

Hebrews Chapter 12 – John Karmelich

1. Since I've developed this theme of opening lessons in Hebrews with questions, the right one for Chapter 12 hit me the other day: If am just trusting in Jesus for my salvation, what about self-discipline? How does discipline come into play? If I am saved by faith alone, is it necessary for me to discipline myself to be a follower of Jesus? I could probably summarize this whole lesson on the single issue of "discipline and the Christian believer".
 - a) OK, why should I care? The question comes down to the idea that if it is our desire to be pleasing to God, how hard do we have to work at it? If we believe Jesus died for our sins, is that enough? Do we have to work hard at being a Christian over and above that? What about the concept that Jesus wants to guide our life? How hard do we have to work at it? In summary, how and where does self-discipline come into play?
 - b) I bring all of this up here because in effect, that is what Chapter 12 is about. The chapter in its own way asks the question, "If I believe in Jesus, how hard do I have to work at it?" That in many ways, this chapter is the most personal one. It is the one that says in effect, "OK, enough about who Jesus is. Let's now talk about what it is we should be doing knowing that Jesus desires to guide our life."
 - c) That leads me back to the question: How hard do we work as believers as opposed to just trusting Jesus to guide our lives? Where does self-discipline fit in to living the Christian life? That issue is the central focus of this chapter. The short answer is "very hard". Think how hard Paul worked once he was saved. We are saved by faith alone, but we demonstrate that faith by making a difference for Jesus with our lives.
2. To explain further, let us go back to the last chapter. There, we had a sweeping history of the Old Testament saints. The focus of that chapter was about how each of those people lived by faith in God. Chapter 12 effectively asks the question, "Now that I know they are saved by faith alone, how does that affect me?" To say it another way, how do we as Christians live by faith?
 - a) OK John, I'll bite. What does God expect of us? It is to use the most valuable asset we have, our time to make a difference for Him. In this chapter, living the Christian life is compared to running a long distance race. It is not that God the Father wants all of us to get into top physical shape and literally start running. It is that He wants us to know that living the Christian life is not about "believing in Jesus and then going back to living like everyone else around us". It is about believing that Jesus not only died for our sins, but also desires to guide our life daily." If He is guiding us, how can we best use our lives in order to make a difference for Him? How can we live out my life (i.e. "run our race") in order to make a difference for Him?
 - b) Are you saying that we have to do works in order to be saved? Never. I am saying that we should work hard because we are saved and we want to please the one who saved us. That doesn't mean we have to ignore our family and friends. It just means we think about our lives in terms of what God wants us to do. I've learned to think in terms of what God wants me to do at any given moment? The answer can be as straightforward as helping out around our homes or helping others around us. Sometimes it is rest and sometimes it is work. The point is simply that it is not "our will" we seek as believers, but His.
 - i) So how do we know we are doing His will? Start by asking. If we get an urge to do something, and assuming that urge is not illegal, sinful or take away from our other obligations in life, go forward. Will we make mistakes? Of course we will. The point is, we move forward and trust that He is guiding us. I get discernment in the strangest of places. Yes it starts with prayer and spending time in His word. Sometimes when I am alone, all of a sudden the "obvious" will just hit me what to do next. If we are willing to be lead by Him, He will lead us. With that speech out of my system, let us look at Chapter 12 and how we should live for Jesus.

