

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 43 May 7, 2022

Look to Jesus

Hebrews 12:1-2

## Introduction

As we begin to examine chapter 12, the first 2 verses are extremely important, somewhat in a similar way to the functional importance of Romans 12:1-2 by Paul. Of course, the theology of each of these 2 passages varies somewhat – Paul’s verses provide a “Therefore” which goes all the way back to Romans 1 and carries through to 11:36, with his intention being to exhort his readers, based on 11 chapters of doctrine, how to now follow this One he has exalted through 11 chapters. Here in Hebrews 12:1-2, which also begins with “Therefore”, directs the readers how and why to run the race of life faithfully, with Jesus’ example and undergirding as our motivation to endure & persevere in the faith for our entire life. Not a completely dissimilar contrast really.

Certainly, we will look at these 2 verses in greater detail, but as we introduce the whole of chapter 12 in this introduction, we look forward to these topics; The race ( vv. 1-2 ); the purpose and character of God’s disciplinary work in believer’s lives ( vv. 3-11 ); our struggle against sin, striving for peace and holiness, and avoiding apostasy ( vv. 12-17 ); a vision of heaven – Mt. Zion, representing the new covenant, and a comparison of that with Mt. Sinai – representing the old covenant law ( vv. 18-24 ); and then in vv. 25-29 a reinforcement of the trustworthiness of God and His eschatological plan – His unshakeable Kingdom. The chapter ends @ vv. 28b-29 with a stark reminder – “*Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire!*”. Verses 25-29 also consist of our 5<sup>th</sup> of 5 warning passages in Hebrews.

All these topical passages will be part and parcel of our study ( DV ) for the next number of weeks or months. I don’t know yet if we will get as far as chapter 13, of if we do, how far into that we will get within the remaining 4 or so months allotted to us.

## The Great Cloud of Witnesses

v. 1

This phrase, “*since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*” is amazing imagery, giving the reader the impression that our faith is somehow on display in an amphitheatre or sports bowl, and that we are at the center as performers and the witnesses are seated or standing around us at the top, cheering us on as we ‘*run our race*’.

Of course, our immediate thought is that this ‘*cloud of witnesses*’ consists, at the least, of all the OT and some of the NT saints who are referred to in Hebrews 11, the near context. Philip Hughes sees that, and adds something to be sure we understand these are more than just ‘witnesses’;

“If these witnesses are in the sense of spectators, as the imagery implies, it is even more important to understand that they are witnesses in the sense of those who proved themselves to be unflinching professors of the faith and have overcome by the word of their testimony ( see Rev. 12:11 ). They are “the glorious company of martyrs”, faithful in their witness both in life and even unto death. ( Though the term martyr does not in the NT have the particular meaning of one who has sealed his witness with his blood that it later came to have, many of those in this cloud of witnesses were, as we have noticed above, martyrs in this later sense ).”<sup>1</sup>

One of the goals of Hebrews 11 is not to supply mere historical facts, but is exhortation, this being the reason that chapter 12 begins with “Therefore”. The demand of the exhortation given here is the implication ( or even stronger ) that we deal with what this has taught us about how we need to respond to the lives and deeds of these faithful people, and then to apply their lessons of faith lived out to our own lives. This is the context in which Hebrews 12 is telling us we should see ourselves as believers – it is to this body we belong, and whose approval we should consider.

Al Mohler provides timely advice on this very topic, lest we begin to follow these OT characters as we might a cult leader. He points out;

“Christianity is not a cult of hero worship. It is centered on the singularity of Jesus Christ. We are not here because of Abel, Moses, Abraham, or even those who were sawn in two or those who wandered the earth living in caves. The church exists because Jesus died and rose again, and the only way to endure is by looking to him. This great cloud witnesses encourages and inspires us, but the One who keeps us in the race is Christ alone.”<sup>2</sup> < [ Excellent point! ]

I am sure that all of us see this as a balanced way, and that is what Dr. Mohler is saying here. The saints of Hebrews 11 – this cloud of witnesses – are not dead men to be remembered, because after all it was God who empowered and undergirded every one of them, but they are true living witnesses whose voice is to be heard ( from Scriptures pages, not audibly, as in Heb. 11:4 of Abel, “*And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.*”

We should recognise the importance of their witness, and ‘hear’ their voices and conform to the pattern of their faithfulness, and not to the pattern of the world – Romans 12:2. We belong to this noble group of committed believers of course, but not in the sense that the RC church adherents “worship” or ‘idolize’ past RC saints and biblical heroes, to whom they pray to alongside their prayers to Christ – a very syncretistic position if there ever was one.

