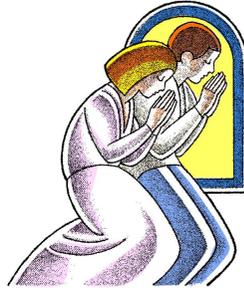


HEBREWS

STUDY 7

12:1-13:17



Concluding Advice: Continue to Run the Race with Determination

This last section draws on imaginative images and metaphors that help us today:

- Church as a living organism.
- Analogy of preparing for an athletic event.
- References to education and family life.
- Encouragement to believers who live in a shaky world.
- The positive value of love and respect.

The Church as Ongoing Organism

Imagine everyone sharing in Holy Communion on the same day – we are surrounded by a ‘great cloud of witnesses’ as well as the saints who ‘from their labours rest’.

Cloud could also mean the heavenly host that surrounds God’s throne (Ps. 148:2; Isa. 6:1-3; Luke 2:13; Rev 4:1-9), or even the angels mentioned in chapters 1 & 2.

For the author of Hebrews, Jesus serves as a major witness in this developing history of the church. Previously described as the *pioneer*, he is also described in 2:2 as the *perfecter* of our faith. This refers to a process of completion – bringing something to an end, leading to full

maturity. This same idea can be seen in James 2:8 in the fulfilment of the royal law of love.

In Hebrews Jesus is said to be made perfect through his sufferings – perfect forever (7:28). The idea is that Jesus is guiding God’s process through all history and providing continuity to the faithful in the past, present and future (13:8). It is the same promise seen in Rev 22:13 – “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.*”

Jesus as the Model in the Faith Race

Sports model for the Christian faith – let us run with perseverance. It is a similar usage of the word ‘*trained*’ in 2:11, which has the image of persons training in a gymnasium. The original readers would have been familiar with the great competitions held in Sparta, Athens, Corinth, Rome and the like throughout the Roman Empire. Through contests in athletics, drama, music, poetry, citizens would train vigorously to win the prize – a laurel or olive leaved wreath for their heads, as well as the kudos that accompanied it.

For the Hebrews who are being persecuted, they are encouraged to train hard and not give up the spiritual race. They need the training and discipline that God offers (12:3-11). They must strengthen weakened knees and legs (12:12-13). The prime example of such perseverance is found in Jesus (12:3).

Examples of Education and Family

Additional metaphors for the rigours of the Christian life are developed in 12:3-17 with reference to disciplined education and adherence to family traditions. Such teachings can be found in Jewish wisdom literature – such as Proverbs.

Church members are compared to as children (children of God), and are urged to think of their trials as God’s discipline rather than punishment. In the 1st Century it was commonly understood that men ran families and the entire household. Thus, if human fathers expected

obedience from their children and provided them with benefits as heirs, how much more would God as a heavenly Father give to members of his family of faith?

God is part of our life for ever, unlike human parents, and God's purpose is for our good in order that we may share his holiness (12:10).

Today we don't tend to attribute God for the sufferings we experience as a way of God enforcing obedience. In the view of the Hebrew's author the case about discipline needs to be pushed further. Obedience proves that one is a son or daughter of God. Those who do not accept God's discipline demonstrate that they are "illegitimate".

A prime example is Esau, which illustrates one who does not respect family tradition and claim rightful inheritance as the oldest son and the true heir to his father's blessing. The writer of Hebrews calls Esau immoral (Gk. *pornos*), godless or profane (see also 1 Timothy 1:9; 4:7).

The first son was the one who inherited everything, and often the only one who would receive an education. For the reader, with this knowledge and tradition, it was inconceivable that anyone would allow themselves to be deceived – to do so was a sign of infidelity to God – thus breaking the covenant. See also the example of Cain's murder of Abel.

12:23 points out in an unusual expression - only those who are *of the assembly of the first-born* can be enrolled in heaven.

Although Esau was restored to his brother, the judgment in Hebrews is harsh as he is seen as an illustration of the danger of apostasy (rejection of the Christian faith) - a sin seen as so great that one could not repent for it (12:17).

For us in our Christian faith, the journey through life can be one whereby we are constantly learning new things about God. We make discoveries about human nature, the world, and God's creative process.

We tend to see things in terms of discipline as more to do with the effort we are willing to put in, rather than the way God pushes us to obey.

Remember the Kingdom that Cannot Be Shaken

12:18-28 somewhat abruptly changes focus from education and family to a pyrotechnic account of Moses on Mt Sinai – the terrifying and bone-rattling experience of meeting God, and the dangers readers live in as the whole world comes crashing down around them. It is a reminder of the awesome power of God whereby the people could not approach or talk to God.

Now, however, they can anticipate a new relationship with God through Jesus, one in which they will find the true Mt Zion (the place on which the Temple is built) and the heavenly Jerusalem.

The new city of Jerusalem is similar to the one described in Revelation 21:1-7 – a place where all suffering and tears are gone, and believers will truly be God's children. The promise of this heavenly place brings hope and courage for the future (read 13:14).

When believers understand the power and purposes of God, they can respond with respect, worship, and true piety (12:28).

So, in the midst of all that is terrible in the world, violence home and abroad, etc, Christians can be assured that because of the eternal plan of God through Christ, they will receive a *kingdom that cannot be shaken*.

Always Extend Love and Show Commitment (13:1-17)

Additional practical advice:

13:1 – regard each other with mutual love (Gk. = *philadelphia* – brother love).

13:2 – it is similar to 13:1, the idea by encouraging the extension of hospitality to all people. Hospitality was especially important in an age when travellers were dependant on the goodwill of people along the way. (Gk = *philoxenias* – love of stranger).

13:3 – admonition to remember prisoners, reflecting how friends and relatives were victims of persecution for their beliefs.

13:4-5 – principles of sharing and stewardship, the sanctity of marriage and avoidance of sexual immorality, warnings about love of money and the danger of possessions.

13:7, 17 – directions of support of church leaders, who preach the word of God – since this is the chief way God communicates to believers. There were those who had rejected what had been taught and had chased after mythological speculations and strange teachings – probably including various theories concerning Jesus’ relationship to God. Others had been influenced by Jewish regulations regarding food. The author bluntly says that these are of no benefit.

Finally, a reminder that the way sacrifice for sin is usually conducted is outmoded and dangerous. Jesus Christ is the high priest who offers himself as the ultimate blood sacrifice to God.

13:12 - “Outside the city” refers to the fact that things that were considered unorthodox or forbidden were taken outside the city to be destroyed (Exod. 29:14; Lev. 4:11-12). Since Jesus was crucified beyond the city walls of Jerusalem on Golgotha, according to Jewish and Roman law about the execution of a criminal (Lev. 24:14, 23), his death shows that God is drawing new boundaries about what is in or out, clean or unclean.

The author of Hebrews wants the readers to leave the security of so-called holy/clean places in the Temple and Tent of Meeting to offer the true sacrifices that are pleasing to God - that is the confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God – and for them to offer lives that are generous and committed to doing good (13:15-16).