

Teaching Tips

September 18
Bible Study Guide 3

Words You Should Know

A. Witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) *martus* (Gk.)—Those who can verify a particular truth based on what they know, have seen, or heard.

B. Chastening (vv. 5, 7, 11) *paideia* (Gk.)—Education or training; by implication, it also means disciplinary correction.

Teacher Preparation

Unifying Principle—Steadfast Fortitude. The writer of Hebrews tells us to keep our eyes on Christ Jesus to grow in grace and character.

A. Study Hebrews 11 and 12.

B. Make a list of some of the struggles African Americans have had to endure to reach and enjoy the standard of living we experience today.

D. Complete the companion lesson in the *Precepts For Living*® Study Guide.

O—Open the Lesson

A. Open the class with prayer.

B. Ask the students to share some of the ways they have suffered and dealt with adversity and the lessons they learned.

C. Have the students silently read the In Focus story. Discuss.

P—Present the Scriptures

A. Use the Background and The People, Places, and Times sections to build the lesson.

B. Discuss why God allows His children to suffer for righteousness' sake.

C. Ask a student to read Hebrews 12:1–11 and then discuss it with the entire class.

E—Explore the Meaning

A. Have volunteers respond to the Discuss the Meaning questions.

B. Explain that 2 Corinthians 13:5 teaches that we are to examine ourselves to see whether we are “in the faith.”

C. Ask: What can we learn from suffering for Christ's sake? Have we denied ourselves, taken up our crosses, and followed Jesus?

N—Next Steps for Application

A. Ask the students to share some of their trials and tribulations that have made them stronger in the faith with others who are in need.

B. Close with prayer.

Worship Guide

For the Superintendent or Teacher

Theme: Faith Is Endurance

Song: “I Am on the Battlefield
for My Lord”

Devotional Reading: James 5:7–11

Faith Is Endurance

Bible Background • HEBREWS 12:1-11

Printed Text • HEBREWS 12:1-11 | Devotional Reading • JAMES 5:7-11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DESCRIBE how to have enduring faith; BECOME CONVINCED that we can endure in faith; and DEVELOP a plan to utilize our faith to determine and reach spiritual goals.

In Focus

As Regina crossed the finish line in the Citywide 5K race she wanted to pinch herself. Was this a dream? Just one year ago, Regina was sitting on the couch binging on snacks and TV shows.

She began to gain weight and have pain in her back. She knew she should start eating healthier and exercising but she just wasn't motivated.

She cried out to God for help.

"Lord, I am so tired of feeling tired all of the time and being in pain, but it is so hard to consistently do what's right. I need your help to make a change so that I can see positive results. Please help me turn things around. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Once she prayed, Regina seemed determined to do what was necessary to meet her goals. She worked hard not to snack between meals, and she joined a walking group for accountability. Over the next few months, the group progressed from walking to jogging to running and registered for the 5K race together.

As the group congratulated each other on a well-run race Regina looked up, "We did it, thank you, Lord!"

In today's lesson, we see that Jesus set the perfect example as the leader who was tempted but did not give in. He endured the pain and shame of the Cross to achieve the joy and victory of eternal life with God.

Keep in Mind

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

(Hebrews 12:1-2, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Hebrews 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:

6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?

8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?

10 For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.

11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

The People, Places, and Times

Rome. As the capital city of Italy, it was the center of commerce, culture, and religion. A myriad of religions dotted the social landscape at the time this letter to the Hebrews was circulated. Although there were times when Jews and Christians were expelled from Rome, there were other times when they could worship freely.

Believers in Rome. Scholars are very unsure of the intended audience, but in Hebrews 13:24, the writer sends greetings from those of Italy. The *NIV Study Bible* notes that the writer is passing on greetings from some Italian believers. William Barclay in his *Daily Study Bible* on Hebrews suggests that it was written to a group of Jewish Christians who met in a “house-church” in

Rome (Barclay, 6-7). They were a subgroup of the main Christian congregation that had been formed there years earlier. Living in a climate of other religions and cults, their faith was tested constantly. When times were hard—politically, culturally, socially, and economically—the chance was greater that they would be tempted to return to Judaism. It was not easy nor politically correct to be a Christian at this time. Christians in Rome had to deal with the threat of persecution by the Roman authorities; although, none of them had become martyrs like Stephen and others. This happened later under Nero, the emperor. Because they were still alive, the writer encouraged them to continue to run their race and not give up. He reminded them that Jesus never gave up and that they shouldn’t either.

