

Chapter 17 – Inheritance comes with in-service training - Hebrews 12

Entering our full inheritance in Christ takes faith, but so does living in that inheritance. It is a “race” of faith in which Satan constantly tries to disqualify us. But Jesus has both shown us, and prepared for us, the way. As the author showed us in Hebrews 10, it is not a static way, like obtaining a certificate for a degree qualification, but a living way. In this chapter the author shows us that our inheritance comes with in-service training. God deeply desires that we will enter and enjoy our full inheritance in the promises He first gave to Abraham, and so He continues to speak to us along the way and disciplines us where we need correction or training.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 11 and look forward to studying chapter 12.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 12 by reading through and noting any questions or surprises. These are the things that strike me in chapter 12.

- V11 How does hardship train us?
- V12 How can we “make level paths...”
- V14 If Christ makes us holy, what kind of holiness is in view here?
- V25 What is God warning us of?

We will try to address these issues as we examine the detail.

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Prov 3:11-12, Deut 8:5 (discipline, vv5-7), Isa 32:17 (fruit of righteousness, v11), Isa 35:3 (strengthen hands, v12), Ps 34:14 (pursue peace, v14), Deut 29:18 (root of bitterness, v15), Gen 25:33, 27:30-40 (Esau, vv16-17), Ex 19:12-16; 20:18-26, Deut 9:19 (mountain of fire, v18-21), Ex 24:8 (blood of covenant, v24), Gen 4:10 (Abel, v24), Hag 2:6, Joel 3:16, Isa 54:10 (shaking, v26), Deu 4:24 (consuming fire, v29).

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was: ¹ “Exhortation to hear and heed God’s voice.”

Chapter 12 follows the previous chapter’s catalogue of faith-filled saints with the exhortation to follow their example through the temptations and hardships of life, returning again to the theme of heeding God’s voice.

My fine-brush structure is:

- V1-4 Encouragement to run the race of faith.
- V5-11 Encouragement to see hardship as God’s discipline to strengthen those he loves.
- V12-17 Exhortation to keep pursuing God.
- V18-24 Our Mount Sinai.
- V25-29 Heed God’s voice.

¹ See chapter 4

Argument

This chapter concludes the author's great exhortation to faith that started from the very first verse of the book. He exhorts his readers to follow the example of their faith-filled forefathers, and particularly Jesus Himself, to run the race of faith with determination and endurance. He urges them to recognise difficulties as a means of God's training and strengthening those whom He loves, and to take care that nothing causes them to stumble along the way. His concluding exhortation mirrors his previous ones. He compares and contrasts their situation with those of the Israelites in the desert, this time using the encounter on Mount Sinai as the example, warning and exhorting his readers to hear and believe the New Covenant promises.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 12:

Follow the many examples of faith you have, especially Jesus Himself. Fix your heart upon your inheritance in the New Covenant promises and, through thick and thin, run for that goal, depending fully on the abundance of grace in Christ.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 12.

Heb 12:1-4

⁽¹⁾ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ⁽²⁾ Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ⁽³⁾ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁽⁴⁾ In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The argument

Here, in a nutshell, is the purpose of the whole letter. The witnesses referred to here are those just mentioned in chapter 11. But there is also the witness of those mentioned in the early chapters, the disobedient and unbelieving Israelites in the desert. Their witness has also been used in the author's exhortation to faith. We have both examples of failure to avoid and of courage to emulate. In view of this we should throw off everything that hinders in our faith and follow Jesus our supreme example.

...a great cloud of witnesses...

The crowd of witnesses are not presented as spectators witnessing our race, but as examples, bearing witness to the power of hope and pointing us to the same goal.

...the sin that so easily entangles...

Note that there is no mention of persecution as a source of hindrance or discouragement, and no warning against returning to the Law. If, as many suggest, this letter was addressed to believers returning to Judaism and Law to avoid persecution, then surely the author would address these issues specifically at this point. Instead, he mentions only sin (v1 and v4).

There are many hindrances to the Christian faith - it is no easy ride. But the difficulties do not arise from hurdles that God sets before us. We do not have to wear horsehair clothing or eat locusts. We do not have to live in caves or monasteries. We do not have to pray five times a day facing east. We do not have to repeat mantras or enter a trance or contort our bodies. In fact, there is nothing at all

we can or should do to gain or keep our salvation. It is the gift of God won for us by Christ on the cross.

