



Hebrews - Chapter Twelve

III Hebrews 10:19-12:29 - Call to faith and endurance (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twelve

Having given examples of the faith exhibited by so many people who had gone before, the writer now turns to the perfect example of faith, the account of Jesus' suffering and death that would reconcile all people to God. The writer exhorts his readers to follow this great example and to be prepared to suffer for their faith in the same way that the Lord had done for them.

The writer then instructs them to encourage others to faith, by pursuing faith with them, and ensuring that no one rejects the grace of God. He reminds them that they are no longer in a place where they could not approach God, as even the animals at Mount Sinai could not without facing death. Instead, they are now at Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, introduced to them through the death of their saviour.

The chapter concludes with a warning not to ignore the teachings of Jesus as many had done when he was on earth, for his return will come with a shaking of the earth to finally sort out the wheat from the chaff.

III.c Hebrews 12:1-29 - Endurance until the kingdom fully comes

The writer brings this major section to a conclusion, intimating that the Christian journey is like a long distance race, with runners being cheered on by those that have gone before, willing the runners to persevere to the very end. This is a race that is not about the winners but about encouraging everyone to make it home.

Given past examples of faith in Chapter 11, and of Jesus' own suffering on the Cross (vv.1-2), Christians are to run, with endurance, the race of faith, knowing that God disciplines his children for their own good (vv.3-11).

The readers are thus also cautioned against rejecting God's grace (vv.12-17 and v.25), since, in comparison with lesser yet still awesome events at Mount Sinai, the overwhelming final judgment will surely come, when God will fully establish his rule and when all the saints will join the great heavenly celebration.

III.c.i Hebrews 12:1-13 - The Example of Jesus

Although those referred to in Chapter 11 had shown great faith through their service to God, Jesus provides a far greater example, for his faith in God was to the point of death and beyond.

The readers of this letter are encouraged to hold on to their faith and, indeed, be prepared to suffer in the same way that Jesus had done, if required to do so.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

Hebrews 12:1

Cloud of witnesses. These are the OT heroes of faith, who formed the basis of the argument in Chapter 11, as is indicated by the therefore here, and by the Greek wordplay between witnesses - *martyrs*, and commended - *martyreō* in: <<**Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised**>> (Hebrews 11:39).

Witnesses may have a double meaning:

1. These OT heroes witnessed to their faith by their words and their faithful lives.
2. Like spectators watching an athletic contest in an arena, they may now be watching or witnessing believers' lives, cheering them on to victory in Christ.

The first sense is a common meaning for the word, but in this verse the imagery of being surrounded by these witnesses gives the sense that they are eagerly watching from heaven, and the image of running the race that is set before us might lead one to think of an athletic race in a sports arena, with all these heroes of the faith from Chapter 11 watching as present-day believers take their turn in the same race that they once ran. However, nowhere else does the NT envisage saints in heaven watching saints on earth, nor does it encourage Christians ever to pray to these believers in heaven, or to ask for their prayers. Christ prayed for his people: <<**I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours**>> (John 17:9), <<**Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us**>> (Romans 8:34), and: <<**Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them**>> (Hebrews 7:25), and is the only mediator between them and God: <<**For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all — this was attested at the right time**>> (1 Timothy 2:5-6). The Holy Spirit helps their prayers: <<**Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God**>> (Romans 8:26-27), and all Christians are priests with the right of direct access to God: <<**Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy**>>

and find grace to help in time of need>> (Hebrews 4:16), <<let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water>> (Hebrews 10:22), <<like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ>> (1 Peter 2:5), and: <<But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light>> (1 Peter 2:9).

Lay aside. This first exhortation pictures sin as a **weight** or impediment to be discarded, since otherwise it ensnares or obstructs the athlete. Many athletes train with heavy packs to build up their strength and then cast aside the extra mass for the race. Too many Christians, however, try to run the race of their faith with the burden of excess baggage that only serves to hold them back.

The sin that clings so closely. The word for cling properly means obstructing or constricting. The writer seems to have in mind the danger an athlete might face if the track is not completely clear, if someone puts a hurdle in the way, or leaves a bench or other object across the path of the runners. That is what sin can be like when believers tolerate it in their lives or in the community. It gets in their way, it can trip them up; it can seriously damage their chances of completing the course.

Let us run is a metaphor also found in Paul's letters: <<*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified>> (1 Corinthians 9:24-27), and: <<*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing>> (2 Timothy 4:7-8), with a focus on endurance in the faith: <<*But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated>> (Hebrews 10:32-33).***

Run with perseverance. Natural athletes have a preference for the type of distance they prefer to run: sprints, middle distance or long distance. However, **the race that is set before us** is intended to be one of endurance and a mistake that many believers make is to treat it like a sprint, only to find they have started out too fast and then falter when they do not see the finish line in sight.

² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

Looking to Jesus. Continuing the endurance race analogy, believers are encouraged to keep the finishing line within the sight of their imagination.

Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. In light of the previous examples of faith in Chapter 11, and especially in light of Jesus' own model of endurance, believers are called to endure as runners in a race.

Pioneer or founder. The Greek can designate either an originator or a leader, as seen in: <<*It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings*>> (Hebrews 2:10). Jesus has run the course that those following are now attempting to run. This knowledge should be a great source of encouragement for, although he met with fierce opposition and suffered immensely on the way, he endured and completed the race set for him. Others, too, have completed the race: <<*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*>> (2 Timothy 4:7).

Perfecter. Through his atoning work, Christ's perfection leads to the perfection of his people, which will be fully realised on the last day. Refer also to comments made on Hebrews 11:39-40 with regard to being made perfect.

For the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross. The Cross of Christ represents the greatest suffering in history, for Jesus not only suffered physically but also experienced God's just wrath in taking upon himself the sin of the world. Still, the promise of future reward and joy gave Jesus strength to suffer, for he was doing the will of his Father: <<*Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will"*>> (Mark 14:35-36).

Disregarding the shame. Crucifixion, performed naked and in public, and inflicting prolonged, excruciating pain on the victim, was intended to cause shame as well as death: <<*For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt*>> (Hebrews 6:4-6). Refer also to the comments made on Matthew 27:35.

At the right hand was considered the most important position that one could be afforded. Refer to comments made on Hebrews 1:3, 1:13, 8:1, and 10:12.

³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Hebrews 12:3

Consider him, that is, Jesus (v.2).

Jesus endured ridicule, mocking, beating and a public execution, used here to again emphasise his perseverance, as in vv.1-2. Many of the readers could identify with the hostility shown to Jesus, although on a lesser scale (v.4).

Weary or fainthearted is referred to again in v.5. The sentiment is echoed in: <<*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*>> (Galatians 6:9), and: <<*I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary*>> (Revelation 2:3).

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Hebrews 12:4

Struggle against sin. Although they are suffering persecution, the readers were not suffering martyrdom, and hence their main test is fighting their own sinful nature.

Not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood contrasts with Jesus' endurance on the Cross and the fate of many OT saints: <<*They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented*>> (Hebrews 11:37). This was commented on in the previous chapter.

⁵ And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,

or lose heart when you are punished by him;

⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,

and chastises every child whom he accepts.’

⁷ Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸ If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children.

Hebrews 12:5-8

Verses 5-6 are a quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12. The author could have chosen other similar scriptures, such as: <<*Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law, giving them respite from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked*>> (Psalm 94:12-13).

Exhortation that addresses you as children. God is viewed as speaking through the proverb; God's discipline proves that he considers believers to be his children, since God chastises every child whom he accepts.

Discipline, the Greek word *paideia*, was a common term for childrearing through instruction, training, and correction; however, Hebrews here focuses on the call for perseverance, endure in v.7, in the painful tests of life (v.11). These tests are to their benefit, prove their sonship, and require a response of perseverance. The readers then should not be discouraged.

Then you are illegitimate and not his children. If a man in the family is not the natural father of the children he may decide not to bother with discipline at all. God is not like that and chooses to discipline his children in order to guide and

teach them the right way to live. The purpose is that God's people might be trained to higher standards of faith, hope and obedience.

⁹ Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness.

Hebrews 12:9-10

This lesser-to-greater analogy from the readers' own childhood training shows that it is appropriate for the heavenly Father to discipline, and it calls for a response of respect and submission; as a loving Father, the Lord always disciplines his children for their good.

The Father of spirits. God is himself Spirit: <<*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*>> (John 4:24), but it is unlikely this is referring to anything other than his role as the Father of the human spirit: <<*O Lord, by these things people live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. O restore me to health and make me live!*>> (Isaiah 38:16).

¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:11

Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant. It may come as a shock to many Christians to discover that there lies ahead of them a life in which God, precisely because he is treating them as sons and daughters, will refuse to spoil them or ignore them, will refuse to let them get away forever with rebellion or folly, with sin or stupidity. God has his ways of alerting his children to the fact that they should either pause and think again, or turn round and go in the opposite direction, or get down on their knees and repent.

It yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. This is similar to the fruit of the Spirit: <<*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things*>> (Galatians 5:22-23).