3. Verse 1: Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.
- a) This chapter is full of great visual pictures, beginning here. This verse describes us being surrounded by a large gathering of people. Does this verse mean to say that many Old Testament saints are actually watching what we are doing every moment of the day? No. I believe this means that, since all of the people mentioned in the last chapter of Hebrews proved their faith in God by "doing something about it", let us do likewise.
 - i) I am not saying we have to do exactly what the people listed in the last chapter did. I am saying that like them, God is calling on us to demonstrate our faith.
 - ii) OK, how do we demonstrate our faith? The short answer is don't look to me, or say your parents, spouse or friends. The answer is in Verse 2. That verse tells us to look to Jesus "the author and perfecter of our faith". What does that mean? That means we look to Jesus not only for our salvation, but also to guide our lives.
 - a) So what does Jesus specifically want me to do today? Ask Him. Pray how God the Father wants me to live today. Remember God is not obligated to answer our prayers on our timing. The answer to that question is usually to simply go forward, make the best decisions possible that one has to deal with and trust that He is guiding us.
 - b) I find if we are willing to submit to His will, in His own way, He makes it obvious to us what He wants us to do if we are willing to trust Him.
 - b) Meanwhile, back to Verse 1. The first point being made here is simply that like the people listed in the last chapter, God wants us to trust Him to guide our lives. To expand upon what I stated in the last lesson, "be willing to put one's time and resources behind one's belief about God's existence and that He is willing to guide our lives".
 - i) I am not saying we have to give to the first Christian cause that comes down the road. I am saying that we look to God to guide us and make it obvious to us how He wants to guide us for His glory. When we look back at our lives, I find it then becomes obvious to see how God has been guiding us the whole time.
 - ii) If it were "that simple", why is there more text in Verse 1, let alone the rest of the chapter? That is the reminder of how it is we are too live for Him. Let me put it this way, if you are still confused about what to do next, welcome to the club, and maybe we should move on to the rest of the verse and the rest of the chapter.
 - c) To understand the rest of the verse, it may help a little to know a little bit about long distance running. When I was a teenager, my father paid for running lessons to help me run better. Being tall, it took me a long time to develop good coordination. Some of those fundamental issues about how to run came to mind as I went through this chapter.
 - i) My point is simply that this verse and others coming up in this chapter compares the Christian life to being a long distance runner.
 - ii) This does not mean we literally have to enter marathons or other types of running races to become a good Christian. It simply means that this verse and some other verses coming up in this chapter use attributes of a runner to teach us some things about how to live the Christian life. If one grasps that concept, the rest of this chapter is going to be easier to understand.
 - d) OK, enough background commentary: Let me discuss running and how that affects our Christian life. The next phrase in Verse 1 says, "let us throw off everything that hinders". The literal Greek translation could be: "let us remove the fat" (that prevents us from being a good runner). OK, I'll spare many of us (myself included) the fact we could lose some fat and move on to the main point here. To better explain this, visualize a runner going through a race holding a 10-pound weight. Later that same runner continues to run without that weight. That is the image here about removing what hinders us.

- e) All right John, if this verse is not literally about losing weight, what is it talking about here in Verse 1? In order to answer, we have to look ahead to Verse 2. Once again, Jesus is the "author and perfecter of our faith". In other words, it is a matter of asking our personal "running coach", what is it that is preventing us from making a better difference for Him.
 - i) It is a matter of praying, "Dear God, I want to make a difference for You in my life. If there is anything holding me back or if there is anything preventing me from being a better witness for You, change me to be that better witness."
 - ii) I'm not sure God can resist a prayer that says in effect, "Help me to be more like the type of person You want me to be." We may not get any immediate answer, but if it is our desire to serve God better, I am sure he will guide our life to do His will. It occurred to me that I never thought those running lessons so many years ago would come in handy in a bible study one day. That is just another reminder how God is working in the background of our lives in order to guide us.
 - f) Meanwhile, we are still on Verse 1. The next phrase has to do with "sin that entangles us".
 - i) My translation: It is a matter of watching out for some sinful aspect of our lives that prevents us from being a better witness for God. Ok, enough guilt there. ☺
 - ii) So what is the difference between a sinful issue and a "fat" issue? The point is not everything that prevents us from being a good witness for God is sin related. When it comes to sin issues, we have to pray for God to help us deal with such issues. As I regularly preach, the secret to living the Christian life is not about trying harder to please Him based on our strength, but to trust Him to change us to be the type of person He wants us to be. That includes the ability to resist sin as well as resist ways that may not be sinful, but they still prevent us from being a good witness for God.
 - g) So John, are you saying we have to be some sort of super-saint that never has any faults or never sins? Of course not. Those Old Testament saints from the last chapter had all sorts of faults in their lives. Remember the most valuable thing that God gives us is our time. It is just a matter of using our time wisely. The only thing that matters for all of eternity is the time we use to make a difference for Him. Does that mean we can't relax or enjoy other things? Again, of course not. The secret to living the Christian life is to know that whatever we choose to do at any moment is to "take God with us". That does not mean we have to think about Him every moment of the day. It just means we should be aware that He is watching us and that we should "walk the walk" to please Him.
 - h) OK then, so what should we be doing? The answer is going to be different for each of us. The answer is to go through our life doing what we enjoy doing (assuming it is not sinful to begin with) and use our lives to make a difference for Him. It is a matter of balancing our responsibilities with what we enjoy doing in order to make that difference.
 - i) That is how we "run the race" which is the illustration of Verse 1. Speaking of running the race, it is best to move on at this point to Verse 2.
4. Verse 2: Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
- a) If I had to pick one word to remember from this chapter, it is the word that is translated "perfecter". The King James Version says "finisher". The point is simply that believing in Jesus is not just, "I believe I'm saved, now leave me alone" concept. To live the Christian life is to constantly, and regularly look to Jesus to guide our lives for His glory. If one can grasp and learn that concept, everything else I teach in this lesson is truly secondary.
 - b) Speaking of trusting Jesus, that concept never ever means that life will be wonderful all the time. If one studies the life of Jesus, He mostly suffered opposition and shame. To be a Christian usually means that many nonbelievers will not respect our lifestyle.

