

Hebrews, Part 11

The Race of Faith

We are at the practical section of the Epistle to the Hebrews where we see that Christ brings better benefits and duties. Chapter 11 was the faith chapter, chapter 12 is the hope chapter, and Chapter 13 is the love chapter.

The author concluded the basic argument of the epistle with a final admonition and warning which grew directly out of that which preceded it. His discussion of the life of faith leads to another call for perseverance. The readers are warned of the danger of remaining stationary. The writer is urging them to action, to move forward as if they are in a race. One of the greatest dangers in the Christian life is the peril of remaining stationary.

Heb 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

“Therefore” connects the writer’s comments here with what was expressed previously. This “great cloud of witnesses,” a reference to the Old Testament witnesses of faith from the preceding chapter, has testified to the value of maintaining one’s faith. This statement does not infer that they are watching believers today.

Hence believers ought to run with “endurance” (perseverance) the race marked out in their Christian lives, setting aside whatever in their lives is a hindrance along with the sin that so easily “ensnares us,” from the Greek which means “ambushes or encircles”.

Contrary to the position of some, “the sin which so easily ensnares us” is not some personal sin that is different and specific to each individual believer, a personal weakness in which we are often ensnared. Although individual believers do have areas of weakness in their lives that result in sins they find frequently troubling for them individually, that isn’t what the author is referring to. The primary theme of Hebrews has been all about faith and specifically the consequences to the readers should they abandon

their faith in Christ and return to their ancestral religion. The “sin which so easily ensnares us” can be none other than that loss of faith. No other sin is as destructive to the believer than to lose one’s faith in Christ and what He did for us at the Cross and can do for us in our Christian lives.

When a believer is faced with some difficulty, how one responds is often a measure of that person’s faith. Do they respond with faith that God has a plan and will see them through the difficulty, or do they respond with doubt, in effect abandoning their faith? Loss of faith at any level is a sin and one “which so easily ensnares us”. It is the worst sin we can commit because it is tantamount to calling God a liar and saying He cannot do what He says He can do. That’s a serious charge.

We are to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us”. They are a hindrance to our running the race with endurance. What is holding you back? Identify it and get rid of it.

We are to “run with endurance the race that is set before us”. The “race” was not won at salvation. We are to continue “running” – advancing to spiritual maturity. The problem is many Christians don’t do that. They get saved, give wonderful testimonies about that and then just kind of drift along and never advance as believers. They never get involved in the study of the Word, and if they do, it is shallow and no deeper than the doctrine of salvation. The Word of God is essential to the growth of a Christian in his faith. Without that study and growth, the believer remains a babe in Christ. The writer warned his readers of that back in chapter 5, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (Heb 5:13). We are called to go on and consume the “solid food” of maturity to be able to “to discern both good and evil” (Heb 5:14). The advance to spiritual maturity is essential for a fully functional and vibrantly alive spiritual life that is glorifying to God.

Heb 12:2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Hebrew believers who want to revert to the Mosaic system because Messiah has not yet returned to set up His Kingdom have lost faith that the

one they thought was Messiah may not be so. They are encouraged to maintain their faith and stay the course – persevere or endure until He does return because He is the Messiah, and He will return.

Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The word “author” (*archēgon*) was used in 2:10 and suggests that Jesus “pioneered” the path of faith. Christians should follow His example. He is also “finisher” (*teleiotes*) of our faith since He reached its end successfully. The Greek implies completion.

Jesus kept His focus on the “joy set before Him,” the “joy” alluded to in Hebrews 1:9 wherein He obtained an eternal throne.

Heb 1:9 You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.”

The believers’ share in that joy must also be kept in view. After enduring the Cross and despising its shame, Jesus assumed that triumphant position at the right hand of the throne of God, a foreshadowing of His and the believers’ final victory.

The Discipline of God

Heb 12:3 For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

It is natural for a person to overestimate the severity of his trials. The writer did not want his audience to do that. We need only look to God with faith to be sustained.

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

If the Hebrew recipients of this epistle would consider the opposition from sinful men, which Jesus confronted and endured, they would be encouraged.

Heb 12:4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

After all, unlike Him, they had not yet resisted ... sin ... to the point of bloodshed. McGee suggests this “not yet resisted to bloodshed,” may be a reference to the coming persecution by the Roman Empire with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple that had not yet happened, it then being a few years away. Or it could simply mean that while they faced opposition from fellow Jews who have “given up” waiting for His return, it had not sunk to violence.

By “sin” the author probably primarily meant that of “sinful men” who opposed them, but no doubt the author also had in mind the sin of loss of faith, which they had to resist to maintain a steadfast Christian profession.

Heb 12:5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord,
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;

6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens,
And scourges every son whom He receives.”

7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

The readers also seemed to have forgotten the encouragement found in Proverbs 3:11–12 quoted here in Hebrews, which presents divine discipline as evidence of divine love. Thus they should not become discouraged but should endure hardship as discipline and regard it as evidence of sonship.

“Sons” is *huios* and is generally used as the offspring of men. The believer is adopted into the position of sonship by God (Gal 4:5-6; Eph 1:5; Rom 8:14-15). All God’s children are subject to His discipline.

