

Lesson 12

Reading: Hebrews 12

Hebrews 12

Jesus is a Superior Source of Encouragement

Key Verses: Hebrews 12:1-2 - "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, 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."

Hebrews 12 begins with an often discussed idea concerning those living today being watched by "so great a cloud of witnesses."

Some think this has reference to games much like that of the ancient Greeks where the spectators in seats that surrounded the stadium watched and cheered on the runners who participated.

This cloud of witnesses looking on was supposed to be the Old Testament saints just mentioned by the writer in Hebrews 11. But we believe the cloud of witnesses are those that he had just referred to throughout the preceding chapter and that they witness to us by the faithful lives they lived when they were alive, and not by watching us run now.

If it helps some to believe that they are watching us then, that is fine for them, but we do not believe that it is actually true.

It seems to us that they are called witnesses because of the testimony they have borne as to the power and victory of faith they had when they lived.

They witness to us that men can live by faith and please God.

The cloud of witnesses lived by faith and remained faithful to the end. This would encourage the Hebrew believers to do the same.

Furthermore Jesus provides superior encouragement to any one or all of the witnesses combined. We keep "looking to Jesus" because He is the "author and finisher of our faith."

Questions for study and discussion: (The verses in parenthesis will help you with a starting point for your study)

1. *By whom is the Christian surrounded? (1)*

"We also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"

- Some think this has reference to games much like that of the ancient Greeks where the spectators in seats that surrounded the stadium watched and cheered on the runners who participated.
- This cloud of witnesses looking on was supposed to be the Old Testament saints just mentioned by the writer in Hebrews 11.
- But I believe the cloud of witnesses are those that he had just referred to throughout the preceding chapter and that they witness to us by the faithful lives they lived when they were alive, and not by watching us run now.
- I do not believe that they are watching us from heaven as we run the Christian race. If it helps some to believe that they are watching us then, that is fine for them, but I do not believe that it is actually true.
- Would those watching us see us if we stumble and how do you suppose that would affect them?

- Ecc. 9:5-6 – These verses seem to teach that the dead do not know what’s going on under the sun, so can they be actually watching?
- It seems to me that they are called witnesses because of the testimony they have borne as to the power and victory of faith they had when they lived.
- They witness to us that men can live by faith and please God.
- The cloud of witnesses lived by faith and remained faithful to the end. This would encourage the Hebrew believers to do the same.

2. What should the answer to number one encourage us to do? (2-3)

let us lay aside every weight

- The writer is comparing the Christian life here to running in a race. When runners run in a race they do not wear combat boots or suits of armor. They run in as little clothing as necessary and as light as they can.
- 1 Cor. 9:24-26: Paul on other occasions used a race to illustrate the Christian life (Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 2 Tim. 2:5).
- "Every weight" would be anything that would hinder us from living the Christian life faithfully.
- In an actual race, you would want to lay aside anything that would hinder or slow you down.
- We must do the same in our lives. It may be a hobby, habit, job, business, T.V., relationship, friends, etc.
- Anything that hinders must be laid aside (Mark 9:43-48; 2 Cor. 6:14ff).

and the sin which so easily ensnares us - In the context of the Book of Hebrews, it seems that "unbelief" is the sin he has in mind, though the verse would also teach them to lay aside any sin which hinders one from running the Christian race.

1. Heb. 10:39-11:40 - The immediate context indicates that the primary reference is to the sin of unbelief.
2. Heb. 3:12 - An evil heart of unbelief is what they were primarily being warned against.

and let us run with endurance – The faithful life is a life of endurance like those the writer had just discussed in the previous chapter.

- Heb. 10:36 - They had need of endurance.
- Heb. 10:24 - Holding fast their confession would require endurance.

the race that is set before us - It is not just any race. It is the race that is set before us. Many times religious people run, but they run in the wrong race.

Verse 2: Looking to Jesus - Here he mentions the greatest example of faithfulness and endurance there is.

- Here he saved the best example of faith until last. He does not put Christ with those faithful of O.T. He refers to Him above them all as in a case that deserves to stand by Himself.
- Matt. 14:22-33 - As long as Peter looked to Jesus, he walked on the water but when he saw the wind, he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink.

the author and finisher of our faith – He is the cause and finisher of our faith. He has begun a good work in us and He will complete it (Phil. 1:6).

who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame - It was not a joy to suffer and die. It was no "joy" to die on the cross, but it was something He "endured" for the joy of saving man from sin.

