

Zion Not Sinai
Christ is Enough Series
Hebrews 12:12-29
Pastor Bryan Clark

How we run a race...both individually and collectively...in other words, our Christian experience is going to be largely determined by whether or not we understand and believe that when we came to Christ, we did not come to Mount Sinai; we came to Mount Zion. To which you are thinking, “I have no idea what that means.” (*laughter*) Well, that’s what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Hebrews, Chapter 12. We’re going to pick it up in verse 12, which starts with the word **therefore**. You know what I’m going to say: Whenever you see the word *therefore*, you stop and see...“what it’s there for!” (*audience response*) “You’re such fine students!” (*laughter*) So you always have to back up with the **therefore**’s and try to figure out what it’s referring to. So the *cloud of witnesses*—the heroes of faith running this race with endurance—most immediately gives this idea that because God loves us, God’s not wanting to punish us; God’s wanting to help. So He teaches us; He instructs us; sometimes it’s necessary to correct us in order that we stay on the path and we run our race well. Having understood that, verse 12:

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. (*NASB, Hebrews 12:12-13)

So what’s he talking about there? The two phrases: **hands**—it’s literally wrists that are *limp* and **knees** that are **feeble** or *weak*. Both of those are athletic metaphors. It’s imagery. You imagine someone who is running a marathon. They’re exhausted; they can’t run one more step. They stop; they’re bent over. Their wrists are limp; their knees are weak; they’re about to pass out. The word **strengthen** is literally a word that means to *straighten up*. So basically they regain strength; they straighten up, and they continue to run. They’re going to run with endurance; they’re going to finish the race.

The idea of **straight paths** is an imagery that doesn’t make much sense to us, but it’s actually very common in the Scriptures. You see it a lot, especially in the poetical books. So in the ancient world, roads weren’t paved; roads weren’t nice. They were typically winding; they were hilly; they were full of rocks and boulders. So the best option—like the best path—would be a path that’s straight, not hilly, and free from stones and rocks and obstacles. So this is an imagery that’s used often. So think for example, Proverbs 3, verses 5 and 6. In verse 6 it says, “*In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will,*” what? “*make your paths straight.*” So very common imagery that this is the best path possible. So the idea of this imagery is that especially if someone is already wounded, a straight path allows them to heal, rather than to be wounded yet further.

So one of the things that’s very interesting about verses 12 and 13 is everything is in the plural. It’s not just talking about an individual race; it’s talking about a race we run together—and to realize we’re all in this together! There are those among us this morning whose wrists are limp, whose knees are weak—they’re not sure they’re going to make it. We talk about this all the time on staff. We recognize on any given weekend, there are people here hanging by a thread. There are people who aren’t sure they are going to make it one more week. There are people that are broken, people

that are discouraged. There are people with terminal diseases—they are dying. There are people whose children are rebelling; their marriages are falling apart; people are dealing with chronic pain. There's all kinds of stuff going on in this room this morning, and we need to realize this is not an individual race; we're teammates. We're not only family but we're teammates—we're running this together. And the idea is that we understand that and we come alongside them and we help strengthen them. We provide an environment where they're not going to get hurt further, but rather an environment where they can find healing, where they can run their race with endurance.

This is really the heartbeat of what we're trying to accomplish with the sections. We don't just do this so you can have a donut together. The intent is to realize: Hey, there are people around you and they're really hurting. They're kind of hanging on by a thread. Do you realize sixty seconds of kindness and compassion can sometimes give people what they need to say, "I can make it one more week"? I can do this—come alongside of the struggling and say, "Yeah, I know it's really hard for you right now, but we're in this together and we're going to get through this, and we're going to get to the finish line. We're going to do it together." That's what we're called to be about as the people of God. It's a beautiful picture of our calling. But it does raise the question, "How exactly does that happen?" So starting in verse 14 there's some detail related to that:

Pursue peace with all men...(or all people)

Very similar to what Paul says in the book of Romans: "As much as possible, pursue peace with everyone." The word **pursue** is a term that was used to describe a hunter pursuing an animal. This is not a passive verb; this is an active verb. This is not sitting around hoping everything's going to be peaceful today. It's a very active pursuit of peace. This Greek word for peace is as close as we come in the Greek language to the Hebrew word *shalom*. It's the idea of flourishing, of a mutual flourishing, of creating an environment that is a straight path where people aren't going to get re-wounded or hurt more deeply, but actually a place of healing, so that we can all run this race well together.