But “if you are without chastening” (v.8) the “if” is in the Greek first class condition, meaning it is true for those without chastening, then “you are illegitimate and not sons”. The clause “of which all have become partakers” is excluding the recipients of this epistle. Verse 8 might be better rendered this way: “But if you are not being chastened, which excludes you because you are being chastened, then you are not a child of God.”

“Chastening” is *paideia* and refers to the whole training and education of children concerning the cultivation of mind and morals and employs for this purpose commands and admonitions, reproof, and punishment. It is not strictly the inflicting of pain for discipline. Although it can involve pain, its purpose is training or correcting, and in this context, it is the training and correcting of believers (sons of God) as part of their Christian experience. Believers who undergo God’s “discipline” are being prepared by this educational process for millennial reward. Any inflicted pain is to get a wayward believer in a condition of disobedience to return to a condition of fellowship with God and continue their advance to spiritual maturity with their spiritual lives fully functional.

It works this way:

1. A child of God is called to be obedient to the leading of God and free of sin. We call this “walking in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16) where we have the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to resist sin. We also call this “in fellowship” with God, meaning we have a personal relationship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit.
2. In the event of sin, that fellowship is broken. Spiritual productivity ceases, and the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit cease except for His ministry of correction to get the wayward believer to confess his sins and return to fellowship. We call this “chastisement”. Notice; It isn’t just sin, as we generally think of it, that can damage our relationship with God. Disobedience to the calling of God will also break fellowship. It is, of course, also a sin. Remember, the sin of Adam was that he ate from that one tree after he was told not to. His sin was simple disobedience.
3. Repentance – the believer “changes his mind” and recognizes his condition. There is no sense of emotional remorse in the word. Although the sinning believer may indeed feel bad/sorry concerning what he has done, that is not part of repentance.

4. He then claims 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "Confess is" homologeo and means to say the same thing as another or to agree with. The sinning believer agrees with God that he has sinned.
5. All sins are then forgiven including "all unrighteousness" those sins we did not know we committed or remember.
6. The believer is immediately returned to a condition of fellowship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. His spiritual life is returned to fully functioning and remains so as long as the believer remains free of sin and obedient to the leading of God.
7. Chastisement ceases, BUT sin often has long-lasting implications the believer may have to deal with later.

Why do Christians suffer? McGee offers seven reasons:

1. Because of our own sins and stupidity. This applies to babes in Christ and even His mature "sons".
2. The second reason we suffer is for taking a stand for truth and righteousness. The evidence of that is becoming more and more apparent in America today.
3. We suffer for sin in our lives. If we refuse to deal with it, God will.
4. We suffer for our past sins. They may have been forgiven because we are believers now or even confessed them if committed after salvation, but sin often has consequences that can come back and bite you years or decades later. An obvious example is having an affair that results in the birth of a child.
5. God's children often suffer for some lofty purpose of God which He does not always reveal to the believer. This is often for the purpose of faith-building.
6. Believers often suffer for their faith. History is full of examples of believers who were slain because of their faith.
7. The last reason is to suffer chastisement spoken of in these passages. If received positively, this discipline has positive results. "It yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11).

Heb 12:9 Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in

subjection to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Drawing on the analogy of the discipline of earthly fathers, the author encouraged a submissive spirit to the discipline of the Father which is life-preserving. “And live” (v. 9) refers to a vitally alive spiritual life that is productive. Chastisement may not be fun and can be downright painful, but it “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Chastisement is designed to take the wayward believer from a condition of non-productivity to a condition where we are “partakers of His holiness” (v. 10), which refers to living a spiritual life that is characterized by righteousness, peace, and fruit production.

Renew Your Spiritual Vitality

Heb 12:12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

Their loss of faith had resulted in a condition of spiritual feebleness. They were “stumbling” along as if lame. In the light of the truths he had expounded, the author encouraged them to renew their strength. That strength comes only from faith in God and in His promises. If they would do this, the weakest among them (the lame) would not be further disabled, but rather healed. Their own strength would benefit weaker Christians.

Heb 12:14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

Peace with all men, as well as personal holiness, must be vigorously sought, since without holiness (*hagiasmos*), no one will see the Lord. Since no sin can stand in God’s presence, Christians must be—and will be—sinless when they see the Lord.

1 John 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

Matt. 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God

I think the idea being expressed here is the corrected believer returned to fellowship can “behold” the essence of God and experience Christ in his own person. I refer to the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” That is the very lifestyle of Christ experienced by the “walking” (by faith) believer (Gal 5:16).

Heb 12:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;

“Looking carefully” is *episkopeo* which means to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after, or care for, but it can also be translated as “beware,” and I think that is how it should be seen here. “Beware lest anyone fall short of the grace of God.” “Fall short” is *hustereo* and means to be left behind in the race and so fail to reach the goal, to be in want of or lack something. It is a warning of failing to confess that sin and to “fall short of” or “miss out” on the grace of God which is afforded to those who are in fellowship.

The warning not to allow “any root of bitterness springing up” and cause trouble is a quote from Deuteronomy.