Nick R. Needham explains how this all developed;

“Along with the growth of ritual and ceremony in fourth-century worship went the expansion of the cult of saints and relics. Christians attached greater importance to the dead bodies of those who were considered holy in their lifetimes, especially martyrs. Chapels, shrines, and sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Hughes, Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 519

<sup>2</sup> Al Mohler, Exalting Christ in Hebrews, B & H Publishing, 2017, p. 196

churches were built over the tombs of saints. Believers increasingly prized relics, for example, a piece of clothing or even a bone. The full-blooded doctrine developed ( it had been present in seed form since earliest times ) that the dead saints, now in heaven, could help struggling believers on earth by their prayers. After all, “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” ( Jas. 5:16 KJV ); surely a saint’s prayers would be even more effective now that he or she was in heaven? So Christians practiced – not praying to the saints – but asking the saints in heaven to pray for them. This was called invocation or invoking the saints ( from Latin *invocare*, to call upon ). In popular piety, it often drifted into a custom of actually praying to the saints, which was little different from the way that pagans prayed to their various gods. People considered certain saints to be especially good at meeting particular needs; one could bring about a cure for childlessness, another could protect travelers, another could reveal the future, and so on. Most of the great church leaders of the time positively encouraged this cult of the saints and relics.”<sup>3</sup>

We should conceive of our lives as belonging to a noble company of God’s beloved people, as sons and daughters of God, living in the world for a time, but walking by faith. We will spend eternity with God alongside believers of all time – past, present, and future – so we need to consider that, and strive to not be one who apostatizes their faith. So how do we do that?

Well, the A.H. immediately provides us with a prescription, beginning in v. 1, “*Let us also [ as they did ] lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*” As if we are runners in a marathon, we are being given our training instructions. The fact that the race is “set before us”, more than implies that someone has placed in this position so that we might run a charted course. Of course, that someone is God Himself. I think that Job 10:12 and Psalm 139: 13-16 are helpful to envision this idea.

## Weights

Since the author begins with “weights” to be set aside, and separates ‘weights’ from ‘sins’ in the process, we must first understand what ‘weights’ are. They are something that, if we are to run effectively, we must leave behind us as we run. Paul often used the imagery of a race or some other athletic contest<sup>4</sup> to parallel the effect of living a life of endurance as we forge ahead to the goal of winning the race of life – notice I Cor. 9:24-27. His goal is that “imperishable wreath”, which he calls elsewhere, “a crown of righteousness” ( 2 Tim. 4:6-8 ).

“In ancient races in Greece ( pre-cursors to the Olympic Games ), an athlete trained in order to lose body weight, and at race time, stripped off all garments, running naked.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nick R. Needham, in “Give Praise to God” Edited by Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas & Ligon Duncan, P & R Publishing, 2003, p. 394

<sup>4</sup> See Gal. 2:2; Phil. 1:29f; 2:16; Col. 1:29; I Tim. 6:12; 2:5; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; Acts 20:24, and II Cor. 10:13ff

<sup>5</sup> Richard Philips, Hebrews, p. 531

A.W. Pink defines “weight” in a more expansive way; “The Greek word for “weights” is “tumor” or “swelling”, so that an excrescence, a superfluity, is what is in view. A “weight” is something which we are at liberty to cast aside, but which instead we choose to retain. It is anything that retards our progress, anything that unfits us for the discharge of our God-assigned duties, anything which dulls the conscience, blunts the edge of our spiritual appetite, or chokes the spirit of prayer. The “cares of this world” weigh down the soul just as effectually as does a greedy grasping after the things of earth.”<sup>6</sup>

This makes a lot of sense, because if the Bible is telling us to set ‘weights aside, they must be something we can set aside, they are not necessary for us to carry, which must mean we prefer to carry them unless told not to do so.

