

“RUNNING THE RACE SET BEFORE US” (HEBREWS 12)

We’re almost finished with Hebrews I’ll admit the Book of Hebrews has been a bit of a challenge, both for you as a class and for me. It’s not the easiest book to understand or to teach, but the end is in sight and I pray that you’ve gotten something out of it. This morning we will be in Ch 12 and then next week we’ll wrap it up. After we finish Hebrews we’ll get into a brand new study.

Chapter 12 begins with the word “therefore.” Having just shown how those O.T. heroes demonstrated their faith in God (by doing what He told them to do), the writer now says it’s time for us to take our own leap of faith [*hotel fire analogy*]. Eleven chapters with all this wonderful doctrine about Jesus – now it’s time to apply what we’ve learned. That’s what the last two chapters are all about.

The writer of Hebrews has clearly laid out the truth about Jesus – who He is and what He’s done. He’s explained why Jesus is better than all the O.T. things. From the Scriptures he has made his case that the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant of the Law. He’s warned his readers what will happen if they, having heard the truth, reject it. He’s reminded them of God’s promises to those who embrace Christ. Now it’s time for us to demonstrate our faith by taking God at His word, make the right decision and come to Christ.

READ Hebrews 12:1-2

Great passage! We “are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Picture all of those great heroes of faith in Chapter 11 – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and so on, having run their race so well and finished strong, having been commended for their faith, now cheering US on as we run our race. That’s the idea. There are many different metaphors, analogies for the Christian life used in Scripture – the one used here is that of running a race.

Just to clarify – this is only an analogy. I'm not sure if the saints who have gone on before us, those who are now in heaven with the Lord, can actually see what we're doing here on earth. The Bible doesn't teach that. The point here is that we should run our race of faith as though all those biblical heroes of faith and even our own spiritual mentors who have died are watching us. These people inspire us! They motivate us to run well.

What must a runner do if they are going to run their race well? Several things are mentioned in these verses. Let's look at them...

V 1, we "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely." There are a lot of "weights" that slow us down, that hinder us spiritually. It may be different things for each one of us – things from our past that we never dealt with, religious legalism, hang-ups we have, hurt feelings, fear, concerns, negative circumstances, relationship issues, health concerns, etc. We need to lay these things aside, cast our burdens on Jesus (1 Peter 5:7).

Not only are we to lay aside every weight, but we are to lay aside every sin. Again it will be different sins for different people. But whatever form it takes in our life it must be dealt with. It must be acknowledged, confessed (1 John 1:9) and turned away from.

V 1, we must "run with endurance." Our race is not a sprint. It's a marathon. Let me tell you something about running marathons. You don't just wake up one day and say "I guess I'll go out and run a marathon today." You won't get very far. You must train for it. Hard work, dedication and personal discipline are required. That's true in the Christian life as well. We need to practice the fundamentals, spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible study, worship, acts of service) and over time we build up our spiritual muscles and increase our endurance.

V 2, "looking to Jesus." The NASB say, "fixing our eyes on Jesus." Those examples from Hebrews 11 are good. But our best example, the pattern we should follow, is Jesus. Second Corinthians 3:18 says that the Lord Jesus makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His

glorious image. What a thought! But that can only happen if we remain focused on Him. Our focus must be on Jesus, not on other Christians good as they might be, and not on ourselves. Only on Him!!

V 2, Jesus is the “founder” of our faith. Other translations say “author” of our faith. The whole basis of our faith rests entirely on what Jesus did. Jesus is also the “perfecter” of our faith. Being perfect in Hebrews references our salvation. Jesus is the source of our salvation. Back in Chap 2 it says so beautifully, “For it was fitting that He [Jesus], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb 2:10)

Jesus is our example. So, how did Jesus run His race? V 2, “Who for the joy that was set before Him [*focused on the end result, the prize, our salvation, pleasing His Father, returning again to heaven*] endured the cross, despising the shame, [*committed to His mission to die on the cross for our sins and He finished it even though it was incredibly difficult and painful and humiliating*] and [*now Jesus*] is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

READ Hebrews 12:3

Just look at what Jesus went through for us. You think your race is difficult? Just take a look at the path Jesus took. When you consider what Jesus went through for you, it ought to give you the motivation you need to keep going, to run your race and finish well.