Now think about this: In a culture that has become so angry, that's become so toxic, that it's just so out of control, every week people are abused; every week people are bullied and pushed around. People are devalued. People are made to feel like they don't belong and they're not accepted, and they are *less than*. Where do people go to find an environment that is *other than* that? You think of all this stuff going on, on social media that's just so toxic. We have to understand as Christians we simply can't be part of that. We can't be part of it in any way. That's not our calling. We don't need to add to the tension and the conflict. We are called to **pursue peace**, to create an environment that's *other than* that. Another way to think of it is: life is hard enough as a Christian without creating unnecessary conflict. You may be strong enough to take it, but what's the damage being done to the people around you? So the idea is: how do we create an environment where people can flourish? We **pursue peace**. We pursue it like a hunter hunting some sort of an animal. The next phrase:

...and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. (Vs. 14b)

We've talked about this. The writer of Hebrews uses **sanctification** differently than the Apostle Paul. Paul tends to use it as an *ongoing process*. The writer of Hebrews uses it as a *noun*, *something that is*. The moment we trust Christ as Savior we become citizens of the heavenly city, and as citizens of the heavenly city, we are called to give people in this world a glimpse of the world to come. And so we are called to be set apart; I like the definition *other than* the rest of the

world. We understand the anger and the abuse and the bullying and everything that goes on in the culture, but we are called to be the people of God. We are called to create something *other than* that as our witness—our testimony—that there’s something about us that’s different. That’s the **sanctification**. Verse 15:

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God;

That’s a wonderful statement! God’s grace is enough! The world’s system is based on competition and comparison—it’s a system based on performance. What breaks us loose from that is this amazing thing called grace, and on the basis of the grace of God, everything is different. I’m not only viewing myself that way but I view those around me that way. Understanding grace means that there’s nobody *more than*; there’s nobody *less than* in Christ. Whether you’ve been a Christian for twenty-four hours or whether you’ve been a Christian for fifty years, there’s nobody more righteous; there’s nobody more accepted; there’s nobody more loved; there’s nobody *more than*. On the basis of the grace of God, we come equally in need of the grace of God. It levels the playing field—therefore there’s enough grace for everyone. Now again, stop and think about how different that is from our culture with all the anger and hostility, with all of the abuse and the bullying and the putdown. How many people in the room would say they don’t really feel loved or accepted or looked up to in the culture? Most people struggle with that at some level. But is there a place where we can have an understanding that we are all equal before a holy God because of the grace of God? Is there a place we can create where people flourish, where they know they are not going to be bullied; they’re not going to be pushed around; they’re not going to be rejected; they’re not going to be put down? But rather this place is different—there’s enough grace for everyone! There’s never an appropriate time for anyone to look at anyone else and think, “I’m more spiritual than you are,” nor should there ever be a time when somebody looks at somebody else and says, “I’m less spiritual than anyone else.” That’s the amazing thing about grace: it levels everything off!

There may be people here: they don’t look like you; they don’t live like you; they don’t smell like you; they don’t have your same politics—but there’s enough grace for everyone! Shouldn’t there be a place and shouldn’t it be the people of God that creates such a place where people can honestly come to grow, to heal, to feel accepted, to feel loved, to feel wanted? Whatever is broken, there they feel healing and strength and, “We will run this race together all the way to the finish line.” That’s what he means—no one comes up short of the grace of God! If we don’t do that, he says:

...that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

If we don’t do that and people rather are just hurt more, are just rejected more, are just bullied more, what happens is a **root of bitterness**. Bitterness is basically *anger turned inside*—and it begins to create a **bitterness**. A bitter root produces bitter fruit, and it just adds to the breakdown of a culture or a community. And so if we don’t take the calling seriously, people are going to get hurt. That creates bitterness—the bitterness he says leads to all kinds of **trouble** and it **defiles**; it contaminates our souls; and when our souls get contaminated, we start to make really bad decisions. Verse 16:

...that there be no immoral...