- c) Sometimes living in the United States amongst other Christians, we forget how difficult it is for most believers in the world to follow Jesus. In some places to be a devout Christian is a death sentence or at the least, one's community shuns us. Remember that the original intended audience of this letter were Jewish Christians still living in a Jewish community. Imagine if our entire family was say, Buddhists, Muslims or even a non-religious family, and then we became a devout Christian. They would shame us for not being like them. That is the point being made here.
- i) I come from a Roman Catholic background. When I started to become a devout Evangelical Christian, I could tell my family didn't know what to do with me. They finally learned to accept that "this is the way John is, and we have to accept it". My point is that if one is a good witness for Jesus, we will get opposition, but our family is still our family and unless Christianity is a death sentence, I find that our family eventually realizes they can't change us and have to accept us.
 - ii) All of this comes back to the idea that we have to trust Jesus to guide our lives. It is easy to focus on whatever difficulty we have to face in life. It is easy to think, "Why should I have to deal with all of this religious stuff, when I can just forget about going to church and live like everyone around me?" That is what the bible and this chapter are warning against. The idea about staying focused on Jesus no matter what the cost or the hardship. I'm not saying we have to unnecessarily suffer. I am saying that the price of trusting Jesus to guide one's life is that one is going to have opposition whether one realizes it or not. It was true for the Jewish Christians this letter was written to, and it will be true for our lives as well.
- d) So if we are suffering for our belief in Jesus, what do we do? Again, it is looking to our "perfector" to give us the strength and wisdom of how to handle whatever it is we have to deal with at that moment in time.
- i) What if we are not suffering at the moment? First of all, enjoy the moment. What one learns is that everyone in life suffers at times. The point of course, is to ask the question, "Is one making a difference for Jesus or not?" If one is, I can promise you (unfortunately) that at the least, demonic forces will in some way oppose us as they don't want us to make a difference for Jesus. Remember that when things are going wrong, God is more powerful than those forces and He can and does guide us through the difficult times of our lives.
 - ii) If one is not making a difference for Jesus, simply ask Him how He wants us to live to make that difference. I promise that He will guide you accordingly.
 - iii) Meanwhile, I believe I beat those two verses to death, and am ready for Verse 4.
5. Verse 4: In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."
- a) To explain these verses, once again we have to go back to the original Jewish believers who converted to Christianity. These verses are saying in effect, "Yes you have suffered amongst your family and relatives for being Christians, but you have not suffered to the point of dying. You may have been shunned or you may have lost your possessions, but you are still a living witness for Jesus." Then these verses are saying that whether you realize it or not, this is God the Father disciplining you as a believer in Jesus.
 - b) OK, if to be a Christian means to be shunned by my family and lose every possession I have why should I bother? First of all, this does not mean that God expects each of us to take a vow of poverty and willfully give up what we own. It just means that to be willing to live for Jesus, means that we have to be willing to literally let go of everything we have in life, if that is what is God's will for us. In effect, to live the Christian life means to say to God, "All I have belongs to You, so know You decide what is best for me."

