

Keep your focus

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[0 : 01] So open your Bibles, if you'll have them open, at Hebrews chapter 12. This chapter is in a sense the culmination of the book of Hebrews.

! Obviously there is chapter 13 and we'll look at that next week. That's by way of a kind of appendix, a very useful appendix, but the sort of logical conclusion of the book of Hebrews we find in chapter 12.

And so this idea that we must fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, actually the new, new international version says the pioneer and finisher, which is perhaps slightly better. Perhaps I should have changed it on the slide. But it reminds us that Jesus is the beginning and the end. So before we dive into chapter 12, I'd like to make two observations.

First of all, chapter 11, obviously, was history. It was about all those heroes of faith from the past. Chapter 12 is written almost entirely in the present tense.

[1 : 13] So the command is now fix your eyes on Jesus, not somehow for the future, but now fix your eyes on Jesus. And even when he comes back to talking about the city of God, he doesn't say you will come to that, although, of course, in a sense that's true.

He says you have come in verse 22. Even in verses 26 to 29, it's in the present tense, we are receiving what was promised.

Of course, we only receive it finally in one sense later, but he says now in the present tense, we are receiving all these things that God has promised. So why does he put it in the present tense?

I think it's because he wants us to remember that all this stuff is not pie in the sky. You might think, oh, it was all right for all those guys, you know, Abraham and David and that crowd.

And yeah, sure, we know that eventually, of course, we're going to, you know, the city of God will be on earth, but it doesn't have much to do with what we do now, does it?

[2 : 20] But no, the writer wants to say, this needs your attention now. When you go back into the world, when you finish reading this letter, when you finish this sermon and this Lord's Day, go back to the world and the life in this world, you need to be, have these things in your mind now, and you need to be giving them your attention now.

So the first observation is that it's all written in the present tense. And the second thing I'd like to point out is that, as I say, this is kind of the logical culmination of the book of Hebrews.

And so not surprisingly, all the, everything in this chapter, and largely everything in this chapter, reiterates the themes of the letter that we've already met.

So in verse 2, we talk about Jesus, the author, or perhaps better, the pioneer. And of course, the same thought occurs in chapter 2, verse 10.

There he's described as the pioneer of faith, but here he's not only the pioneer, but the finisher, the perfecter, the completer, as well. But it's picking up that thought from chapter 2, verse 10.

[3 : 39] He talks about, in verses 7 to 11, he talks about discipline and childhood. And you remember in chapter 6, verse 1, he's told the Hebrews, the readers, his Hebrews listeners, that it's time they grew up.

And so he returns to this idea of growing up, in verses 7 to 11. In verses 14 and 16 of this chapter, he talks about the need for holiness.

That's, of course, run all the way through the epistle, but for instance, in chapter 2, verse 11, he says, he emphasizes the need for holiness. Just last week, in chapter 11, we were looking at the city built by God, and the city that the fathers were seeking.

And we have it described for us here, in verse 22. That city built by God. Even the angels, you remember chapter 1, the angels got a mention.

And the angels pop up again here, in verse 22. But in their proper place, surrounding the throne of God. And, of course, the central theme of the, of Hebrews, in chapters 7 to 10, is the new covenant, in the blood of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 58] And that's what we meet, of course, in verse 24. And then, towards the end, we're reminded again, that reminder we find, towards the beginning of the letter, in chapter 2, verse 1, the need to pay careful attention, to what God has said.

And that pops up again, in verse 25. Excuse me. So, all these themes, that have run through the epistle, up to now, all sort of brought together, in this, in this chapter 12.

But, if you or I, were sort of writing this, we might just put, conclusion, I have said, so and so, and just listed them. But, the writer doesn't do it that way. It's not just a, a kind of list.

Rather, there's a whole, the chapter has a structure, and a dynamic, of its own. And, it's, divided into two, main sections, as you can see there, four, subsections.

And, the first half, of the chapter, are two helpful metaphors, for Christian progress, ways of thinking, about living, as a Christian, and making progress, as a Christian.

