

## Hebrews 12

### Enduring faithfully in the midst of suffering (12:4-13)

The author is bringing his exhortation to endurance which start back in 10:32-39 to a close. Here he gives them a theology of their suffering in 4-11, and then exhorts them to endure in 12-13.

- **James Thompson** – ...the author combines educational and athletic metaphors to interpret suffering. The reference to the “struggle against sin” (12:4) at the beginning of the discussion employs an athletic metaphor (lit. “struggle in an athletic contest”), as does the concluding line in verse 11 (lit. “to those being trained”).

Interpreting affliction with metaphors of education and athletic training was common in ancient literature.

- **James Thompson** – One passage is especially noteworthy as a background to Hebrews. In *On the Preliminary Studies*, Philo has a lengthy discussion of affliction. He argues that prosperity causes one to forget God's laws (159-160), while affliction breeds virtue. Philo describes the period in the wilderness as a time of testing for Israel, concluding that some are “like weary athletes,” for “they drop their hands in weakness and determine to speed back to Egypt and enjoy passion” (164). Others, however, “finish the contest of life” (165). Like the author of Hebrews, Philo cites Prov 3:11-12, concluding that affliction is a sign of a kinship with God (175).

### Encouragement for God's children (12:4-6)

*4In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?*

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reprov'd by him.*

*6For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

Here the image changes from runners training, to children disciplined. The listeners are now addressed as “sons”. He used Jesus example to encourage them to disdain the opinions of people. Now he quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, which urges them not to disdain the instruction of God. God is seen as a father who is involved in the listener's lives through instruction, reproof and love.

- **Vs4** Lit. Trans - “not yet to the point of death you resisted struggling against sin”.
  - Resisting is the main verb, struggling is the participle. The listeners resist sin by struggling against it. Some have translated struggle as “battle” or “contest”.
    - **Craig Koester** – The imagery suggests resisting like an athlete in a boxing match or the pancratium, an even that combined wrestling and boxing with kicking, strangling, and twisting limbs.
      - Their battle/contest with sin has not yet brought them to the point of death.
  - What is this sin?
    - **James Thompson** – although it has suffered physical and verbal abuse (10:32-34) in the past. “Battling against sin” is not the confrontation with various vices but a struggle with the “deliberate sin” of apostasy (10:26), which the author describes elsewhere as the “deceitfulness of sin” (3:13) and the “entangling sin” (12:1) of despair (cf. 10:39).
      - In other words the sin in focus has to do with the community's situation. They have suffered abuse, loss of property, and alienation from society. The sin they are facing is the temptation to leave the community, to give up the race they are running, and go back into their society.
  - Point of shedding... blood. In other words the listener's have not become martyrs yet.
    - **Craig Koester** – the comment... tries to put their situation in perspective. The author has already encouraged listener's by affirming that they have suffered a great deal (10:32-34), but here he points out that they have not suffered as much as others have, which makes their difficulties seem more manageable... The martyrs (11:35-38) and Jesus remained faithful despite great suffering. The issue now is whether the listeners can remain faithful in *lesser* suffering.
      - In other words, the author is not trying to chide them, but to change their perception. He is pointing out that they have not suffered as much as others. The argument is this. The martyrs and Jesus remained faithful despite great suffering. Will the listeners remain faithful in lesser suffering?
- **The quotation (5-6):**
  - The author called it an exhortation which they have forgotten.
    - **Craig Koester** – The author introduces Prov 3:1-12 by calling it an exhortation, which shapes the way the text should be heard. As an exhortation, the quotation is designed to stir listeners to greater zeal, not to offer a comprehensive explanation of human suffering... The main problem perceived by the author is not that God is unjust, but that the listeners are despondent.
      - In other words, this is meant to encourage them.
  - The quotations addresses them as sons. This is important!
    - **James Thompson** – The adaptation of **my son** in the citation (12:5b; cf. Prov 3:11) to an address to “sons” is central to the author's argument, for it indicates that the passage speaks to people alienated from their own society with the assurance that they have a special relationship to God. The author has established earlier in

the homily that God “brings many sons to glory” through the work of the Son, who is not ashamed to speak of his brothers (2:10-14), and he has reassured the readers, “We are his house” (3:6). This special relationship to God allows the community to interpret its sufferings as a sign not of abandonment but of a special relationship to God.

