

Hebrews 12

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For most of us, it's not uncommon for us to daydream about what life would be like if we were only in a better situation than we are now. We might wonder what it would be like to be movie-star good-looking, or Michael-Jordan talented, or Warren-Buffett rich. We might even imagine that if those situations were our situation, then our life would be happier and better than it is now, as though everyone who is attractive or talented or rich is also happy.

In reality, though, whether our lives are happy or successful has little or nothing to do with our situation. It has everything to do with how we react to that situation. Warren Buffett wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Instead, he worked his way up from humble beginnings to become a multi-billionaire. Likewise, Michael Jordan didn't get to be the greatest basketball player of all time by sitting on the couch and eating Cheetos. He had the raw talent, it's true, but so do all kinds of other guys who never make it off the playground. What made him a great basketball player was his relentless dedication to becoming great, his willingness to practice another half hour when the other guys went home.

Similarly, what makes us happy and successful is not the genetic and environmental hand we were dealt. It is our determination to succeed despite the obstacles in our path. Nowhere is this more true than in the spiritual realm, and that is one of the main arguments of the book of Hebrews. The original audience of Hebrews did not find itself in a situation that we would envy. In addition to all of the temptations they face, they also had to deal with persecution that could cost them their property, their freedom, or their lives. However, those grim circumstances did not render them incapable of righteousness. As the Hebrews writer makes clear, they were expected to persevere no matter what, and we can learn much from his words about our perseverance today. Let's see how the argument works in Hebrews 12.

Witnesses and Discipline

This discussion begins when the writer exhorts his readership to remember the **WITNESSES** who were watching them. He points this out in Hebrews 12:1-3. The "so great a cloud of witnesses" is a reference back to all of the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11. There are two possible ways in which those heroes could be considered witnesses. They could be considered witnesses in that they glorified God with their lives while they were still alive, or they could be witnesses in the sense that they are watching us today. Of these two explanations, the second is the better one. The Hebrews writer speaks of these witnesses surrounding us, like the fans in the stands at a football game surround the two teams. The reason why we must lay aside encumbrances and sin is because these faithful witnesses are watching us right now. They're rooting for us to overcome like they did, and we must run our race in a way that won't disappoint them.

The most important witness of all, of course, is Christ. Christ didn't merely run the race successfully. He ran it perfectly, even though His race involved suffering and shame to the point of death. Just like when we mow the lawn, we fix our eyes on some distant point to keep our path straight, in our spiritual lives, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, so that we will end up following Him. The devil does not intend to make this easy for us. Just as he did in the lives of Jesus and the lives of the Hebrews, he's going to put as many obstacles in our path as God will let him. However, Jesus fought through those obstacles, at the cost of His own life, and He won the victory that God wanted Him to win. Friends, if Jesus did it, we can do it too. Through His help, we can run our race with endurance and claim the joy set before us.

Next, the writer discusses one of the ways that God helps us—through **DISCIPLINE**. He describes this discipline and its consequences in Hebrews 12:4-11. This passage implies a great deal about one of the spiritual problems the Hebrews were grappling with. In their service to Christ, they kept on encountering hardship after hardship after hardship, while many of those who persecuted them were prospering. Just as it would us, this really led the Hebrews to question whose side God was on. Maybe the adversity they were experiencing was a sign of His disfavor.

In answer, the Hebrews writer raises a point that really helps us to understand our walk with God. He tells the Hebrews that simply because something was bad in physical terms didn't make it bad in spiritual terms. To illustrate this point, he compares God's relationship with us to a parent's relationship with his children. Let me tell you, friends: when I was growing up, my parents did all sorts of things that I didn't enjoy. They wouldn't let me buy a new pair of sneakers every two months like the cool kids at school. They didn't let me have ice cream and cookies whenever I wanted them. They had these long, agonizing talks with me when my grades didn't meet their expectations. And, of course, on a more physically painful level, my mother's wooden spoon spent plenty of quality time with my backside.

Does all of that mean that my parents didn't love me? Certainly not! They did those unpleasant things to me, but they also did them for me, because they wanted me to become the happiest, most well rounded adult that I could be. If they hadn't loved me, they wouldn't have bothered to do those things, because they wouldn't have cared about the result.