Background

Some Bible commentators believe Hebrews was written to a Jewish-Christian congregation in Rome around A.D. 67–70. Others believe it was written to Jews living in Egypt or Palestine. Traditionally, authorship was attributed to the apostle Paul, but modern scholars are unsure of the true identity of the author of this epistle. Some believe Barnabas wrote it, and still others suggest Apollos, a Jew born in Alexandria, which is located in northern Africa. The author wrote the letter in response to the threat that believers might renounce Christianity and revert to Judaism. The writer wanted to inform his vacillating readers that Jesus Christ, the object of God’s final revelation, is superior to the greatest of Judaism’s heroes. The writer also wanted to highlight, while reminding his audience of, the efficacy of Jesus’ power of salvation. He emphasizes that whereas the Jewish legal sacrificial system was powerless to remit sins, Jesus, the eternal High Priest, “is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Furthermore, the writer explained the need for patient endurance amid the persecution and sufferings to which the heirs of eternal salvation are inevitably exposed.

The writer suggests that all Christians emulate Jesus’ suffering and patience in anticipation of an eternal reward. One cannot help but notice the metaphors of Greek athletic terms such as “run with perseverance the race” and “a great cloud of witnesses [spectators]” (Hebrews 12:1, NIV). These Christians were to think of themselves as athletes who possessed endurance in order to ensure victory over the forces of evil. The writer also made it clear that the Christians’ secret weapon, needed for victory in spite of trials and tribulations, was unwavering faith.

At-A-Glance

1. Believers Must Run the Race
(Hebrews 12:1–2)
2. Believers Must Develop Endurance
(vv. 3–6)
3. Believers Must Learn to Accept the Discipline of the Lord (vv. 7–11)

In Depth

1. Believers Must Run the Race (Hebrews 12:1–2)

The writer encourages the Christian readers to continue to “run their race” of discipleship no matter what tries to hinder them. He tells them not to get distracted by burdens or sins that are present in their lives.

Being a Christian was not an easy thing back then, and it still isn’t today. It is a lifelong commitment that involves peaks and valleys, good times and bad times, and sunshine and rain. Christian discipleship is not akin to a sprint; it is a marathon. That is why the author tells his audience to use “perseverance” (v. 1, NIV). Perseverance is an inner quality that allows one to continue in some course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition. To persevere is to be steadfast in a particular purpose.

Disciples of Jesus Christ must always look to Jesus as the ultimate model of perseverance. In His ministry, He suffered insults and attempts on His life. He persisted even though His hometown and relatives rejected Him. He overcame the obstinacy of His followers and betrayal by one of His own. He never faltered during the unjust criminal trial that accused Him of sedition and heresy or the beating by the Roman police force. Finally, He did not waver on the Cross at Calvary. He did all of that not only so future generations of believers would have access to a spiritual power potent enough

to change the world but also to set an example of the perfect leader who was tempted but did not give in. And most importantly, He endured the Cross to carry our sins and provide the way of salvation for us.

We must also remember that we have an inspiration. We are surrounded by a “great ... cloud of witnesses,” credible leaders who have fought a good fight, finished their course, kept the faith, and earned their crowns of righteousness. They are our inspiration. Our heroes of faith should inspire us to keep our faith so we can pursue a life of complete holiness and participate in kingdom work that can change our world and be a witness of the world to come. Today, we look at heroes of faith such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mary McLeod Bethune, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks.

Therefore, as we continue to live as ambassadors of Christ, let us persevere on our jobs, in our homes, and in our communities. God demands our best in this life. No matter what hardships we go through, our history is peppered with credible leaders who have overcome greater hardships than we have ever had to imagine. We can learn from them. If they made it, surely we can make it. With God on our side and a “great ... cloud of witnesses” cheering us on, we can get through any adverse situation we face.

2. Believers Must Develop Endurance (vv. 3–6)

When life becomes unbearable and we get discouraged by some temporal circumstances, we ought to have enough of a spiritual sense to look to Jesus as our source of strength. If we think of all that Jesus endured, giving His life so we might have life, we have to thank God for the character and integrity of His Son Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews encouraged the vacillating Jewish Christians, when they began to complain about the adversity they had to

face, to consider Jesus’ suffering. He supported his argument by testifying that they had not faced persecution to the degree that they had shed their own blood. He also let them know that trials suffered for righteousness’ sake could be theologically viewed as the “chastening of the Lord,” God’s “disciplinary correction, instruction, and nurture.”

The Lord’s chastening is not arbitrary or without direction—it always has a purpose. The writer suggests that trials could be disciplinary correction and a part of God’s overall plan to edify His children. Corrective discipline is always a good thing that symbolizes love. When an earthly father exercises discipline on his child, in most cases it’s meant to be is beneficial to the child so that the same wrong actions will not be repeated. Our Heavenly Father operates in the same way. Because God loves us, He disciplines us so we will not commit the same sins or something worse.

