

# Daily Bible Study Commentary by Pastor Steve

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## Hebrews 12:1

**Verse 1** (continued): The author also tells his readers to lay aside "the sin which has firmly surrounded you." Though the word "sin" is often a general term describing all types of misbehavior, in this instance he seems to have a specific sin in mind, one which he warns is (literally) "standing well around" them. Whatever this sin is it has surrounded them and is strong enough to conquer them like an army besieging a city. In the case of his readers this must be the sin he's already warned them about over and over again in his letter (He 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 5:11-6:8; 10:26-39). In chapter three he called it "...an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God" (He 3:12). That he can define it as "standing well around" them let's us know some of his readers were in danger of abandoning Christ altogether.

## Hebrews 12:2

**Verse 2:** In explaining to his readers how to endure in the life of faith the author not only tells them to lay aside sin, but also to look to Jesus. They must "look away" from what they had been looking at in the past and focus their attention on Jesus because He is the "author/beginner and perfecter/finisher of faith." The phrase "author and perfecter" carries at least two layers of meaning. First, it points to Him as the ultimate example of someone who ran the race of faith with endurance from start to finish. At no point did He grow bitter or turn aside from the path God asked Him to travel. Second, He is also the "author and perfecter" of our faith in the sense that every believer must draw constant spiritual strength from Him, by means of the Holy Spirit, if we are to successfully endure in faith for the rest of our lives (Jn 14:15-20, 26; 15:4-6; Php 1:6; He 13:20, 21). This is certainly part of what He meant when He said He is the "vine" and we are the "branches" (Jn 15:1-6).

## Hebrews 12:2, 3

**Verse 2** (continued): He describes Jesus as the One who "because of..." (Greek: anti) the "joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God." The "joy" which Jesus considered to be of far greater value than the shame of the cross must have been the knowledge that His substitutionary death on the cross would make it possible for sinful people to return to God. His heart rejoiced in the knowledge that He would delight His Father by "bringing many sons to glory" (He 2:10). The Father's response to His Son's enduring faith was to resurrect Him and place Him at His right hand in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 (He 1:3, 13; 10:12, 13). **Verse 3:** We are told to "look at the One who endured such hostile things said about Him by sinners" so that those who are weakening will not collapse. Jesus' example above all others should encourage us to endure the hardships associated with faith. After all, if God was willing to let His Son suffer more abuse than we will ever suffer, then we must never think that by allowing such adversity to come our way that He has failed to protect us. He is simply treating us like His own Son. And like His own Son, He will also reward our endurance by raising us from the dead and inviting us to boldly enter His presence (He 6:19, 20).

## Hebrews 12:4-6

**Verse 4:** The author says his readers had not yet stood their ground to the point of martyrdom in their struggle against sin. The word "sin" as he uses it in this context must refer to their weakening commitment to Jesus. His statement about "blood" may be simply an observation that no one in their churches had yet been martyred, but it is also possible that it contains a note of disapproval that when pressed severely they had always compromised to avoid being executed. At any rate, the author implies that in the future God might still allow them to pay that price. **Verses 5, 6:** By quoting Proverbs 3:11, 12 the author reminds them that Solomon had told them that God would allow believers to suffer persecution and the trials

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associated with the life of faith. Solomon had likened God to a human father who disciplines all his children. The author is addressing these words to people who were grumbling about the suffering that following Jesus had brought to them. They assumed something must be wrong—that persecution was abnormal. So the author says, “You have completely forgotten the exhortation in which He reasons with you as sons, ‘My son, do not think lightly of the discipline (a word meaning the training and correction of children) of the Lord, nor weaken when being rebuked (lit: exposed) by Him. For whom the Lord loves, He trains like a child, scourging every son whom He takes by the hand and draws to His side’ (literal).”

## Hebrews 12:7

**Verse 7:** When believers suffer persecution or are forced to walk by faith through a painful trial they must not become bitter at God. The fact that He has allowed us to experience such adversity does not mean He has failed to care for us. It's not His fault that evil people rise up in anger when Christ is presented, and it's not His fault that obtaining promises can be so difficult in a fallen world. But as our Father, He will use even those difficult circumstances to make us better. Paul teaches this same truth in Romans 8:28 when he says, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” If the gospel is going to penetrate into a dark world, men and women must suffer because evil will always oppose them. If by prayer and obedience believers seek to bring God's rule into their own lives, great internal battles must be fought against the flesh and the devil. Such sufferings are real and severe, yet in God's providence they do not destroy us but rather mold us into the image of His Son (Ro 8:29).