- Heb. 2:10 - He will bring many to glory by His suffering on the cross.
- Jesus has made the cross famous. We make jewelry in the form of a cross. When we think of the cross, we think of an innocent man dying, but when Christ died on it, it was regarded as the punishment for the vilest and meanest outlaws and criminals. It was the place for murderers, thieves, and rebels. It had more shame connected with it in that day than the gas chamber, electric chair, or gallows has today. Illustration - Suppose today you asked a man about his brother and he says he was electrocuted in "the chair" in Atmore, AL. Right away you would know he was a criminal, a menace to society and one who in all probability deserved to die for crimes against state. This is the same shame that was connected with the cross when Christ died on it.
- Phil. 2:5-7 - This will help us understand such statements as "even the death of cross."

- Gal. 3:13 - It was not only a horrible way to die, but also had great shame connected with it.

and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God – As has already been emphasized Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

- Acts 2:33 - Peter said He was exalted to the right hand of God.
- Heb. 1:3 - He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.
- Hebrews 1:8 - He has a throne and scepter which is ruler's staff or a rod held in the hand of kings as a token of authority.

Verse 3: For consider Him - They had already considered the heroes of faith in chapter eleven, and now they need to see what Jesus had endured for them (1 Peter 2:21).

who endured such hostility from sinners - Jesus was opposed and resisted by sinful men. Men contradicted and opposed Him. They were hostile toward Him.

- John 1:11 - His own nation rejected him.
- Ps. 2:2 - The kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord and His Anointed.
- If these Jewish Christians would just consider what Jesus endured from sinners, they would not think so much of the persecution they were receiving from their unbelieving brethren, nor be so disheartened by them as to reject or renounce the gospel.

against Himself - What did they say about Him? Among other things they said the following:

- Matt. 12:24 - He casts out demons by power of the devil.
- Mark 3:21 - They said He was crazy.
- Matt. 11:19 - He was called a gluttonous man and a drunkard.
- Matt. 22:63 - The leaders said He was a deceiver.

lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls - Discouragement has always been a threat to faith in the church. The Hebrew Christians were having problems with this very thing.

- Gal. 6:9 - Be not weary in well doing for in due time we will reap.

- 1 Cor. 9:24-27 - Men running in a race may get tired and weary after a long run but it is only the one who finishes who will receive the prize. It is the same with the Christian race as Paul clearly reveals.

3. *What two things does the Lord do for “every son he receives” (6)*

Verse 6: For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives - Whom the Lord loves He disciplines or trains. It is like a good football coach who trains and disciplines his players.

- Rev. 3:19 - Those He loves He chastens. Therefore training is proof of His love for us.
- God is a good Coach because He knows how to train which includes discipline.

4. *How is the one “without chastening” described? (7-8)*

for what son is there whom a father does not chasten - It is a characteristic of a good earthly father to train his children by discipline and correction. Therefore, it should not shock us or make us think less of God if He does what any good parent would and should do.

- Prov. 22:6 - When we train our children in the way they should go it is proof of our love and concern for their well-being. Indifference and failure to discipline or train them only shows that we don't really love them as we should. These Hebrews needed to know the hardships and persecutions God was allowing them to endure was proof of His love.
- *God sends and/or allows persecution in order to help His children stay close to Him.*
- *Hab. 1:5-11 - Many times in the Old Testament God sent nations to punish and discipline His people in order to get them to repent and keep them from going further into idolatry and rebellion.*
- *Job 2:3-7 However, it can be said that God does something when in reality He only allows it. This could be the case with the Hebrew Christians.*

Verse 8: But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons - *If we are without chastisement or*

training, we are illegitimate children and not true sons. If God did not discipline and correct us it would be proof that we are not true children of God.

5. What is to be “pursued with all people”? (14)

Verse 14: Pursue peace with all people - The context here requires us to understand this mainly of persecutors. He exhorts them to manifest a spirit of kindness toward all men, even though some were engaged in persecuting them. We are to make war with sin, but not with men.

- *Romans 12:18* - This admonition is to be understood in light of all that is said on the subject. Paul told the Romans to live at peace with all men "if" it is possible and as much as depends on us.
- *Matt. 5:44* - Jesus said, "Love your enemies..."
- *This does not mean that we will have the same love and affection for them as we do our wives, children, brethren, friends, etc. But it means to do good to them and help them when and if we can.*
- *Rom. 12:19-20* - Like Jesus, Paul teaches not to seek personal vengeance but help those who are our enemies and God will take care of the rest.
- *Gal. 6:10; 1 Thess. 5:14-15; 2 Cor. 9:13; 1 Tim. 2:1* - We are to do good, pray for, and help all men as we have opportunity.

6. How can many become defiled? (15) How can this be avoided?

Verse 15: Looking carefully - We are to be looking diligently, and he lists four kinds of troubles to be looking for:

- Lest any man fail the grace of God.
- Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you.
- Lest there be any fornicators.
- Lest there be any profane person.

lest anyone fall short of the grace of God - They must pay close attention and look diligently lest any of them miss the divine favor of God by having an evil heart of unbelief in departing from God (Heb. 3:12).