Bishop Tom Wright concludes: The truth of v.11 is offered so that we can cling to it when things are difficult. There is much sorrow in an ordinary human life; sorrow which was, of course, shared by the Man of Sorrows as he identified completely with us, a point Hebrews has already made forcefully in Hebrews 5:7-10. It is possible, even for Christians, to see it all as meaningless, to fret and fume as though everything had gone wrong. Well, things do go wrong, and we mustn't make the mistake of blaming God for everything, ('Why did you do this to me?'), as though there were no evil forces out there - and even 'in here', within one's own only partly redeemed human heart - which still have the power to create havoc. But again and again, when we find ourselves thwarted or disappointed, opposed or vilified, or even subject to physical

abuse and violence, we may in faith be able to hear the gentle and wise voice of the father, urging us to follow him more closely, to trust him more fully, to love him more deeply. As v.11 indicates, suffering can be the trowel which digs deeply in the soil of our lives, so that the plant of peaceful righteousness - a life of settled commitment to live as God's new covenant people - may have its roots deep in the love of God.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,
¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Hebrews 12:12-13

In poetic OT language, perhaps intentionally drawn from: <<**Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees**>> (Isaiah 35:3), and: <<**Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure**>> (Proverbs 4:26), the author exhorts his readers to endurance in the race set before them. There is no room for spiritual laziness, which often includes an element of physical laziness as well.

Make straight paths for your feet indicates that the race of faith may be over undulating and difficult terrain. The way can be made easier for believers by keeping their eyes firmly on the example of Jesus and following his ways. That is, they should remain in the vine: <<**You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing**>> (John 15:3-5).

John the Baptist was sent to make straight paths for Jesus. However, this was more to prepare the people to receive Jesus rather than to make Jesus' work easier: <<**He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said**>> (John 1:23). The quote was from Isaiah 40:3.

III.c.ii Hebrews 12:14-29 - Warnings against Rejecting God's Grace

These verses provide both encouragement and warnings in equal measure. The encouragement is not just for the individual but for all members of the church to exhort one another, calling them to live in harmony with all other people.

The readers are reminded that Jesus has now made a way for them to be reconciled back to God and that they can now approach him. However, there is also a warning that there will be those who do not heed the teachings of Jesus and will pay the price at his return.

¹⁴ Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14

Pursue peace with everyone. This is a command found elsewhere in scripture: <<*Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*>> (Mark 9:50), <<*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'* No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good>> (Romans 12:18-21), <<*Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification*>> (Romans 14:19), and: <<*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you*>> (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Holiness is clearly expected of all Christians, without which no one will see the Lord. This is not salvation by works, however, for Christians are sanctified once for all by the death of Christ: <<*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*>> (Hebrews 10:14); holy living is part of the perseverance encouraged throughout Hebrews.

¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.

Hebrews 12:15

See to it that. As they pursue peace and holiness (v.14), Christians should watch out for each other: <<*But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*>> (Hebrews 3:13), <<*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching*>> (Hebrews 10:24-25), in order that no one falls short of the gift of eternal salvation, i.e. fails to obtain the grace of God: <<*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*>> (Hebrews 4:16), and: <<*How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?*>> (Hebrews 10:29).

Root of bitterness. The author warns against bitterness by alluding to Deuteronomy 29:18, which describes one who turns away from God and pursues other gods. A bitter and resentful person is like a contagious poison, spreading his resentment to others. Sometimes, even from within an apparently happy and successful church or fellowship, discontent can arise. It may take the form of doctrinal or ethical disagreement; these can be real enough, but often they can provide a smokescreen for personal agendas. The sign is always the sense of bitterness that accompanies it.

¹⁶ See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

Hebrews 12:16-17

Esau is deemed unholy, likely due to his treating his birthright as profane: <<*Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.'* So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright>> (Genesis 25:33-34); immoral probably also applies to him but there is no direct OT evidence of this, although it is alluded to by the upset he caused his parents by marrying outside his race: <<*When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah>> (Genesis 26:34-35), even though another of his wives was related through his paternal grandfather, this did not alleviate the conflict and hurt for it was done in defiance of his father: <<*Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, 'You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women', and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had>> (Genesis 28:6-9). Clearly the author calls his readers to be holy and sexually responsible, as noted in v.10 and v.14, as well as: <<*Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers>> (Hebrews 13:4).***

Later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected. Esau's failure to win back the inheritance he had rejected, see Genesis 25:33-34 and 27:34-40, also serves to caution the Christian community against rejecting the inheritance offered to believers. For more comments on inheritance refer to Hebrews 1:14, 6:4-6, 6:12, 9:15, and 10:26-31.

