

Hebrews 12:1-17

As you run for the prize of “well done” (Mt 25:21), do you find yourself weary and/or discouraged? This was the condition of the Hebrews to whom this epistle is addressed.

The people of God have always had to face these difficulties. Even the earliest generations of believers, like the original audience of the book of Hebrews, had to deal with such problems. However, instead of pressing on, this particular audience began to slow down in the race, and considered veering back into the lane of Judaism, entirely leaving Christianity. They were considering a return to the old covenant. They wanted to run away from the goal of resting in Jesus alone.

The one central theme of the epistle to the Hebrews is the absolute superiority of Jesus to all who came before Him. Jesus is worthy of much more glory than either the angels or Moses (1:1–3:6). He brings the final Sabbath rest to the people of God (3:7–4:13) and supersedes the Aaronic priesthood (4:14–7:28). He has inaugurated the new covenant by means of the perfect sacrifice of Himself (8:1–10:18). This Jesus is the promise; the old covenant saints waited for Him, and the new covenant saints have witnessed Him (10:19–11:40).

By faith, the old covenant saints performed mighty deeds, received many blessings, and sacrificed their lives rather than abandon the faith. They did all these things in eager expectation of the day of Christ, the day that they never saw in their lifetimes but only greeted from afar (Heb. 11:13). The lives of these saints show us that we live in a better age since we have experienced Jesus not from afar and in shadows, but in reality.

This defines how we interpret Hebrews 12:1-2. Jesus is the subject and theme of the book. He is its only Hero. It is only consistent and fitting that 12:1-2 be interpreted in that light.

The ‘witnesses’ of Hb 12:1 do surround us but they are not witnesses, as such, to our race. They do not applaud or cheer us on in the race. The witnesses are witnesses to Jesus; his reality and sufficiency.

Jesus is not only the supreme example of persevering faith,
he is also its object!

They are witnesses to:

11:1 - *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...*

11:6 – *the faith necessary to please God*

11:10 – *the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

11:12 - *born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.*

11:19 - *God [who] was able even to raise him [Isaac] from the dead*

11:26 - *the reproach of Christ [as] greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt*

11:39-40 – [the fact that they] *did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

And, what is it that God has promised?

Genesis 3:15 - *...he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel* (the protoevangelium – the first Bible mention of the good news of salvation)

All of this points to Jesus.

We know that the witnesses are witnesses of Jesus, and not us, because verse 2 encourages us to “*looking unto Jesus...*” and not to these witnesses or to one another.

Because of this vast superiority, we must throw all hindering sins aside and persevere as we run the race of faith (12:1). We are only able to do this as we look to Jesus, the one who grants us faith and brings it to perfection. He is the object of our faith, the one in whom we trust, the one who is above all things. Only when we look to His glory can we persevere in our faith and inherit all the promises of God (v. 2).

Left to ourselves, we would stumble and retreat back into our old lives. Left to ourselves we would not persevere. But God does not leave us to ourselves. He guarantees that all those who truly confess Christ will never fall away

John 10:27-30 – *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one.*”

But, God, does not guarantee our perseverance in a way that ignores our decisions. In fact, the whole book of Hebrews is intended to stir our souls to follow the examples before us as models of persevering faith so that we can attest with the author –

10:39 - *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

And what are the benefits of this Christ-centric, this Jesus-centered life?

“For this one thought alone ought to be sufficient to conquer all temptations, that is, when we know that we are companions or associates of the Son of God, and that he, who was so far above us, willingly came down to our condition in order that he might animate us by his own example; yea it is thus that we gather courage, which would otherwise melt away, and turn as it were into despair.”
John Calvin

3 – We will not grow weary or fainthearted

6 – We dislike hardship so much that we often misunderstand the purposes of strife in our lives. Sometimes we begin to think that God must not truly love us if we are suffering. Sometimes we might even doubt that we are truly His children.

But the suffering endured by the original audience of Hebrews proved that they were in fact sons of God. For the Lord disciplines only those whom He loves (12:5–6) and it’s for that reason that the author calls them (and us) to endure the discipline of God (v. 7). This discipline is for our good, so that we might share in His holiness (v. 10).

7 – We will see trouble and sorrow as disciple and endure it

The original audience may have been suffering because they had not yet progressed past the elementary teachings of the faith (5:11–14). Maybe it was because they were not showing solidarity with other suffering Christians as they once did (10:32–34). Perhaps their sufferings were at first just the result of being exiles on the earth (11:13–16, 35b–38).

The exhortation to look to Jesus and to consider His trials (12:1–4) demonstrate that this audience was consumed with their sorrow and pain and not with the God who is sovereign over their pain. Their view was horizontal and not vertical. This was causing them to weary and contemplate returning to Judaism.

Had they fixed their eyes on Jesus, they would have had a correct understanding of their situation. They would have seen that their sufferings were to be expected since, Jesus, our Savior, model and forerunner also endured suffering. They would have seen that God sometimes uses them in order to discipline those whom He loves. Such sufferings, in fact, demonstrate that God loved them and desired to bring them into a closer and holier relationship with Him. Thus, they would have accepted these sufferings and endured them with confidence rather than considering a return to the old covenant.

God may allow evil to come against us, He is in no way responsible or culpable for it (James 1:13–14). He may allow suffering to discipline us and he may use evil, but He never authors it.

And we must remember that God disciplines us because He loves us (Heb. 12:6).

8 – We will be assured in our sonship

11 – We will be trained to obtain the peaceful fruit of righteousness

When we were children, we hated discipline. We hated to be grounded when we broke curfew. We hated to be scolded when we told little “white lies.” But in adulthood, we see the good produced in us as a result of the discipline from our earthly parents. Without it we probably would not have become good citizens. Without it, some of us may never have come to know Christ at all. If earthly discipline has benefitted us, then the discipline from our Heavenly Father will benefit us all the more. It will produce righteousness in our lives (v. 11).

12-13 – We will lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees and make straight paths for our feet

14 – We will strive for peace with everyone

15a – We will obtain the grace of God

15b – We will not be embittered

16a – We will not live sexually immoral lives

16b – We will not profane holy things

17 – We will live repentant lives

In Hebrews 6:4–8, we observed that it is possible to be in the covenant community and receive many of God’s blessings without having true faith. There is a definite distinction between the church visible, which contains both true and false believers, and the church invisible, which contains true believers only. Esau is an example of one who was a member of the church visible but not the church invisible. He was blessed to be a part of the covenant because he was a descendant of Abraham. But his covenant membership was no guarantee that he would find salvation. Esau’s sin in selling his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and his marriage into pagan peoples (36:2) evidenced an ungodly heart (Heb. 12:16) that in reality was far from God.

There came a day when Esau found no chance to repent because he was sorry only for the consequences of sin and not for the sin itself (Heb. 12:17). The ‘it’ he sought was not God but the blessings/privileges of the birthright.

Conclusion

No one knows where deliberate sin may lead
John Owen

We must all patiently press on into Jesus, maintaining our ‘lane’ and our enthusiasm for Christ.