Even when seemingly unprovoked trials and tribulations come into our lives, we can benefit from them. Romans 8:28 reads, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Truly, when we try to compare what we have to go through to what Jesus endured, we see there is no comparison. He suffered much for us. The question is: What will we suffer through for Him? It is hard for us to lose, to mourn the death of a loved one, to feel the pain of a broken relationship or the discomfort of owing insurmountable debt. Trials will come in this life. Pain will be a part of our pilgrimage. But the good news is that enduring the suffering brings us into new levels of God’s consciousness.

3. Believers Must Learn to Accept the Discipline of the Lord (vv. 7–11)

The writer of Hebrews presents yet another reason that believers should cheerfully bear

affliction when it comes. Christians are encouraged to endure the discipline of the Lord because it is the mark of the sonship of Christ as well as the way to become more holy and righteous.

The Bible is clear that those who suffer for righteousness' sake glorify God: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12–13, KJV). Second Timothy 2:12 says, "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us." The writers insist that we must look on all the hardships of life as the discipline of God sent to work, not for our harm, but for our ultimate and highest good.

It is never pleasant to be corrected and disciplined by God, but His discipline is a sign of His deep love for us. When God corrects you, see it as proof of His love and His ability to lead you in the right direction. Then pray and ask Him what He is working to teach you. We may respond to the Lord's discipline in several ways. First, we can accept it with resignation. Second, we can accept it with self-pity, thinking we really don't deserve it. Third, we can be angry and resentful toward God. Or, fourth, we can accept it gratefully, which is the appropriate response we owe a loving Father who cares enough about us to point us in the right direction.

Search the Scriptures

1. What should inspire Christians to hold on to their faith (Hebrews 12:1)?
2. Why is our Christianity never to be stationary or stagnant (v. 1)?
3. Who should we model ourselves after (v. 2)?
4. What is the end result of God's chastening (vv. 10–11)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What makes Jesus a credible leader? How would you have turned out if the Lord had not chastised you? Think about your children or children you know. Imagine how they would grow up without someone to discipline them.

2. Why is it so hard for Christians to adjust to suffering? Have you been told that once you give your life to Jesus, everything will be all right? How have we been anesthetized into believing that children of God are exempt from suffering?

Liberating Lesson

Before a professional sports team takes the field, it goes through training camp. Training camp is a fiery trial that most players hate. However, veterans and rookies alike must endure training camp in order to learn new plays, to get into shape, and, most importantly, to learn how to become a disciplined and victorious team.

If we Christians are going to be victorious, we have to endure our own version of training camp. God, our coach (leader), wants to turn us into a well-trained and well-disciplined body of believers. To do that, God allows some adversity into our lives. Christians are like tea bags. In order for our rich and robust flavor to come out, we have to be placed in hot water. The Christians in our text were being tested so that their "flavor" would come out.

Application for Activation

Many great biblical and historical characters had to endure much suffering for the causes they supported, whether it was for the spread of Christianity or in the fight for civil rights. Life is a marathon, not a sprint. If we are going to be successful, individually and collectively, we have to keep our eyes on the prize. Individually, that prize is to become like Jesus Christ; collectively, the prize is to make the kingdom of God a reality in our midst. Commit to following

Jesus' example of godly discipline even when times are tough and temptation to sin is great. Continue working toward your goals, never giving up and keeping your eyes on the prize.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Hebrews 12:1–11

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

In this verse, the “great cloud of witnesses” is referring to those persons mentioned in chapter 11. Here, the writer is saying that those who have gone before are examples to others of living the life of faith. God has confirmed their faithfulness, and they can be seen as examples of those who endured. Therefore, in light of our inspiring audience, we must rid ourselves of “every weight” and “run with patience.”

The Greek word for “patience” is *hupomone* (hoo-po-mo-NAY), derived from two Greek words: *hupo* (hoo-PO), meaning “under,” and *meno* (MEN-oh), meaning “to remain.” In other words, the Greek root indicates that by remaining under some trial, we may be molded to fit God’s purposes.

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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

To run the race, one must stay focused on Jesus, as implied here by the use of the Greek word *aphorao* (ah-for-AH-oh), translated as “looking.” To *aphorao* means “to turn the eyes away from other things and fix them on something else”—namely Jesus. We do so because Jesus is the “author” (Gk. *archegos*, ar-khay-GOSS), meaning chief leader, and the “finisher” (Gk. *teleiotes*, tel-i-OT-ace), which means “perfecter” of faith. In other words, Jesus’ life is the perfect example of faith.