But the combination of the ordinary troubles of living, our fallen human nature and the attention of Satan and his demons results in many hindrances to our faith. So much of our lives get taken up with the ordinary business of living that we can simply disconnect from a daily living relationship with God and become addicted to busy-ness. We are so easily distracted by the attractions and cares of the world. We are drawn away by temptations for short-term “gains” or by false promises of happiness, and we are subject to every kind of accusation that we are sinful and unworthy of God’s grace. We can become entangled in a web of confused values, self-recrimination, introspection and despair leaving behind a guilty conscience and feelings of self-disqualification. These feelings act as a powerful disincentive to running the race set before us. If we keep stumbling and receive these accusations of failure, we will prefer not to even try.

The author has written this letter to cut through this entangling web. He said,

“Therefore, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:22-23).

Solid confidence that Christ alone is our righteousness is essential to throwing off sin and discouragement. We need to say, with Micah, “Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.” (Mic 7:8)

...the race...

The author describes our faith as a race, not a walk. A race requires continual effort and the runner keeps the goal always in clear focus, whereas a walk is effortless and often meandering with many stops for every distraction. The Israelites in the desert were walking their faith, just drifting along, going with the crowd and complaining about the food. When they came upon challenges, they were not ready for them. But the runners are prepared and have trained their minds and their muscles for the challenges ahead so they will reach the goal and receive the prize. We should see the Christian faith as a race, sustained by the grace of God, not a stroll in the park.

... the race marked out for us ...fix our eyes on Jesus...

In running the race of faith, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus. He has run the race before us and now cheers us on. The race marked out for us is found in the Gospels; they are our road-map for discipleship. We will never become true disciples if we do not immerse ourselves in the Gospels. It is Jesus we must fix our eyes on and follow, not correct doctrine; Jesus not our pastor; Jesus not our favourite author or conference speaker or TV evangelist. Jesus is the author of our race and no one else. We are to follow the example of others only in so far as they too are following in Jesus’ footsteps. Throughout this letter the author exhorts us to look to Jesus; not just as a name or an idea, but how He lived out the Gospel and brought it to others. Jesus alone marks out the path we are called to follow.

Nevertheless, insofar as others also follow in the footsteps of Jesus it is good to remember, as the author has done, those who have gone before. Their stories are inspirational and many have become missionaries as a result of reading the stories of other great men and women of faith. We should also look to those in our families and churches who inspire us to follow Jesus. The author exhorts us to imitate their faith and patience. But all these should point us to Jesus who is the one true model for us to aspire to. Copying the clothing, hairstyles and mannerisms of our human heroes seems to be human nature, but it does nothing to promote our maturity and serves only as a distraction from Christ. We should be inspired and learn all we can from our fellow believers, and then fix our eyes on Jesus and run our own race.

...the author and perfecter of our faith...

Jesus did not run the race as a super-human figure but as our saviour. He was not like an Olympian who proves it is possible for *one* human being to run a mile in 3 minutes and 43 seconds, rather, Jesus pioneered the way by which *all* men may be saved. Although Jesus lived a truly good life, He showed that it was impossible for any other man to be good enough to save himself. He summarised His sermon on the mount by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). *That* describes the Olympian race that Jesus alone was able to run. That is not the way of salvation for us. Through His death, he authored and perfected a race we can all run. It is the race of faith in His all-sufficient sacrifice for our sin. And now, in Christ, we have all the promises of God so that through them we can share in God’s nature (2Peter 1:3-4). This has been the subject of the letter from chapters seven through to ten.

...for the joy set before him...

Jesus is the supreme example of endurance empowered by anticipation of a joyful inheritance. It is not simply His endurance that should inspire us, but His hope. The fact that someone may endure terrific hardship does not inspire me. I am likely to say, “That is amazing, but I could never do it.” But if I learn of the hope that enabled them to persevere, I am likely to say, “I trust that I too could endure great suffering for the sake of such a hope.”