## Hebrews 12:7

**Verse 7 (continued):** After all, God used these same hostile forces to “perfect” His own Son to be our high priest (Heb 2:10; 5:2, 7-9; 7:28). In the same way when believers are persecuted or suffer the inner struggle of faith, the Holy Spirit takes control of the situation and works in us so that we are built up and not torn down—that which comes against us, in God's hand, becomes “discipline” and refines us instead. This is why the author asked his readers to endure through their hardships. They could be certain that the Father's loving hand was using it to build them up just like a good parent trains a child. And a good parent will make sure discipline is applied to every one of their children according to the need of that child. Not one will escape. Because each is deeply loved, each will be trained until he or she conforms to the standard of behavior required of all the members of that family.

## Hebrews 12:8

**Verse 8:** In a healthy family it would be unthinkable for a child to be left out of this process. For any parent to ignore a child, denying him or her the time, energy and emotion it takes to be properly trained, means the child is unloved. This type of parental abandonment often occurs to children who have been fathered outside the bounds of the family. They are “illegitimate children and not sons.” But God is not an unhealthy parent and He loves each of His children. He does not consider any one of them to be of less value than another (Ac 10:34). He prizes each one equally and not one will ever be denied His fatherly training.

## Hebrews 12:9

**Verse 9:** As believers we must think of God as our spiritual father. Jesus taught us to call Him “Our Father” (Mt 6:9). He wanted us to recognize that though we have a human father, we also have a spiritual father. From one we received a physical body, and from the other we received both biological life and spiritual life. The author of Hebrews is making this same distinction here.

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He's telling us that both our human father and our divine father have a right to discipline us. If we accepted our human father's authority to guide our development by teaching, encouraging and even painful correction, then why would we not acknowledge our Heavenly Father's authority to do the same?

## Hebrews 12:9

**Verse 9** (continued): The author wrote to people living in a culture which held to a hierarchy of authority in the structure of a family. Fathers were expected to discipline their children and children were expected to receive that discipline submissively. This is why he is able to say so confidently, "we had earthly fathers (lit: "fathers of the flesh") to discipline us, and we respected them..." because most of his readers did. As children they had accepted their father's discipline without question, so now he asks them, "...shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" We have within us not only physical life from our physical father, but also spiritual life from our spiritual father, and we must place ourselves under His authority, trusting that He is good, wise and faithful in His care of us. Doing so will ensure that "we shall live." However, those who reject His parental authority and become bitter, put themselves on a road leading to death (Heb 3:7-19).

## Hebrews 12:10

**Verse 10:** Earthly fathers "disciplined us for a few days according to the thing seeming good to them..." (literal), but our spiritual father disciplines us "for our good (profit, benefit) so that we may share in His holiness." The life of faith brings to every believer persecution, temptation and situations requiring patience and self-denial. Though the process is painful God uses it to shape our character until we share His holiness. He wants us to be humble, selfless, patient, kind and courageous. The discipline we received from human fathers was marred by their own ignorance and selfishness, but the discipline we receive from our Heavenly Father comes from His perfect love and is designed only for our good. Knowing this should help us gladly submit to Him.

## Hebrews 12:11

**Verse 11:** Even though it may be good for us, no one enjoys being disciplined. At the time we feel sorrow, not joy. Only after it's over, or at least enough time has passed for us to gain perspective, do we recognize that positive changes have taken place. We discover new attitudes and sensitivities have grown in us. We've become better people, and we're not even sure when the change took place. It came slowly—unnoticeably—like fruit grows, and with it came a new peace inside us. Like a well-trained child who has grown to value a parent's discipline, we stop questioning God or arguing the unfairness of the situation (Ps 131), trusting in His love for us regardless of the circumstances. Then the author concludes this verse by pointing to another gift we receive when we submit to God's discipline: righteousness. To be "righteous" means that our day-to-day behavior is in line with God's standards. God considers us righteous when we repent and place our faith in Christ, but by disciplining us He produces real change in the way we behave.