We all have things in our lives, even after we become believers, and perhaps even as mature believers that we like to cling to, and it means different things for each person, because we tend to rationalize – “This is not technically ‘a sin’, so it must be OK for me to continue to do it.” When the Bible tells us to examine ourselves ( i.e., I Cor. 11:28; II Cor. 13:5 ), it is not only sin we are to search for and forsake, but also those lifestyle choices, things that do not assist us in our Christian life, but instead, if we looked at them truthfully, are a hindrance to Christian growth. Richard Phillips points out,

“Hindrances can be career ambitions, hobbies, associations and friendships, habits and preoccupations.”<sup>7</sup> Pray for God to examine your heart, to help you identify entrenched weights, these hindrances, and then discard them.

David, in possibly the most beloved Psalm of all, Ps. 139, at the very end of it, after extolling God’s magnificent attributes of omniscience and omnipresence, and sovereignty over our lives, points out this nugget of truth: *“Search me O God and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous [ KJV – wicked ] way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”* ( vv. 23-24 ). We don’t always see what really lurks in our hearts ( Jeremiah 17:9 ).

## Besetting Sin

Then, back in Heb. 12:1, we are also told we must *“lay aside...sin which clings so closely,...”* ( ESV ). The KJV translates this as *“the sin which so easily besets us...”*. I recall hearing – many years ago – as a young believer, Chuck Swindoll preaching on this passage, and he talked about besetting sin, and said that “a besetting sin is the one you are thinking about right now when you hear that phrase.” It’s the sin that leaps to mind, the one sin that nags at you. You know it’s in your life, and you try to stop it, you pray for God to take the temptation of it away from you, and you experience brief victories over it, but it always seems to come back to haunt you and you give in to it again. A.W. Pink says it like this;

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<sup>6</sup> A.W. Pink, Exposition of Hebrews, Volume 2, Baker, 1963; p. 898

<sup>7</sup> Richard Phillips, p. 531

“It is true that each one of us has some special form of sin to which we are most prone, and that he is more sorely tempted from one direction than another; but we think it is very clear from all which precedes our text that what the apostle has particularly in mind here is that which most seeks to hinder the exercise of faith. Let the reader ponder John 16:8,9.”<sup>8</sup>

It clings to us. It entangles us. It frustrates us. We must take our sin ( not someone else’s, as tempting as that is ) seriously. We take it lightly at our own peril – note Heb. 3:12-19. We are aware by now, especially as we encounter the lives of some of the OT saints named in Hebrews 11, that they were imperfect and they committed sins – some of them big sins! Just as one example – David allowing his heart to lust after Bathsheba, and the outworking of the consequences throughout the rest of his life. Oh, God forgave him, but read the account of his life and the horrific historical and social consequences that affected his family, friends, official relationships and the nation of Israel! If we do not keep sin at bay, we will all too quickly find ourselves distracted, veering off the narrow path and becoming entangled in our sins!

Albert Mohler comments again;

“One of the most horrifying truths about sin is that it clings to the sinner. Christians would like to say that once we have come to faith in Christ, sin assaults us no more. Unfortunately, it’s not easily shed. God’s Word never says that sin will stop assaulting or enticing us after conversion. Instead, Scripture gives warnings and examples, as Paul does in Romans 7. Sin is a real threat with which Christians must constantly contend. This is why the author commands us to throw it off and lay it aside. If we don’t, we won’t endure.”<sup>9</sup>

Our ‘race’ is not a 100 yard sprint, and it will not be won by a single burst of energetic worship. It is a marathon that lasts from our conversion until God takes us home. Matthew warns us in Matt. 13:18-22 of the danger of the assaults on our beliefs from the outside world – on those who seem to accept Christ in joy, but then revert to what they love best! We need to run the race with “*patient endurance*” ( Rev. 2:9 ). This is one reason that Jesus warned to those who would follow Him – as he says in LK 14:25-33, count the cost!