[6 : 16] And then, as we'd expect, all the way through, we get these warnings, in the book of Hebrew. This one, I think is the sixth one, but, don't quote me on that.

But, it is the, the culminating one. And, again, we can split that, into two bits. It's a little bit, longer than some. But, I think we can, split it up into, the community, guarding the community, in verses 12 to 24.

And, the NIV heading, notwithstanding. I think it does start, in verse 12, not in verse 14, the, the, the warning, section. And, and then there's, a final exhortation, which I've called, now listen up, at the end.

So, we're going to divide, the, the chapter up, into those four sections, and, and again, go through it, and see what we can, get out of it. So, we start, with running the race, in verses one to three.

I don't think, we're really supposed, to think of, sort of the, the dead saints, the people of God, who are in heaven, are kind of peering over, the parapet, watching to see, how we, get on.

[7 : 28] I mean, there's nothing, anything else, in the scripture, I think that particularly, suggests that. But, that's nevertheless, kind of the implication here, even if we're not meant, to take it very literally.

Because, what we have here, is the image, of a running stadium, isn't it? The, Romans and, Greeks, were very keen, on competitions, and athletics, and the like.

And, what we have here, is the image, of a running, track. We're in an athletic, stadium, and we're surrounded, by the crowd. But, this isn't just, any crowd.

Because, all these spectators, these witnesses, are in fact, previous competitors. They like to do that, don't they? When you're watching, a sporting event, on the television, often the cameraman, spots somebody, in the crowd, and focuses on that person, in the crowd, and you realise, oh yes, he's still, the world record holder, or you know, that lady was, Olympic champion, 20 years ago. Something like that. And, why are they there? Well, for the current competitors, that's both, an encouragement, and a challenge, isn't it?

[8 : 45] It's an encouragement, because, it shows them, that the race, can be run, that the prize, can be obtained, given the determination, to win, because they've, already done it, they've shown, that it can be done.

But, it's also a challenge, because, they've completed, their race, haven't they? And again, he's probably thinking, of those Old Testament, heroes of faith, that are listed, in chapter 11.

they've already, they've already, they've already, reached the goal, as it were, even if they've not, quite got to the prize giving yet, they've already run, they've done their, their race.

But now, it's your turn, in front of the TV cameras. Now, it's your turn, to show that the race, can be run, and to run it, with determination.

But then he reminds us, actually, there's even more than that, because in the VIP box, in the royal box, is Jesus himself. And he, as it were, was the pioneer, the real pioneer, the one who really showed, how the race should be run.

[9 : 58] He was the greatest competitor, of all, one might say, in verses two and three. The one that, showed how the race, should really be run. Look, what he endured, to obtain the prize.

And we notice, it does say, he endured it, to obtain the prize. And if he could endure that, we should not lose heart. We should keep our eye on him, as we run the race ourselves, of the Christian life.

So, we need to, think about the spectators, find them as an encouragement, but not an intimidation. And we need to have, the right attitude, to the race, don't we?

Some people, you see, if you watch, the marathons, on the television, you see some people, will run it, dressed as a gorilla, or a chicken, or something. But they're not serious competitors, are they?

They're just doing it for fun. They're not running, with the intention, or the expectation, of winning. The real athlete, runs with patience, and determination.

[11:11] The real athlete, has a strategy, that gives her, the best chance of winning. You know, you don't, if you're running a marathon, you don't sprint, the first hundred yards, and then collapse in a heap. You run with patience, determination, looking forward.

forward. And, to keep on, until the end, I don't know, whether you saw this, but a few years ago, in the Winter Olympics, I think it wasn't the last one, but the one before, but there was, a snowboarder, who had had her waist, won, more or less.

She was in sight, of the finish line, and she was well ahead, of the competition. But then, with the finish in sight, she took her eye, as it were, off the finish line. Arrogance, and overconfidence, took over.

What did she do? She put in an entirely, unnecessary jump, and she fell, on landing, and so of course, she lost the race, within sight of the finish. She didn't have, the right attitude.