- In other words, calling them sons here shows that even though they are abandoned by society, they have a family! They have a special relationship to God!
- A simple parallelism can be seen in the quotation itself. **Vs5** sets out the wrong response.
  - my son do not despise*
  - (the) discipline of (the) Lord*
  - and do not become discouraged*
  - being rebuked by Him*
- *Despise* is contrasted with being *discouraged* and *discipline* is contrasted with being *rebuked*. He is expressing a parallel thought.
  - To **regard lightly** means to “despise, to regard something or someone as little value” (Louw Nida).
  - To be **weary** means to “become discouraged, to lose one's motivation to accomplish some valid goal” (Louw Nida).
    - **Discipline** = *Paideia*, “instruction, discipline, punishment”.
      - **G.H Lang** - The word so translated *paideia* has the root *pais* a child, and signifies all those steps which a parent takes to educate, correct, train the boy he loves and to fit him for his post and privileges in life.
    - **Rebuke** = to state that one has done wrong, with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing (Louw Nida).
      - **Craig Koester** – God's reproof can be best understood as the verbal reproofs that occur when the Spirit admonishes listeners through OT texts (3:7, 15; 4:7) or when Christians exhort each other (3:13).
        - The author does not want them to see God's instruction as little value and to become discouraged when he states to them their wrongs.
          - Remember chapter 5:11-6:3? the picture of instruction. The goal was to distinguish between good and evil. The people were exhorted to keep going to maturity, to distinguish between good and evil. This was so they would be able to follow God's will in their life. As a part of this training, God will put them in situations to practise what they have learnt.
            - The people are in a situation of training right now. They have learnt about the reality of Christ sitting at God's right hand, and the world to come. Now they need to put what they have learnt into practise. They need to look past the evil around them, to the good before them. So they can continue to follow God's will in their life.
  - **Vs6** gives us the reason. Notice again a simple chiasmus.
    - because the one whom (the) Lord loves*
    - He disciplines*
    - and He punishes every son*
    - whom He accepts*
  - “love and accepts” are on the outside, while “discipline and punishes” is on the inside. The author is simply showing that their punishment and discipline is a sign of God's love and acceptance of them. Which he explains further in 7-11.
    - Their discipline addresses them as sons whom God loves and accepts.
    - **Craig Koester** – ...the author repeatedly mentions “instruction” (12:7a, 8a, 9a, 10a, 11a), but he does not use “chastise” again. Hebrews is not focusing on the need to repent in the face of divine chastisement, but to endure by drawing on divine training.

### The Lord's discipline (12:7-11)

*7It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Here we see the author interpret the psalm.

#### 1. Relationship within which the instruction occurs. (12:7-8)

1. The author shows here that their *paideia* happens since they are sons. Vs7a is the author's conclusion. Their endurance now is for their *paideia* (instruction/discipline/punishment). Quite simply, God is training them as his children through their present endurance. It shows them to be true children of God, as opposed to illegitimate children.

## 2. Outcome of instruction. (12:9-10)

1. The author here brings in a contrast between our “fathers of flesh” and the “Father of spirits”.

<i>Human Fathers (earthly)</i>	<i>Father of Spirits (heavenly)</i>
<i>we were instructed by them</i>	<i>we are subject to him</i>
<i>we respected them (receive)</i>	<i>we will live (with Him) (give)</i>
<i>instructed by what</i>	<i>instructed by what</i>
<i>seem good to them (fallible)</i>	<i>is beneficial (infallible)</i>
<i>for a few days</i>	<i>that we might share his holiness (goal)</i>

1. It is an argument from the lesser to the greater, if we respected them (human fathers) when they disciplined, trained, us, how much more God? The reason is that God's *paideia* leads to life and sharing his holiness.

1. **Craig Koester** – In a surprising move the emphasis then shifts from what a father *receives* from his children (respect) to what the Father *gives* to his children (life). The gift of life – and according to the wider context, life means living eternally in God's heavenly city – is a worthy outcome for the relationship.
2. **James Thompson** – ...the author reassures the suffering community that, like Jesus, they will reach the goal only through the path of suffering, which is now disciplining them for the future in which they will participate in the nature of God.