This next section, v 4-11 speaks about God’s discipline. In keeping with the idea of running a race, this is in effect God’s training program...

READ Hebrews 12:4

It’s good for us to step back occasionally and just put things into perspective. Things really aren’t that bad. We’re still alive. We haven’t been martyred for our faith.

READ Hebrews 12:5-8 (v 5 quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, v 6 quotes Psalm 94:12)

Here we see a parallel between an earthly father's discipline of his son and God's discipline of us as His children. V 6 says that God disciplines us because He loves us. His sovereign hand is molding us, conforming us to the image of Christ. God wants what's best for us. V 10 which we'll get to in a few minutes says, "He disciplines us for our good." God doesn't want us to hurt ourselves. Also He wants us to represent His family name in a way that brings honor to Him. God doesn't want us to hurt our witness for Christ. At times God has to re-direct us to get us back on the right track. Hopefully we learn the lessons God's trying to teach us. *[Show Q3 slide]*

READ Hebrews 12:9

We can all look back at your own lives and see where we needed to be guided and corrected by our earthly fathers or mothers or coaches or bosses or whoever was in authority over us. We submitted to them. They weren't trying to be our best friend. They wanted to teach us. They wanted to help us. They wanted us to do well and succeed. If we can see the benefit of following human authority, how much more will we gain when we submit to a loving God's perfect plan for us?

So then, what is God's ultimate purpose for us?

READ Hebrews 12:10-11

I referenced 1 Peter 1:16

READ 1 Peter 1:14-16

God's desire is for us to be holy. He wants us to exhibit righteous behavior. He wants us to be more like Christ. Getting there is often a painful process because we're fallen creatures. We have our own wills and desires and ambitions. So God has to continually work on us. We're God's children and He wants us to act like it. "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

READ Hebrews 12:12-13

Returning to his race analogy the writer exhorts us to keep going. It's a long hard race and our hands will get tired. Our knees will grow weak. He says, "Keep on moving – slow and steady and straight. Don't get spiritually tired or lazy."

V 13 is hard to understand. The idea here is this: we're not running the race alone. We're running alongside other believers. Some of them might be struggling, just barely limping along. They may not be as strong or as well trained or as experienced as we are. We need to help them out. We need to encourage them to keep running their race. Earlier in our study the writer emphasized the importance of meeting together with other believers to "stir up on another in love and good works (10:23-25). This may not be good English but it's good theology – IT AIN'T ALL ABOUT US!

READ Hebrews 12:14

Our relationship with other people is important to God. We need to "strive for peace with everyone." Romans 14:19 tells us to "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." This is not always easy to do. Some people can be difficult to deal with. That's why Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." So we need to make sure that horizontal relationship is right.

The second part, "striving for holiness" ensures that our vertical relationship with God is right. As Christians our "position" is that we are at peace with God. We're no longer His enemies. Our behavior, then, should match our position. If we're going to "see God," experience His presence in our lives we need to practice holiness.

If you don't do what v 14 says, here's what could happen to you...

READ Hebrews 12:15-16a

Unbelievers in our circle of influence – friends, family, work associates – those who are aware that we are Christians are watching us. This verse is warning us that if we are not careful we could turn people away from Christ by the way we live. The “root of bitterness” is in quotes because it is a direct reference of Deut 29:18. Here’s the context: Speaking to the people of Israel God says this: “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.” So the idea here is that God’s people by their ungodly behavior could turn unbelievers away from following God. As Christians we’re should reflect Christ to the world.