She didn't have, that attitude, that any sportsman, has to have, that it's, it's not over, till it's over. Until you've got there, the race is not won. So we need to run, our race with patience, and perseverance, and determination.

[12:28] And that's what we're, supposed to, learn from the running track. And of course, the real athlete, so he doesn't wear, a gorilla suit, the real athlete, strips for action.

Get rid of any, unnecessary weight. Even your, running suit, you want it to be, as light as possible. You don't want to, carry any weight, that you don't have to.

Anything, that might trip you up. What does the writer, mean by this? Well I think the weight, can be just the affairs, of the world, which can deflect us, from the prize. Of course we do need, to live in the world, but remember Jesus, told us to seek first, the kingdom of heaven.

And I think that's perhaps, what he's, the writer has in mind here. Not be cluttered up, with the things, of this world. Not there's anything wrong, with going around, wearing a gorilla suit, if that's what you'd like, to do.

But, but not if you, it's not going to help you, to win the race. So let's not be, cluttered, with the things, of this world. And even worse than that, are the things, that can trip us up.

[13:37] And by that, I think he means, the sins, that we can keep, going back to. And he reminds us, you know, you'll just trip over, if you keep, if you can't put aside, those sins, that we find so difficult, to avoid.

It's like trying to, run a marathon, with your shoelaces, tied together. You're just going to, fall flat on your face. And so we do need, to actively, to discard, these hindrances, the weight of the world, and the sins, that we find, in our own hearts.

If we're going to run, with determination, and perseverance, we need to put, these things aside. So we need to, think of the spectators, have the right attitude, and wear the right kit.

The other thing, of course, an athlete needs, is training. And I guess, there was a continuation, of the idea here, but the writer, at this point, changes, his metaphor, because he thinks, of discipline, as training.

We find this, in verses 4 to 11. Now I think, it's worth making the point, that discipline, is not the same thing, as punishment.

[14:54] Strange actually, I thought, let me think of a name, that nobody, in the congregation, is going to have. And I thought, it's the name Billy, and now we've got a Billy here. But, I was going to say, when mum, mum says to her child, Billy, go and tidy your bedroom.

That's not a punishment, as such. But it is discipline, isn't it? It's part of learning, to be an adult. But of course, occasionally, we don't learn that lesson, and punishment is required, to enforce it.

And so, in verses 5 and 6, he does quote, that quotation, I've got to look up, where it was from, but it's a quotation, from the Old Testament. saying that the Lord, chastises those, whom he loves. Because he's, he wants us, to make progress. Discipline, can be unpleasant. But it's only a fool, who rejects it, isn't it?

And parents, who don't discipline, their children, in this way, are neglectful. That's the way, we think of them. We would criticise them, and say, they don't really care, for their children. You know, the child may say, oh, you don't love me.

[16:07] But actually, in their hearts, they know that actually, the converse, exactly the opposite, is the case. The parent, that really loves, their child, will discipline them, to grow up, as proper citizens.

It's the neglectful parent, the one who doesn't care, who doesn't, discipline their children. children. And, as the writer says, it's as if they're, you know, actually said, they're illegitimate children. I don't know whether he's criticising the children there, but surely not. He's criticising the parent there, in a sense. Because, you know, they're just children I don't care about. They're not, they're not my real children, that I really, want to adopt.

I want to look after, and keep. So, if we're not disciplined, it says that we're actually children, that God doesn't really care about at all. But the ones that God does care about, he will discipline. And, of course, parents don't always get it right. And the writer, reminds us of that, in verse 10. But here, we're talking about, the wisest of all fathers.

[17:19] In verse 9. So, it might not be obvious to Billy, how tidying his room, is going to make him, a better brain surgeon, in later life. At the time, he probably doesn't think it is.

But actually, it is. The habits of care, and tidiness, that are inculcated, by his parents, will serve him well, for the future. Don't they? Help him to be a good citizen.

And when we go through, hardships of any kind, particularly suffering, it might actually be hard, to see how this is useful to us. But just in case, we can't see it, the writer tells us.

