

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Hebrews 12

The model of endurance (12:1-3)

- v. 1 – The previous chapter provided real-life examples of godly men and women exercising faith in times of trials. They are called here “a great cloud of witnesses.” The word translated as witness (*martus*) is the root of the word he used in 11:2 that describes how the people of faith in that chapter received a testimony (not “approval,” as some translations have). So a cloud of witnesses refers to a great number of people who have been given a testimony to others because of their faith.

He then uses the metaphor of running a race with specific aspects. Races and athletics in general in the Greco-Roman world were competed without the encumbrance or hindrance of clothing. His purpose is to emphasize the reality of things in our lives that hinder faith, such as the distractions of the world and listening to ungodly sources that can bring doubt and wear down our faith.

“The sin that most easily entangles” this particular audience in Hebrews is the threat of drifting away and returning to Levitical Judaism.

Running with endurance in a physical sense requires training and patience, so that you don’t burn yourself out by sprinting. The word translated as race is *agon*, from which we get the English word agony. When running long distance races like marathons, there is an agony that sets in long into the race. So when thoughts of quitting enter your thinking, you have to resolve to push through the agony and finish the race. And what helps us to make that commitment to endure is seeing a loved one at the finish line. So in a spiritual sense, we are called to keep on running a life of faith when agony of many kinds comes into our lives. There are two things that help us to press on. Like spectators cheering runners along the route, the “cloud of witnesses” encourage us by their faithful testimony. And we are encouraged by staying focused on Yeshua—the one at the finish line—and how He endured His own agony.

- v. 2 – This verse shifts the focus to the example of Yeshua. In keeping with the metaphor of a race, He completed His own calling by continually looking forward to the finish. He endured the agony of the cross by staying focused on doing the Father’s will and on the exaltation that would come afterward by being seated at the right hand of the Father and ruling over creation (1:3; 8:1; 10:12-13).
- v. 3 – The Greek word translated as “consider” is the basis for the English word analogy. The reader is being asked to compare closely our personal experience with Yeshua in terms of agony. When we consider the intensity of the hostility that Yeshua faced, the mocking, the physical pain, and the awesomeness of having the sin of humanity being placed upon Him, it should humble us as we put our own agony in perspective. And that will strengthen our faith.

The connection between discipline and endurance (12:4-11)

- v. 4 – The timing of the writing of the book of Hebrews helps us to understand the phrase that the audience had “not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.” There was likely a general

awareness of the coming of a great conflict between the Jewish zealots and Rome. And coupled with the understanding that Yeshua predicted the destruction of the temple (Mat 24:2), the discernment of the author is that there was great potential for people in his audience to join in the conflict. And in so doing, that would not just be contrary to the way of Yeshua, but it would be a great step toward returning to Levitical Judaism.

- vv. 5-6 – That concern leads the author to give a warning of what would result if they began shedding blood in the revolt. This warning builds on his ongoing warning against returning to Levitical Judaism. The warning concerns God’s discipline, which is something that they should already know, but have apparently forgotten. He quotes Proverbs 3:11-12. The key to that quotation is the principle that God disciplines those that He loves.
- v. 7 – Then he describes who that passage applies in this context. Practically speaking, his question: “what son is there whom his father does not discipline” demonstrates that discipline was considered to be a universal practice. And the lack of criticism of the practice shows that it is biblically endorsed. The reason becomes apparent as the argument continues to develop.
- v. 8 – In the biblical culture, illegitimate children had no inheritance and could not marry within society. You were essentially an outcast and without meaningful relationships. So in the reasoning of the author, divine discipline is an indicator that you are, in fact, a child of God, and your spiritual inheritance remains secure. The opposite (meaning you have never experienced discipline from God) implies that you have never become a child of God and have no eternal inheritance.
- vv. 9-10 – The author employs another *kal v’chomer* (“light and heavy”) argument. The discipline of earthly fathers is light compared to that of our Heavenly Father. But the significance and the desired result is likewise greater. A connection between God’s discipline and His holiness is evident. Since holiness means being separate from all things common or sinful, and God has made it possible for human beings to be in His presence throughout eternity, there is a need for his holiness and purity to stay undefiled. And that is accomplished, in part through discipline.
- v. 11 – The author returns to his athletic metaphor, emphasizing that physical training can be unpleasant. But there is a reward by doing well in the race.

Exhortations to continue in the way of righteousness (12:12-29)

- vv. 12-15 – He continues with the metaphor by describing the training that the community needed to do.
So you need to think of these verses in terms of the community rather than the individual.
The training calls for strengthening weaker members, healing those that are “out of joint,” and managing the team so that none of the members are bitter and causing trouble.
That serves as a good model for leaders of congregations, like managers or coaches of teams.
- vv. 16-17 – Esau exchanged his birthright for a bowl of lentils (Gen 25:28-34; 27:30-40). This story is a parallel with the main thesis of the book of Hebrews. If they let go of Messianic

Judaism, it would be like Esau letting go of his birthright. And when that happens, they would not return.