- c) Remember that these verses are talking about accepting God's "discipline". Nobody likes the idea of being disciplined. I was thinking today about a problem I have been dealing with in my life and it didn't occur to me until now, that this issue may be God disciplining me to change me in some way. Without getting into specifics, my point is to consider whatever issue one is facing at the moment and consider the possibility that whatever one is dealing with, it may be God "guiding" you. Instead of blaming whoever is causing the problem or blaming oneself for getting into a mess, think about our situations from the standpoint of "God is guiding me, He wants the best for my life and He is allowing me to go through this situation to teach me something". That may not make our problems go away, but it is getting our focus in the right direction to deal with our problems.
 - i) The point is to remember that everything in our Christian life is "God filtered". I don't know the reason why He allows what He allows. I just know He has His reasons and we have to accept His discipline. The same way a child does not like the discipline they go through at the moment, we may not like whatever situation we have to deal with at the present time. However, if we consider that God is allowing whatever we are going through, it helps our perspective. Further, we can look to Him to guide us through what we are dealing with at this time.
6. Verse 7: Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.
- a) Speaking of enduring through discipline, I present these five verses. The idea is for us to think about the idea that "If we weren't going through trials as Christians, that must mean that God doesn't care for us. If God loves us, then He loves us enough to discipline us like a good father in order to live and act the way He wants us to live."
 - b) Wait a minute you might say. I know many non-Christians that go through difficult times in their own lives. How is that different from whatever trials we face as Christians?
 - i) The answer is that no one gets to avoid problems in life. The difference has to do with perspective. For the Christian, it is to realize that we have a God who cares about our lives, desires to guide us, desires to mold us to be the type of person He wants us to be. That God allows difficult things to happen in our lives, ultimately for His purpose. I can't explain all tragedies. I just know that somehow, it all works out for God's benefit through the worst things one can imagine.
 - ii) OK, what about the tragedies of the nonbeliever? The answer is that we all live in a world corrupted by sin and it affects us. Again, I can't explain all tragedies. All I know is that God the Father not only forgives all of our sins through Jesus, but He desires to guide our lives ultimately for His glory. Why anyone would want to turn down that free gift is beyond my reason to imagine, but it usually comes down to the issue that people want to prove themselves worthy to God or to others around them. That is why they refuse the idea of Jesus dying for them.
 - c) The main point this paragraph is to teach us about enduring through whatever difficulty we have for the moment. I am not saying to avoid say, taking medicine as needed. I am saying that God the Father is well aware of whatever we are going through and He wants to be our power source to guide us through our situations. Yes, whatever difficulties we face at the moment may be His discipline. We may not like it, but no one does, even if it is for our own good. The good news is either later in this life or in heaven, we will benefit from whatever discipline we have to endure from this life.

7. Verse 12: Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.¹³ "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.
- a) In these two verses, we go back to the "runner" illustration. Visualize a long distance runner who is getting tired in the middle of a race. At that point in a race, the runner may not be pumping his or her arms like they should be doing ("feeble arm" reference). He or she may not be lifting up their legs like they should ("weak knee" reference) or they may not be running in a straight line ("level path for one's feet" reference). They may even get injured if they keep this up failure to run properly (the "disabled" reference).
 - b) OK, John, you just spent over a page discussing how the difficult things we go through in our life are "God filtered" and we have to accept it as His discipline. What does any of that have to do with the illustration here of a runner who is not running at his or her best?
 - i) The picture here is still about dealing with God's discipline. This is about keeping our focus on God despite the pain of whatever discipline we receive. The idea of living the Christian life is not about literally running from "point A to point B". The idea is to keep our focus on what God desires us to do despite whatever trials we have to deal with at any given moment.
 - ii) Think back to the original recipients of Hebrews. These were Jewish Christians who were slipping back in Judaism out of fear of persecution by nonbelievers in Jesus. God was somehow disciplining them to focus on what He called them to do. After dealing with those hardships, one can get tired and in effect "not run the race very well", as one is worn out. That is the picture being painted here.
 - iii) So if we are tired from some painful event, (that is in effect "God filtered") are we supposed to forget our pain and run as hard as we can? I am not saying we don't need time to recover. The point is we still have to focus on what God calls on us to focus on. If we are aware of what are spiritual gifts are, we are to continue to use them in order to make a difference for Him. Just as God was calling those Jewish Christians to focus again on trusting Jesus to guide their lives, so He is calling you and me to focus our lives on what He has called us to do.
 - a) What if I don't know what I am supposed to do? As I like to say, welcome to the club. As I also preach regularly, it is a matter of discovering what one enjoys doing, and combining it with what talents we have and using that combination to make a difference for God. If one doesn't know what one is good at, ask others. It is a then matter of using the most valuable gift God gives us, our time, to make a difference for Him with our lives.
 - c) Think of these verses as a sports coach encouraging us to keep going. It is easy to get into a pity party mode and feel sorry for ourselves. Most adults know what it is like to go through horrible and tragic events. The point is to remember the goal, which is to live our lives to make a difference for Him. Therefore, Jesus as our coach is encouraging us to keep running hard, that is, to use our lives to make a difference for Him.
8. Verse 14: Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.
- a) As I was discussing Verse 13, I in effect, left off with a question. That question is, "What do I do now?" We get the idea of using one's time to make a difference for eternity. But what do we do specifically? That is where Verse 14 comes into play.
 - b) The first thing God tells us is to "live in peace with all men". In effect that means to let go of any hatred we have of people. Yes some people deserve punishment but God never calls us to take matters into our own hands unless of course we are serving in roles such as police officers or the military. If we are going to be a good witness for Jesus, we can't hold any resentment in our hearts toward people. That is why we have to forgive others just as Jesus forgives us of sins that we commit. Jesus said to pray for those who hurt us (Matthew 5:44). We do that not for their sake, but to help get our perspective right.

