

PRESSING ON/TAKING FLIGHT
HEBREWS 12
WEEK 21

Hebrews 12:1

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. . . .

The author applies the truth presented in Hebrews 11 to the readers. The word *therefore* introduces the application. Because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. . . we can run this race – which is a MARATHON – NOT a short sprint! The author envisions all believers as engaged in a marathon. These are not spectators watching to see how we run the race. These are the witnesses who were presented in Hebrews 11.

They bear witness to the sufficiency of faith. They demonstrate that faith will. . .

- produce patient endurance
- will result in obedience
- and will accept trials without wavering

Lexicon – *witnesses* - those who after JESUS' example have proved the strength and genuineness of their faith in Christ by undergoing trials/sufferings

The Apostle Paul incorporates images of athletic competitions in his epistles.

- II Tim. 4:7 – “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.”

Athletes in the ancient world competed not for money but for glory. The prize was a simple wreath fashioned from a branch. But that wreath symbolized excellence. Athletes in any sport had a single and simple goal – to win the prize. This goal brought focus to their lives and led them to train rigorously.

- II Cor. 9:24-27 – “²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. ²⁵ And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*. ²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

Those who compete must be “temperate in all things.” They watch their diet and “discipline [their] body and bring it into subjection.” They willingly accept the pain of strained muscles, ready to pay any price to win.

The author exhorts the readers to:

- “lay aside every weight” – or “encumbrance”
 - For a runner, weight can be either excess body fat or a burdensome load. The words *lay aside* convey the idea of taking off a robe. If one is to reach the goal in the race, it is necessary to lay aside any encumbrance. So, the

contestant will train down to a desired weight and lay aside any garments that might impede his/her progress.

- Encumbrances/weights – are NOT sins. They are things that slow us down – that make running the race more difficult.
- Encumbrances are not evil. This is why encumbrances are difficult to discern. Encumbrances are many times good things. However, if they run away with us – absorbing too much of our time. . .then the focus of life is distorted.
- Suggestion for all of us – if we are serious about running with endurance – we need to discover what these encumbrances might be in our lives – individually.
- What is an encumbrance in my life may very well NOT be an encumbrance in your life – and vice/versa. This is why we need the wisdom of God in this matter?
- Lay aside “the sin which so easily ensnares us”
 - Sin is easier to identify; however, in spite of that, we still get entangled in sin, i.e. bad attitudes, speech patterns that are improper, thoughts that are sinful, unrighteous actions.
 - While it is true that any sin will impede the runner’s progress, the fact that the author refers specifically to “the sin” suggests that the author has in mind the sin of unbelief (Heb. 10:38-39). Of course, any sin will bog us down. The greatest sin, however, in the book of Hebrews is unbelief.
 - The word translated “ensnares” means to “stand around us.” Just as the runner is surrounded by a multitude who bear witness to the validity of faith, so unbelief also surrounds us and entices us to abandon faith.
 - The moment the contestant loses assurance that they will complete the race – they begin to doubt they’ll be able to finish – it’s easy to give up.
- “run with endurance the race that is set before us”
 - Faith in what God has promised gives assurance to the one who runs the race – that they will complete the race and reach the goal – which is maturity (Heb. 6:1).
 - FAITH is the God-given present assurance of a future reality! Faith – God’s gift – spurs us on to finish well!
 - The race is not a sprint to a goal that can be reached in a short period of time. Rather, it is an extended marathon that spans a person’s life. The author does not exhort the readers – and us – to run with faith – but that we run with patient endurance by faith.

While endurance is closely linked to waiting – looking toward the future – endurance is not passive. The author is telling us to “run” with endurance – to keep on going – don’t slow down or stop.

The author wants us to remember that the race we’re to run is one that “is set before us”. God has laid out the track on which each of us is to run. He’s planned each bend; He’s laid out every hill, and He has carefully prepared for each obstacle we’ll be asked to overcome!

Recognizing God's hand in everything that happens is one of the keys to running with endurance!

Hebrews 12:2-4

² *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.*

³ *For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.* ⁴ *You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.*

How are we to run – always “looking unto Jesus” – Who is our excellent example – our example, par excellence. Jesus exemplified patient endurance in His sufferings. We are to follow His example.

The word translated “looking” has the idea of turning away from something else. What about those within the “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11?

They are witnesses to the patient endurance that faith produces.

They bear witness to the sufficiency of faith!

Jesus is the “author and finisher of our faith.”

- “author” – indicates a “trailblazer” or “champion.” Jesus has opened up the path along which we're to run. He is the “champion” Who has already won the race.
 - He is the initiator of our faith.
- “finisher” – to bring something to completion; “perfecter”
- When we look at Jesus we see faith's beginning in suffering and its end in glory! We see the salvation won for us on Calvary and we see the future secured for us by Jesus. The victory party is NOW!

