

## Hebrews Study Session 18 - Chapter 12:1-17

The author of Hebrews begins the pastoral application of his message to the original audience. He does this by linking what he's about to discuss in chapter 12 with the previous chapter on the importance of faith. With the question of faith settled, now he moves forward with what to do with that faith in God. How does it show itself in the real world in which this congregation is living?

In this section of chapter 12, we are going to examine three sections. 1) How to run the race of the life of faith (vv.1-3), 2) How to endure the suffering that comes with the Christian life (vv.4-11), & 3) How to live the life of faith within the church body (vv.12-17).

### 1. How to run the race of the life of faith

#### **[Read Hebrews 12:1-3]**

The "therefore" at the beginning of v.1 clearly links what is coming in this section with the previous section on faith. What is coming is how to use or live by faith in the world.

The "we" links the author with the recipients. He was saying that he was in the race with them. The word for cloud usually means a cloud in the sky but rarely, as it does here, it can mean a throng of multitude of people. The author of Hebrews is stating that there is a throng of Old Testament saints who surround believers as they consider how to live their lives. But the wording implies that the witnesses mentioned here are more than just passive spectators. Rather, the term "witness" means that these Old Testament saints mentioned in chapter 11 (and more than mentioned) are actually witnesses of God's faithfulness. They are witnesses of the effectiveness of faith being shown in a believer's life. So the New Testament believer is surrounded by a host of Old Testament saints who are witnesses of God's faithfulness.

F.F. Bruce said of this verse, *"It is not so much they who look at us as we who look to them - for encouragement."*

The race mentioned in this verse is a long race, not a sprint. It is one that is going to require endurance and perseverance to complete. With the above mentioned "witnesses" idea, this race could be like a relay race, where those who have passed away, passed the baton of faith to the next generation of believers. So, they are now standing on the sidelines watching their next teammate run the next leg of the race.

"lay aside every encumbrance" - this is the only time in the New Testament this word is used. It speaks of an unnecessary weight that should be shed. Christians should travel light in this world. This phrase deals with things which are not wrong in and of themselves but place undo burdens upon us that keep us from putting forth our best effort.

Q: What are some of the encumbrances which we as believers cling to? (*many answers - anything in the "grey zone" of the faith - things not wrong but reveal a misuse of time, talents or treasure as well as misguided priorities*)

Q: Why do you think that the author was urging his readers to shed these unnecessary weights?

*(they kept them from living their life of faith in a God-honoring manner, other answers possible)*

**[Read Luke 9:57-62]**

There are things in the world that keep us from living as disciples of Christ. They are not bad or sinful in and of themselves but they hold us down. They add weight to a runner. Can you imagine trying to run a long race in a huge fur parka while carrying heavy barbells? You'd find it hard to move much less run. In fact, serious runners don't run with their warm-up pants on as they are too heavy and bulky. Some things are fine for the lost but will burden us and our ability to live by faith in Christ fully.

The next phrase deals with the possibility of sin holding Christians back from running effectively. The sin is said to be that which "easily entangles us". This is the only time in the New Testament that this word is used. It is a word that means to fully encompass and prevent us from moving.

The race is called a course that is marked out for us by God. This word was used by in 6:18 by the author to describe the hope that was placed before us. The runners are looking down the track and see the path that they are about to be running through.

Q: In what ways does sin entangle us? *(many answers - but it is a trap - once you get involved in a sin, your flesh and the devil and the world create a stronghold in your life that makes it difficult to escape)*

Q: What are Christians told to do with the unnecessary weights and the entangling sins? *(lay them aside)*

Q: Instead of the things and concerns of this world, where does our attention need to be? *(v.2 - on Jesus)*

Jesus is given two titles here. The first is "author". This word has numerous translations depending upon the context. It can mean champion, leader, forerunner or initiator - thus author - the one who initiates and tells the story. In 2:10 the author used this word of Jesus to describe Him as the one who brings us salvation. Forerunner and champion also fit the context of the race or athletic game. The second word is "perfecter". This is a word that the writer of Hebrews made up. It appears no where in the Greek language before this author used it. Jesus is the one who consummates our faith or brings it to the place God wants it to be. (As we have seen this author's love for the use of the word "perfect" in relation to our relationship with God.) (These two titles show that Jesus is the beginning and end of our faith or our Alpha and Omega.)