## Hebrews 12:12, 13

It's already evident from the tenor of this letter that a number of people were waning in their commitment to Jesus. Their faith was failing and apparently would not last over the remainder of their lives. The effects of persecution, theological confusion, relational strife and worldly temptation had taken its toll. Like exhausted runners who lack the energy to make it to the finish line, many seemed close to collapsing on the sidelines. For these Jewish believers in the Messiah Jesus it meant returning to traditional Judaism, or maybe even functional atheism, as sometimes happens to those who are badly wounded by religion.

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The author has already compared the Christian life to a long distance race telling his readers to lay aside those things that would prevent them from running with endurance (Heb 12:1). Now he returns to that image of a race.

## Hebrews 12:12, 13

**Verses 12, 13:** Having just said that persecution and the trials of faith are a normal part of the Christian life (Heb 12:5-11) he now says, "...straighten up the hands that hang limp and the knees that are paralyzed, and make straight paths ("tracks") for your feet so that those who are crippled will not fall to the side, but rather be healed" (literal). Judging from the plural verb he chose, he's directing these commands at all his readers. He's telling the weak and the strong alike to "strengthen your faith and don't vacillate between Christianity and Judaism because you are causing those who are following you to stumble." The weak must find God's strength (Heb 12: 2, 3) and quit entertaining in their minds the option of abandoning Christ, and the strong must take the initiative to strengthen the faith of those who are weaker. They must not passively ignore those around them who are struggling. They must do what they can to help. In particular they must accept the fact that their example affects others. Their single-minded devotion to Christ will be a healing influence to those weakened by doubts.

## Hebrews 12:12, 13

**Verse 12, 13** (continued): The author's exhortation in these verses appears to be drawn from two Old Testament passages. The first is Isaiah 35:3, 4. There Isaiah tells those awaiting Messiah's arrival to "encourage the exhausted and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, take courage, fear not. Behold your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come; He will come and save you." Isaiah is telling the people of Israel to speak words of encouragement to each other, reminding each other that God will faithfully do what He's promised. Isaiah goes on to picture the miraculous transformation that will take place when Messiah comes (Isa 35:5-10). He then concludes this passage by saying the ransomed of the Lord will come to Zion where Messiah is enthroned, with "gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isa 35:10). Surely this is exactly the message the author of Hebrews wants to convey. Along with Isaiah he wants believers to remind each other of what awaits them in the future; if they will remain faithful.

## Hebrews 12:12, 13

**Verses 12, 13** (continued): The second Old Testament passage from which he draws is Proverbs 4:25-27. There Solomon exhorts his son, "Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor the left; turn your foot from evil." This is what the author means when he tells his readers to "make straight paths for your feet..." Solomon wanted his son to be single-minded, to refuse to be diverted by temptation which would assault him from the right and left. And in the same way the author wants his readers to fix their gaze on Jesus (Heb 12:2) and not vacillate over whether or not Jesus is the Savior. By listening to such doubts, some were wandering back and forth in their faith, confusing not only themselves, but those they influenced as well.

## Hebrews 12:14

**Verse 14:** Next the author tells his readers to "pursue peace with all...." He is saying they must not allow the bitter arguments that had arisen to continue. We can only imagine the angry exchanges that took place when some claimed that Jesus was not the divine Son of God (Heb 1:5-14) or that He couldn't be the Messiah because the true Messiah would never suffer and die (Heb 2:9-18) or that returning to a Judaism without Jesus was perfectly acceptable to God (Heb 2:1-4). In order to "pursue peace" the author wasn't telling believers to passively allow such teachings to go unchallenged, but he did want the debate to

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remain respectful and calm. Very likely he wanted his readers to respond in the same manner as that in which Paul instructed Timothy, "The Lord's bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to all... patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition..." (2Ti 2:24-26). Paul told Timothy to confront false teaching and correct it (1Ti 1:3, 4) and even disciple when necessary (1Ti 1:20), but through it all to maintain a peaceful attitude (1Ti 6:11; Ro 12:18).