Randy Alcorn – “Your life on earth is a dot. From that dot extends a line that goes on for all eternity. Right now you're living *in* the dot. But what are you living *for*? Are you living for the dot or for the line? Are you living for earth or for heaven? Are you living for the short today or the long tomorrow?”

Jesus begins our faith and completes/perfects our faith. He is the One to whom believers should look.

What motivated Jesus in His suffering was “the JOY that was set before Him” – to bring many sons to glory – to complete the task God the Father had given Him to do. (Psalm 45:7 – Jesus has been anointed with the oil of gladness. . . .) In obedience to God the Father, Jesus chose to live for “the joy that was set before Him.”

The book of Hebrews focuses on our responsibility as believers – to run the race and to finish the task God has given us to do. We need to run the race joyfully – knowing that this task has been given to us by God – for a purpose – to come alongside fellow believers and to bring glory to God!

Hebrews 12:5-11

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

*“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD,
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;*

*⁶ For whom the LORD loves He chastens,
And scourges every son whom He receives.”^[a]*

⁷ If^[b] you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸ But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹ Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. ¹¹ Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Here we have the explanation of discipline. . . .

The author is telling the readers that they are despising the Lord’s correction. The word *despise* means to regard lightly or make of little account. The readers saw no benefit in the experiences they were undergoing.

The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 – telling them that they have forgotten the exhortation from this Proverb – they’ve forgotten that they need to understand their afflictions as evidence of a father’s love for his children. Rather than despising God’s chastening or being discouraged when sufferings come, they should welcome them as assurance that they are the sons of God, for God will chasten only those who are His own children.

When we think of being our being a child of God – our primary thought is how wonderful this life is – and heaven is for sure. . . . Have we forgotten that children are disciplined? Why did you discipline your children? Out of love and concern.

It was common in the ancient world for a man to father both legitimate and illegitimate children. To prepare the legitimate child to be his heir, he disciplined him by means of a series of tutors and a rigorous program of study and exercise for the mind, while relegating the illegitimate child to a life of careless ease. Discipline was, therefore, a sign at once of legitimacy and of selection for inheritance!

The Father will work at freeing us from weights and sin. He knows that holiness and righteousness are the best way to go. Are we convinced of that?

The word *discipline* in the Greek means “child training.” The underlying concept of “discipline/chasten” is correction and direction - which contributed to a person’s training in righteousness.

God is committed to our holiness – to be pure, to be set apart. He wants us to be pure. God is committed to that – we are oftentimes not committed to that goal!

Respect for God is demonstrated in submission to His will.

It is important to distinguish between punishment and chastening. Punishment is retribution for evil that has been done. God never punishes His children for their iniquities because all punishment for sin was borne by Jesus on the cross. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). No child of God should fear punishment from God.

Chastening or discipline has moral training in view. It is an instructive device by which a child is conformed to the standards or expectations of his father. Just as it is the responsibility of earthly fathers to discipline their children, so God as our Father disciplines us. The absence of any discipline would indicate that we are not sons of God.

Therefore, correction or discipline should be viewed as an evidence of our sonship and of the Father’s love.

There may be degrees in discipline, as suggested in the contrast between chastening and scourging (12:6). This is speaking to degree or intensity. God may begin the discipline process very gently and then increase the intensity of the discipline only if the one being disciplined resists it. When the discipline has accomplished its desired purpose, then the discipline will be lifted.

If the child of God is perpetually unresponsive, God’s ultimate discipline may be to remove that individual from life here on earth and transfer him into glory where the process of perfection will be accomplished (I John 5:16).

Divine discipline is NOT an evidence of God’s anger. Divine discipline is designed “for our profit” (Heb. 12:10):

- That “we may be partakers of His holiness” (Heb. 12:10) and
- Divine discipline “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

Holiness speaks to the essential character of the individual. This is what we are in Christ. Righteousness is the external manifestation of that character.

Discipline received in the right attitude will make us partakers of His holiness and produce in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness. . . therefore. . .

we, as believers, as sons of God, have an obligation. . .

Hebrews 12:12-17

¹² *Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.*

¹⁴ *Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: ¹⁵ looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; ¹⁶ lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.*

Firstly, the author points out the obligation of those who are practicing patient endurance toward those who are being overwhelmed by their experiences.

In the picture of the marathon, there are those who become so weary that their hands are hanging at their side. They have become so weak that they find it hard to stand.

This picture is a throwback to the experience of Moses when Israel was engaged in a battle with the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16 [esp. vv. 11-12]). The battle went Israel's way when Moses held up his hands; however, when he could hold them up no longer and his hands hung down, the battle turned in the enemy's favor.

Aaron and Hur held Moses arms up all day. The result was Israel's victory.