That’s the word from which we get our word pornography. It refers to any kind of sexual sin. One of the unique things about sexual sin is people turn to sexual behaviors when they are hurt, when they are wounded, when they’re bitter, when they’re angry, when they’re struggling. It’s not a coincidence that the more angry and toxic we become as a culture, the more our sexual behavior

gets out of control. So people turn to either sexual relationships or people turn to pornography, and it becomes like a refuge to deal with the pain and the bitterness that's within them. That's what he's referring to.

...that there be no immoral or godless (we would use the word secular) person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Vs. 16-17)

So if you're not familiar with the story, Abraham had a son, Isaac; Isaac had a son, Esau. Esau was the first-born. In that culture he would have had the birthright, would receive the majority of the inheritance. So God made a promise to Abraham. It went through Isaac, then to Esau. But Esau was not interested in the promise. It doesn't mean he was a bad guy; it just meant he was a completely secular guy. He had no spiritual interest; he didn't buy into the promise to Abraham. So he comes in from hunting, and he is starving. His brother Jacob has made a stew, and Jacob basically says, "I'll tell you what; I'll give you a bowl of stew in exchange for the birthright." Well, I'm sure Esau thought, "Well Isaac's got nothing to pass on; it's no big deal." So he made the deal. Now the interesting thing is: the next day Esau would have been hungry again. It was just this momentary satisfaction of his hunger in exchange for the inheritance. So eventually it comes to the day when Isaac's about to die and he's going to pass on the inheritance that's promised—and Esau changes his mind. "I changed my mind; I want it now." But God sovereignly superintends and makes sure the promise goes from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob.

There's this sobering picture that when we become angry, when we become bitter, when we're hurt, we just start to experience kind of the contamination, the defilement of our soul, and just start to make bad decisions. We start to trade that which *will* last forever for that which is *in the moment*. We live day to day. We live for the things of this world, and then we get to the finish line and we change our minds. "Wait a minute; I want a do-over." We only get one shot at life, and it's like at the end, "I...I want to rethink this...I want a do-over." But there is no do-over, and that's kind of the imagery of the story of Esau. This is what happens when people get hurt, when we don't create an environment where we can flourish in this race together.

Now the foundation of this conversation is really built on what we've talked about throughout the book of Hebrews and the contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant, that's cleverly reviewed in verses 18 through 24:

For you have not come to a *mountain* (meaning Mount Sinai) that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which *sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED."* And so terrible was the sight, *that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."* (Vs. 18-21)

So this is recapturing what happened on Mount Sinai when Moses went up the mountain to basically enter into the presence of God and he received the old covenant. It was an experience of sound and fire and fury and trembling. There was this moment of absolute terror for the people. God made a boundary around Mount Sinai and told the people they couldn't come any closer. "You can't, as sinners, just stroll into the presence of God, and if you do, you will die!" But God took it one notch further and He said, "By the way, if even an animal crosses the boundary, they're

to be put to death.” And the people said, “We can’t take this anymore; we don’t want to hear any more!” They were absolutely terrified! Even Moses himself was trembling and terrified by the awesomeness of this moment. That’s capturing the old covenant—why the Apostle Paul called it a *ministry of death*. It was a ministry of condemnation. The presence of God would dwell within the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. No one could come close except the high priest and the high priest one time a year. There was this sense of the awesome holiness of God and the Law and their inability to keep the Law. It was a covenant of bondage and as long as that defines the culture, it will never really be a place of flourishing and grace like he just talked about. Verse 22:

But... (If you’re inclined to write in your Bible, I’d circle that; this is the big moment.)

But you... (us as Christians; we did not come to Mount Sinai)

...you have come to Mount Zion (So Mount Zion was the mountain upon which Jerusalem sat, the temple would sit, the place of the crucifixion, the place of the resurrection; but all of that was yet figurative of the heavenly Zion—the ultimate heavenly Jerusalem.)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads (which means thousands and thousands) **of angels,** (so it’s this picture of this heavenly city full of thousands of angels)

to the general assembly... (Vs. 22-23a)

Now I would suggest to you in 21st century American language, **general assembly** is a very unfortunate translation, because what we hear is something like the *United Nations*. It sounds very administrative and very boring. That’s not what the word is at all. It is a Greek term that was a reference to their grand festivals, most famously this magnificent festival that was held during the Greek Olympics. It was a time of joyful celebration. The runners are running, and people gathered by the thousands to live it up, to party, to celebrate this wondrous moment. So if you think about the running imagery it all fits very nicely there.

