your group to identify where they sense God inviting growth or trust in their present circumstances.