Those who are running with patient endurance are to strengthen the weak – which speaks to their present condition.

Those who are running with patient endurance are to make “straight paths” for those who are veering off course – which speaks to what may be ahead for their fellow contestant.

Making “straight paths” also carries the idea of removing any obstacle that would cause the runner to dislocate a joint and be eliminated from the race!

This is in perfect harmony with I Cor. 12:12-31. . . .

One who is pursuing the goal of maturity will render assistance to another who is in danger of falling short of the goal.

Paul tells us in I Cor. 12:26, “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.”

Heb. 12:14 addresses our obligation to ourselves. We are not to lose sight of the goal set before us.

Pursue peace – shalom – the root of shalom: “repairing that which was broken.” Our relationship with God was broken. Peace speaks to wholeness and harmony with God.

Pursue is a strong word. It suggests fixing our eyes on a goal and concentrating every effort to reach it.

Colossians 3:12-15 teaches us how we can “pursue peace” within the body of Christ: ¹² “Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*. ¹⁴ But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. ¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

Holiness, in a practical sense – as we walk with God, involves the way we relate to one another, always reflecting His character and His life moment by moment in this world.

If we fail to pursue a life of peace, others won’t see the Lord working in and through us. Others won’t see the Lord!

Heb. 12:15 – the phrase “fall short” means “to lose sight of, to miss.” It was too easy for the readers to lose sight of God’s grace, His divine enablement (Heb. 4:16), under the constant pressure of troubles and persecution. It’s all too easy for us to do the same today.

Heb. 4:16 – Because Jesus is our High Priest, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

That grace is the promise of DIVINE ENABLEMENT to meet every circumstance. There is a danger, however, that a believer might become so preoccupied with circumstances that they will not take refuge in God’s grace to enable them to endure that adversity.

The emphasis of Hebrews 12 is on the grace of God as shown in how He disciplines and instructs believers. It’s too easy to miss God’s loving hand in painful experiences, and so to lose sight of His grace.

When we keep God’s grace in sight, our hearts are filled with peace even when our days are filled with troubles. On the other hand, too often the consequence of missing God’s grace is bitterness.

Words for bitterness in the OT describe an emotion that’s close to despair. The bitter person is in anguish, crushed by circumstances.

- Naomi (Ruth 1:20)
- Woman who lost her only child (II Kings 4:27)
- Job’s tragedies made him “bitter of soul” (Job 3:20)
- Jeremiah 4:18b-19 – “It is bitter because it reaches to your heart. . . I am pained in my very heart! . . .”

In the NT:

- Rom. 3:14 quotes a psalm which uses “cursing and bitterness” as synonyms
- Eph. 4:31 places bitterness alongside “wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking”
- James 3:14 associates bitterness with envy and selfishness.

We have a picture of a bitter person as one whose sufferings have turned them into a hostile, antagonistic person dominated by resentment. This is why the author of Hebrews warns against the “root of bitterness” that can “cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.”

The author urges the readers to accept God’s discipline as a gift of love and to be always alert for evidences of God’s grace. We have a choice. We can respond to God’s discipline appropriately, knowing that this will yield “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11). OR we can continue to wallow in despair, closing our eyes to God’s grace, and become bitter, resentful individuals.

The choice we make will dramatically affect our lives and the lives of others!

The example of Esau (Gen. 25:27-34). . . . To satisfy his physical appetite, Esau voluntarily surrendered every privilege and blessing to which he was heir as the firstborn.

Esau had been born a few seconds before Jacob. That made him the elder brother. As the oldest, Esau was entitled to a larger portion of their father’s material wealth and to intangible possessions as well. The one great intangible possession of Isaac was the covenant promise that God had given Abraham to pass down to his descendants.

These and other blessings promised to Abraham weren’t real to Esau. But the bowl of red stew was real! When Esau came in from the field, he was famished; Esau and Jacob bargained. “You take the birthright, Jacob. I’ll take the stew.”

The point of bringing Esau into the epistle to the readers of this book is THE example the author is driving home: Don’t be like Esau who traded his future inheritance for present gratification!

NOTE: Esau changed his mind and begged his father for at least one blessing and he broke down and wept bitterly. Isaac would NOT change his mind. There was a point of no return – just as we saw in Hebrews 3 & 4 regarding the Exodus generation. The Exodus generation arrived at a point when God said, “No – you’re not going into the land!”

The application for all readers of Hebrews is clear. If we do not avail ourselves of God’s gracious provision of strength for conflict, and if we become embittered because of circumstances, exchanging spiritual blessings for momentary relief from physical sufferings, we will lapse into a state of immaturity. The Jewish believers were already warned of this in Heb. 6. And this immature state may well be one from which it will IMPOSSIBLE to be restored to the same blessings enjoyed by those who, through patient endurance, progress toward maturity!