...to myriads of angels to the general assembly (the festival) **and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,** (Vs. 23b)

So who’s that? Well, that’s us. This is the already, not yet, part of our theology. I’m already a citizen of the heavenly city. I’m an alien and a stranger on this earth. My citizenship is now in heaven, but I don’t live there yet. I still live here. So it’s true of me there, but I’m not there yet. So we’re the runners and we’re running the race; and the festival is going on, and the angels are gathered there; it’s this magnificent scene in the heavenly city!

...and to God, the Judge of all, (Vs. 23c)

So God is there, and God’s the ultimate Judge. Now when people hear about God as the Judge, most people automatically think negative; people think condemnation. People kind of imagine biting their nails and wondering, “Do I get through or not?” So it’s really important to understand a judge not only condemns, a judge vindicates. The Judge stands there and says, “On the basis of the payment that was made, God made a promise; God made an oath that the ultimate High Priest, whose sacrificed Himself for sin, was sufficient for sin once for all, and as long as that High Priest lives, then the payment is good. We had that in Hebrews. He’s not standing there waiting to condemn us, but rather to declare us righteous before a holy God.

...the Judge of all and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, (Vs. 23d)

I think that's talking about the saints who have died—the *cloud of witnesses*—those that are already in the presence of Jesus, gathered in the festival. Verse 24:

...and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood of Abel*.

Ultimately to Jesus, who is the One who's made it all possible. So we are headed to Mount Zion, to the heavenly city where the angels are gathered, where there's this magnificent celebration, where God is there ready to vindicate us and declare us righteous, where those who have gone before us are there. And while we are enrolled in the books of heaven, we're still running our race. They're waiting for us to get there. It's this magnificent festival, and it's all built on the blood of Jesus that was shed once for all time. The idea of **the blood of Abel** is referring to the fact that he was the first one in the Scriptures that we know of that offered a blood sacrifice. He was the first hero of faith in chapter 11. His blood sacrifice was merely a shadow—like the sacrifices of the old covenant—but the blood payment of Jesus wasn't a shadow. It was the fulfillment; it was the final payment made once for all time, sufficient for sin, which is the basis by which we enter Mount Zion.

So again, think about the context of this: As long as we're still thinking old covenant, we're still thinking law, we're still thinking judgment, we're still thinking God is out to get us, we're still thinking competition and comparison, we're caught up in all this legalism and all this bondage, and it's just going to be one wound after another. You're never going to be able to create an environment that sets people free, an environment where people flourish, an environment where people can come and be accepted and find healing. So as long as we think we've come to Sinai, we're never going to get there. So we have to remember we've actually come to Mount Zion; we've come through the grace of God. We've come through the shed blood of Jesus. No matter who you are, no matter what your story is, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, we stand righteous in the presence of a holy God. It's not that God is less holy on Mount Sinai. He's not less holy. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. The difference is that the payment has been made once for all, and on the basis of that payment, we as sinful men and women stand right before a holy God, now and forever!

So it's not fear and trembling—"Man, it's party time. It's a festival. This is awesome. The heavenlies will celebrate forever!" As long as we understand that, we begin to live that way on earth. We create an environment where people can flourish, an environment of kindness and compassion and love and acceptance, a place where people can come and they can heal and they can run the race. We will do this together all the way to the finish line. That's the idea. That's the theological foundation necessary to make it happen. Verse 25:

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned *them* on earth, much less *will we escape* who turn away from Him who *warns* from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." This *expression*, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. (Vs. 25-27)

Now that's perfectly clear is it not? (*laughter*) It is so confusing. But here's what he's saying: That when God spoke from Mount Sinai—as terrifying as it was—they didn't listen...they didn't listen;

they didn't obey; they didn't follow him! Remember, that's the generation that didn't even make it into the Land of Promise. They didn't believe. We have it in Hebrews 3—because of their unbelief they didn't make it in! So there's a reminder: they didn't listen and the consequences were real and they were severe. So now God has come from heaven to earth to establish a new covenant, established on the basis of the death, burial, and the resurrection of Jesus. It is a better covenant, built on better promises, with a better hope, headed to a better city! So if we don't listen to that, then we're going to miss what God wants for us on Mount Zion.