- c) The next issue is the word "holy". Time for a quick reminder of what that means.
 - i) Holiness does not mean that we never sin. It means we have to be separated for God's use. Practically speaking, it means we don't live like nonbelievers. It means we make every effort in our lives to live in a way that is pleasing to God. It means we try to avoid sin and we do confess sin when we become aware of it.
 - ii) That is why God disciplines us. It is to make us holy. That is to be separate from nonbelievers in order to be pleasing to Him. It doesn't mean we act in a way that is superior to others around us. It just means we make the effort to avoid things that we know cause us to "stumble" before God.
 - iii) Let me give an illustration: There may be a certain activity or a certain place that is a weakness for us. It may even be acceptable for other Christians to do what can be a problem for us. In order to please God we make an every effort to avoid that particular situation. That is an example of being "holy". We may even have to say no when others ask us to join in that activity because for us it is a weakness.
 - iv) What if I'm stuck in a situation I can't get out of? Ask God to help you through that particular situation. Ask other believers to pray for you and help you deal with it. The point is God never calls us on us to do it alone. He is that power source that is willing to guide us through whatever we have to deal with in life.
- 9. Verse 15: See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.
 - a) Speaking of how we should live for God (i.e., "holy"), I present Verse 15.
 - b) To explain this verse, I would like to start with the concept of "misses the grace of God".
 - i) The idea of that phrase is that we as Christians are free to live however we want. In effect, we are free to sin all we want. The issue is how much do we want to?
 - ii) The point here in Verse 15 is that we can take God's grace in vain. That means He has given us this wonderful free gift that we can live however we want. The issue is how do we want to live? Do we want to live to make a difference for Him, or just live for our own pleasure? Those original Jewish Christians readers were in effect turning down God's grace by going back to Judaism, which is in effect the concept of trying to prove one's value to God by performing good works.
 - a) Christianity is teaching that one doesn't have to prove oneself to God. Therefore we do good works out of gratitude, not to prove one's worth.
 - c) OK John, I sort of know all of that. ☺ What does it have to do with having a "bitter root, causing trouble and defiling many" as this verse says?
 - i) The point is we could go through our lives angry at what has occurred to us or to others. We could be angry at the way our lives have turned out. We could be angry that another person has more stuff or accomplished more than we have. The point is we get our focus off of what God has called us to do and we start having a pity party over what is going on in our lives.
 - ii) It is to realize whatever suffering we go through in our lives is "God filtered" and He allows it for His reasons. That doesn't mean we just give up. It just means our lives are again, "God filtered". Remember we are called to make a difference for Him with our lives. Therefore, the lives of other people are His problem as well. Our job is to make a difference for Him in this lifetime.
 - iii) The idea is to focus on what God has called us to do and not try to fix what we cannot fix. I am not saying we should just live carefree lives and ignore problems. Often it is our duty to help out others. It is also the job of a society to stop evil and prevent pain from happening. I also would like to remind all of us again that God is our power source to help us through whatever situation we have to face at the moment. Once we know He is willing to guide us, then we can and should get what other help we can get to help us through our situation.