## Hebrews 12:14

**Verse 14** (continued): The author of Hebrews also tells believers to "pursue... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." By "holiness" he means the moral transformation of a believer's heart and life. Each of us is being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ (Ro 8:29). We are not simply forgiven, we are truly changed by the indwelling Spirit who puts God's laws into our minds and writes them on our hearts (Heb 8:10). Yet, we still have a responsibility to actively participate in the process by making the right choices and doing what is required in order to obey.

## Hebrews 12:14

**Verse 14** (continued): Not only was relational strife present, the believers also faced worldly temptations like those he will mention shortly (Heb 13:4, 5). In order to endure in faith for a lifetime these also must be consistently avoided. Yielding to the appetites of the flesh (Ga 5:16-21) can over time quench faith by imposing on it a growing weight of guilt. If this is not addressed properly through repentance and confession a person can become increasingly alienated from God. It's possible to become enslaved again to sinful appetites to the point that a person will not "see the Lord" (Mt 5:8), meaning join Him in the resurrection. Peter describes this return to enslavement in unmistakable terms (2Pe 2:19-22) and Paul makes it clear there are behaviors that will not be accepted by God (1Co 6:9, 10). None of these passages intends to teach us that we must reach a state of sinlessness to go to heaven, but they point to the fact that when a person is truly transformed by the New Covenant his/her attitudes and behaviors show profound change. In other words, they are becoming "holy."

## Hebrews 12:15, 16

**Verses 15, 16:** The author says that while pursuing peace and holiness believers ought also to be "carefully watching" (observing, caring for, visiting) in order to prevent three distinct categories of sin: 1) anyone falling behind from the grace of God; 2) any troubling bitter root growing up; and 3) any fornication (all forms of illicit sexual behavior) or unholy person (profane, spiritually unacceptable to God, defiled, impure) like Esau who in order to eat gave up his rights of the firstborn. Before we examine the meaning of each we should note the overall principle he is applying here. He's saying to all believers, "Remember, you are responsible for the faith of others." This means when we observe someone struggling we should do what we can to help. It's not enough to strengthen only my own "hands" and "knees" (v 12), I am commanded to do the same for others. Though he doesn't specifically list ways he wants this done, fulfilling this command would undoubtedly include such responses as prayer, confrontation, teaching, encouragement—all of which would require that we make room in our busy lives to care for someone else. Of course this must be done wisely and at the leading of the Lord, but the point here is that we are indeed our "brother's keeper" (Ge 4:9). Obedience begins by accepting our responsibility to lovingly watch for those headed in the wrong direction and to do what we can to restore them (Ga 6:1, 2).

## Hebrews 12:15, 16

**Verses 15, 16** (continued): The first category for which we should be "carefully watching" is anyone "falling behind from the grace of God" (literal). Taken in a general sense this statement could refer to anyone to whom God's saving grace does not

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extend. But in the context of this letter, where a major concern is believers ceasing to pursue Christ by returning to Judaism, it very likely points to those who were falling back into legalism. The author pictures the Church moving together as a community like Israel during the Exodus. The main body of the group was walking forward, firmly trusting in the grace which is received by faith in Jesus Christ, but some were falling behind as stragglers, tempted to return to the Law of Moses (Heb 3:12-19; 4:9-11).

## Hebrews 12:15, 16

**Verses 15, 16** (continued): The second category for which we should be "carefully watching" is "any troubling bitter root" which might grow up and "by this many be defiled (stained)." In Deuteronomy 29:18 Moses warned Israel to watch out for "a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood," and by that he meant anyone "whose heart turns away... from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of the nations..." Said another way, it is those who "forsook the covenant of the Lord... which he made with them..." (Dt 29:25) and "...went and served other gods and worshipped them..." (Dt 29:26). If allowed to grow, Moses said this "root" would bring "curses" upon the nation (Dt 28:15-68). Spiritual disloyalty to God is described as a "root" because like a plant it has the power to grow and reproduce itself in others. So the author of Hebrews uses this same image to warn his readers to watch for anyone whose heart was turning away from Jesus. If allowed to go unchecked, such unbelief could spread to many and cause "trouble." Jesus and Paul made the same point using the figure of leaven (Mt 16:6-12; 1Co 5:6-13; Ga 5:9).

