

HEBREWS CHAPTER TWELVE

Years ago, when my children were still young, I began running in the early morning with a few girlfriends in my neighborhood. We got up before the sun – and before our kids - so we could finish before our husbands left for work. Kari motivated our group with a 10K run. We had three months to get ready. So we met every morning under a specific street light, stretched, and pounded the pavement – chatting the entire time.

The four of us entered and finished the race. I think we were all among the last ten runners but we all crossed the finish line! Our families cheered us on from the sidelines holding signs that said “Go Mom!” We were so excited about our accomplishment we decided to keep training to prepare for a half marathon.

Unfortunately a couple of months later I injured my foot. I could hardly walk for a while, much less run. I gave running a half-hearted try after my foot healed, but my race days were over. However, our friend Kelly persevered. She has completed at least two full marathons and still runs.

I allowed a little difficulty to sideline me for good. Thing got hard so I quit. The audience of the book of Hebrews was in danger of the same thing. When the persecution began to heat up they pulled back. At the beginning of chapter 12, the author uses a race metaphor to encourage them to persevere, to keep going in the face of trials. Their prize for running was much greater than a trophy or ribbon. It was Jesus Himself!

Run the Race with Endurance

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

The author’s audience needed encouragement to stand firm in the face of persecution. In chapter 11, he gave them example after example of persecuted people who were faithful to God – many even giving their lives. God commended these heroes of faith for their steadfast perseverance. The author held up the example of this faithful “cloud of witnesses” which testifies that a life of faith will gain God’s promises.

Describe the metaphor the author uses as a picture for faithful endurance. (See verse 1.)

Athletic imagery was common in Greek and Roman thought. In the ancient games, an athlete would strip off anything and everything that hindered movement or restricted the limbs or impaired breathing. Anything that would negatively affect the outcome of the race was done away with.

As Christians we have a course to complete- a goal to reach. This race is not a sprint; it is a long-distance marathon. This marathon requires preparation and training. We must throw away everything that hinders our performance. In verse 1, the author writes “throw off everything that hinders *and* the sin that so easily entangles...” Getting rid of sin is vital, but it is only part of the author’s call. Sometimes, things that aren’t necessarily sinful can still hinder our faithful obedience in following Christ.

Ask God now to show you if there is anything in your life or any area of your life that hinders your faithful endurance. Write your thoughts below.

The author depicts the Christian life as a marathon, not a sprint. What difference does this make for us in the way we prepare and “run?”

The sustained effort required for a marathon is much different than the short burst of energy needed for a sprint. Without training, I could put on my running shoes and give it everything I’ve got to get to the end of the block in a hurry. (Granted, I might pull something along the way!) But I could not run a marathon. I couldn’t even run that 10K.

During a race, the runners look down the track at the course laid out ahead and toward the intended goal. As a Christian “athlete” on what are we to focus?

Although the heroes in chapter 11 set faithful examples for us, Jesus is still our ultimate example. Not only did He blaze this trail of faith we must run, He also completed it with perfection. He “authored” or laid out the course and then “perfected” it by reaching its intended goal.

Jesus is our ultimate example of faithfulness to God. Based on verses 2 and 3 how, can considering Christ's example help us?

The pain and humiliation of the cross was insignificant to Jesus in light of the joy He would gain from obeying the Father and fulfilling God's plan to provide salvation for a lost world. He focused on the eternal rather than the temporary. The audience of Hebrews faced a similar situation. They had been enduring "opposition from sinful men." The author encouraged them to follow Jesus' example by scorning any pain that would come from persecution and focusing on the joy that would come from obedience. Remembering what Jesus endured can also motivate us to hold fast to our faith in times of difficulty and persecution, to "not grow weary and lose heart."

Fatherly Discipline

Read Hebrews 12:4-11

Discipline is one of the primary responsibilities of a parent. We've all seen children whose parents have obviously shirked that responsibility. They are not doing their children – or the rest of humanity - any favors! Discipline is necessary for a child to grow into a fully functioning, law-abiding, productive adult.

The word translated as "discipline" in the NIV is the Greek word *paideia*. It carries the ideas of both correcting or chastening and education or training. God's discipline in the lives of His children corrects wrong behavior *and* equips us for the road ahead.

The audience of Hebrews needed to understand that God would positively use any persecution they faced. Nothing would come into their lives that He could not use to mold and shape them into the image of Christ.

They had already faced some persecution, though none had yet given their lives. However, assuming the letter was written to Christians in Rome in the early to mid- 60's that would soon change. Not long after this, the persecution increased drastically and martyrdom became widespread. The audience needed a proper perspective on persecution to faithfully persevere to the end.