The word “endured” comes from *hupomeno* (Gk. hoop-om-EN-oh), meaning “to remain or tarry.” Jesus chose to remain on the Cross and bear the cost of sin to save humanity. Jesus focused on the future and finished the work of our redemption, bringing many to glory (Hebrews 2:10).

4 Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

Here, the readers are reminded that although they may have suffered great persecution (Hebrews 10:32–34), none have shed blood and died as Jesus did. None had yet become martyrs because of their confession of Jesus as their Messiah or Savior.

5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation that speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son he receiveth.

In verses 5 and 6, the author quotes Proverbs 3:11–12. The Lord disciplines those He loves. In these verses, the reader is reminded of the parent-child relationship. Undisciplined children are unloved children. The use of the Greek word *paideia* (pahee-**DI**-ah) means “to nurture” or “give instruction.” The writer is saying that one should not make light of God’s instruction but welcome it as a means of spiritual growth.

7 If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? 8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Christians should view trials as a form of divine discipline. Just as a parent would discipline a child so would God deal with the sinner. No wise father or mother would allow his or her children to continue exhibiting bad behavior and not correct it. Therefore, receiving discipline can be viewed as a sign of God’s fatherly love.

9 Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?

God, here, is called “the Father of spirits” (an expression that occurs only here in the New Testament) in contrast to the human “fathers of our flesh.” The writer makes a comparison between an earthly father and the Heavenly Father. The argument is that if earthly parents discipline us and we respect them for it over the

long run, then we should respect our Heavenly Father even more.

10 For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.

Verse 10 points out the difference between human and heavenly discipline. The Greek word for “profit” is *sumphero* (soom-**FEHR**-oh), which means “to help, to be profitable or to be expedient.” Our earthly parents discipline us “for a few days,” whereas God’s discipline gives us an eternal benefit. Human discipline is often inconsistent and sometimes provides a temporary benefit. However, the long-term goal in God’s discipline is that we might be “partakers” (Gk. *metalambano*, me-ta-lahm-**BAHN**-oh) of His holiness. Nothing pleases God more than children who grow to emulate Him.

11 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Present discipline seems painful because it is! The purpose of our pain is to produce Christ-like behavior. Sometimes we have to endure painful discipline. The Greek word for “exercised” is *gumnazo* (goom-**NAHD**-zoh), and here it implies exercise of the mind in order to endure persecution. God desires for His children to have fruitful lives, and often, that requires pain and sacrifice.

Sources:

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Say It Correctly

Beset. bih-**SET**.
Chasten. **CHEY**-suhn.
Exhortation. Eg-zawr-**TEY**-shuhn.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Discipline of the Lord
(Job 5:8–18)

TUESDAY

The Death of Sin
(Romans 6:1–11)

WEDNESDAY

The Race for the Prize
(1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

THURSDAY

The Training for Godliness
(1 Timothy 4:6–10)

FRIDAY

The Endurance of the Faithful
(James 5:7–11)

SATURDAY

The Example of Faithfulness
(1 Peter 2:18–25)

SUNDAY

The Pioneer of Faith
(Hebrews 12:1–11)

Notes

Teaching Tips

September 25
Bible Study Guide 4

Words You Should Know

A. Voice (Hebrews 12:19, 26) *phone* (Gk.)—A sound; a tone; speech; the sound of uttered words.

B. Mediator (v. 24) *mesites* (Gk.)—One who intervenes between two others to restore peace and friendship.

Teacher Preparation

Unifying Principle—Steadfast Thanks.
The writer of Hebrews says we do not have to fear death because God, in Christ Jesus, brought us forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

A. Pray and ask God for lesson clarity and that students will seek God's forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

B. Study and reflect on the entire lesson.

C. Complete the companion lesson in the *Precepts For Living*® Study Guide.

O—Open the Lesson

A. After receiving prayer requests, open class with prayer.

B. Discuss students' fears about death and assurance of God's grace.

C. Ask for a volunteer to read the In Focus story and relate the story to today's Aim for Change.

D. Discuss expressions of God's love and forgiveness.

P—Present the Scriptures

A. Read the Keep in Mind verse collectively.

B. Ask for volunteers to read the Focal Verses.

C. Use the Background, The People, Places, and Times, and In Depth outline to expand the meaning of today's Focal Verses.