## 3. Perception of instruction. (12:11)

1. Vs11 concludes the author's interpretation. The author switches back to the Athletic language with the word “trained”. He acknowledges that no discipline is pleasant when you go through it, but points to the fruit of it. Their training will later yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness. He is changing the perception of their suffering. Instead of seeing themselves as victims, he wants them to see themselves as training towards a goal.

1. **James Thompson** – the present suffering, like disciplined training of the athlete, is the necessary condition for reaching the goal.
2. **Craig Koester** – there is an implicit argument from the lesser to the greater: if one's own past experience shows that perceptions of instruction change when the training produces fruit, how much more will one's perception of the present challenges change when the training in faith has yielded it's fruit?
  1. 2 Corinthians 4:17 is a good parallel.

## Drooping hands and weak knees (12:12-13)

*12Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.*

The author continues his athletic imagery telling them to strengthen (straighten) their drooping hands and weak knees. The fact that their suffering/endurance shows them to be sons, and is also working to yield the fruit of righteousness is the basis for this request.

1. **James Thompson** – the term *anorthoun* is used in Luke 13:13 for the crippled woman who “stood erect” after she was healed. Thus to “strengthen” the hands and knees is to restore them to their original condition in order that the readers can once more endure suffering as they did in the past.
2. The author tells them to *make straight paths for their feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.*
  1. Here we see their problem. The runners are lame. The author puts 2 situations before them. Running a straight path so they may be healed, or instead (by leaving the straight path) causing injury and putting their feet out of joint.
    1. **Prov 4:26-27** *Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. 27 Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.*

## Listening to the one who is speaking from heaven (12:14-29)

Care for each other (12:14-17) (The journey from the wilderness to Sinai to Zion)

*14Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.*

Care for each other (12:14-17) (The journey from the wilderness to Sinai to Zion)

The author is taking them now to Mount Sinai, and then the Mount Zion. But before that, he first moves them through the wilderness once again.

1. Vs14. Embrace.
  1. The author has been calling them not to leave the community, but to exhort one another so that no one may fall. He wants them instead of abandoning the community to strive for peace within it.
  2. Holiness takes us back to the result of God's training. It is a call not to see God's *paideia* as little value, but instead to embrace it.

1. The author is calling them to stick with the community and endure.
2. Vs15-16. Watch over.
  1. See to it – is a term used elsewhere for the function of elders. The author wants them to care for one another like elders watching over each other.
  2. The author actually introduces three parallel phrases all beginning with *me tis*.
  3. **James Thompson** – with the careful arrangement of the three parallel clauses, each beginning with *me tis* (lest anyone) in a pattern of increasing length, he describes those who fall away and the consequences of their apostasy.
    1. *that no one* fails to obtain the grace of God
      1. **James Thompson** – reinforces the earlier concern to ensure straight paths for the lame (12:13) and the challenge to take care “lest anyone of you fail” to enter into God’s rest (4:1). Those who have received God’s grace must now be encouraged to remain within it as they “draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16) in anticipation of God’s ultimate gift.
    2. *that no* “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.
      1. The image comes from Deut 29:18. It warns that a person who departs from God’s people to the world is a root which can infect other people. The unbelief of one member can defile many people.
        1. To be defiled is the opposite of being cleansed. How many people died in the wilderness when the people complained against Moses? Wanted to return back to Egypt? And finally refused to enter the land?
    3. *that no one* is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.
      1. **James Thompson** – the author’s primary concern is not, however, with problems of sexual immorality within the community for the phrase “sexually immoral or worldly” places the emphasis on Esau’s disregard for the holy... Esau gave away the privileges of the firstborn... for a single meal, emphasizing Esau’s worldliness and disregard for the ultimate good... Unlike the heroes of faith, who denied the pleasures of the moment for the sake of the later inheritance, Esau epitomizes the inverted values of those who choose the material world over the eschatological promise.
        1. Esau chose the pleasure of the present world over his future promise. Why must they look out for this?
3. Vs17, The danger. *For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.*
  1. The author is bringing in again the impossibility of repentance. He showed us first with Israel in the wilderness, and then with Hebrews 6, and now with Esau. Hebrews connects the sale of the birthright directly to Esau’s failure to obtain a blessing. In Genesis when Esau learned that Isaac had given the blessing to Jacob, Esau cried out “Bless me, me also, father!” and he “lifted up his voice and wept” (Gen 27:34-38). Isaac was disturbed by what had happened, according to Genesis, but Hebrews says that Esau’s plea for blessing was rejected.
    1. **James Thompson** – in his failure to find a place of repentance for his worldly outlook, Esau also exemplifies the irrevocable consequences of rejecting God’s promise. The author has depicted Esau in this manner because his community, composed of those who do not see the world in subjection to the Son, is now in danger of choosing this world over the promise of entering God’s rest. The author’s interpretation of Esau is a warning against disregarding the ultimate gift for the sake of immediate relief from the alienation that the community now experiences.
    2. **Craig Koester** – in other passages (6:4-8; 10:26-31) warn of a point where God will allow a person to reject him. Moses’ generation refused to trust God’s promise of rest in the land, and God eventually allowed their rejection to stand so that they perished in the wilderness (3:7-19). Similarly, Esau had the promise of a birthright and a blessing, yet he sold his long-term hope for the short-term benefit of a meal. God did not take Esau’s blessing from him; Esau traded it away. And God let him bear the consequences of his action. Listeners are like Esau in that they have a firstborn’s right to an inheritance and blessings in the age to come (6:7, 12-14, 17; cf. 2:5; 12:23). As Esau gave up the promise in order to ease his physical discomfort, listeners might consider giving up the promise in order to ease their social discomfort (13:13). Abandoning Christian commitments might allow greater access to the benefits offered by society, but such benefits are transient when compared to the enduring blessings that God has promised. The severity of this text can be as disturbing as those found earlier in Hebrews, and attempts to soften it have not been successful. Like other warnings, however, this passage is designed to awaken people to danger, not to make them give up hope. Warning is the counterpart to promise; both pertain to the future. Warnings disturb people, while promises encourage them, but together they serve the same end, which is encouraging people to persevere in faith.
      1. The author has taken them once again through the wilderness, its dangers, and warnings. Now he brings them to Mount Sinai.