Human stories of hope can be inspiring, but they may also be false. Many people suffer for a futile hope. They may hope that riches or fame will bring them true happiness and suffer long hours of work or a disrupted lifestyle in their pursuit. These days, many offer themselves for suicide bombings in a false hope of eternal life. Hope must have an authentic foundation. Jesus is the only human who fully understood the hope He lived and died for. John observed this in Jesus before he washed the disciples feet: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (Jn 13:3). Knowing where we come from (God’s calling) and where we are going (God’s Kingdom purposes) is the proper foundation for our hope.

But joy that is found only in a distant inheritance is not the only joy God has for us. In the opening passage of the letter we are reminded that “you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness, therefore God has ... anointed you with the oil of joy.” Jesus said He came that we might have “fullness of joy”. There is great sustaining joy in simply walking in fellowship with Jesus, knowing that as we believe and live out His promises we share in His divine nature. Jesus at the well said that he had food to eat of which the disciple had no knowledge. The joy of seeing someone healed, seeing someone touched by an encouraging word from God, seeing a lost soul warming to the Good News of Jesus, seeing a troubled heart finding peace with God or the simple joy of hearing God speak to your heart. The world has nothing to compare with this joy; it is truly nourishing and empowering; it makes all other joys pale.

... sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

It’s not all action. Jesus is now seated in fellowship with His Father, and Paul reminds us that we too are seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). We need to learn to sit quietly with Jesus and give Him space and our full attention, so that He can speak to us, give us His promises and direct our focus. This chapter, especially, reminds us that one day we will face God as our judge, when every thought of our hearts will be revealed and everything in our lives shaken. It is far better that we take time now to let the Spirit examine our hearts and give our priorities a good shake.

Sitting with Jesus is thoroughly wise investment, but it is also an attitude of faith. Jesus is sat down because He has vanquished His foe. He is not fighting but ruling. We too sit with Jesus because our battles have been won by Jesus. Yes, as Paul so often reminds us, we are engaged in a battle of faith with the principalities and powers, but that is because they attack our faith. But having fought off doubt and accusations we can sit down and rule in faith with Jesus. Faith is assurance and certainty

and peace in God's faithfulness by which we demolish strongholds and take the enemy captive. So we sit with Jesus in fellowship, and we sit with Jesus in confident ruling faith.

...opposition from sinful men...

In fixing our eyes on Jesus, we are also exhorted to consider His stand against the sinful men who opposed Him. Jesus faced constant harassment from the Pharisees and other religious leaders, even his own brothers mocked him and ultimately of course he was murdered. Jesus' stood fast against evil even "to the point of shedding [His] blood". His example, and the hope that sustained Him in it, should encourage us "not to grow weary and lose heart.

There is no evidence in the letter to suggest the Hebrews were suffering persecution, but we all suffer from the sinful acts of others. We live in a broken world where even well-meaning people can make wrong decisions and we can suffer injustice and discrimination. Beyond this we suffer setbacks in nearly all our endeavours. That is simply part of the curse of the fall – thistles growing in our gardens. But it is especially disheartening when sinful men stand in the way of our progress or, even worse, deliberately destroy what we have laboured to build.

Peter said "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1Pe 2:20-21).

...not grow weary and lose heart

The whole letter is written to stir our faith so that we will energetically pursue God's promises and not lose heart.

...to the point of shedding your blood.

The reference to not having yet shed blood is another point cited by those who believe the recipients were facing persecution. But this is simply the author making the stark contrast between Jesus' example of resistance to sin and their own faltering example.

The fact that the recipients had not shed their blood (i.e. faced martyrdom) suggests the letter was not addressed to believers in Jerusalem, since Stephen, James and others had been martyred there quite early on.

Heb 12:5-11

⁽⁵⁾ And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁽⁶⁾ because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." ⁽⁷⁾ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁽⁸⁾ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁽⁹⁾ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ⁽¹⁰⁾ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ⁽¹¹⁾ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

The argument

The recipients have been suffering hardship of some kind,² but rather than rising to the challenge in faith, they have been grumbling (just like Israel in the desert). The author urges them to remember the encouragements in the Hebrew scriptures, that one of the ways God shows His love and care for His people is through allowing hardships to train and discipline them. Rather than grumbling, they should be thankful to God for His loving discipline that is designed to strengthen faith and form godly character. Paul wrote, “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Ro 5:2-5). Likewise, James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jas 1:2-4). To this, Peter adds his encouragement, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1Pe 1:6-7).