## Run With Endurance

So, once we have dealt with weights and sins, we are now to run the race with endurance that is ‘set before us.’ Pink is helpful here;

“The “race” is that life of faith and obedience, that pursuit of personal holiness, to which the Christian is called by God. Turning from sin and the world in penitence and trust to Christ is not the finishing-post, but only the starting point. The Christian race begins at the new birth, and ends not until we are summoned to leave this world. The prize to be run for is heavenly glory. The ground to be covered is our journey through this life. The track itself is “set before us”; marked

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<sup>8</sup> Pink, Hebrews, Vol. 2, p. 899

<sup>9</sup> Mohler, Hebrews, p. 195

out in the Word. The rules to be observed, the path which is to be traversed, the difficulties to be overcome, the dangers to be avoided, the source and secret of the needed strength, are all plainly revealed in the holy Scriptures. If we lose, the blame is entirely ours; if we succeed, the glory belongs to God alone.”<sup>10</sup>

In the context of this letter/sermon, those to whom the A.H. originally wrote, started well, but had begun to lose their will to persevere and so they needed this advice ( as do we all ) to regain confidence in Christ and a spirit of perseverance. This is the race we were called to run.

## Looking to Jesus

### v. 2

“A constant view of the glory of Christ will revive our souls and cause our spiritual lives to flourish and thrive...The more we behold the glory of Christ by faith now, the more spiritual and the more heavenly will be the state of our souls. The reason why the spiritual life in our souls decays and wither is because we fill our minds full of other things...But when the mind is filled with thoughts of Christ and his glory, these things will be expelled...This is how our spiritual life is revived.”<sup>11</sup> – John Owen ( emphasis mine ).

This is the secret of the Christian life – to place our eyes, our attention, not on the world, or even on other people, but to focus our attention on Him who is the source of our faith, and the supreme example of how to live a life pleasing to God – to exercise the faith that Hebrews 11:6 tells us the only way to please him.

Verse 2 goes on to describe why we should look to Jesus. He is the ‘founder’, ‘forerunner’ or ‘pioneer’ of our faith. He has gone ahead and overcome all the barriers to faithful living we will or have already encountered in our own lives of faith – note JN 16:32-33. Jesus comforts His disciples, whom He is about to leave as He goes to the cross, to *“take heart, I have overcome the world.”* We must look at Him as we ‘run’ undistracted by those siren calls around us, which attempt to pull our feet off the narrow path, and direct us away from our goal. He is our goal, and He is our prize, the “pearl of great price” at the end of the race.

Back in Mark 9:2-8, as Moses and Elijah appear on the mount with Jesus, Peter, James and John, as Peter desires to erect 3 tents to house Jesus, Moses and Elijah, notice what God says in vv. 7-8., telling them that Jesus is the most important Person on that mount; *“This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him.”*

Mark Jones comments about the faith of Jesus;

“There is an important principle in Christian life that must be understood if we are going to grasp the glories of our so-great salvation ( Heb. 2:3 ); namely, that whatever spiritual blessing we

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<sup>10</sup> Pink, Hebrews Vol. 2, p. 895

<sup>11</sup> John Owen, cited by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 533

receive from God, the same must have been true of Jesus himself. Therefore, if we possess the gift of faith, that gift belonged pre-eminently to Jesus himself. He is the 'pioneer' and 'perfecter' of our faith because he led the way ( Heb. 12:2 ). He lived by faith while he was on earth ( Heb. 2:13, 'I will put my trust in him' ). Thomas Goodwin made the point that Jesus was 'put to live by faith like as we are...For in this example of Christ, we have the highest instance of believing that ever was."<sup>12</sup>

Lest we think that Jesus' path to the cross was a life "on automatic", we must realise that He operated in the power of the Spirit and in faith and trust of His Father entirely. John chapter 5 especially points out Jesus' walk of faith.

It is the story of Jesus , of His mission to save sinners, that is the key to our understanding of the Bible, and it is the key in these 1<sup>st</sup> 2 verses of Heb. 12. Whereas the Hebrew Christian recipients of this letter were in danger of not enduring, not persevering in the faith, because they believed the persecution they were under would end if they reverted back to Judaism, they would now read or hear v. 2. It was by faith that Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, persevering to the end of His earthly life to receive the reward of the restoration of the glory He had left behind when He condescended to come to earth as a human – cf. Phil. 2:5-11 – which is almost a parallel to v. 2 here.

