

Hebrews 12: Do Not Turn Back

December 21, 2014

Exhortation: Persevere in faith through persecution (12:1-4).

Throughout his letter, the writer has presented the black-and-white options: “shrinking back to destruction” or persevering in faith to ultimate salvation (10:39). Chapter 11 listed numerous examples of true, persevering faith—faith that did not give up in the face of hardship. In fact, as the writer notes, these examples all “died in faith” without receiving what they had been promised. These men and women pleased God by their persevering faith, although they were rejected and persecuted by the world (12:1). We must lay aside any weight or sin that weighs us down and run with endurance the course set before us (12:2). As we do, we look ahead to our pioneer, our leader, the founder and completer of our faith, Jesus Christ (12:3). His “race” was much harder than ours; indeed, he faced the cross and persevered through it, disregarding the shame because of the joy of completing his course and was duly rewarded by God. The readers had not yet faced martyrdom for their faith (12:4).

Objection: Doesn't difficulty mean God is against us? (12:5-11).

They had forgotten the encouragement of Scripture to God's people when they undergo God's testing (12:5). Why were they facing difficulties? Why were they being challenged in their faith? Why were bad things happening to them? Proverbs 3:11-12 reminds us that God addresses his people as his *children*. God loves his children, and because he does, he disciplines them for their good (12:6). The difficulties God is sending are for their training (12:7) and they are proof of their genuine relationship with God (12:8). Our earthly parents reared us in their limited understanding and wisdom (12:9), but our heavenly Father disciplines us for our eternal good—so that we can be holy (12:10; cf. 12:14). Discipline is painful in the short haul, but joyful in the long run. Ultimately, discipline blossoms into the peaceful fruit of righteousness (12:11).

Exhortation: Encourage one another to persevere (12:12-17).

In light of this, believers should encourage each other (12:13-14) toward peace with one another and sanctification (12:15). They must beware the dangers of failing to obtain God's grace, of allowing the bitter root of unbelief to destroy themselves and others (12:16), and of falling to immorality, devaluing eternal spiritual blessing for temporary physical pleasure like Esau did (12:17-18).

Warning: Do not refuse God's salvation (12:18-29).

Once again, the theme of faith in Jesus Christ or judgment from God is revisited. The fear and awe of approaching God is even greater than the fear the people of Israel felt when they looked at Mount Sinai (12:18-21; cf. Exod 19:10-25; 20:18-21; Deut 4:10-24). We are approaching the heavenly dwelling place of the living God, where he reigns with his angels (12:22), along with the church of Jesus Christ who have their names written in heaven, and in the presence of the Old Testament saints, whose justification has been made complete by Christ's work on the cross (12:23). We approach God by the blood or sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the mediator of a better covenant (cf. 9:15), whose blood shed on the cross declares that we are cleansed and justified, while Abel's blood only cried out for vengeance (12:24).

One must take care not to reject this almighty God, because if God has judged men for disobeying his Word spoken on earth, there is no chance of escape for those who rebel against his heavenly decree (12:25). God's voice shook the earth at Mount Sinai at the giving of the law, and God has promised to shake the earth again (12:26; cf. Hag 2:6), indicating the temporary nature of this world and pointing to the enduring inheritance that the believer looks forward to by faith (12:27). The proper response is thankfulness and reverent worship (12:28-29).

To Think About:

Do suffering and trials in a Christian's life indicate that he has sinned? Can you think of an example of a just man who "learned obedience" through suffering?

Does God punish Christians for their sin? What is the punishment for sin? Would the writer of Hebrews say that his readers' persecution is a punishment from God because of their sin?

What kinds of sins might a "bitter root" of unbelief produce? How would those things defile brothers and sisters in the church?

Should we be fearful to approach God?

Praying through epistle of Hebrews:

For my own heart: that I do not have a bitter root of unbelief in my heart (12:15)

For my brothers and sisters in Christ: to strive for sanctification (12:14)

For my church: that WBC would look to Jesus (12:2)