- *1 Cor. 9:27; 10:12* - Paul knew he could fall short.
- *2 Cor. 6:1* - We can receive the grace of God in vain.
- *Gal. 5:4* - We can fall from grace.

lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled - Some think this is a reference to Deuteronomy 29:18 and that it refers to some person in the church who would rise up and cause bitterness and strife among the members. This may be right of course, but it may also have reference to the bitterness that might spring up in the hearts of these Hebrews against those who were persecuting them. If they harbored these bitter feelings against their enemies, they could be defiled by the bitterness. This seems to me to be the meaning.

7. How is Esau described? (16)

Verse 16: *lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright* –

- Some understand “fornicator” to mean physical fornication and believe he is talking about one who commits the physical act of fornication like the man in 1 Corinthians 5:1.
- But this could be talking about spiritual fornication as those in Revelation 2:20-22 or James 4:4. Profane is the opposite of sacred. A profane person is one who does not properly regard God.
- Esau treated the birthright with abuse, irreverence, and contempt because he sold it for one morsel of meat. The Hebrew brethren could do the same thing by rejecting the blessings in Christ for earthly comforts.
- Romans 7:11-4 - Christians are separated from the Law of Moses in order to be married to Christ. If those who are married to Christ go back to the Law of Moses as these Hebrews were being tempted to do, then they would be committing spiritual fornication and this might be the meaning here.
- Genesis 25:29-34 - Esau had been hunting and was tired and weary. Because of his disdain for spiritual things he sold his birthright for one bowl of stew. His most valuable possession was sold for one meal. The entire honor that is now associated with the name "Jacob" would have been Esau's, but he sold it for one moment's pleasure. He was truly a profane person. The honor Esau parted with can be easily understood by looking at the honors which were bestowed on Jacob.
- These Hebrews could sell their greatest possession which is salvation in Christ for worldly advantages being offered them by returning to Judaism.

8. *What event is described that caused Moses to tremble? (18-21)*

Verse 18: *For*

- This word connects this verse with what has just been said - that is, they should look diligently:
- Lest you fail the grace of God.
- Lest any root of bitterness spring up and trouble you.
- Lest there be any fornicator or profane person.
- *For* your privileges and position under the gospel are far superior to those of Judaism.

you have not come to the mountain that may be touched

- This was Mount Sinai and the Old Covenant that was given from it. It was a mountain that *could* be touched, although at the giving of the law, the Israelites were not allowed to touch it. It is here referred to as a mount that might be touched to show it was a mountain of the earth, touchable material, or earthly mountain.
- Ex. 19:12-13 - They could not touch the Mount.
- These Hebrews had not come to Mount Sinai as the Israelites had but had come to one superior, as will be seen later.

and that burned with fire

- Mount Sinai burned with fire at the giving of the law.
- Ex. 19:18 - God descended in fire.
- Deut. 4:11 - The Mountain burned with fire.

and to blackness and darkness and tempest - This was more of the scary stuff that kept them away from God and His presence on the mountain.

Verse 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*

- God spoke in an audible voice when He first gave the Ten Commandments to Israel.
- Ex. 19:19 - There was the sound of a trumpet.

- Ex 20:1-20 - God spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel first and they asked that God not speak to them anymore (Ex. 20:18-19).
- Deut. 4:12-13 - These verses show that He spoke the Ten Commandments first and later wrote them down.
- Deut. 5:22 - He *spoke* the Ten Commandments with a *great voice* and He wrote them on two tables of stone.
- Deut. 9:9-12 - These verses show that God wrote on the stones the things which he had *spoken* to them earlier.
- Deut. 9:12 - They had turned aside from the way God had commanded them. When had He commanded them not to make an image? Answer: He had spoken the Ten Commandments to Israel before Moses went upon the mountain to receive them in writing.

Verse 20: *For they could not endure what was commanded* - The meaning is that the manner in which they were communicated inspired terror which they could not bear (Deut. 5:24-25).

And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow - It was such a terrifying situation that even if a beast touched the mount it was to be killed. If man or beast touched the mount, he was to be killed (Ex. 19:13).

Verse 21: *And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I am exceedingly afraid and trembling* - It was such a terrible sight that even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and tremble."