10. Verse 16: See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.
- a) One has to admit it is a strange transition to go from discussing giving our problems to God to discussing the bible character Esau. The first question to ponder here is in effect, "Why does the author of Hebrews bring up Esau as someone who is "godless"? Esau is simply a good example of someone who cares far more about living out his life than he does about pleasing God.
 - i) The specific reference here is to Genesis Chapter 25 where Esau gave up his rights as the oldest son to be blessed by his father Jacob in exchange for dinner.
 - ii) Let me explain that one. In Jewish tradition, the oldest son in their family gets a double portion of the family inheritance in exchange for being the godly leader amongst one's brothers and sisters. In Genesis 25, Esau cared so little about his relationship with God that when he came home hungry one day, in exchange for his brother making him dinner, he gave up that birthright.
 - iii) The even stranger part about that story is that Esau's brother Jacob tricked his father into thinking that he really was Esau. When their father was giving that family blessing to Jacob, the father (who was going blind at that point) thought he was actually giving it to Esau. Despite the trickery, the blessing stood.
 - a) Why did God honor all of this trickery? The point is that God wanted the "family line of the Nation of Israel" to go through Jacob and not Esau. In fact, it took a lifetime for Jacob to learn to trust God despite that trickery. It does not mean that God condones such actions. He just wanted the family blessing to go through Jacob and allowed of this "trickery" for His glory.
 - iv) The related point, which comes back to Hebrews, is that because Esau didn't care about his relationship with God through out his life, God rejected him. Does that mean one can lose one's salvation? No I am just saying that if one goes one's entire life by rejecting Jesus as payment for one's sins, one is going to hell as that is the only unforgivable sin in the bible. In effect, Esau committed that sin as he only cared about pleasing himself and had no interest in God's influence over his life.
 - v) That story is told here, because the Jewish Christians, to whom this letter was originally addressed to, were turning back to Judaism. Hebrews is saying in effect, "If you spend the rest of your life rejecting Jesus, you too will suffer the same eternal fate as Esau because after one's life is over, one cannot turn back to God. That is, after one dies, one realizes the truth about Jesus in the next life.
 - vi) All of this leads back to you and me. Remember how this chapter talked about running the race and to work hard to make a difference for Jesus? The warning here is about the danger of not running that race. It uses Esau as an example of what happens when we no longer focus on living to make a difference for God.
 - b) Before I leave these verses, let me also comment on the phrase "sexually immoral". In the story of Esau, it never records him cheating on his wives. He had multiple wives, and I'll remind us that nothing good ever happens to any bible character in their simultaneous relationship with multiple wives. The point is not that Esau was sexually immoral that we know of. The point is "sexual immorality" in Jewish thought is a synonym for turning away from God. Why is that? To be sexual immoral means that one is cheating on one's spouse. To turn from God being the center focus of our life, means that one is "cheating" on one's relationship with Him. Therefore, the terms are synonyms to describe a person who is turning away from a commitment to which they should be united to in their life.
 - i) The point of sexually immorality is in effect about avoiding the danger of turning from our relationship with Jesus with this concept.

11. Verse 18: You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."
- a) I have to admit, just when one thinks this chapter is strange enough, it gets worse with each set of verses that we cover. We have jumped from learning to trust Jesus being like in a running race to the danger of living like the biblical character "Esau". Now we have this strange reference of avoiding some unspecified mountain. Whatever this mountain is, it is so terrifying that whoever touches it must be stoned (killed). Whatever or where ever it is located, Moses spoke of it and said, "I am trembling in fear".
 - b) OK John, so what or where is this mountain, and why should I avoid it? Please explain:
 - i) First, the mountain being referenced is "Mount Sinai". This is located in the desert and was on the route that the Israelites took when leaving Egypt on their way to entering the land of Israel. This is the mountain from which Moses was given the "10 Commandments". There is a point in that story in Exodus 19 where no one was allowed to touch that mountain right before God spoke. Even Moses himself, was in fear based on Hebrews 12:21 above and also based on Exodus 18:21.
 - ii) To understand this reference, once again we have to turn back to the original Jewish Christian audience for whom this letter was originally written. These people were turning back to Judaism. The author of Hebrews is saying in effect, "You want to live your life by trying to be obedient to the law, well let me tell you what Moses thought of trying to please God by keeping the law".
 - a) I'm not saying the Jewish law is bad. I'm saying we can't be perfect and His standard to be with Him forever is perfection.
 - iii) Judaism is about trying to please God by trying to keep the law. Yes in Judaism one could be forgiven for their sins by animal sacrifices, but those sacrifices were designed to point to Jesus. Hebrews is saying in effect, "Why would you want to turn down God's free gift of forgiveness through Jesus and in effect go back to trying to keep the law?" That is the question being posed here in Hebrews.
 - c) Let's now focus on us Christians reading this. Why should we care? What is the danger for us? The danger is always slipping back into a way of thinking of trying to please God with our efforts. So how do we "run this race" (we're back to the issue of discipline) if it is not our job to please God in the first place? Great question.
 - i) The idea is that we should care about pleasing Him. Discipline comes into play in that we have to remember that we can't earn God's love by doing good things.
 - ii) Remember that to be a Christian is only about doing good works out of gratitude for what God has already done for us, and not to earn points with Him. It is easy to slip into a "hey look at me" mode of thinking. It is easy to want gratitude for our good works. The discipline is about remembering that we can't earn God's favor and we should live to make a difference for Him, again out of gratitude and not out of necessity. Am I perfect at this? Of course not. That is why we all need God's discipline (not ours) to remind us that we trust in Him for guidance.
 - d) Are these verses saying that "God's law" is a bad thing? Of course not. God's laws are still His standard for perfection. It's like the old joke: There are two ways to get into heaven. The first is to never sin, once in one's life. The other way is to accept Jesus' full payment of all of our sins. The idea of these verses is to show that our "good works" is not good enough for God's standard of perfection to spend eternity with Him.
 - i) How do you know God's standard is perfection? Easy. That is the only way we could know for sure what He expects of us. That is why we have to accept His perfect payment for our sins. Speaking of which, let me present Verse 22.