He tells us at the end, that in fact, this is the way, to righteousness and peace. Verse 11. That when we go through, these things, it's not, just because God, wants to make things, difficult for us.

But rather, this is the way, that we, we find righteousness, and peace. Might not be quite obvious, immediately obvious, why that is, but, that seems to be, what the writer, is telling us here.

[18:27] That, as we, put our trust in, God, and as we keep our eyes, on Jesus, when we go through, difficulties of all sorts, whatever it is, and he mentions, various sorts of, difficulties.

Then, this is actually, training us up, in righteousness, and peace. So, we have those, two metaphors, of the running track, and, discipline, as training, training us, in righteousness, and peace.

And, we need to keep those, in mind. Well, of course, we need to keep those, in mind. That's why he's, told us them. But, they're, ways to help us, think about, running the Christian race, living the Christian life.

And, when we, come up against, these things, when, you know, it just all seems, too much trouble, and, we're still only, halfway through the marathon, and it's, you know, it's too far to go. We hit the wall, as the coaches say.

Then, remember that, the race can be run, and we, the, the Lord has, has run it, and we keep our eyes, fixed on Jesus.

[19:34] And then, again, when we, find ourselves suffering, remember, this is part of the process. This is, what the Lord has to, to teach us, through these things. Otherwise, we would think, it's all us, wouldn't we?

And we wouldn't, realize that we, we need, changing, we need to change, and we need, to struggle. And then, we come, to the, the, the warning, the great warning, as it were.

And it's, slightly extended, and it, as most of these do, there's some encouragement, as well as the warning. thing. But, we find this, in the second half, of this chapter.

And I'll, again, I'll divide it, into two bits. First of all, guarding the community, of God, and then, the, the final, exhortation, at the end.

Now, no metaphor's perfect, and of course, the problem, with the running track, illustration, of the Christian life, is that, in a running track, of course, you only get one winner.

[20:39] And indeed, the point of a, a running track, the point of a running competition, is to beat everybody else. That's why you're there, to do that. But, the Christian life, is not run that way.

Christian life, if you like, is a, it's a team event. And so, he moves on, to remind us, that we live that life, in a community. That the Christian race, isn't the rat race.

That, if we find, our fellow Christians, struggling, we don't rejoice, that that's one, fewer competitor, to trouble us. Rather, in verse 13, we take the trouble, to help them, on their way, as well.

It says, make the path straight, for those who are stumbling, and, struggling, so they won't be, disabled, altogether. Rather, we'll be, we help them, on their way, to finish the race, for themselves. And then, he reminds us, that sin damages, not just us, but the church, in verse 15. We need to watch out, for anything, that might divide us. Anything, that might, tear us apart.

[21 : 52] And certainly, competitiveness, in that sense, within the church, is not going to do us, any good at all. A bitter root, might grow up. We need to be united, working together, pressing on together.

And it's mainly, the Christian community, I think, with which the writer, is concerned. But, even here, it doesn't seem to be, entirely that. Because in some ways, we find that the blessings, of this kingdom, spill out, into the world.

And he seems to, hint at that, in verse 14, doesn't he? He says, live at peace, with all men, and be holy, for without holiness, we won't, see God.

That's actually, a remarkable thing, isn't it? Just think, what he's actually saying there. Live at peace, with all men, presumably, meaning largely, those outside, the church. But, be holy, be separate, be set apart, from the world.

That's what holy means, isn't it? Being set apart. Is that even possible? How on earth, can you do that? Every day, don't we, we see, challenges.

[23 : 08] Just read about, that baker, in Northern Ireland, haven't we? He wouldn't, bake a gay, marriage cake. You could say, he wasn't, living at peace, with the world.

It's difficult, you have to make, wisdom, you need wisdom, and caution, don't you, to navigate this. I'm not suggesting, at the moment, he'd made the wrong decision, I think he'd probably, made the right decision, but, there are two sides to it.

He does tell us, to live at peace, with as much as you can, with all men. And this is what, we're required to do. We're required to do, both those things. We don't want to bring, Christ into disrepute, by being obnoxious, and fractious.