## Hebrews 12:15, 16

**Verses 15, 16** (continued): The third category for which we should carefully watch is "any fornicator or unholy person like Esau who in order to eat gave up his rights of the firstborn" (literal). We are to watch for those who fall into sexual impurity (Heb 13:4) or greed (Heb 13:5) or any other type of appetite, which lures a person to consider momentary pleasure to be of greater value than future spiritual blessing. That, of course, was how Esau lost the blessing due him as Isaac's oldest son. He thought of his physical needs as more important than his spiritual needs, selling his birthright to his younger brother for a meal of bread and lentil stew (Ge 25:28-34). Obviously, he lacked the faith to treasure his birthright. And he lacked the patience to wait for something that seemed so far in the future. This made him unfit to receive his inheritance. He was unwilling to postpone the gratification of his flesh and later on when he wanted to reverse that decision it was too late.

## Hebrews 12:17

**Verse 17:** The point being made by the author is not to warn us that a single decision to indulge a forbidden appetite will leave us disqualified to receive God's blessings and unable to repent, but rather to warn that those who value worldly pleasure over eternal rewards will someday find themselves facing God's judgment and then it will be too late to repent. When he says, "... even afterwards when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected," the "afterwards" the author wants us to contemplate is the final judgment which comes after this age has passed away. Much speculation has been focused on the words, "...he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." Did Esau try to repent but found he was unable to do so, or did he tearfully try to change Isaac's mind so he would give him a blessing? The second view is the one that matches the report in Scripture (Ge 27:34). Esau bitterly implored his father to bless him too, but Isaac replied that what was done couldn't be undone. The author appears to be using Esau to warn us that it is possible to so disqualify ourselves with ungodly behavior that someday when we seek God's blessing on the day of judgment, we too will be rejected, and no amount of tears will change that verdict either.

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## Hebrews 12:18-29 (Introduction)

**Introduction:** In verses 18-29 the author presents his final appeal. In the next chapter he offers some practical pastoral admonitions and gives a closing pronouncement of blessing but this portion of chapter 12 provides the real summary of his letter. Here is where he demands that we see the implication of all he has said and make a choice: for or against Jesus. Over the previous chapters he asked us to endure persecution and the hardships of walking in faith, accept the possibility of martyrdom, think of these hardships as God's loving discipline and deny the improper appetites of our flesh. In addition, he asked us to believe that the promised Messiah has come; that He is Jesus; that He is the eternal Son of God who existed prior to His incarnation and is the One through whom the world was made and by whose power all creation is upheld (Heb 1:1-12); that the Father will require all creation to kneel in submission to Jesus; that He fully became a man and suffered our temptations and died violently in order to save us (Heb 2; 5-18); that the Father will punish all His enemies (Heb 1:13); that the priesthood of Aaron has been eternally superceded by the priesthood of the Messiah (Heb 6:20; 7:4-28); that God will give the promised New Covenant to those who come to Him through this priesthood (10:1-22); and that faith in Jesus will produce a complete removal of sins, a cleansed conscience, and unbroken fellowship with God forever. With these understandings firmly in place, he now demands that his readers no longer wander back and forth between the Old and New Covenants. They must choose one or the other, and the two are profoundly different.

## Hebrews 12:18-20

**Verses 18, 19:** The Old Covenant was made at a physical mountain "which... had been lighted with fire and (there was) blackness and deathly gloom and violent winds and a trumpet sound and a voice (speaking) words which the ones that heard begged that not another word be placed before them" (literal) (Ex 19:9-20; 20:18; Dt 4:11, 12; 5:22-26). Meeting God was so terrifying, the people "trembled and stood at a distance" (Ex 20:18) and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us or we will die" (Ex 20:19). **Verse 20:** And they were so separated from God by their sins that any person or any one of their livestock which ventured onto the mountain had to be "stoned or shot through" and "no hand shall touch him" because they had come under severe judgment for having spiritually contaminated a holy place (Ex 19:12, 13).

## Hebrews 12:21

**Verse 21:** Even Moses later on acknowledged being fearful when he appealed to God for mercy on behalf of the nation after they worshipped the golden calf (Dt 9:19, 20). By reminding his readers of these things the author is contrasting the Old Covenant with the New. He's asking those thinking of returning to the Old to recognize what a poor trade they would be making. The Old held no promise for a joyful union with God. Instead it was marked by fear and separation. God was distant from His people at Sinai so why would anyone prefer that covenant to the joyful eternal fellowship promised by the New?

