

Hebrews 12

This chapter starts with another ‘therefore’, and this seems to be the beginning of the writer’s summing up of all that he has written so far. Yes, he is referring back to the great ‘cloud’ of witnesses in the previous chapter, but he introduced them as examples of ‘the faith that doesn’t shrink back’ from **chapter 10**. In turn, each chapter has been following on and enlarging on the one before it, building an amazing picture of what God has done for us in Christ and framing it in the context of the Old Testament scriptures.

He has compared and contrasted the ineffectiveness of the Law with the reality of the ‘more excellent ministry’ of the Lord Jesus Christ and has shown how the Tabernacle revealed to Moses was a ‘shadow’ of the actual real Presence of God in the heavens. He has shown us that we have freedom of direct access to God himself and that the new covenant in the blood of Jesus means that, instead of having endless written rules and laws which we would need to follow in order to please God, we now have his laws being written into our hearts.

Paul’s favourite phrase to describe Christian believers is ‘in Christ’ and, although this phrase is not used even once in the whole letter,¹ the anonymous writer has given us an enormous catalogue of many aspects of our inheritance in him. ‘Therefore’, he says in **12:1**, it is time to put it into practice . . .

12:1-2 The Race Ahead. We are like runners in a race, but this is not a 100-metre sprint, this is a long haul, so we need to get rid of the things that might prevent us from ‘running with endurance’. The first is a bulky ‘weight’ or ‘encumbrance’, something that we would have to carry as we run and would slow us down. The second is ‘sin which so easily entangles us’. The word translated ‘entangles’ means ‘stands well around’, and I get the picture of a runner surrounded by the spectators but also with his feet surrounded by lots of things standing around them which

¹ For me, this seems to underline that Paul did NOT write Hebrews!

he could so easily trip over. We'll get rid of them, as well as leaving the bulky weight behind, and get on with the race!

Jesus did the same! There were lots of things that could have slowed him down, and he was certainly not immune from temptation, so there were plenty of tripwires waiting for him. But he looked forward to 'the joy set before him' and endured right through the horror and shame of crucifixion (amazingly, despising the shame!) and is now at the right hand of the Father. Does this give us a fresh light on his prayer in Gethsemane?

12:3-11 Endurance and Discipline. '*Consider him who has endured . . .*' Just for a moment, consider the 'wearing down' effect of the constant hostility that the Lord Jesus faced. How easy it would have been for him to get weary, give in and 'faint in his soul' (the literal meaning of 'lose heart')! **12:2** has shown us the result of Jesus' endurance. Our endurance also brings results!

12:4 The readers' resistance had not yet reached the level of bloodshed. That remains true for most of us today, but we know there have been many down the centuries who have faced it.

12:5-6 Straight out of **Proverbs 3:11-12** (Greek version, the Septuagint), followed by the direct application in **12:7-11** . . .

'It is for discipline that you endure'. The two are closely linked. The purpose of endurance is discipline, and the purpose of discipline is maturity. If we are going through a tough time (as it seems the readers of this letter were), it will help us to realise that this is a normal part of spiritual 'growing up'. Our Father is dealing with us as a human father deals with his son and heir, whom he wants to see grow up into a mature man. If we are missing out on discipline, are we really a legitimate part of the family? Perhaps a little reassurance when we feel that we are 'going through it'!

Human fathers train their children with the best intentions to see them mature properly. Our Father (the 'Father of spirits' as compared to the 'fathers of our flesh' in **12:9**) trains us with a view to sharing his holiness. Wow! Compare **2 Peter 1:2-11**, where Peter explores the same process from a different angle.

No discipline feels like much fun at the time, but the results are rich and peaceful (**12:11**).

12:12-17 Taking Positive Action. Endurance and discipline are things that happen to us; now he focuses on actions that we can take ourselves, still in the same direction – towards maturity.

12:12 Another ‘therefore’! Because of all that we have seen about endurance, discipline and maturity. . .

1) Make your weak hands straight. This is the same word used for a woman who was crippled and bent double and then was cured and stood straight (**Luke 13:13**) and the restoration of the tabernacle (**Acts 15:16**). The same applies to those paralysed knees! (The word translated as ‘weak’ or ‘feeble’ is translated as ‘paralysed’ in every other place where it is used in the New Testament!)

2) Straighten out the way that you follow with your feet. Again the word is used for standing up straight (**Acts 14:10**). The implication is that getting our paths straightened out will result in healing and restoration for us – interesting!

3) Two things to actively chase after! (The word means to chase something so hard that it runs away, or at least tries to!) i) peace with all. ii) being set apart for the Lord. See **Matthew 5:8** and **1 John 3:2**.

4) Make sure no-one misses out on (literally ‘lags behind’) and comes away from the grace of God. That ‘see to it’ has a ‘supervisory’ meaning, keeping a lookout for our brothers and sisters, not just for ourselves. Making sure that we are all up to date with the Lord, with no ‘unfinished business’ clouding our relationship with him. If things are not dealt with properly, bitterness can easily result.¹ Immorality and godlessness as exemplified by Esau, for whom there was no way back after he despised his birthright (and therefore his inheritance in the promises of God).²

12:18-24 Why? What Is So Different? As the old exam papers used to say, ‘Compare and Contrast’ ! The difference between

¹ Solemn warnings about the ‘root of bitterness’ in **Deuteronomy 29:14-21**, especially **v.18**.

² See **Genesis 25:27-34**.

the Old Covenant (= 'Old Testament') and the New Covenant (= 'New Testament'), summarised in graphic imagery . . .

Mount Sinai, enveloped in clouds of smoke, the ground shaking and the ever-increasing volume of a piercing trumpet blast, the LORD thundering back as Moses spoke with him, the people pleading not to have to hear that voice again, terrified of the instant death that struck man or beast which even touched the mountain, even Moses himself full of fear and trembling . . .¹

'Mount Zion' – traditionally the name of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where God's awesome Presence dwelt. Have we been brought there? NO, but to the real thing, the real presence of God, the real 'city of the living God', the heavenly Jerusalem, surrounded by angels in festive gathering, the firstborn 'called-out-ones' whose names are written in the heavens, to God himself, the judge of all, the spirits of 'the righteous made perfect (i.e. complete)', and ultimately to Jesus, the mediator of this new covenant, whose blood pardons us, not accuses like Abel's blood.

Graphic enough for us as Gentiles, but dramatically charged for Jews reading this letter, as all that they have read so far is summarised in these striking images!

12:25-29 The Unshakeable Kingdom. 'Keep listening', he writes, 'God is speaking to you from the heavens, not merely from a terrifying Mount Sinai. Don't turn away!

There will be a final shaking. Man-made things will be removed. Only the unshakeable can possibly survive. There is a promise here from the book of **Haggai**, which speaks of the ultimate glory of the Church and the Kingdom of God.²

We are receiving this kingdom **now**. We can express our thanks to our Father with reverence and awe.

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¹ *Exodus 19:18-21, 20:19, Deuteronomy 9:19.*

² See *Because of My House* from www.justonecandle.uk