I see Jesus in this part of the passage similar to the rabbit that is used in a greyhound race. The greyhounds are fixated upon the rabbit that is mechanically moved around the track ahead of the dogs to keep them running. They are chasing it down with all their speed and won't take their eyes off the rabbit until the race is over. That's how we need to be with Jesus.

Q: What does it mean to fix our eyes upon Jesus in practical terms? *(many answers - it means no*

*divided loyalty or divided attention - one is fully attentive to Jesus.)*

Q: Why did Jesus endure the cross? *(v.2 - the joy set before Him)*

Q: In what way could His execution on the cross be reason for joy? *(it was for the payment of all of mankind's sins - to bring them to God and thus accomplish God's ultimate will for man.)*

Notice that Jesus despised the shame. Despise means to “think against” something. Normally, people don't do what they despise. Yet in this reversal, Jesus endured the cross for us and despised the shame. He considered the shame nothing in order to esteem the cross as that was God's will for Him. It is important to note that the author is also setting up his next theme here and that is the suffering of the saint and how to endure it successfully.

Q: What did Jesus do after the cross? *(v. 2 - He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God)*

Q: From our previous lessons, what does that mean? *(Jesus now is exalted in the heavens. He has completed His work for the salvation of man and is now in the most honored position in the universe.)*

Q: What is the consequence of forgetting that Jesus has sat down at the right hand of God's throne? *(one will begin to look for ways to save himself, other answers possible)*

The author puts the word “sat down” in the perfect tense which means that the emphasis is on the permanent result. He could only sit down once everything was done and now there is zero left to be done. The permanent result is that all the work needed for anyone's salvation is already completed by Christ.

The word “consider” in v.3 is a word that means “calculate”. Understanding that Jesus is the solution to living out the life of faith is the cure for doubt and hesitation.

Q: What is the author's main goal in pointing these people to the sufferings of Jesus? *(because they were suffering now as well and so their Savior could empathize with them as He had already suffered and now was in heaven, where they would some day be.)*

Remember, this section deals with living out the life of faith. Genuine faith in God always perseveres - which is with a joyful and confident expectation of God's work to be revealed through the ordeal. It will endure and it will not lose heart because it keeps itself fixed on Jesus - both what He did for us for salvation but also what He did for us in the way of showing us the suffering will come to those who believe in Him.

### **[Read II Timothy 3:10-12]**

Q: What are some of the reasons that this verse is true? Why does God place hardships and suffering along the course of our race? *(various answers but one is that we don't belong to this world and another is that it gives us a chance to show faith in God and grow in that trust in Him)*

*and get to know Him more fully.)*

## 2. How to endure suffering that comes with the Christian life

### **[Read Hebrews 12:4-11]**

In this section the author gave meaning to the sufferings that his audience was experiencing.

Q: According to the author, what have his original audience not done yet? (*resisted sin to the point of shedding blood yet*)

While it isn't stated plainly, based on what he just said, the author is making the point that Jesus did resist sin to the point of shedding blood. The word "resisted" or "striving" means to compete in an athletic event. The original audience isn't in the competition yet, but they need to be ready for it at any time.

Q: Do you think this warning applies to us today and if so how? (*being prepare for the suffering of the saints in the last days as well as every day of our lives*)

The reason the author stresses this here is because in the author's eyes, suffering has been transformed by Christ on the cross. His suffering was the will of God and it had profound meaning to it. We serve a Savior who suffered for us and would not lead us into meaningless suffering. As we will see, suffering is evidence that God loves us. It will be proof that we belong to God.

### **[Read I Peter 4:12-19]**

Q: According to Peter, why would the believer consider himself blessed when being reviled for bearing the name of Christ? (*v.14 - it shows that the Holy Spirit rests upon you - suffering is a mark of the world waging war against the Holy Spirit within us.*)

### **[Read Proverbs 3:11-12]**

Q: What does God do to those He loves? (*v. 6 - He disciplines them*)

The word "discipline" is both chastening and instructional. It is done to correct wrong beliefs and wrong behavior. The author is telling his original audience not to belittle the suffering that is a result of God's discipline. Discipline is a mark of being a legitimate son of God. The word "illegitimate" in v.8 refers to one who is born to a slave or concubine but is not a member of the family and not an heir. While he's not directly saying it, if you are not a child of God, you are a child of the devil. God has no business disciplining children which are not His. Discipline is one of the universal experiences of childhood thus rather than revile the experiences of discipline and suffering, believers are to endure it knowing it is for a reason.