The quote is from the book of Haggai. I'm sure most of you knew that and were reading Haggai this week (*laughter*) but for those who didn't, the idea was that the first time what shook was the mountain on earth. But there's going to be one more time, and that's the second coming of Jesus where He's going to shake it one more time, only that's not only going to be shaking the earth, but *heaven and earth*. The imagery is everything that's not eternal is going to be shaken off the earth. Now it's just imagery, but imagine all the stuff of this world that is temporal just gets shaken off the earth. It all comes flying loose and the only thing that's left, the things that remain are the things that will last forever. And then he ushers in the new heaven, the new earth—our final resting place, which then gets to verse 28:

Therefore (in light of that; because that's true), **since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken...**

So I want to stop right there. I am well aware of the fact that any time we talk about these kinds of warning passages, words like, "If you do not listen, God's going to come; He's going to shake heaven and earth and everything that's not eternal will come flying off." There's always people like "Oh no! OH NO! What if that's me? What if I'm not really saved? What if I don't really believe? What if I come flying off the earth when He shakes it?" Okay, let's remind ourselves he's talking about the grace of God—a salvation we have received. He's not talking about your performance. He's not talking about whether or not you were super Christian this week. He's not talking about whether or not you have somehow earned favor with God. Look at what the verse says: **Therefore, since we receive a kingdom...** so all you have to do is answer the question: "Have you or have you not trusted in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus for your salvation? Have you received His gift?" If so, you're enrolled in heaven. You're not going to get shaken off the earth. This kingdom can't be shaken. You're part of something that will last forever. It's meant to be a point of encouragement, or strength, not a point of fear.

Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Vs. 28-29)

Because of what's true, because we've come to Mount Sinai, because of what we've received, because we are now part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken, it will endure forever! All He asks in return is that in gratitude we actually live like we believe it's true. That's what He's saying—that in service, in the way that we live our lives, we live in such a way that it reflects we actually believe it's true. This is what we learned in Hebrews 11:1—that the substance of faith is the idea of we so believe the hope of the gospel, we so believe what he just explained to us is true, that we actually live that way now. We actually give people a bit of a glimpse of the kingdom to come *today*. We create an environment where people can flourish. We create an environment where people can find healing. We create an environment where people experience acceptance and kindness and compassion and love, and when they are broken and they're wounded and they're needy and they're

struggling, there's a place where you belong...there's a place where you fit...there's a place where you can heal. There's a place where we are going to come alongside you and say, "We're in this together. Let's make it all the way to the finish line...together." It is a glimpse, just a glimpse of the heavenly city to come!

Wouldn't you join me in praying that God will allow Lincoln Berean, for the glory of God, to be such a place?

Our Father, we're so thankful that when we were lost in our sin, You sent Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promise that we can receive salvation freely as a gift. But, God, we are sobered at the reminder of our responsibility to create something, as the people of God, so different from the culture that it's set apart, that's it's noticeable, that it becomes our witness in the life-changing power of Jesus. Lord, may we be such a place for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Zion not Sinai

Christ is Enough

Hebrews 12:12-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What are some of the things that Christians might do to make the race more difficult for everyone (fellow runners)? Can you share personal experiences?
2. We so often tend to think of our Christian lives as individual races, but Hebrews is clear we run together as a team. What are some things we can do to help assure our teammates run well? What do we need from our teammates to run well?

Bible Study

1. Read Hebrews 12:12-17. Try to rewrite verses 12, 13 in your own words.
2. What we're trying to do is what you wrote in question 1. How we do that is discussed in verses 14-17. So, what does it mean to:
 - a. Pursue peace with all (see Romans 12:18; 14:19)?
 - b. No one comes up short?
 - c. Have no root of bitterness spring up?
 - d. Not be defiled through immorality or like Esau?
3. Read Hebrews 12:18-29. What is the difference between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion? This text is a clever review of much of the theology of Hebrews. What are some of the major differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?
4. How should the description of Mt. Zion help us run our race well (together)?
5. Hebrews 12:25-29 is another warning to the readers. What is the text describing and what is the warning?
6. How should we live if the New Covenant is true (v.29)?