### Mount Sinai (12:18-21)

*18For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” 21Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”*

Vs18-24 are one big sentence. Here the author is giving them the reason why they should not give up their inheritance for the sake of earthly things like Esau. Vs18-21 give the first part of the reason, while vs22-24 give the second part.

- The first part, 18-21.
  - The author here describes mount Sinai to the people. He uses unsettling pictures. A trumpet blast suggests alarm. The people are warned by a voice coming out of the darkness. The people are told not to allow an animal to touch the mountain. The idea is that if the prohibition applies even to an animal, how much more to a human being. Here Moses shows fear is the proper response to a warning from God. His example implies an argument from the great to the lesser. "if God's most faithful servant was afraid, how much more should others (including the listeners) tremble at warnings from God."
    - Did you notice something? The author focused on their senses! He showed them something which they were not allowed to "touch". Fire, gloom and darkness which could be "seen", as well as a tempest and trumpet which they could "hear".
      - This is the first part of the reason not to give up their inheritance for the sake of earthly things like Esau. Because they are not on a journey to something earthly!
      - The interesting thing here is that this description vs18-21, God remains hidden. The author used a lot of descriptive elements. These elements did not reveal God, but rather concealed Him. The author is building to make a contrast.
- The second part, 22-24.

*22But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

- The author here describes the goal of their journey, what they are travelling towards. In contrast to the unnamed mountain. Here we are given many names. Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the new Jerusalem. This is where God's promises are realised.
  - **James Thompson** – the author's affirmation that **we have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem** (12:22) suggests that this untouchable and invisible city is the homeland and city that Abraham could see only from a distance (11:13-16), the "things not seen" (11:1), and the heavenly rest that Israel did not enter (3:7-19). The community has approached this heavenly world because Christ, the forerunner, opened up the way for his people to enter the heavenly sanctuary (6:20; 10:19).
    - **Zion**, according to Psalm 110:1-4, is the place where Jesus now sits at the right hand of God. It is God's city, the heavenly Jerusalem.
      - **Craig Koester** – although Abraham lived as a foreigner on earth, he hoped for the city of God (11:8-10, 13-16). Similarly, Hebrews addressed those who had no abiding city on earth (13:14), even though they were the heirs of the promises made to Abraham (2:16; 6:12, 17).
        - Thus we are seeing that God will keep his commitments and bring Abraham's heirs to the city that He has prepared for them.
    - **festal gathering**, has 2 pictures.
      - **Craig Koester** – Listener's who have been running with endurance in the contest of faith (12:1, 12) now find themselves in a festival gathering of angels (12:22). Festival gatherings in Greco-Roman society included athletic events, where contestants endured for the sake of honor at the end. In 12:1 the author declared that those who run in the contest of faith are surrounded by generations of the faithful who constitute a cloud of faithful witnesses. Here the listeners are given a glimpse of the outcome of their struggle, drawing them to a festival gathering that transcends any on earth and to "the noble and glorious crown, which no human festival gathering has ever bestowed".
        - Thus we are seeing the end of the race, where the runners receive their crown of endurance, and join in the festival.
      - **Craig Koester** – The principal Jewish festival was the Sabbath. It was a day of rest and celebration. Israel was to do no work on the Sabbath "except to praise the Lord in the assembly of the elders". People kept the Sabbath by giving great praise and thanks to the Lord, who had preserved them for that day. Psalm 92 which is a psalm of praise, bears a title assigning it for use on the Sabbath.