## Hebrews 12:22

**Verse 22:** Now he turns his attention to portraying the rewards of the New Covenant using deeply Jewish imagery, and as he does he tells us something profound. He makes it clear that the New Covenant is not a new religion. Jewish followers of Jesus are not ceasing to be Jewish nor are they abandoning the faithful among their ancestors. Jesus came so that all true Israel can be with God. Without the mediation of His blood none of the Old Covenant saints would be allowed to come near to God. This is not to say that believing Gentiles are not welcome as well, but he is making it clear that Jesus is first of all Israel's Messiah (Mt 15:24; Jn 4:22; Ac 3:26; Ro 1:16). He is the fulfillment of Israel's ancient longings. Just as Israel left Mt. Sinai

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and, after settling the promised land, worshipped God at Mt. Zion, Jewish believers must move on from the covenant made at an earthly Mt. Sinai and march toward the heavenly Mt. Zion. In fact, faith in Jesus makes it possible for them to enter into the Holy of holies of God's presence even now (Heb 9:11; 10:19-22).

## Hebrews 12:22

**Verse 22** (continued): The "city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..." is the same glorious eternal city for which Abraham longed (Heb 11:10, 16). It's the "New Jerusalem" that John describes in Revelation 21:1-22:5. Just as the tabernacle and temple were only prophetic symbols pointing to the spiritual realities of heaven (Heb 8:5; 9:23, 24; 10:1) so earthly Jerusalem is only a "shadow" of the eternal city God is preparing as a dwelling place for His people (Jn 14:2, 3). The next reference to "myriads (a number so large it can't be counted) of angels" is not incidental. It makes an important statement. Deuteronomy 33:1-29 records "the blessing with which Moses...blessed the sons of Israel before His death" (v 1). In the second verse of that blessing Moses tells Israel that when the Lord's glory came to them at Mt. Sinai, Mt. Seir and Mt. Paran "He came with myriads of Holy Ones, on His right hand angels with Him" (LXX, literal). In other words, where the God of Israel is there are countless numbers of angels.

## Hebrews 12:22, 23

**Verse 22** (continued): The point that the author is making by mentioning angels to these Jewish believers is that their faith in Jesus will bring them to the same God who met with Israel in the Exodus. As Jews they are not being asked to follow a new god. By receiving Jesus' atonement they will spend eternity with their God and His angels in His heavenly city. But just as Israel had to leave Mt. Sinai and travel on to Mt. Zion, so too they must leave the Old Covenant and come to the New. **Verse 23**: Three times a year all males in Israel were to gather for a "holy convocation" in Jerusalem (Ex 23:14-17): 1) Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:4-8) to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt; 2) the Feast of the Harvest (first fruits) to bring the first fruits of the spring wheat (Lev 23:9-14); and 3) Ingathering (booths) bringing the autumn harvest of fruits and olives (Lev 23:33-44). The same word which is translated here as "general assembly" is used in the Septuagint for these gatherings (Isa 66:10 in LXX; Eze 46:11; Hos 2:11; 9:5; Am 5:21), and here the author is applying this word to the massive crowd who will gather in heaven. Just as Mt. Zion and Jerusalem are "shadows" of the eternal reward awaiting believers, so too were the festivals when all Israel came together to worship at the temple. Like the enormous crowd which gathered at those festivals there will be a "holy convocation" in God's heavenly city.

## Hebrews 12:23

**Verse 23** (continued): The word translated as "church" in the phrase "church of the firstborn" is a word commonly used in the Septuagint to speak of other types of worship gatherings beyond the three national festivals. It's usually translated as the "assembly" or "congregation." By using the words "church (congregation) of the firstborn" the author pictures heaven as a worshipful gathering of firstborn sons. The word "firstborn" takes us back to the first night of Passover when Israel's firstborn sons were spared death as long as the blood of the Passover lamb marked the doorway of that home (Ex 12:12-14; 13:2, 11-15). Later on at Mt. Sinai God explained that all the firstborn in Israel in every generation must be "redeemed" from death. This was to be done in two ways: by giving the tribe of Levi to Him as priests (Nu 3:11-13) and by paying a certain amount of money when a man or a clean animal was born (Nu 18:15, 16). A firstborn must be redeemed or killed, though human sacrifice was never an option because God hated it. This is the concept behind the term "congregation of the firstborn." Here is a gathering of men and women all of whom would have died had not God redeemed them with the blood of the Passover

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lamb Jesus. They are worshipping because their life has been rescued from death.