What does the presence of God's discipline in our lives prove?

How should we respond to the Lord's discipline?

*In what ways is our heavenly Father's discipline superior to our earthly father's discipline?
(See verses 9-10.)*

What is the purpose of God's discipline in the lives of His children? (See verses 10b-11.)

Our character and holiness is more important to God than our physical comfort. God allows difficulties and persecution into our lives so He can use them as tools to refine our faith and shape our character. This hard truth is all over Scripture. (See James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 1:6-7, and Romans 5:3-5 for examples.)

What is more important to you, your holiness or your physical comfort?

Call to Holiness

Read Hebrews 12:12-17.

This section of Scripture begins with “therefore.” Because of the way God uses discipline in the lives of His children, the author called his audience to prepare themselves for the road ahead. Verses 12-13 show that this journey requires a group effort. God’s people must work together to help each other stand firm. We must help make “level paths” for those who are weaker among us, encouraging them along in the faith.

In verses 14-17, the author reminds us of the goal of God's discipline (our holiness) and warns of a few things that could keep His children from that intended goal. The Greek word translated as "holiness" is *hagios*. To be holy means to be set apart *from* the world and *to* God. We still live in the world, but we must be different than the world. God's children should adhere to His standards and not the world's standards. Our experience of God's presence will be limited if we do not live the holy life He calls us to. But if we embrace holiness, God promises we will "see" Him!

The author cautions his audience of at least four things in verses 14-16 that could inhibit holiness. What warnings do you find?

Esau represents someone who missed out on the blessings attached to the position of an honored child. He rejected the honored status offered to him as his father's first born son because of momentary cravings. Ravenous from a day of hunting, Esau sold his inheritance rights of the first born to his brother in exchange for a bowl of beans. (See Exodus 25:24-34.)

How does Esau's story serve as an example to encourage the audience to persevere during persecution?

Two Mountains

Read Hebrews 12:18-24

In this passage, the author emphasizes the superiority of the New Covenant by contrasting two "mountains." The scene at Mt. Sinai represents the law, the Old Covenant. There only Moses could approach God; the people had to remain at a distance. But Mount Zion, God's spiritual Kingdom, is far superior!

Read Exodus 19:1-25.

What would happen to the people if they approached the mountain?

What did God tell Moses to do to protect the people?

___ *Confine everyone to their tents*

___ *Ordain them all as priests*

___ *Put barriers/limits around the mountain*

Read Exodus 20:18-21.

How did the people respond to God's presence? Did they desire to draw closer to Him?

Why did God reveal Himself to the people?

God's holy presence on Mt. Sinai made the mountain itself a holy place. Thunder, fire, smoke, and trembling ground dramatically accompanied God's fearsome holiness. The people could not touch the mountain because they were sinful. God ordained Moses as their intercessor.

What does the scene at Mt. Sinai teach us about the nature of the Old Covenant?

In the list of words/phrases below, circle all those associated with the Old Covenant (Mt. Sinai). Underline all those associated with the New Covenant (Mt. Zion).

untouchable terrifying better word

joyful assembly trembling come to God

What does the author's description of Mount Zion in verses 22-24, reveal about the nature of the New Covenant?

I am so glad that under the New Covenant we are invited to come to Mount Zion instead of Mount Sinai! If we have accepted Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we can freely approach Mount Zion and worship God because we have been made righteous by the blood of our mediator, Jesus. In the heavenly realm, forgiven sinners will add our voices of praise to the “joyful assembly!”

One last warning

Read Hebrews 12:25-29.

Once again, the author uses a “lesser to greater” argument to stress the importance of heeding God’s words. The audience knew the result of their ancestors’ disregard for God’s Word. Our holy God judged their disobedience. That first generation could not enter the Promised Land.

If God demanded His people to obey a covenant that would be replaced, He certainly expects us to “not refuse” His permanent, superior covenant. When the people disobeyed the first covenant they experienced the consequences of their disobedience. Rejection of the New Covenant will more certainly bring God’s judgment.

Verses 26-29 refer to the end of time when Christ will return and God will establish his everlasting Kingdom. At that time, He will replace the physical and temporal with the spiritual and eternal. All physical creation will be “shaken,” but the eternal will remain.

Based on verse 28, how should we respond to this truth?

Read 2 Peter 3:10-14.

In light of Christ’s return and the destruction of the physical creation, how should we live?

As we close this session, prayerfully consider the truth that our “God is a consuming fire.” How should the truth that God is holy affect how we respond to Him?