Q: Does anyone have an example of a time when God disciplined you?

Q: Did it have a lasting impact on you?

Q: What are the differences between being disciplined by our earthly fathers and our Heavenly Father? *(vv.9-10 - Our earthly fathers did their best and they did it for a brief period of time while we were kids and they were subject to making mistakes. Our Heavenly Father only disciplines us for our good and knows what is truly best for us, He does it for us throughout this life and never makes mistakes.)*

Q: If our Heavenly Father never makes mistakes, how should we cope with any suffering that accompanies His discipline of us? *(we should patiently endure it, knowing it is for our best)*

Q: What is the goal of God's discipline? *(v.10 - to share in His holiness)*

The word "holiness" is not common in the New Testament. It refers to God's character. He is desiring for us to share in His character and become more like Him, our Heavenly Father.

Q: Why is there a strong temptation to avoid discipline? *(v.11 - it is unpleasant)*

Q: According to v.11, what do you think would happen if one does not endure suffering in the right spirit? *(it will not produce the right results)*

Q: So what do you consider the right attitudes to cling to when enduring suffering for God's discipline upon us? *(knowledge that it is for our best, to make us more like Him, to prepare us for a deeper relationship with Himself, to prepare us for heaven and eternity, to witness His glory and share it with others, many answers)*

It is important to note that if suffering isn't accepted in the right spirit, it will not yield the right result.

Q: Do you think that all suffering is God's discipline? Why or why not? *(personal answers)*  
*(Keep in mind that while discipline will involve some sort of suffering, sin also carries with it suffering in this world - it has a built in suffering attached to it. So discipline is not be the root of all suffering. There are many reasons for suffering and we just may not know the reason until eternity.)*

### 3. How to live the life of faith in the church body

The author uses the discussion on God's discipline to address some issues which were cropping up and troubling the church body. He's moving from accepting the Father's discipline in general to the way discipline is to be applied to the Christian experience.

**[Read Hebrews 12:12-17]**

Again, we see the use of “therefore” which shows that vv. 4-11 are linked with vv. 12-17. In v. 12 the author is speaking of those who may be spiritually paralyzed.

Q: Based upon what you know about these people, why might they be spiritually paralyzed?  
*(fear, confusion - other answers)*

**[Read Isaiah 35:3-8]**

In Isaiah, those who were facing dire circumstances and were discouraged were called to hope in the coming, the justice, and the blessings of God. These words in v.12 are figurative of taking heart or hoping in the Lord.

**[Read Proverbs 4:26-7]**

Q: What do you think the image of “lame” refers to here? *(exhaustion or the crippling effect of spiritual discouragement)*

Q: What are some of the signs of spiritual exhaustion? *(many answers)*

Keep in mind that the author is speaking to a church body here. He’s reminding the believers to keep in mind those who are weaker in the faith and encourage them by facilitating their travel - their spiritual walk. In other words, they were to help the weak - those on the verge of falling away from the faith. The healing describes the result of helping the weaker believers in the context of the whole church body - the body is healed when consideration - love - is shown for those who need help to continue on in their faith.

There are four commands/exhortations that the author gives for the church body as a whole in vv.14-17.

Q: What are the four imperatives/exhortations that the author gives the church? *(v.14 - pursue peace and sanctification, v. 15 - don’t come short of the grace of God AND see to it that no root of bitterness springs up in the church body, v. 16 - that there be no immoral person like Esau)*

Before going any further, we need to think about the original audience. They were not only facing persecution but also many had deserted their ranks. There were some that they felt were their friends and co-laborers in Christ and yet some of these people left the church and the faith.

Q: How do you feel when someone leaves your church? *(betrayed, disappointed, bitter, etc.)*

These people had people leaving the faith, not just the church. Their heads were swirling over them taking the easy path and walking away from the faith. This section is intended to deal with how to deal with their feelings and continue in their walk of faith. The first command given to continue in faith in the church body is peace. The Christians were to pursue it. Pursue means to hunt it down. So they were to track peace down and not let up the chase for it.