...he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.

The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 from the Septuagint, which adds the verb “punishes” to the last phrase of v12. I was brought up, like many, with the threat that God would punish my disobedience. Although the author quotes this, by way of reminding his readers of the scriptures which speak positively about God’s loving discipline of His children, the author does not teach that God punishes us. On the contrary, he has gone to great lengths to show that Jesus has dealt with all our sin on the cross. The author was clearly very familiar with Isaiah, since he draws freely from him in several places through his letter. Isaiah made that great prophecy about Jesus, saying, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5). The New Testament is clear; Jesus took the punishment for our sin. God does not punish us. But He does discipline us. The hardship, test, or suffering which God uses is not to extract payment from us for our sin, but to train us in godliness. He may allow us to suffer the natural consequences of our sin or He may arrange some other pressures to bear on us. But the purpose is to get us to listen to Him when we have stopped our ears to the quiet prompting of the Holy Spirit. God loves us enough not to stand silent whilst we pursue a damaging course of action. But we may ignore His discipline as well, in which case we may put ourselves in grave danger of becoming fruitless and hardened by sin. We should not “make light of the Lord’s discipline” but quicken our ears to hear His voice.

...that we may share in his holiness.

God’s discipline is so different from the harsh anger that so many people have experienced in their own homes or schools under the guise of discipline. Sadly, so-called ‘discipline’ is in fact so often a punishment meted out to appease a person’s anger and rage. But God’s discipline is measured and purposeful. It comes from His loving desire that “we may share in his holiness.” We should not see

² The hardship is not specified. It may have been some kind of mild persecution, or interference from the itinerant Judaizers that troubled many of Paul’s churches. It may have been internal difficulties such as strife between believers, immorality or leadership difficulties. It may have been discouragement due to some drifting away from the church or a feeling of isolation from other Christian communities or lack of numerical growth and discouragement in evangelism. The hardship may simply have been a series of seemingly disconnected challenging events such as flooding, disease and general misfortune. The fact that we can imagine any number of scenarios that fit the few hints we have in the letter, should caution us against assuming that persecution was the unspecified hardship. It also helps us to see its application to our many and varied struggles.

holiness as a cold bare puritan thing but as a beautiful quality with beautiful adornments. It is unspoilt beauty, unpolluted creativity, unbounded love and untainted truth. Holiness is the most appealing and desirable quality possible.³ And it is often gained through God's loving discipline.

...a harvest of righteousness and peace...

When we receive God's discipline joyfully and with faith, there is a harvest. To the author's "righteousness and peace", Paul, James and Peter add (in the passages quoted above): perseverance, character, hope, maturity, completeness of character and, when Jesus returns, praise, glory and honour. What a harvest!

...for those who have been trained by it.

But this harvest is not automatic. It comes to "those who have been trained by it." We would all love to be made instantly Christ like. And that day will come, Paul says, "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1Cor 15:52). So perhaps all we need to do is wait until we see Jesus, then all will be well. What is the point of discipline to make us a bit holier if we are going to be made properly holy when we die? To this John says, "continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1Jo 2:28). He also affirms we will be made like Jesus when we see him, but adds, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1Jn 3:3).

Yes, we will be finished off when we see Jesus. The work of holiness will be completed. We will be made fully fit for heaven. But the progress towards holiness which we make before we die has a great bearing on our enjoyment of eternity. We are rewarded for our faith and our faithfulness. We are rewarded for the harvest of righteousness we reap before we die. But also, we get to enjoy the wonderful benefits of godliness and share the goodness of God with others. God's kingdom is expressed in and through those who are trained by the Spirit, the word and God's loving discipline.

Heb 12:12-17

(12) Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees! (13) "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (14) Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord. (15) See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (16) See that no-one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. (17) Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

The argument

Having urged his readers to run the race, embracing the Lord's discipline, he addresses two relevant issues for them. With another reference to the race, for which they need to "strengthen [their] feeble arms and weak knees", he focuses their attention on relationship difficulties between believers and sexually immorality. (Note again, there is not a hint of persecution.) The two things, in the author's view, most likely to de-rail their faith are as relevant today as they ever were. Note that vv15-17 expand the basic exhortation of v14: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy." To live in peace we must obtain the grace of God in our relationships so there is no opportunity for bitterness to arise. Grumbling and complaining spread like a cancer and undermine

³ See for example, Psalm 96.

faith. If there are real difficulties or issues, we should face them and seek to resolve them quickly, speaking truth in love and accepting wrongs done to us rather than insisting on our rights.