## Hebrews 12:23

**Verse 23** (continued): The author next describes these "firstborns" as having their names recorded in the registry of heaven. He uses the same word Luke uses for the census taken by Caesar Augustus prior to Jesus' birth (Lk 2:1, 2, 3, 5). This idea of a census of registry of names for the members of the family of God goes back to the Exodus (Ex 30:12; 38:26). When speaking to God Moses referred to this book of names (Ex 32:32, 33). Later the prophets mentioned it (Ps 69:28; Eze 13:9; Da 12:1), and the concept was explained more fully in the New Testament (Lk 10:20; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). Having one's name "enrolled in heaven" means that person is accepted by God into His eternal family. So the crowd that the author pictures is made up of people whose names are recorded in that book, they are, as it were, members of the heavenly nation of Israel (Ro 9:4-8; Gal 3:6-9) which is made up of believing Jews and Gentiles (Ro 11:13-24; Eph 2:11-19; Rev 21:12, 14).

## Hebrews 12:23

**Verse 23** (continued): Ultimately the New Covenant does not lead us merely to a place called "heaven" or even other people, it leads us to God Himself. And the God to whom it leads is the "Judge of all," so if our sins had not been atoned by Christ we could not participate in that gathering. God is a just God who will punish the wicked but He is also merciful and therefore has given righteousness to those who repent and have faith. What makes this enormous assembly in heaven so remarkable is that all who are gathered there are sinners who deserve judgment yet have been completely accepted by the "Judge of all." The author goes on to note that this gathering includes "the spirits of the righteous made perfect." It is an odd way to refer to believers because certainly more than their "spirits" are present. Their resurrected bodies are present as well. But if by this phrase he is telling us that the spirits of Old Testament saints will be fully included in that "perfection" (Heb 11:39, 40) then the statement becomes a very important one to his readers. It assures them that their ancestors who truly walked in repentance and faith (Heb 11) will be resurrected and standing there with them in that great assembly (F.F. Bruce, Hebrews, Erdmans, 1964, p.378).

## Hebrews 12:24

**Verse 24**: We've come to an eternal city filled with angels (v 22). We've come to a "holy convocation" of God's people in heaven (v 23). We've come to God the Father who judges all who come to Him (v 23). And finally the author tells us we've come to Jesus our high priest who has sprinkled us with His atoning blood so that we can receive the promised New Covenant (v 24). As our "mediator," Jesus stands in the middle between us and God the Father bringing together the two estranged parties. Unlike the relationship God had with His people in the Old Covenant, we who have been "sprinkled" are now able to "draw near in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:22). We have "confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19).

## Hebrews 12:24

**Verse 24** (continued): By using the word "sprinkled" the author pictures Jesus as our high priest who has performed a "sin offering" as prescribed by the Law of Moses (Lev 4:2-6, 13-18; 16:11-19; Heb 9:11-14, 19-22; 10:22; 1Pe 1:2). It is as though He had taken His finger and dipped it in a bowl of His own blood and splashed it seven times before the veil of heaven's sanctuary. So when we receive by faith His death on the cross in effect He performs a "sin offering" on our behalf before God

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the Father. But unlike Israel's priests He doesn't need to keep repeating this ceremony because His blood "speaks a better thing than Abel's" (literal). Just as Abel's blood continued to cry out to God for justice from the ground after his brother murdered him (Ge 4:10; Heb 11:4), Jesus' spilled blood continues to cry out to God for mercy for all who come to Him.