Always, always, seeking confrontation, with the world, always getting at people, and, and saying, you know, you, just look how holy I am, you're not, look how awful you people are.

But neither do we want to, bring Christ into disrepute, by immoral behavior. To tolerate sin, in the church, is lethal, and it will break up, the community, as we said, in verse 15.

[24 : 18] And it will prevent us, from inheriting God's blessing, as he tells us, in verses 16 and 17. And just to say, something on this, I think where possible, Christian holiness, works more by example, where the church, is the light of the world, than by confrontation.

I'm not sure, that's always the case. I think there are occasions, when we do need, to confront the world, openly. And yet, the things that Jesus, says about it, are more, the church being, the light of the world, the light set on a hill, people might, shall see your good deeds, and, and be changed by that.

And you might say, well the Old Testament prophets, thundered their message, and they did thunder, the message of judgment, to the, well they certainly talked about, those outside, the, the, the nation of Jerusalem, and did indeed, pronounce judgment, on the nations around.

And yet, they actually did it, to the Jews, and to the Israel, the house of Israel, that was where the message, was delivered to. So while there is a message, of judgment, even in those days, I think it was meant, to be more, that the, people of God, should be a witness, to the people around.

And in fact, the problem was, that they were, as bad or not worse, as the, than the nations surrounding. So, sometimes we need to confront the world, and yet we are told also, to, to live at peace, as far as we can, with all men.

[25 : 52] But, to be holy. So that, our separateness, is not, the separateness of, putting a wall up, shutting ourselves away, in some cloister somewhere.

But rather, shining, you know, the lights, city set on a hill, cannot be hid. So why do we make an effort, to hide it, as we do sometimes?

We should be, demonstrating, that the kingdom of God, is a better kingdom, a more just kingdom, a more caring kingdom, than anything the world, may have, even though it claims otherwise.

But still, you might, up to now, you might be thinking, that this is all, a bit much. And, this is all, rather tough. Making it all, seem rather hard work.

And so, the writer, wants us, to give us encouragement. Because he says, this isn't a matter, of gloom and doom. Tells us in verse 18. The church of God, may appear, to be weak, and fragile, and

suffering, and rather miserable, sometimes.

[27 : 11] And it is true, that we need to be careful, not to damage it. But actually, it's not that sort of community, at all. It's not a community, that's founded, on the fear of judgment, and on those signs, of terror, and exclusion.

It reminds us, of all those scary things, that happened, on the Mount Sinai, when the law was given. But he says, you haven't come, to that mountain at all.

You've come, to the heavenly Jerusalem. The place, where God may indeed, be met. And what are the characteristics, of that city?

Joy, verse 22. There was this, there's this stuff, at the beginning, of the epistle, about angels. And people were, talking about angels, as though, you know, you're supposed to worship angels, instead of Jesus.

But no, the angels, are there, yes. But they are, joyful, in joyful praise, for the grace, that's found, in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 19] They are rejoicing, that, there are those, who are gathered, to God, from the sons of men. It's based on grace, verse 24.

It's based, based on citizenship, verse 23. If we're washed, by the sprinkled blood, of Christ, we needn't fear, to enter the kingdom, of God, because that blood, has brought us, citizenship.

We're listed, in the official register, of residents, of the city. If we are truly, people of the, city of God, there's a register, there's a list of names, an electoral register, as you might say, or a list of citizens. And if we have truly, those who have had, our citizenship, bought for us, by, by the Lord Jesus Christ, that we're recorded, as such. Citizenship, of course, in those days, was very important, because not everybody, was a Roman citizen.

If you were, a Roman citizen, you had all sorts, of protections, under the law, which you, wouldn't have, otherwise. So, then there had to be, a list of who was, and it had to be recorded, who was, or was not, a Roman citizen.

[29 : 33] And here, he's saying, well, you may, may or may not be, Roman citizens. You may or may not be, citizens of, the United Kingdom, or the EU, or some other nation. But if you are those, who was, citizenship has been, bought by the blood, of the Lamb, then you are citizens, of that heavenly Jerusalem.