E—Explore the Meaning

A. Read and discuss the Application for Activation and Liberating Lesson sections.

B. Ask the students to suggest ways to share God's forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

C. Discuss the peace we have because of the assurance of God's grace.

N—Next Steps for Application

A. Instruct students to review the Daily Bible Readings to prepare for next week's class.

B. Close with prayer.

Worship Guide

For the Superintendent or Teacher

Theme: Faith Inspires Gratitude

Song: "Give Thanks with
a Grateful Heart"

Devotional Reading:

2 Thessalonians 1:1–7

Faith Inspires Gratitude

Bible Background • HEBREWS 12:14–29

Printed Text • HEBREWS 12:18–29 | Devotional Reading • 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1–7

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **KNOW** the meaning of God’s forgiveness and promise of eternal life; **EXPLORE** our fears about death and assurances of God’s grace; and **REPENT** for sometimes rejecting God’s grace.

In Focus

Lamar lay in the hospital bed; he couldn’t remember anything. His brother, Warren, said, “Good morning. It has been almost six days since the accident. Do you remember what happened?” Lamar shook his head.

Warren said, “You had a stroke while you were driving. Your car just stopped on the side of the road.”

Lamar became frustrated when he tried to lift his right hand. As his wife, Joyce, hugged him, she whispered, “You are paralyzed on your right side. The doctors don’t know if it is permanent.” Tears ran down Lamar’s face.

Each day, Joyce prayed with Lamar, who became withdrawn. One day, Warren visited Lamar at the rehabilitation center.

Warren said, “You know God has His hand on your life. His grace and mercy are so evident. You could be dead, but His grace has allowed you to live. Be thankful!”

Lamar said, “I am not sure. I believe that death would be better than half a life.”

Warren said, “You are blessed with life for a purpose. God’s grace has spared you.”

God is gracious and merciful. When we experience difficulty in life, we should trust God.

In today’s lesson, we are reminded to trust God and not fear death but live each day with thankfulness as we experience God’s grace.

Keep in Mind

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”
(Hebrews 12:28, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Hebrews 12:18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,

19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:

20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:

21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)

22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,

23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:

26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.

27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

29 For our God is a consuming fire.

The People, Places, and Times

Mosaic Covenant. The Pentateuch (first five books of Old Testament) record the conditions and requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, which was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai for God's people, the Israelites. Moses was the liaison between God and the Israelites. Moses communicated God's requirements for the covenant and pled Israel's case before God. After God revealed His power and rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the Mosaic Covenant was conditional based on Israel fulfilling its part of the covenant.

New Covenant. The New Covenant is based on Jesus Christ, the Mediator, who died for the sins of all humanity. Jesus established the New Covenant through His own death and

commissioned His disciples and believers to share the Good News about the kingdom of God. Believers will dwell with God in the heavenly city of God, Mount Zion (Sion).

Mount Zion. This is a reference to the heavenly city of God and believers who will dwell with Him. The mountain is available through the blood of Jesus. It is a celebration of the Holy One where angels, believers, and righteous people dwell.

Background

The majority of the earliest believers in Christ were Jews. When Paul went to Jerusalem, he was told, "Many thousands of Jews there are which believe" (Acts 21:20). The number of Jewish Christians grew, but the church communities

endured physical and social persecution from the Jews and Romans. Many people were arrested and ostracized because of their faith, and some suffered physically and experienced loss of their property because of their belief. The writer of Hebrews expressed the superiority of Christianity and urged believers to keep their eyes on Jesus. The early believers may have considered returning to Judaism to hold on to the biblical truths. The people needed to remember that Jesus was the Messiah and that He would return. The writer of Hebrews wanted the believers to hold onto their faith and look forward to Jesus' return.

As the believers at the newborn church struggled, disciples who had victoriously run the race gazed at the struggling believers. The writer urged them not to be discouraged by struggles that perfect believers. He also urged them to be very careful and guard against defiling themselves and selling their birthrights, which would result in losing the promises of God. We must remember our actions have lasting consequences. Although we repent and seek God's forgiveness, we cannot eliminate the consequences of sin.

At-A-Glance

1. The Two Mountains: Sinai and Zion (The Heavenly City) (Hebrews 12:18–21)
2. The Heavenly City (Zion or Sion) (vv. 22–23)
3. The Heavenly City and Jesus, the Mediator (v. 24)
4. Criteria for Entering the Heavenly City (vv. 25–26)
5. Preparing for the Heavenly City (vv. 27–29)

In Depth

1. The Two Mountains: Sinai and Zion (The Heavenly City) (Hebrews 12:18–21)

The writer of Hebrews compares the Mosaic Covenant with the New Covenant by examining two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. God gave the Law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai with a majestic display of “thunderings, and the lightnings ... they (the people) removed (themselves) and stood afar off” (Exodus 20:18). The people came before God with fear and trembling at Mount Sinai. They feared that speaking directly to God would lead to death.