READ Hebrews 12:16-17

We talked about Esau in Hebrews 11. He was part of a great family. His father was one of the patriarchs – Isaac. His grand-father was Abraham. Esau was raised to fear God and to honor Him. But he was a secular-minded man. He had no respect for the things of God. He didn’t care about spiritual matters. Sure, Esau enjoyed many of the blessings and benefits from being a part of God’s covenant family, but he had no desire to obey or please God. He was self-centered. Here was a man who sold his birthright to his younger brother for a pot of stew! That story is told in Genesis 25. Later in Genesis 27 after Isaac had blessed Jacob with the covenant blessing (that Jacob tricked him into giving) Esau wanted that same blessing, but Isaac rejected his request. It was too late. He lived his life indifferent to the things of God for so long that eventually “he found no chance to repent.” Very sad! Back in Ch 6 the writer warned that a person who hears the truth, maybe even enjoys the fellowship of Christians, but then stops short of repenting and turning to Christ – one can resist God for so long and then they will remain lost. That was the case with Esau. He lived his life on his terms rather than God’s. The warning here is “don’t be like Esau!”

The chapter closes by contrasting two mountains – Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. The writer of Hebrews has driven home that the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant of the Law. Well, it's decision time.

READ Hebrews 12:18-21

Mount Sinai was in a desert. Here is a description from Exodus Chapters 19 and 20. Mount Sinai was where God gave the Ten Commandments and the Law to Moses (old covenant). On Sinai were boundaries set up where you couldn't get close to God. There was fire, darkness, gloom, fear and trembling, death, terror.

But if you're a believer in Jesus Christ this is NOT the mountain you have come to (v 18). What mountain have you come to instead?

READ Hebrews 12:22-24

Zion is another name for Jerusalem, God's holy city where the temple and worship of the Lord God of Israel took place. But this is not talking about the earthly Jerusalem we know today as the capital of Israel. V 22, this is "the heavenly Jerusalem." It's in heaven, in the "city of the living God." It's a heavenly city inhabited by the angels and the saints. They are all gathered around the throne of God worshipping. This is the same city that Abraham was looking forward back in Hebrews 11:10 – "the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. This is the city of the new covenant whose mediator is Jesus.

V 24, "to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Here we have a contrast between Jesus's blood and Abel's blood. I like the way The Message paraphrases this: "The murder of Jesus, unlike Abel's murder – a homicide that cried out for vengeance – became a proclamation of grace." Both had their blood shed. But Jesus's blood saves us. Thus His blood speaks a better word!

READ Hebrews 12:25-27 (v 26 quotes Haggai 2:6)

At Mount Sinai the people of Israel experienced the fear and terror of a holy God. In Exodus 19 God's presence and voice are described as "thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled." It says the whole mountain, Mount Sinai, trembled greatly.

Here in Hebrews those who would reject the new covenant in Christ are warned about God's final judgment and destruction of the earth. This is that terrible "Day of the Lord" spoken of by many of the O.T. prophets. God will shake the earth just like it did at Mount Sinai.

V 25, "For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven." The question was asked earlier in our study, "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" (Heb 2:3). The message in Hebrews is clear – "Do NOT reject the salvation that Jesus offers in the new covenant!"

READ Hebrews 12:28-29

What is this "kingdom that cannot be shaken"? It is a reference to Revelation 21 when God creates a new heaven and a new earth and established an eternal kingdom.

Earlier in Hebrews the writer told his audience, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). We draw near to God with fear and reverence. He is a holy God. That last phrase, "God is a consuming fire" takes us back to Chapter 10 – "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31).

So then the question for those reading and hearing the message of Hebrews is, "which mountain are you going to come to?" You can either come to Mount Sinai, the old covenant, where you must keep the Law perfectly or die in their sins. Or you can come to Mount Zion, the new covenant, where Jesus has already paid the penalty for your sin and which

you receive by grace through faith. So then, it's decision time. Which mountain will you choose?