In fact, he says, that's nothing less, than that city, whose builder, and architect, is the living God. Verses 22, and 23, that city, that we found, that the Old Testament, heroes of faith, were looking for.

I said, they could have gone, Abraham could have gone, back to Ur, if he'd wanted to. But he didn't. We could go back, to this world, if we want to. But he says, that would be, the wrong decision, to make.

That because, we've come, to a better city, that city, that really is, built by the living God. And so, we move now, to that, dramatic, climax.

I think this is, all rather low key, actually. Considering, what it actually says. The language, is really quite restrained, understated.

[30 : 50] But then you read, what it actually says, and you think, hang on a minute. You can hear, the sirens starting up. You can hear, the alarms going off here. This is your, final warning.

Why? Well, because this world, is scheduled, for demolition. That's what he says, isn't it? In verse, 26, 27.

The warning bells, are ringing. Time to get out. That's what he's saying, isn't it? God is still, a consuming fire.

Verse 29. 29. It's not that, it's all be, you know, fine for everybody, in the end. No, this current age, however pretty it looks, however, whatever there is, desirable in it, is scheduled, for being shaken, so that, what cannot be shaken, will stand.

I think, by shaken, he presumably, means something, like an earthquake. And we've seen, the power of earthquakes, haven't we, recently, in Nepal, seen that, everything just gets, knocked over, knocked flat. And all those hopes, and things that people had, all their treasure possessions, that they had in their, their, houses, are buried under, a big pile of rubble.

[32 : 07] And he says, that's the warning, you need to make sure, you're not in a, a building, that's, going to be destroyed, by an earthquake. I remember hearing that once, somebody said, it's not earthquakes, that kill people, it's buildings.

Because that's what falls on you, and, destroys you. And, if we're in, a city that's going to be destroyed, going to be shaken, then that is not a safe place to be. But he's giving us, fair warning. And have you got, the right exit pass, because you're going to need it. And what is that pass? Well he tells us, doesn't he? It's the same actually, as that exit pass, that the Jews had, in, as that when they left Egypt. As judge of what, was coming on Egypt. It was the blood, of the covenant. The blood, of the sacrificed lamb. So, we shouldn't be frivolous, about this. We shouldn't be running, in our monkey suits, or in our chicken suits. This is a serious business. [33 : 06] A serious race. We'll go through tough times. And when we do, we won't actually like it. I don't think anybody, is supposed to like it, as such.

And yet, there should be joy, to be found in it. Because, that is the, it is yielding, that fruit of righteousness, that we have. And we shouldn't be discouraged, because, just as Abraham, was seeking a city, built by God.

So are we. And although, in one sense, that city, you know, we're not living in that city, in one sense. And yet, the writer says, actually, you have come to it now.

You are citizens, of heaven now. And, even sitting here, among the people of God. This is an outpost, as it were, of heaven.

It may not be the, you may not be, see the angels, in joyful assembly. But, this is nonetheless, an outpost, of the kingdom of heaven. This is part of that, heavenly city.

[34 : 15] Now. And so we should find, our joy in that. So, what should our attitude, attitude be? Well, he tells us three things, doesn't he?

Thankfulness, first of all. So that we shouldn't, shouldn't get discouraged, and like, you know, that the boy who's disciplined, say, I hate you.

You don't care for me. I'm running away. But rather, be thankful, that God, does care for us.

Reverence. We need to take things seriously.

Remember that, well, that our God is a consuming fire. And then he says, awe. Interesting thing to say, to finish with, isn't it? Awe.

Awe is amazement, at something, bigger than we've, you know, we expected, I think. That's probably what awe means. And he says that we should have awe, the great salvation that is found, in Jesus Christ.

[35 : 22] That, not the awe of those Jews, on Mount Sinai, who were terrified, by the thunder, and the signs. But we should have awe, nonetheless. But it's a different sort of awe, that awe that is found, as we appreciate, and see what Jesus has done for us, as we come to see, that city of God, that is built by, not by human hands, but by God himself.

So let's close this portion, portion of our, worship by, singing again. Let me go back to the.