## Hebrews 12:25

**Verse 25:** In verses 22-24 the author asked his readers to keep hope alive. He wanted them to remember the eternal destiny awaiting those who endure in faith. Now in verses 25-29 he warns them about the future judgment that awaits those who do not endure. If hope isn't enough to convince them to make the right choice then they need to remember there is much to fear for those who turn away from Jesus. They need only let their minds go back to their ancestors' encounter with God at Sinai to discover that He is willing to punish those who disobey Him (He 3:16-19). There on a mountain in the wilderness He gave His laws to Israel through a man named Moses (Dt 5:1-5, 22-27, 31), and when they stubbornly refused to obey He let that entire generation die before leading the nation into the promised land (Heb 3:7-11). The warning given by their example should be clear: "...if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth..." how much more severe will the punishment of those who rebel against His Son who is seated at His right hand in heaven (Ps 110:1; Heb 1:13). After all, He promised Jesus to make His enemies a "footstool" for His feet.

## Hebrews 12:26

**Verse 26:** When God spoke to Israel from the top of Mt. Sinai "the whole mountain quaked violently" (Ex 19:18; Ps 68:7), but that earthquake was nothing compared to the shaking that will take place when He destroys this present universe. To make this point the author quotes from Haggai 2:6 which says, "Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land." If we read on in Haggai (Hag 2:7-9) we can see that the prophet was specifically describing the future millennial kingdom which will be set up when the Messiah rules the earth from Jerusalem, but the author of Hebrews looks to an event beyond that preliminary "shaking" of world governments. He's describing the destruction of heavens and earth as they now exist after the Millennium has ended and the final judgment has taken place (Heb 1:10-12; 1Co 3:13-15; 7:31; 2Co 4:18; 2Th 1:7-10; 2Pe 3:7-13; Rev 21:1-22:5).

## Hebrews 12:27

**Verse 27:** The words, "those things which can be shaken" mean everything that is part of this present created order. By "shaking" it he means God will destroy it by releasing upon it the "fire" of His glory in its full intensity (2Pe 3:7, 10-13). At some point in the future the time period in which God has allowed rebellion in both the spiritual and human realms will come to an end (Mt 24:35, 36). When it does such passages as those listed above tell us He will destroy the physical universe by removing all restraint to His glory, so that the "fire" of His holy presence will devour it all. However, since spirits never cease to exist and since both the righteous and unrighteous will be resurrected (Jn 5:25-29) He will separate from Himself all who rebelled, whether angels or humans (Mt 7:23; 25:41; 2Pe 2:4, 9; Jude 1:6; Rev 20:10-15). He does this so that "those things which cannot be shaken may remain" referring to the eternal kingdom just described in verses 22-24.

## Hebrews 12:28

**Verse 28:** God does all these things to prepare a glorious kingdom for us (Da 7:27). While on earth Jesus made it plain that God's kingdom authority was already at work on earth (Mt 4:17; 6:10; 10:7; 12:28; Lk 17:20, 21), but in the future His authority will be expressed in its complete form in a beautiful city populated by resurrected believers, located on a newly created earth

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(Rev 21:1-4). The devil and his angels will be bound (Rev 20:10). Rebellious humans will be removed (Rev 22:14, 15). Sin, sorrow, sickness and death will never again exist, so this new kingdom will be "unshakable." It will be a place where God's judgment never occurs again. And because this hope awaits us the author encourages us to "keep holding on to grace (or, "keep on giving thanks") through which we may worship God in a way that pleases Him with reverent devotion and holy fear" (literal).

## Hebrews 12:29

**Verse 29:** The author still has one more statement to add to his warning. He says, "For indeed our God is a consuming fire" (Dt 4:24). Of course God is a person, not a substance, but he wants us to see that His essential goodness is so completed that He exudes a power which acts like fire. It often appears as a light so intense that if it were not restrained it would destroy all that is not holy. This picture emerges when we look at descriptions of Him in the Old and New Testaments (Ex 3:2; 19:18; 33:18-23; Isa 26:11; 33:14; 66:15, 16; Eze 1:4, 13; Da 7:9; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; 2Th 1:7; Heb 10:27; 2Pe 3:7, 10-13; Jd 1:7; Rev 20:11). Those having "the righteousness which is according to faith" (Heb 11:7) are able to longingly look forward to an eternity in that holy "fire" (Rev 21:23; 22:5), but those without it must dread the prospect (Heb 10:27). To them His glory is a "consuming fire."