Esau is set forth as an example of someone who was godless. He put no proper value on his inheritance. He sold his birthright for some food, and although he came to regret it, he was never able to regain what he had thrown away. He is an example of what happens with those who succumb to the temptation of sexual immorality. They are hungry for a quick fix and set such little value on their inheritance in Christ that they are prepared to throw it all away for a false promise of pleasure or happiness.⁴

There is a basic level of holiness, whereby we recognise that eternal things are of such significance that we do not knowingly throw them away in exchange for some temporal gain. We set ourselves apart from the lies of the world for God. This is the holiness we are called to, without which no one will see the Lord. The author does not mean that if a Christian sins he will not see the Lord. We do sin, and we have, in Jesus, “one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1Jo 2:1-2). We have a great High Priest who sympathises with us in our weakness and who forever lives to intercede for us. We do not need to fear that our sin has been insufficiently dealt with by Christ. The author has already stated, “by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). But those who give up caring about their inheritance in Christ to the extent that they throw it away for some worldly desire, such people cannot expect to “see the Lord” in this life.

...strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees!

The author quotes from Isaiah 35:3-4 “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’” The context is a wonderful prophecy of future glory for Israel. The quote is fitting since the author, like Isaiah, is writing to stir faith for the promised inheritance.

...without holiness no-one will see the Lord.

Some commentators take this to mean that without holiness in God’s people the unsaved will not see God. Certainly this would tie in with Jesus’ command; “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). But I do not think that fits with the general argument. The author is not discussing evangelism but inheritance. The ultimate prize is to have full and free fellowship with God. Those who care nothing for that hope will not be rewarded with it.

...no bitter root...

The author quotes from Deuteronomy, “Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, ‘I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.’ This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry” (De 29:18-19). This passage exactly fits the author’s concerns expressed in his warnings. Those who persist in godless disregard for the promises God has given should not imagine they will escape God’s wrath. The author’s particular concern is that the faithless behaviour of a few can spread to infect many.

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that salvation is thrown away, but sexual immorality has irreversible consequences at many levels in our lives, relationships and ministry, not to mention loss of potential eternal inheritance.

He could bring about no change of mind...

The author has warned repeatedly through his letter that a point may come in a rebellious believer's life where something is lost in his inheritance, which can never be regained. Esau is given as an example of just such a person. Again, we must note that loss of salvation is not in view. Esau was restored to his brother (Gen 32-33) and was there at his father's deathbed (35:29). He was still a member of the family but he lost the inheritance due to the first-born, which had been his. Someone who "misses the grace of God," becoming bitter and causing trouble in the church, or who gives themselves to some godless desire, is in danger of losing part of their inheritance both in this life and in eternity. They may eventually repent but still be prevented by God from progressing as they could have done. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Ga 6:7).

Heb 12:18-24

(18) You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; (19) to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, (20) because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." (21) The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." (22) But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, (23) to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, (24) to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The argument

The letter started by contrasting the way God spoke in the past with the way He is speaking now: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2). The author goes on to say, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Heb 2:1).

In his concluding exhortation, the author restates his opening argument, this time contrasting the Israelite encounter with God at Mount Sinai with our encounter with God in Christ. He reminds them of the terrifying nature of that first encounter on a hostile mountain, which emphasised the separation between God and sinful men. What a contrast with our encounter through Christ. We come to the heavenly city where God dwells with men in joyful assembly with the angels.

You have come...

The author is not describing the end of our pilgrimage, but the beginning. Just as Sinai was the beginning of Israel's walk with God under the Old Covenant, so our encounter with God, in Christ, at "Mount Zion" is the beginning of our walk with God under the New Covenant. The author lists seven things to which we have come. These include the Old Covenant saints who have been "made perfect" in Christ (see 11:40) and those New Covenant believers who have already completed their race (the church of the firstborn). These, along with myriads of angels, join God Himself in cheering us on and encouraging us to complete our race of faith, so that we might be received into their number with praise and glory (1Pet 1:7).