Hebrews 12:18-21

¹⁸ For you have not come to the mountain that^[c] may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness^[d] and tempest, 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. ²⁰ (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a

beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned^[e] or shot with an arrow.”^[f] ²¹ And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”^[l]

Here is the fifth warning – the final warning of Hebrews.

Once again we see recurring patterns. The author is contrasting Mount Sinai with Mount Zion – he is contrasting the law, symbolized by Sinai, with faith, symbolized by Mount Zion.

The readers, experiencing intense persecution, were seeking a refuge to which they could flee. They sought a return to Temple worship under the Mosaic Covenant.

The author reminds the readers that at the time the law was given, the people were overwhelmed with fear because of the fire, blackness, darkness, tempest and trumpet sound that caused them to flee from His presence. They did not experience quietness, rest, and peace, but rather an overwhelming fear. So unapproachable was God at Sinai that instructions had been given that if an animal touched the mountain, it was to be put to death (Ex. 19:12-13). The people were so afraid of God that they begged that His voice might be stilled (Ex. 20:18-19).

The author's point is that if one was to seek refuge again in the law under the Mosaic Covenant, they would not find peace and rest.

Hebrews 12:22-24

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

BUT – they and we have not come to Sinai but to Mount Zion. They have come to the city of the living God.

In saying, “You have come to Mount Zion,” the author is focusing on the difference between the law and grace.

- The law thunders the message of human sin and divine punishment.
- Grace joyfully shouts the Gospel of God's removal of sin forever.
- Sinai emphasizes the inapproachability of God.
- Zion emphasizes God's presence.

God does NOT change! Our holy and loving God gave the law to the children of Israel.

Mount Zion:

- The City of the living God.
 - Where He personally dwells. It is a city where there is no darkness at all, for the glory of God illuminates it and the Lamb is its light (Rev. 21:23).
 - It is the land of “no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain” (Rev. 21:4).
 - It is the place where God Himself “will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3)
- The heavenly Jerusalem
 - Existing in the realm of the unseen where there are “an innumerable company of angels” (Heb. 12:22).
 - While unseen – it is very real. The host of angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14)
 - General Assembly and Church of the Firstborn
 - This refers to all believers of this present age which had its beginning on the day of Pentecost and will continue until the translation of the saints out of this world (I Thess. 4:13-17).
 - “The spirits of just men made perfect”
 - OT saints together with the Tribulation saints who will be resurrected and translated there at the Second Advent of Christ to earth (Dan. 12:12).
- John describes “the holy city, New Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:1-8) as the eternal dwelling place of all the redeemed of all the ages. This is the city to which Abraham looked forward (Heb. 11:10), in which “the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).
- Believers will enter this city on the basis of Jesus’ blood – the blood of the New Covenant (Heb. 13:24).

Hebrews 12:25-29

²⁵ See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, ²⁶ whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I shake^[h] not only the earth, but also heaven.”^[i] ²⁷ Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may^[j] serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God is a consuming fire.

While God spoke at Sinai, the author views God as still speaking from heaven (Heb. 12:25). God’s revelation has come through the apostles/the author.

When the law was given at Sinai, the word from God “shook the earth”. This word suggests a violent convulsion of nature.

The author quotes Haggai 2:6 - ⁶“For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land. . . .’” and interprets it to teach “the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made” (Heb. 12:27).

Everything of this creation will be destroyed, and only “the things which cannot be shaken” will remain.

The readers are already “registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). Therefore, the author exhorts them to “have grace.”

The phrase “have grace” is used in Heb. 12:28 in the sense of “be thankful”. We’re to appreciate what God has done and respond out of thankfulness rather than fear. True appreciation for what God has done for us motivates acceptable service which flows from a grateful, loving heart.

They have access to the throne of grace where they “may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

Their particular need is for patient endurance. By receiving the gift of God’s grace they “may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Heb. 12:28).

As a consuming fire, God purifies all that is unworthy and unacceptable in those who serve Him. Serve Him from a heart that is pleasing and acceptable.

Are we going to be part of the cloud of witnesses? Are we going to end well and bear witness regarding the sufficiency of Jesus?

God give us wisdom to do so!

QUESTIONS

Ask God to reveal encumbrances/weights and sins that you should lay aside in your walk with Him.

In what ways is Jesus the “author and finisher” of our faith?

What does the word “chasten” mean?

What is God’s attitude in disciplining us? What is God’s goal in disciplining us? What does God’s discipline feel like to us? What is the end result if we respond appropriately?

What is the nature of the peace we’re to pursue?

What is the danger of failing to see the grace of God?

In what way does Esau illustrate the danger that the author of Hebrews warns against?

What is the significance of Mount Sinai? What is the significance of Mount Zion?

How can we serve God acceptably?