Deut 29:18 Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit

The “root of bitterness” the author is referring to is what this epistle is all about. It is a warning not to turn away “from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods”. In the context of Hebrews, the “other gods” is the Law.

Don't let this "bitter root" take hold among you and distract you from faith in Christ! It will poison the congregation, and many will "become defiled". By abandoning their faith they will become like a bitter root whose infidelity to God affects others.

Heb 12:16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

One who abandons his faith would be godless (*bebēlos*, "profane, unhallowed, desecrated") like Esau, Jacob's brother, whose loose and profane character led him to sell his inheritance rights as the oldest son for the temporary gratification of a single meal. He warned the readers not to yield to transitory pressures and forfeit their inheritances. If some did, they would ultimately regret the foolish step and might find their inheritance privileges irrevocably lost as were Esau's. This would of course be true of one who ended his Christian experience in a state of apostasy, which the writer had continually warned against. Back under the Law, there is no longer a place for repentance for their sins. "Back" isn't there anymore. The only way for them is to go forward. Only then can they find the "fruits of repentance".

The Glorious Company

Heb 12:18 For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." 21 And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.")

The writer painted a picture of Mount Sinai where the Old Covenant was given. Its awesomeness and fearful nature were vividly described. We need to remember that the people to whom he was writing were Hebrews. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 were saved, and they were all Jews. The early

church remained exclusively Jewish until Paul, Barnabas, and other missionaries began to spread out and take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

These Hebrews who had turned to Christ had been accustomed to the practices relating to the Law. They attended the Temple, made sacrifices, observed feast days, and suddenly they found themselves separated from the Law, shut out of the Temple, and no longer part of that system. Some certainly tried to maintain that relationship to the Law, combining the Law with grace, but that was an unacceptable compromise. The writer is here speaking to these Hebrews who have turned to Christ and reminding them they have come to a mountain that is very different from Mt. Sinai. There 3,000 were slain, but 3,000 were saved on the Day of Pentecost. Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Law was a terrifying experience. There was thunder and lightning, earthquakes, blazing fire, and trumpet blasts. It was so frightening that the people said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Ex 20:19). The writer is saying, “You do not want to go back to that system!”

These Hebrew believers had been accustomed to going to Temple and going through rituals, now there was nothing for them, no ceremony, no sacrifice to bring. The writer now tells them they really do have something.

Heb 12: 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Mount Zion was the site of the Jebusite city captured by David, Jerusalem, and is here equated with a “heavenly Jerusalem” with an “innumerable company of angels”. This city is in Heaven. The Book of the Revelation calls it the “New Jerusalem,” the eternal city of the Living God.

“Firstborn” means primary heir. The term “church of the firstborn” is referring to all those who are born again whose inheritance rights are already won. Their ultimate sanctification is so certain (“spirits made perfect”) that their names are already written in Heaven.

These Hebrew believers should not be looking back to the Law and that frightening Mount Sinai but looking forward to Mount Zion, that Heavenly Jerusalem.

But above all, it is to God, the Judge of all men, that they have come, and to Jesus the Mediator of a New Covenant whose atoning blood does not cry for judgment as did Abel's but secures the acceptance of all New-Covenant believers.

The writer is trying to get these Hebrews to take their eyes off the Temple, off the bloody sacrifices, off the ritual, and focus on Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant. The Temple and all its splendor were passing away and soon to be destroyed. Now, they are under a new economy.

Today some call for Christians to "commit" their lives to Jesus. What kind of life do you live that is worth committing to Jesus? You are dead in your trespasses and sins. You have nothing in your life to offer – BUT – He has a life to offer you, His very own Life in the Fruit of the Spirit.

Others say, "Give your heart to Jesus." Here are the things that come out of man's heart, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:19). God doesn't want your heart. He wants to give YOU a new heart and a new life.

Like the recipients of this epistle, we need to not look back to the law but set our eyes on Christ and what He is offering.

Hear the Heavenly Voice

Heb 12:25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven,

The contrast between the two covenants is now focused as a contrast between a warning given on Earth and one that issues from Heaven itself. Since those who refused the Old Covenant did not escape, how could those of the New Covenant who turn away expect to do so? The "Speaker"

is none other than the Originator of the New Covenant who now sits “at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3).

Heb 12:26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” 27 Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

This divine voice which once shook only the Earth at the giving of the Law will ultimately shake not only the Earth but also the heavens. This reference to Haggai 2:6 was understood by the author as speaking of the ultimate remaking of the heavens and earth which will follow the Millennial Kingdom. What remains after this cataclysmic event will be eternal.

Heb 12:28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

And such is the character of the Kingdom which we are receiving. The words rendered “let us have [or ‘obtain’] grace” are likely a final reference to the resources of grace available from the great High Priest. This is confirmed by the words “by which”. It reminds the readers that this grace is required to “serve” God acceptably within the New Covenant community. Failure to do so should be deterred by the concluding solemn thought that “our God is a consuming fire”. A believer who departs from His magnificent privileges abandons the grace of God available under the New Covenant, and returns to the Old Covenant will invite God’s retribution.