He did what He said, He came as a servant, born of low estate, without privilege or treasure, with no place to lay His head, lived in total obedience to His Father for His entire earthly life, and here in v. 2, we are told His motivation was "*for the joy set before him*." The idea of His total obedience and His expectation of the coming joy are both expressed in His High Priestly prayer of John 17:4,5,23,24; and see what I Peter 2:21 adds.

James Montgomery Boice says;

"The only thing that will ever get us moving along this path of self-denial and discipleship is fixing our eyes on Jesus and what he has done for us, coming to love him as a result, and thus wanting also to be with him both now and always. Jesus is our only possible model for self-denial. He is the very image of cross-bearing. And it is for love of him and a desire to be like him that we take up our cross and willingly follow him."<sup>13</sup>

The joy that was set before Jesus was not just what we have already stated. He took joy especially in obedience to His Father ( cf. JN 4:34 ). Obedience was seen by Jesus as His very sustenance. Although we do not often attribute joy to His final words from the cross, "*It is finished!*" ( JN 19:30 ), certainly this cry of victory was tinged with if not sopping with joy, because the suffering was over and the mission successfully accomplished!

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Jones, Knowing Christ, Banner of truth, 2016, p. 68

<sup>13</sup> James Montgomery Boice, cited in Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p.534

Jesus is the object of our faith, not just the example of it. It is to Him and for Him we are running our race, and we long to see Him at the finish line, and to hear those beautiful words, *“Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Lord.”* ( MT. 25:23 ). We find our only safety, our only hope, our greatest longing for ultimate joy and righteousness in His cross-work.

Jesus is also the source of our faith. He is active in inspiring and empowering our faith because He lives now, and according to Hebrews 7:22-25, from His position at the right hand of the Father in heaven, He forges not only our forgiveness, but creates a union between us and the Father because *“He brings us to God”* ( I Pet. 3:18 ). In Luke 22:32, Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed for him, *“that his faith would not fail”*, and who imagines that He does not also do the same on our behalf from that position at God’s right hand? Paul captures some of the imagery of what looking unto Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith will provide us with in 2 Cor. 3:18.

Jesus is with us during our entire lives as believers. Notice the words of painful wisdom from Joni Eareckson-Tada:

“I hope in some way I can take my wheelchair to heaven. With my new glorified body, I will stand on resurrected legs, and I will be next to the Lord Jesus. And I will feel those nail prints in his hands, and I will say, “Thank you, Jesus!” He will know I mean it, because he will recognize me from the inner sanctum of sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings. He will see that I was the one who identified with him in the sharing of his sufferings, so my gratitude will not be hollow. And then I will say, “Lord Jesus, do you see that wheelchair over there? Well, you were right. When you put me in it, it was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. I do not think that I would ever have known the glory of your grace were it not for the weakness of that wheelchair. So thank you, Lord Jesus, for that. Now, if you like, you can send that thing off to hell.”<sup>14</sup>

Philip Hughes wraps up this lesson with his excellent summary:

“We should consider, too, the utter loneliness of Jesus on his earthly course. We run together, he ran alone; for he came to do what no one else was competent to achieve. His course led him to the terrible forsakenness of the cross, whereas we run toward the prize of everlasting salvation and glory which he won for us through his death on the cross. But he too, in his unique and solitary struggle, had a goal on which his attention was inflexibly fixed, namely, the joy that was set before him, the joy, that is, of completing the work of reconciliation he had come to perform for our eternal benefit and to the glory of the Father’s name ( cf. JN 12:28 ), thus bringing to fruition all the purposes of God’s creation and all the promises of his covenant. His joy, which is indeed the fulness of joy ( Ps. 16:11 ), is the joy also of his elect; for it is his will that his own joy should dwell in them so that their joy, like his, may be full, and it was his prayer that that they might have his joy fulfilled in themselves ( JN 15:11; 17:13 ). His joy is the joy of heaven over every sinner who repents and returns to the Father’s home, over every lost sheep that is found, over every son that was dead and is alive again ( LK 15:6f, 24,32 ).”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Joni-Eareckson-Tada, in *“Why O God?”*, Larry J. Waters & Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Crossway, 2011, Pg. 324

<sup>15</sup> Philip Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 523