God does the same thing with His children, except that He is far better at it than even my parents were. He uses both joy and sorrow to shape our lives, with the goal not of making us well rounded adults, but of leading us to live with

Him forever in heaven. There are lessons that we learn from His kindness and His blessings, but there are also lessons that we must learn from His discipline. As was true for the children of Israel, it is often true for us that when things go too well, we tend to drift away from God, and we shall only remember that we need Him when we are painfully reminded that we need Him. This is why God does not shield us from the painful consequences of sin. He wants us to learn from those consequences. He provides additional learning experiences in our lives even when we have not sinned. This is clearly evident in the life of our older brother, Jesus. God allowed Jesus to suffer and die because there was an all-important lesson He had to learn from suffering and death. Jesus would not have been able to serve as our Savior without experiencing that suffering first. In the same way, it is often the suffering that we experience in our lives that both makes us most useful in the kingdom and most kindles our longing for heaven. Our suffering is also spiritually vital.

All of this depends, though, on whether we take the right lesson from suffering. All too many Christians encounter God's discipline and become discouraged by it. They blame God for the hardships they endure, rather than learning from them. This is about as reasonable as the teenage girl who shouts, "I hate you!" at her parents, stomps into her bedroom, and slams the door because they grounded her. Instead, we need to listen to what God is saying.

Exhortation

On this basis, the writer next directs an **EXHORTATION** to his hearers. We find this in Hebrews 12:12-17. The point is that because God is on our side, we should keep going, that we should do the things that are necessary to ensure that we will endure until the end. Unlike much of the other content of Hebrews, this section contains instructions that are familiar to us from other parts of Scripture. As a people, we must be peaceable, holy, and free from sexual immorality. There's one element here, though, with a meaning that's not immediately obvious. When we read that we must beware of the root of bitterness springing up, our natural reaction is to think that this is a warning against being embittered against one another. Certainly, Christians are not to be bitter people, but that's not what the passage means by "root of bitterness." Instead, this is a reference to Deuteronomy 29:18, where the "root of bitterness" is plainly an Israelite who practices idolatry. This text in Hebrews, then, is a warning to avoid idolatry also, whether the overt kind where we bow down to statues, or the subtler kind, where we put our possessions or families or anything else above God.

If we fail in this, we shall find ourselves in the same predicament as Esau. We shall reach a point where we will want God's blessing, but will be unable to repent. This doesn't refer to an earthly problem. We know from 1 John 1 that God hears and forgives whenever we ask Him for it. Instead, it refers to the day of judgment, a day when all fallen-away Christians will recognize their error but will be unable to recover from it. Only the faithful now will be rewarded later.

After this, the Hebrews writer next talks about the **TWO MOUNTAINS** associated with the old and new covenants, respectively. We read this comparison in Hebrews 12:18-24. The first part of the illustration is about the physical reality that the Israelites experienced when they came to Mt. Sinai. They saw a terrifying display of God's power in the strange sights and sounds around the mountain, and they were warned that anything that came any closer to God, even an animal, was to be stoned to death. Moses himself, the man who spoke with God as a man speaks with his friend, was scared to death by the things he witnessed on the mountain. The message was clear: God is holy; keep away.

Our message is very different today. When we come to the spiritual Mt. Zion, all sorts of different groups gather to welcome us. We make our covenant with God in the presence of the righteous who are still on earth, of angels gathered to celebrate, of the righteous who have already passed on to their eternal reward, of God, and of Christ Himself. This joyous fellowship is made possible by the blood of Jesus, which the writer tells us speaks better than the blood of Abel. If you'll recall, back in Genesis 4, God told Cain that the blood of Abel, the brother whom he had murdered, was crying out against him from the ground. Cain was condemned by the testimony of Abel's blood. By contrast, when Christ's blood is sprinkled on us, it doesn't condemn us. It sanctifies us, and its testimony is that we are righteous.

From this, the Hebrews writer draws the logical conclusion. We must do everything in our power to receive **THE UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM**. His instruction about this appears in Hebrews 12:25-29. Because the covenant that we have is so much better than the covenant that the Israelites had, we must be more careful than they were. Even those who disobeyed under the lesser covenant were destroyed. What do we think shall happen to those who violate their greater covenant with God? Our agreement with God is a solemn one, and not at all to be taken lightly.

Furthermore, we must recognize that we cannot escape God even if we are outside the covenant. The Hebrews writer here cites Haggai 2, where God says that He will yet once more shake the heavens and the earth. According to the writer, this doesn't simply have reference to historical events of the time of Haggai. Instead, it refers also to a final shaking of the heavens and the earth, after which God will never shake them again, because they will no longer exist. All of the physical creation will be destroyed, and the only things that shall remain shall be the eternal things of the kingdom of God. Those who are not a part of that kingdom shall be consumed along with the rest of the visible world. When we talk about remaining faithful to the Lord, we're talking about eternal life versus eternal annihilation. We need to take our service to God seriously, because if we do not, we can be certain that the fire of his consuming wrath will consume us.