- This statement of Moses is nowhere recorded in the Old Testament, but there is no doubting that he said it.
- Jn. 14:26; 16:13 - The Hebrew writer was obviously guided in what he wrote by the Holy Spirit. Hence, there is no doubt that Moses made this statement, although it is not recorded.
- Eph. 3:3-5 - If Paul did not write the Book of Hebrews, then a prophet or one of the other apostles did, and they too were guided by the Spirit in what they wrote
- Ex. 19:19 - Some think this statement may have been what Moses spoke here. This may be, but it is just an opinion.
- These Hebrew Christians had not come to such a terrible manifestation of the presence of God. They had not come to a situation that struck only fear in their hearts. They had not come to a situation where they were shaking

in their shoes for fear. But they had come to something far superior to the manifestation that God made at the giving of the law. They had come to a new and living way by which they could draw near to God in full assurance of faith. (Heb. 10:20-22).

9. *Of what is Jesus the mediator? How is He better than Abel? (24)*

Verse 24: *To Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant*

- Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant, but these Christians had come to Jesus Christ who is the mediator of the New Covenant. He had already shown in chapter three of this book that Jesus was superior to Moses.
- Gal. 3:19 - The Old Covenant was appointed by angels in the hand of a mediator.
- 1 Tim. 2:5 - Jesus is now the only mediator between God and man. If these Hebrew Christians went back to Judaism and rejected Jesus, they would be rejecting the only mediator between God and man.
- Heb. 9:15 - The writer had already referred to Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant.

and to the blood of sprinkling - The blood of sprinkling is the blood of Jesus. This simply means that as the blood of animals was sprinkled on the book and people to dedicate the Old Covenant and as the blood of animals was sprinkled on the mercy seat to atone for the sins of Israel, so the blood of Jesus is the means of the New Covenant that has redeemed us from sin.

- Hebrews 9:18, 19 - Moses dedicated the Old Covenant by sprinkling blood on the book and people.
- Lev. 16:14, 15 - Blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.
- 1 Peter 1:2 - Peter refers to the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from sin.

that speaks better things than that of Abel – Abel's blood cried out for vengeance whereas the blood of Jesus speaks of grace, mercy and peace.

- Gen. 4:10 - Abel's blood cried out from the ground for vengeance and vindication.

- Rom. 5:1 - The blood of Jesus justifies us so that we now have peace with God. Rom. 5:9-10 - Christ's blood cries out for reconciliation of His enemies.

10. What cannot be "shaken"? To what does this refer? (28)

Verse 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

- Judaism with its temple, priests, and sacrifices was going to be taken out of the way for good and the kingdom of Christ was to remain. It would never be moved or taken out of the way as Judaism was about to be. We serve Him with honor or respect that is felt and shown.
- Daniel 2:44 - The kingdom Daniel foresaw was one "that would never be destroyed" - which is the same as saying, "It cannot be shaken."
- Daniel 7:13-14 - This kingdom of Daniel is the same as the one these Hebrew Christians had received.
- Lk. 1:32-33 - Jesus will reign over His kingdom (house of Jacob) forever.
- Dan. 7:18 - The saints possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.
- 2 Pet. 1:11 - There is the first (primary) phase of the kingdom which is on this present earth and the second (ultimate) phase of the kingdom which will be in the new heaven and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13).

11. How is God described in verse 29?

Verse 29: For our God is consuming fire

- This applies to the willfully disobedient who continue sinning willfully by rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. God is a caring Father to the faithful, but He is a consuming fire to those who have an evil heart of unbelief and depart from God (Heb. 3:12).
- Romans 11:22 - We must behold the goodness and severity of God.
- Heb. 10:31 - It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God unprepared.

"Digging Deeper for Better Things"

RESEARCH QUESTION: *Where else in the Bible does it say that "God is a consuming fire"?*

Deut. 4:24; Psalm 21:9; Rev. 21:8; 2 Peter 2:4

THOUGHT QUESTION: What do you THINK is meant by the phrase “to the spirits of just men made perfect” in Hebrews 12:23?

to the spirits of just men made perfect - This may refer to the departed saints of the Old Testament and those who had died already under the New. The saints who die are in a state of perfection where there is no Satan or sin but only salvation.

A Message of “Better Things” from Hebrews 12

- It’s an interesting study to consider in Hebrews 12:23 concerning those, *“who are registered in heaven”*.
- If he is explaining who the *“firstborn”* ones are here, then the firstborn ones are Christians who have their names written in the Lamb’s book of life.
 - Luke 10:20 - The names of all of the righteous are in the Book of Life.
 - Phil. 4:3 - These two women had their names in the book of life.
 - Rev. 13:8; 21:27 - Those who will be in heaven have their names in the Lamb’s book of life.
 - Rev. 3:5 - We must overcome the world or else our names will be blotted out of that book. In Revelation 12:11 we are told how to overcome.
 - Rev. 20:15 - Those whose names are not in the Book of Life at the judgment will be lost.
- Can there be a “better” thought than having your name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life??