        - Thus we are seeing God's eternal Sabbath rest where the people cease from their work and praise the Lord
    - **Firstborn** – the firstborn received the blessing and inheritance. The mention of the assembly of the firstborn, who are registered in God's heavenly city, points to the fulfilment of their promised inheritance.
    - Here **God is the judge of all**. The tone is hopeful. The Christians had been looked down upon in the world, but here God is the judge. God commends faith and judges rightly.
      - Since God's judgement is the final one, listeners can persevere in faith. Instead of abandoning it for a favourable judgement from society.
    - The population of the city includes the **spirits of the righteous who have been made complete**. This brings us back to Hebrews 11 with the heroes. On earth they did not fully receive what was promised but

persecuted. Here we see that God will not abandon the righteous. He will make them complete by fulfilling his promises.

- **Vs24**, the mention of the **sprinkled blood** has to do with keeping a vow. God is keeping His vow to make a new covenant. The speaking at this festival is done by Jesus blood. It communicates the grace of God.
- What we are seeing here is the climax of Hebrews.
  - **Hebrews 1:1-14** allowed the listeners to hear God speaking to His Son. Now they are back in God's presence again. ==> This time they see all of God's children joining in on the celebration.
  - **Hebrews 2:10-6:20**, followed the journey of Israel through the wilderness. They were faithless and did not inherit God's rest. But the hope of entering God's rest still remained. His rest was His eternal Sabbath rest. The Sabbath was a celebration.  
==> the people have been brought from the wilderness to the goal of the journey, the heavenly celebration.
  - **Hebrews 7:1-10:39** announced that Jesus brought into existence the new covenant by His blood. This gives the faithful the boldness to come into God's presence.  
==> Now the listeners are in the presence of God where the promises are fulfilled.
  - **Hebrews 11:1-12:27** followed the journey of the righteous who lived by faith. They endured conflict, disappointment and death. They were not made complete on earth.  
==> Now we see the spirits of the righteous made complete in God's own city.
    - Bringing this all together, they should not trade away their inheritance for an earthly moment of pleasure because the goal of their journey is not of this world, but it is heavenly, the place where all of God's promises are fulfilled.

### **Do not refuse the one speaking (12:25-27)**

*25See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.*

Here he gives them 2 reasons to pay attention to the word which they have received and not to refuse the one who is speaking to them.

1. The Past, Vs25... For if they did not escape when they refused... much less will we escape if we reject...
  1. He is making a comparison. At Sinai the people refused God who warned them from earth, culminating in the refusal to enter the land and the oath of Psalm 95. We have received a warning from heaven. The question is, how much less will we escape if we reject him?
    1. They did not escape... whatever is less than that...
2. The Future, Vs26-27... he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake... the earth... the heavens..."
  1. God shook the earth at Sinai, but he will also shake both earth and heaven. At this time only those things which cannot be shaken will remain.
    1. In contrast to the Law which was a shadow and is passing away, the listeners have a high priest who abides forever. In him they have been given access to the eternal reality. They are receiving an unshakable kingdom.

The author has taken his readers on a journey through the wilderness, past Sinai, and to Zion. He does not want them to throw away their inheritance like Esau for the things of this world, but to hold on to what they have been given so they may inherit the eternal reality. He wants them to endure now.