12. Verse 22: But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
- a) To understand these verses, you have to compare them with the last paragraph. In effect, part of this chapter is a contrast between two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion.
 - i) Mount Sinai is where God gave the 10 commandments.
 - ii) Mount Zion is where Jerusalem is located in Israel.
 - iii) Mount Sinai is in a desert wasteland and in effect "impossible" living conditions.
 - iv) Mount Zion is in a cooler place. It is high up on a mountain above the hotter desert weather. It is a place of comfort and relief in comparison to Sinai.
 - v) When one reads of Mount Sinai in Exodus Chapter 19 and again here in the last few verses of Hebrews, one would think, "Don't touch this place, it is deadly". Again, it is not saying God's laws are bad. It is just saying that people are not capable of being pleasing to Him based on their or our own efforts.
 - vi) When one reads of Jerusalem in the bible, it is usually described as "God's home". That does not mean that God is only located there. It is a symbolic concept that represents where believers are gathered together in order to worship Him.
 - b) Speaking of symbolic concepts, that leads me perfectly back to these verses. These verses are not talking about the city of Jerusalem that exists in Israel today. I say that because Verse 22 says "heavenly Jerusalem". Just as the "earthly Jerusalem" represents the place where believers travel to worship Him, so this new "heavenly Jerusalem" represents all believers coming together to worship Him.
 - i) Whenever one gets confused about Hebrews, it always helps to come back to the original intended audience to understand it better. (I know I've beaten that point to death by now in these lessons. ☺) Remember that these Jewish Christians were turning away from Jesus and were going back to trying to please God with their efforts. The writer of Hebrews is saying here, "Hey, don't try living to please God based on the "Mount Sinai" covenant (i.e. God's laws), but remember that you are saved based on God's grace and you now belong in "Heavenly Jerusalem".
 - a) It is saying we are saved by grace and we should not try to please God based on our efforts. If one gets that concept down, one understands the role of discipline that is central to this lesson.
 - c) With that said, let's talk a little more about this "heavenly Jerusalem" from these verses.
 - i) These verses mention multitudes of angels being there. Why? Well, if one wants to be where God is, I suppose the angels want to be there to. To put it another way, we never read of multitudes of angels being at Mount Sinai. In effect, those angels want to live by God's grace and not try to please Him based on the law.
 - ii) Next it mentions the "church of the first born". That is a title and another way of describing the Christian church itself. It is saying that if one is trusting in Jesus for one's salvation, one is part of this group. Notice that Hebrews is describing those Jewish Christians that were reverting back to Judaism as being part of this group.
 - iii) In other words, one cannot "sin enough" to lose one's salvation. It is only a lifetime denial of Jesus as a complete payment of one's sins that causes one to be sent to hell assuming one has had the opportunity in life to learn whom Jesus is.
 - d) This leads to Verse 23. The straightforward idea here is simply that God will judge all people, but we as Christians are saved by the blood of Jesus, and not based on our works.
 - i) Once again we are back to "discipline". We do good works out of gratitude for what Jesus did for us, not out of necessity to please God the Father. That concept is the central message of this chapter.

- e) Before I leave these verses, I should to explain the "Abel" reference. If you have been reading through most of these lessons on Hebrews, you know by know the author is obsessed with using Old Testament characters to explain biblical principals. Does one have to know the Old Testament well to understand Hebrews? No, but to have a little understanding about the people mentioned does help to explain all of these references.
 - i) So what exactly does Verse 24 means by the blood of Abel in comparison to the blood of Jesus? First of all, it is not talking about Abel's literal blood.
 - ii) To explain, let's remember who Abel was: He was a first generation son of Adam and Eve. He was the one killed by his brother Cain. It is the first recorded death in the bible of one human killing another.
 - a) The point as it relates here is that it speaks of God's justice being required. Murder is one of the 10 Commandments. The point is one may get away with murder in this lifetime, but one is still going to be accountable to Him for murder when one faces God's judgment.
 - iii) OK John, we know that. Why is it relevant here? The concept here is that the murder of Abel is an example of God's laws being "still on the books". To say it another way, Mount Sinai (symbolically) is still alive and well. Many people are still trying to prove their worth to God by their actions. God is effectively saying to them, "You want to prove your worth to Me? Too bad, because My standards are perfection and you who want to prove your worth to Me are not perfect".
 - a) The point is the "blood of Jesus" is in effect superior to the "blood of Abel" in that the death of Abel is an example of God's laws being on the books.
 - b) The "blood of Jesus" is about Jesus payment for our sins being sufficient as full payment for all the sins we have ever committed, past, present and future. That is why the blood of Jesus is superior to that that of "Abel's".
 - iv) Let me share a quick story here that relates to this passage: The other day I met a wonderful Jewish family (three siblings) whose mother survived through the German concentration camps. Those grown children deal with that issue by believing that there is a God who will judge people fairly for their deeds.
 - a) While that is a good thing to believe, they miss the point that all of us serve a perfect God. Since He is perfect, His standard to be with Him in heaven is perfection. That is why we need "Jesus blood" as a superior offering to any and all good we can do to make up for all of our faults.