- vv. 18-24 – He shifts his discussion to a comparison between the Old and New Covenants using figurative language. In verses 18-21, the scene is the giving of the Torah and the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant on Mt Sinai. The people were so fearful that they begged for God to stop speaking to them directly. Moses was even “full of fear and trembling.” Moreover, in a general sense the Law invoked fear because it focused on punishments for disobedience,

In contrast, verses 22-24 is a description of the setting of the arrival of the New Jerusalem, which represents the New Covenant. Here, there is no fear, and only things that are very positive—accompanied by angels, all of the believers are present and perfected, and Yeshua is right there in the midst.

Notice the phrase, “written in heaven” (KJV, NIV) or “enrolled in heaven” (NASB, ESV) or “names recorded in heaven” (CJB). It is an allusion to the “book of life” that is referenced several places in the Bible (Ex 32:33; Ps 69:28; Isa 4:3; Dan 12:1; Lk 10:20; Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12). And we know that the book of life is a key theme during the Jewish holidays of *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). But the most significant thing we can note about this phrase is that it is in the perfect tense, which conveys completed action with continuing results. This indicates that salvation is a finished work, with benefits that are permanently secure.

Another difference is that on Mt Sinai, the people were warned to stay away, but no such imagery is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem, which is consistent with the promise in 10:19 that believers in Yeshua are welcome in the heavenly holy place. In keeping with the themes of the book, the author is trying to convey the folly of going back to the fear of the Mosaic Covenant when they could have the rejoicing and fulfillment of the New Covenant.

In verse 22, the author refers to “Mt Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” In verse 10 of the previous chapter, we are told that Abraham “was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” That means Abraham was able to perceive the ultimate city of promise in some manner. But the point is that there are a number of references to a heavenly Jerusalem. The most detailed description is found in Revelation 21, where “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God.” This verse describes its dimensions and the materials that it is built with. So it is clear that it is not just a metaphor but a real city that comes from God. But even though it may already exist in a heavenly dimension, its appearance is in the future. The full context of Scripture shows that it is a literal city, not built by people, but directly by God. That is consistent with the nature of prophecy. In other words, if future Jerusalem is not a literal city, we cannot be certain that any of the cities mentioned in prophecy like Bethlehem is a literal city.

How then can the author say here in verse 22 that believers have “*come* to Mt Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem?” The word translated as “*come*” here is not the common word translated in that way. The word *proserchomai* literally means to “*approach*” (toward+come). It has the sense of believers being given the privilege of approaching the heavenly Jerusalem. In biblical times, approaching

Jerusalem was a very important experience. Most commonly, this was done for the three pilgrimage feasts—Passover, *Shavuot* (Pentecost/Weeks) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). And as the people were approaching Jerusalem, they would sing the Psalms of Ascents (120-134), with words like: “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of Adonai” (Ps 122:1). The full realization of this verse is an echo of the words of Isaiah:

Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of Adonai will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of Adonai, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of Adonai from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war (Isa 2:2-4).

Clearly that day is yet in the future. All things considered, believers have been given the promise of being able to approach or to come to the place where Yeshua will be in the Messianic kingdom and the world to come, and that is the New Jerusalem.

- v. 25 – This is the final warning by the author, and once again, he expresses it with another *kal v'chomer* (“light and heavy”) argument. So we need to determine the light and heavy actions, and the light and heavy results. And we have to maintain the context in which he has been comparing the people who received the Mosaic and New Covenants, represented by Mt Sinai and the New Jerusalem. Another way of saying it is that it is a comparison between the people of the Exodus generation and the people of the book of Hebrews.

The light action in verse 25 is ignoring God’s warnings through Moses. The heavy action is ignoring God’s warnings through the writer to Hebrews, especially the warning not to drift away and return to Levitical Judaism. The results are not stated in the text. But we can derive them from what we know in the greater context of Scripture and in history.

The light result for the Exodus generation was that they mainly died of natural causes over a 38-year period (except Joshua and Caleb). The heavy result for the audience of the book of Hebrews cannot be a reference to losing their salvation, because the author has repeatedly taught otherwise. But if they drifted away, they would have made temple worship the central focus of their lives. And that would mean getting caught in the horrible situation that was at hand regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the violent death of 1.1 million people. Josephus cites this number and notes that the siege was timed to coincide with Passover when the number of Jews in the city was at its maximum (*War* 6.420-422). The gruesome manner of their death was much heavier than natural causes. But we know from the early church historian Eusebius, the believers in Yeshua fled the city before the siege began and escaped the fate of the non-believers (*Ecclesiastical History* 3:5:3).

- v. 28 – The author concludes his argument with the declaration that the kingdom [of God] cannot be shaken, which should lead believers to have a sense of gratitude, service, reverence and awe. That is what the Messianic believer’s life should be about, not settling for religious ritual, the traditions of men, and works of the Law that have no merit. That is what he urged for his audience, and applies to us as well.

- v. 29 – The phrase “our God is a consuming fire” is a quotation from Deuteronomy 4:24, which in the previous verse warned against forgetting God’s covenant and engaging in false worship. And it is followed by saying Adonai is a jealous God. The author of Hebrews is using this quotation to emphasize the seriousness of messing around with the Lord. Another way of saying this is “don’t play around with fire because you will get burned.” It’s always best and safer to remain faithful to what we know to be true. That is the ultimate message of Hebrews.