No chance to repent. The text literally means 'he did not find a place of repentance'. The author is not saying Esau longed to repent but God refused to forgive him, for it can be seen from Peter's denials and subsequent forgiveness that those who repent are always forgiven.

Even though he sought the blessing with tears. Esau still wanted the blessing, which indicates that Esau desired the good consequences of repentance, but was not truly sorry for his sins; therefore, he did not offer genuine repentance.

The story of Esau and Jacob is a sorry tale from which neither emerges without blemish on their character. Esau came home from hunting one day and Jacob was cooking a stew. Esau was famished but Jacob would not give him any food until Esau had promised to give his birthright as the elder twin to Jacob, which meant that Jacob would inherit the majority share of Isaac's estate, with its rights of family leadership. Later on, Jacob tricked his father Isaac into

believing he was Esau and got Isaac to bless him, legally acknowledging him as his rightful heir. When Esau came into his father he too wanted the blessing but it was now too late, even though he begged with tears. Wrong decisions have their consequences. Refer to Genesis Chapters 26-27.

See to it that no one becomes like Esau. The writer does not want any one in any church to live outside of the grace of God and to simply be part of the church for the comfort or sense of security it provides, or for the social aspects. He wants everyone to play a full in their faith through the lives they lead.

¹⁸ You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear').

Hebrews 12:18-21

The terrifying experience of Israel at Mount Sinai, especially that recorded in Exodus 19:12-25, 20:18-21, and Deuteronomy 18:16, shows how great and fearful was the Mosaic covenant.

Moses said, 'I tremble with fear'. This quote is from Deuteronomy 9:19, where on Mount Sinai, Moses feared that God might destroy Israel after their worship of the golden calf. The author may intend this allusion to warn against similar idolatry as indicated by v.15 and vv.25-29.

Introduction to Hebrews 12:22-24

The greatness of the new covenant exceeds the old covenant revelation at Sinai, so it is all the more important to accept the new (v.25), and: <<*Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'* *How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'* And again, *'The Lord will judge his people.'* *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*>> (Hebrews 10:28-31).

This also draws to a climax another great theme of this letter: the contrast between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus as the promised Messiah.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

Hebrews 12:22

You have come to Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the main mountain on which Jerusalem is built and was the location for the temple. This draws on extensive OT imagery of a new heavenly Zion, used here for the new city of Jerusalem.

Zion was a name used to describe Jerusalem in the OT as well as God's people: <<*I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill*>> (Psalm 2:6), and: <<*The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty sceptre. Rule in the midst of your foes*>> (Psalm 110:2). It was spoken of prophetically about the coming Messiah and his church: <<*The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.' They shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord'; and you shall be called, 'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken'*>> (Isaiah 62:11-12).

This city was referred to in Hebrews 11:10, 11:16 and 13:14. It is revealed most fully in Revelation 21:1-22:5, to say that Christian believers have access, in the invisible, spiritual realm, into the heavenly Jerusalem, and therefore participate in worship with innumerable angels: <<*He said: The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran. With him were myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own*>> (Deuteronomy 33:2), <<*A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened*>> (Daniel 7:10), and: <<*Of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire'*>> (Hebrews 1:7), and the great assembly (v.23) of those who have died in faith and are already in God's presence.

The living God was discussed in comments made on Hebrews 9:14.

²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

Hebrews 12:23

Assembly of the firstborn. Firstborn is plural in Greek and modified by who are enrolled. Jesus was previously called the firstborn Son: <<*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'*>> (Hebrews 1:6); here his followers are also granted an inheritance as if they too were firstborn sons. Refer to Hebrews 1:14, 2:10, 9:15 and vv.5-8 above.

Enrolled alludes to the book of life, as recently noted in Daniel 7:10, as well as: <<*Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven*>> (Luke 10:20), <<*Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life*>> (Philippians 4:3), <<*And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire*>> (Revelation 20:12-15), listing the true followers of Jesus.

The title judge of all recalls previous warnings: <<*For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'* And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*>> (Hebrews 10:30-31). However, the fact that God is the judge of all is more something to be celebrated rather than feared: <<*From the heavens you uttered judgement; the earth feared and was still when God rose up to establish judgement, to save all the oppressed of the earth*>> (Psalm 76:8-9).

Spirits of the righteous refers to the saints of the old and new covenants, here portrayed as holy or righteous, and as personally made perfect, which was the goal of Christ's work: <<*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*>> (Hebrews 10:14), and: <<*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect*>> (Hebrews 11:39-40), although with their re-embodiment still to come at the final resurrection.