13. Verse 25: See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

- a) Just when you think this chapter is confusing enough, it never ceases to get stranger. ☺ After discussing two "Middle East" mountains (Jerusalem and Sinai) and after this strange comparison of Jesus' blood to that of the fairly trivial bible character "Esau", we know get this equally strange description about "God speaking and the earth being shaken".
 - i) Let me start by saying this: If you can figure out Chapter 12 of Hebrews, you can comprehend any chapter in the bible. Yes this chapter is easier to understand if one has a little bit of background of Old Testament knowledge. My point is this chapter is not a great mystery that no one can understand. It can be explained "point by point" if one understands the background references of this chapter.
- b) With that said, let's start with Verse 25. The "him who speaks" refers to Jesus. The point is the original audience was turning away from trusting Jesus. The author is warning about the danger of turning away from Jesus' free gift of salvation for our lives.

- c) In effect, we are back to the issue of discipline. The idea of "refusing" (Verse 25) is more than just refusing to believe He died for our sins. It is the refusal to believe He is willing to guide our lives so that we can live by using His power to make a difference for Him.
 - d) OK, but what does this "shaking" reference mean in these verses? When was the earth shaken as the verses refer and when will "heaven and earth" be shaken again?
 - i) To explain, we have to go back to the "Mount Sinai" references. If you recall from earlier in the chapter, when God gave the 10 commandments, the mountain shook. (This is a reference to Exodus Chapter 19, Verse 18.)
 - ii) Does that mean the whole earth felt that shaking? No, that is not the point. The point is we are all accountable to God. The earth was shaken in a figurative sense in that the God who created this world made His presence felt within the world He created. In effect, it is about the birth of the Nation of Israel as His witness to the world and that all people will be judged by His standards.
 - iii) So what is the "second shaking future" reference mean? It is a way of describing the fact that all people will be judged. The verse says that both heaven and earth will be shaken to remind us that God the Father will judge all people who ever have lived or ever will live. There is no getting around that judgment.
 - iv) Remember that the "shaking" at Mount Sinai was a terrifying thing to watch for those Israelites who witnessed that event. The point is God's judgment should be feared, and not something to look forward to. The only way to avoid experiencing God's judgment is to accept His perfect sin payment on our behalf. That is how we survive through the "second shaking" that affects all people who ever have or will ever live on earth. I should also add that God's judgment is a separate issue from God rewarding believers. The point is all believers should fear this shaking and keep us focused on Jesus, which is the point of this lesson.
 - e) So do we have to fear this shaking? The next (last) two verses answer that question.
14. Verse 28: Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."
- a) This chapter ends with a reminder of our eternal destiny as believers. It is a reminder that the purpose of discipline is to make a difference for Him in our lifetime. Remember that giving praise to God is more than just saying thank you. It is to remember who God is, in the sense that He desires to be in charge of our lives, and He desires to guide us so what we can make a difference for Him.
 - b) Verse 29 calls God a "consuming fire". The idea is that God will judge how we have lived our lives. If we live by trusting in Jesus for our sins and trust Him to guide our lives, we don't have to fear this "shaking". Because we don't have to fear it, we can praise Him and at the same time treat God with "reverence and awe" (Verse 28) in that we remember who He is and who we are in comparison to that. Let me explain that in my closing prayer.
15. Heavenly Father, we thank You that You have chosen us to be with You forever in heaven. We are grateful that we don't have to fear Your judgment or your "shaking" as this chapter calls it. Help us to use our time to make a difference for You. Discipline us, as unpleasant as that may be in order to be the type of person that You desire us to be. Help us to use our time for Your glory. Help us to do good works out of gratitude for what You have done for us, not so that we can earn Your respect. Continue to forgive us for our mistakes and help us to trust You to change us to be the type of person You desire of us. Help us to accept the necessity of Your discipline so that we can grow into the type of believer that You desire. As difficult as this can be at times, we know it is the best thing for our lives. Guide us, in Jesus name, we pray, Amen.