In contrast, through a New Covenant, Christian believers joyfully approached God through the blood of Jesus on Mount Zion (Sion), which is the Heavenly City of God. While God seemed distant and threatening at Mount Sinai, at Mount Zion, Jesus has made the believer's faith personal. Through Christ, we have the promise of eternal life through forgiveness of our sins. We can accept God's invitation through Christ, receive forgiveness and experience the presence of God.

2. The Heavenly City Zion (or Sion) (vv. 22–23)

Ancient custom approved special treatment for the firstborn son, who received a father's blessings, which was a double portion. In the Old Testament, Joseph received a double inheritance among the sons of Jacob instead of Reuben, who had unacceptable behavior. The firstborn son received special blessings from his earthly father. The heirs in heaven are believers, who are justified and made perfect because they are in heaven, they are “just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23). Through Christ, believers will inherit the Kingdom: “Ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:24). We have the promise of eternal life, our inheritance.

By faith, believers' names are recorded in heaven; they are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Believers can come to God by faith through Christ, make a supplication, and receive absolution for their sins and justification. We have an eternal home with God in heaven and the blessings of the firstborn. Thus, every believer is an heir with rights and privileges of the firstborn.

3. The Heavenly City and Jesus, the Mediator (v. 24)

Jesus Christ is the mediator or "go-between" uniting two parties: God and sinful humanity. Moses was the mediator of the Mosaic Covenant; he was the liaison between God and the Israelites. Moses gave the Israelites God's Law, instruction, and the obligations for the covenant between God and the Israelites.

In the same vein, Jesus is the mediator for the New Covenant that was established through His sacrificial death on the Cross. He helps believers to remain in a covenant relationship with God. Therefore, through Jesus, humanity prays to God and receives His favor. Jesus pleads our cause before God. The New Covenant of Jesus Christ speaks forgiveness for the believer and new life through Christ, our mediator.

4. Criteria for Entering the Heavenly City (vv. 25–26)

Jesus Christ speaks to humanity and He offers forgiveness through God's grace and mercy. Because we have more knowledge of Christ and the promise of eternal life, "If we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven" we will be judged for our unbelief (Hebrews 12:25). Therefore, our faith in God should inspire our gratitude for all that He's done for us.

When Korah, a Levite who was the tabernacle assistant, instigated a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, God destroyed him. Korah and the other leaders directly challenged Moses and

God. As a result, God judged and punished their unbelief. Today, God still judges unbelief. If we do not believe and accept Christ, we refuse Him.

The "whole mountain trembled violently" when God gave the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18, NIV). When Christ returns, God will "shake not the earth only, but also heaven" (Hebrews 12:26). The entire universe will shake when the Son of God returns, but the kingdom of God will not be shaken. It will endure through eternity. The power of God will be evident, and everyone will recognize Him.

5. Preparing for the Heavenly City (vv. 27–29)

The writer of Hebrews explains that temporary things will be shaken and removed when Christ returns, while the eternal things will not be moved. The "things which cannot be shaken may remain"; they are eternal (Hebrews 12:27). Only God's kingdom will last.

Believers will endure the shaking and endure through the grace of God. We will receive the kingdom of God that will endure; it is unchanging and cannot be moved. No power on earth or hell can destroy God's kingdom.

The writer encourages believers to "have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28). Grace is the unmerited favor of God that offers the gift of salvation to humanity. We can hold to the grace we have received and trust the assurance that we have an eternal home with God. By grace, we serve God with love and respect. If you have rejected God's grace, repent and receive God's love and mercy today. Then accept the gift of His Son with gratitude.

Search the Scriptures

1. How did the blood of Jesus satisfy God's revenge (Hebrews 12:24)?

2. When Jesus returns, the heavens and earth will shake. What and who will remain amid the burning and shaking (v. 27)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. As disciples of the New Covenant, how can we share the meaning of God's forgiveness and the promise of eternal life?

2. Why do people knowingly reject Jesus Christ and God's promise of eternal life?

Liberating Lesson

According to a recent Gallup poll, 35 percent of Americans said they attend church each week while 20 percent say they do not, and 25 percent say they seldom attend. However, the number of African Americans who say they attend church is much greater—53 percent. The economic turmoil has caused a surge in church attendance. Many people turn to God because of fear, judgment, or uncertainty to find security and seek a firm foundation that the world cannot offer. When believers accept Christ, the eternal promise of new life with God outweighs their temporary fears. By faith, we focus on the assurances we have through God's grace. The firm assurances are not based upon the world but upon God's promises. Through God's grace, we can experience God's continual presence. Receive God's grace and experience His presence and His eternal promises.