... a better word than the blood of Abel.

Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, but Jesus' blood brings mercy and forgiveness.

Heb 12:25-29

⁽²⁵⁾ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ⁽²⁶⁾ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ⁽²⁷⁾ The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ⁽²⁸⁾ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ⁽²⁹⁾ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

The argument

As in chapter 10:28-29, the author contrasts the penalty for refusing God under the Law with what we should expect in the light of the much greater revelation we have in Christ. The issues at stake for us are not simply an earthly inheritance in a land, but an eternal kingdom, which started with Christ’s resurrection and will stand, even through the end of the world when the heavens and the earth will be consumed and the new creation will be established. “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

...the removing of what can be shaken...

The things that “can be shaken” are the fallen creation, which, as Paul states, “waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom 8:19-22).

It is probable that the author would also include the faithless aspects of believers’ lives that will be burned up due to their worthlessness.

...God is a consuming fire.

The reference to God as a consuming fire is a quote from Deuteronomy 4:24 and, as we saw in Heb 10:27, was a frequent image in warnings and prophecies concerning God’s judgement of His people’s sin. Here too, it refers to God’s judgement of His people, accompanying the metaphor of shaking. Our worship is “acceptable” to God, and “we are receiving a kingdom” from God, who judges His people with consuming fire. Again, the image is not of loss of salvation, but of loss of reward, for those who are burned by this fire.

Since God is a fearful judge as well as our loving Father who disciplines those He loves, “let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.”

Conclusion

The concluding argument of chapter 12, with its illustration and warning, is strikingly similar to the first argument and warning of chapter 2:1. The intervening chapters have repeated and illustrated the appeal to rise in faith to inherit all that God has promised. In chapter 12 the author makes his final appeal to the readers to fix their eyes on Jesus and persevere through every difficulty with faith and godliness so that they may receive their full inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 12

V1 Who, living or dead, inspires your faith?

- What are the “weights” that encumber your pursuit of God?
- What things entangle you in your relationship with God?
- Do you feel you are “running” the race?
- What would you like to see change so you can run a better race?
- V2 What specific aspects of Jesus’ life particularly encourage you?
- V3 What inspired Jesus’ obedience and endurance? How can this inspire you?
- V4 What price have you paid to withstand sin? What has been the benefit?
- V5-11 When have you been aware of the Lord’s discipline?
- What hardships have you grown through?
- What fruit have you recognised through your hardships?
- What hardships do you now face? Are you facing them with faith?
- V12 What are the ways you can strengthen your faith and your relationship with God?
- V13 What obstacles to your relationship with God could you deal with?
- V14 Are you aware of any strains or difficulties in your relationships?
- How can you bring peace to these relationships?
- Is your life and heart set apart for doing God’s will?
- What issues in your life test your obedience to God?
- What is the basis of your confidence that you will “see the Lord”?
- V15 Is there any cause of bitterness in you or amongst your friends?
- How can you obtain God’s grace to deal with this?
- V16-17 Do you know anyone who is in danger of throwing away their inheritance?
- How can you help them to look beyond the immediate situation to see the danger they are in?
- V18-24 What do you see in your mind’s eye when you pray?
- Try picturing the scene described in these verses before you pray.
- What other scriptures paint a picture of our reception in heaven when we pray?
- Make a list and try using these to stir your confidence and faith in approaching God in prayer and worship.
- V25 Has God spoken any specific things to you?
- How would you summarise the general things that God has spoken to Christians?
- Are there areas where you think you may not be heeding God’s word?
- How can you discern between God’s voice and the accusing words of Satan?
- What action can you take to show more faith and obedience to God?
- V26-27 What things in your life will collapse and burn when God shakes the earth?
- How should we live in this world where so much that occupies us is so temporary?
- How does your life demonstrate your belief that all will be shaken?
- V28-29 What can you give thanks for in the light of this shaking?
- How does knowledge of this shaking affect your worship?
- What place does reverence and awe have in your worship?
- How can you maintain a sense of godly fear alongside the boldness and confidence we are encouraged to have in approaching God?

Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?