²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:24

This picture of a present spiritual realm culminates with Jesus. For Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant refer to comments made Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15.

Sprinkled blood was discussed most extensively in Hebrews 9:11-14 and 9:24-28, with further references in chapters 10 and 13.

The blood of Abel cries out a curse for vengeance: <<*And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand*>> (Genesis 4:10-11), and was commented on in Hebrews 11:4. However, what is more important is that Jesus' blood brings peace, forgiveness and atonement: <<*If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*>> (1 John 1:6-7).

At the centre of the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, in fact, is the contrast between a holiness which is terrifying and unapproachable and a holiness which is welcoming, cleansing and healing.

The point about Mount Zion, and the living God whose home it is, is not that holiness doesn't matter, but a new way has been found and accomplished through which the holiness people could not attain under the Mosaic law has at last been achieved through the Son of God.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

Hebrews 12:25

The one who warned them on earth could refer to Noah's proclamations of the coming flood, the words of Moses, or more likely, the teachings of Jesus.

Given the superior nature of the new covenant, and the reign of Christ who warns from heaven, the author calls for a response of faith.

They did not escape applies especially to the exodus generation (vv.18-21 and v.26), who rejected the voice of the one who spoke. The author had warned of this almost from the outset: <<*Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will*>> (Hebrews 2:1-4). Refer also to Hebrews 3:7-19, 4:2 and 10:28-30.

How much less will we escape. A similar lesser-to-greater argument is made in Hebrews 10:28-30. Many commentators believe that this refers to the danger of eternal judgment upon those who reject the one who warns from heaven.

Some have argued that such rejection of God can be committed by true believers, since we, in the phrase how much less will we escape, includes the believing author. However, it seems more likely to understand the we as a reference to the current church participants, some of whom may not have possessed true faith, as noted in comments on Hebrews 10:26-27 and 10:28-29. Another view is that the warnings are addressed to true believers, so that the warnings are the means that God uses to keep his own from committing apostasy and to challenge believers to persevere in their faith.

²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.'

²⁷ This phrase 'Yet once more' indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Hebrews 12:26-27

At that time, that is, at Mount Sinai (v.19).

Yet once more, both the earth and the heaven will be judged in order to establish the future reality, which is eternal, i.e. the things that cannot be shaken. This verse is taken from: <<*For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land*>> (Haggai 2:6). This transition to the new covenant was as devastating, because of the nature of the Messiah's death, as was the experience of establishing the first at Mount Sinai. It is also clear that the way in which God will finally bring all of creation to its intended state will not be a smooth transition either.

'Yet once more' indicates the removal of what is shaken. This is an indication that the old order is about to pass away: <<*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come*

to mind>> (Isaiah 65:17), <<And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever>> (Daniel 2:44), and: <<Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more>> (Revelation 21:1).

That what cannot be shaken may remain includes all those who have remained faithful to God through his Son, for they will have indestructible resurrection bodies, modelled on that of Jesus. That is what Hebrews chapters 11-12 have all been about.

The breathtaking promise of God's new world comes to the readers not only as promise though, but as a warning. If people who refused to listen to Moses found themselves in dire trouble, what will happen if people now refuse to listen to one who is so much greater than Moses?

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28-29

Gratitude and worship are due in light of salvation. Acceptable worship takes into account, with reverence and awe, God's holiness and his position as a judge to whom alone worship is due. Some say that this acceptable worship is depicted in the conduct described in Hebrews 13:1-19 and: *<<I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>> (Romans 12:1-2).*

For indeed our God is a consuming fire is taken from the Septuagint version of: *<<For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God>> (Deuteronomy 4:24).*

The true God is not tame, nor does he spoil his children. He is like a fire: the holiness of God, emphasised through the Temple ritual, is not undermined by the fact that, in the new covenant, his people are invited into his presence in a new way. To think like that would be to make a radical mistake.

It is not that God has stopped being holy. God has not changed a bit. It is, rather, that Jesus has opened a new and living path, through the curtain and right up to him. Only when believers remind themselves of God's holiness do they fully appreciate the significance of what Jesus achieved.

It is noticeable that, where thinkers have spoken of God without stressing his all-consuming holiness, the meaning of the Cross is downgraded in proportion. Hebrews, in line with the rest of the NT, celebrates the accomplishment of Jesus in his sacrificial death precisely because its view of God has not changed from the central Jewish belief found in the OT. God is the same; or, to put it the other way round, it is the same God who has now, in Jesus, brought his saving plan, set out in the OT, to a triumphant conclusion.