Application for Activation

The news constantly reports details of natural disasters, economic hardships, and of lives that seem to have little focus on steadfast thankfulness for God. The struggles of life are not the focus in today's lesson. Instead, it is the challenge to be thankful for God's grace even when troubles shake our world. But that grace is only available to those who believe and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. Have you made that decision?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Hebrews 12:18–29

18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, 19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: 20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake)

Beginning from verse 18, the author contrasts the Jewish and Christian ways by juxtaposing the terrors associated with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai with the glory associated with Mount Zion. Although the description in verses 18–21 leaves no doubt that the writer has Sinai in mind, there is no explicit

reference to the mountain of revelation. The phenomena listed are all associated with the Sinai event (see Deuteronomy 4:11). Elsewhere, they are all linked with the presence of God: “fire” (Judges 13:20; 1 Kings 18:38), “darkness” (1 Kings 8:12), and “tempest” (Nahum 1:3); the “trumpet” (Hebrews 12:19) are all associated with the End Times when God will manifest Himself (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). The picture is one that strikes terror in the heart. He sounds the note of warning that great privilege means great responsibility.

The Israelites were terrified by the experience. They responded to “a sound of words” by pleading that no further message be given to them (Hebrews 12:19b). The writer’s statement summarizes Deuteronomy 5:23–27; it particularly reflects on Deuteronomy 5:25, where the people express the fear that they will be consumed by the fire if they continue to listen to the voice (see Exodus 20:18–19). So they asked that they should hear God’s voice no more (Exodus 20:19; Deuteronomy 5:25–27). They were overcome with terror and wanted no further part in the wonderful events. The fearfulness of the giving of the Law on Sinai is mentioned with reference to one of the commands laid on the people, namely, that neither man nor beast should touch the mountain under penalty of death (Exodus 19:13). “The writer [of Hebrews 12:20] focuses upon the most stringent aspect of the command: ‘if even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned,’ in order to emphasize the gravity of the injunction and the peril of coming before the annihilating holiness of the divine appearing.” (Lane, 463). In effect, the command that nothing touch it indicates the holiness of the mountain. Judgment for anyone who ignores the holiness of God is swift and terrible.

Hebrews 12:21 is a further indication of the awe of it all. At the time of the giving of the

Law, Moses was the leader of the people. He was known as one who had an especially close relationship with God (Exodus 33:11). Yet, even he was terrified. It was a scary occasion, one that affected all the people and terrified even Moses, the man of God.

22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

“But” is the strong conjunction that (Gk. *alla*, al-LAH) introduces a marked contrast. Christians order their lives in accordance with a different revelation. Scholar William Lane writes: “In sharp contradistinction from the scene at Sinai, every aspect of this vision provides encouragement for coming boldly into the presence of God (see 4:16)...An overwhelming impression of the distant God is eclipsed in the experience of full access to the presence of God and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant,” (Lane, 464-465).

The destination of the Christian pilgrims is described by various evocative images. First, they are “come unto” Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:22). This is to be understood not as the seat of temporal Israel but as a reference to God’s eschatological rule through Christ, just as in Revelation 14:1–5. Second, Hebrews 12:22 states that they have come to the “city of the living God,” a city with foundations that the patriarchs looked forward to and one that is eternal (13:14). The book of Revelation also uses this image for God’s presence, when it speaks of a “holy city” (21:2; 22:19). Third, Hebrews 12:22 says they have come to the “heavenly Jerusalem”

a designation that is called “new Jerusalem” in Revelation 3:12.

It should be noted that the City of God, later famously expounded upon by Augustine, is filled with life and contains a more vibrant, dynamic, and powerful sort than is available on earth. Hebrews 12:22 says there are “innumerable” or “countless numbers” (Gk. *urias*, moo-REE-as) of angels who are present as part of the welcoming and celebratory throng. Then we have the church of the firstborn. In verse 23, the Greek word *ekklesia* (ek-klay-SEE-ah), translated as “church,” is taken from the common civic life of the Greeks and normally refers to the official gathering of the officials or their representatives. The “firstborn” (Gk. *prototokia*, pro-tot-OK-ee-ah) probably refers to all those “sons” whom God is leading into glory together with Jesus (Hebrews 2:10). Understood this way, it means “the spirits of just men made perfect” (12:23), or the spirits of righteous people. It is another way of describing the same participants in the true inheritance, which is a participation in God’s holiness. In summation, the City of God is filled with angels and saints. The climax is reached in verse 24 with the reference to Jesus, who here is “the mediator of a new covenant.” The author does not only affirm the humanity of Jesus and His role as mediator but also places Him definitively at God’s side, a place that was His from the beginning (Hebrews 1:1–4). Jesus’ blood speaks “a better word” than that of Abel (12:24, NIV). His blood opens up a way into the holiest for people (10:19).