*Q: Why do you think pursuing peace is given such a place of importance in this list? (It is the foundation of healthy and godly relationships. It means that they are focused on the other more than themselves. People at peace spread peace. Other answers)*

*Q: What is sanctification in this context and why is it to be hunted down like peace? (sanctification here is the working out of what Christ has put into us as believers. Although a man of God will live in the world, he must be in a sense different and separate from the world. Sanctification means to be holy and holiness involves separation for God's uses and away from the world or self's use.)*

Notice that this peace is to be pursued with all people, not just the family of God.

*Q: Are there people with whom you need to hunt down peace?*

“See to it” in v.15 is unusual. It conveys the sense of oversight and is connected with the noun we translate “bishop” or “overseer”. It means that we, Christians in the church body, have oversight responsibility for those others in our body. We need to care for one another. God gives grace abundantly and freely but it is upon us to make full use of the opportunities it affords. In other words, it's like the warning the author has issued several times before that no one should neglect to take God's grace and thus miss His salvation. By our oversight as believers, don't allow lost people in our midst to stay lost. Be praying for them, encouraging them, sharing with and loving them into the kingdom.

The next exhortation in v.15 is that no root of bitterness is to spring up. The word springing involves a quick action. While the one harboring bitterness may let it fester and it may slowly spread, at some point the picture is that it erupts and real trouble hits. This word “trouble” means a disturbance in a crowd. The crowd, as a whole, gets annoyed and begins to get rowdy.

*Q: How would you define bitterness? (various answers - feelings of being treated unjustly or unfairly, the grudge born by those feelings is considered to be justified thus it leads to a spirit which is unrepentant.)*

### **[Read Galatians 5:3-4]**

Those who justify bitterness have “fallen from grace” in the sense that they have abandoned the grace they received and have chosen rather to seek aid or provision from the “law” (not the ceremonial laws but rather the laws of this world and its ways in general).

*Q: Why do you think that the author is bringing bitterness up to these people as a problem in their church body? (various answers but could include people leaving, facing difficulty more than before they were saved, etc.)*

*Q: What are some ways you deal with bitterness when confronted by it in others? (many answers*

*- bitterness is a social sin. It may spread slowly and quietly underground at first but will eventually erupt and cause a huge problem for everyone in the church body.)*

The problem is that if left unchecked, it defiles many. The word “defile” means to make unfit. The bitter person becomes unfit to serve in the church as they’ve lost their witness and have taken many others with them.

The last exhortation was that none of the believers in the church should be immoral as Esau. The word “immoral” is the word for sexual immorality. However, in the Old Testament, we are not of Esau being sexually immoral directly. Some thing that since he had two wives from Canaanite origins that it might constitute sexual immorality but this is the usual word for fornication. It seems rather that the author is warning his readers against being godless or living to just to satisfy themselves or live for immediate gratification only. Esau was not spiritually minded but rather taken up with the “here and now”. For a very small gain, he gave away something of incredible worth and didn’t even realize it until later in life. He didn’t see the value of his birthright as the first born but sold it for a cup of stew. V. 17 is a bit tough in the English but it’s important to realize that Esau never repented from his lifestyle. He sight the blessing, the birthright with tears - not repentance. He could not find a way to undo what he had done. Take the example of teen losing his or her virginity. They can repent from the immorality they committed but the act of losing one’s virginity cannot be undone.

Q: What attitudes is the author warning Christians about in this last section? *(living for the now or only to satisfy oneself for the moment)*

Q: In what ways do we get caught up in the “here and now” and lose sight of Jesus?

Q: What is one of the problem of being godless according to v.17? *(one refuses to ask God for forgiveness and repent from the self-centered style of living)*

Q: How should we handle the Esau’s in our own churches today? *(various answers)*

The main thought of the author is still faith but it has shifted from the faith of the forefathers in the Old Testament to those Christians struggling to live the faith out as they faced the mounting persecution of the Roman Empire and the rejection of those once considered to be brothers and sisters in the Lord. These same challenges (and others) are still plaguing those of us who wish to live the life of faith in Christ today.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?