25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: 26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth

only, but also heaven. 27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

The transition from exposition in Hebrews 12:18–24 to exhortation in verses 25–29 is abrupt. The author, with a sharp change in tone, resumes the expression of urgent concern that characterizes verses 14–17. Here, the sternness of the warning is justified by the detailing of the privileged status of Christians in verses 18–24. They have a qualitatively greater responsibility than Israel did to listen attentively to the voice of God. Those who deliberately ignore the eschatological revelation of God through his Son and who show contempt for the blessings of the New Covenant cannot possibly escape judgment. The concluding paragraph consists of a sober caution to listen to what God is saying, a concentration of His word in the form of prophecy, and a final admonition to respond appropriately with gratitude and worship. A tendency toward apathy or complacency is sharply rebuked with the phrase, “Be careful that you do not refuse to listen to the One who is speaking,” (12:25, NLT). The form of the statement recalls 3:12, and it connotes a deliberate and culpable refusal to listen to the one speaking. The readers must also be aware that the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility, and the greater the peril involved in its rejection.

In 12:26, the author goes on to recall the solemnity of the events at Sinai. Repeatedly, we are told that then the earth shook (Exodus 19:18; Judges 5:4–5; Psalm 68:8; 77:18; 114:4, 7). The writer of Hebrews has already spoken of the awe-inspiring nature of what happened

when the Law was given. Now, the reference to the shaking of the earth brings it all back. At the same time, it enables the author to speak of a promise that involved a further shaking that is recorded in Haggai 2:6. The prophet looked forward to something much grander than Sinai. Then God shook the earth, but Haggai foresaw a day when God would shake “not only the earth but also the heavens” (Hebrews 12:26, NLT). This will be no small event but one of cosmic grandeur. The reference to heaven and earth may be meant to hint at the concept of the New Heaven and the New Earth (Isaiah 66:22). At any rate, it points to the decisive intervention that God will make at the last time.

In Hebrews 12:27, the writer uses the expression “yet once more” (Gk. *eti hapax*, **ET-ee HAP-ax**) to point out the decisive significance of the things of which the author is writing. There is an air of finality about it all. God is going to make a radical and final change. This is the decisive time. This physical creation can be shaken, and it is set in contrast to what cannot be shaken. These are the things that really matter, the things that have the character of permanence. The author does not go into detail about the precise nature of the ultimate rest. But whatever it may be, it will separate the things that last forever from those that do not. It is God’s will for this final differentiation to be made so that only what cannot be shaken will remain. As Donald Guthrie notes, what the writer is “concerned to demonstrate is that the Christian position, unlike the era of the Mosaic law, leads to a state of absolute stability,” (Guthrie, 265).

The ultimate reality of God’s sovereignty is evident in verse 28. Believers have received the Kingdom of God, which cannot be shaken. The Kingdom is something we “receive.” It is not earned or created by believers; it is God’s gift. While not all details are provided in the New Testament, it is clear that the Kingdom is in

stark contrast with earthly systems that can and will be shaken. This is untrue of God’s kingdom! The author does not simply say that it will not be shaken but that it cannot be. It has a quality found in nothing earthly. It is on the strength of this that the writer gives two exhortations: “let us have grace” and “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” The exhortations could also mean, “Let us be thankful, and let us offer acceptable worship to God.” The latter meaning is preferred. The appropriate response to the gift we have received is gratitude to God and acceptable worship, that is, in living a life that is pleasing to God. The qualification “with reverence and godly fear” constitutes a sober reminder of the holy character of God.

The chapter concludes with an expression apparently taken from Deuteronomy 4:24. The author of Hebrews 12 emphasizes that God is not to be trifled with. It is easy to be so taken up with the love and compassion of God that we overlook His implacable opposition to all evil. The wrath of God is not always a popular subject today, but it looms large in biblical teaching. Because God is in fact a consuming fire, we do best to come to Him on His terms.

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Say It Correctly

Moses. MOH-ziz, -zis.
Zion. ZI-uhn.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Listening to the Voice of Warning
(Ezekiel 33:1–9)

TUESDAY

Listening to the Spirit
(Revelation 3:1–13)

WEDNESDAY

Anticipating a Better Covenant
(Hebrews 8:1–7)

THURSDAY

Giving Thanks for the Faithful
(2 Thessalonians 1:1–7)

FRIDAY

Loving with God’s Kind of Love
(Matthew 5:43–48)

SATURDAY

Pursuing Peace and Holiness
(Hebrews 12:12–17)

SUNDAY

Offering Acceptable Worship
(Hebrews 12:18–29)

Notes
