

Looking to the Right Mountain

The Book of Hebrews

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Well, we continue in this wonderful epistle. We call it Hebrews, don't we? A letter to these Jewish background believers. People, if that was their background, that seems to be where they are averting to now again rather than remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the passage we read a moment ago, well, the title that's going with our considerations is this. Somewhat of an esoteric title, but "Looking to the Right Mountain." Looking to the right mountain. That's the theme that we're going to pick up in a moment because we've been seeing, haven't we, that we are under discipline. That as God's children, true children, not illegitimate children who are left, as it were, without a father to care for them, look after them, discipline them. We're not. We have a heavenly Father, and he's on our case. And we saw last time that sometimes that means he will chasten us, and he will bring us low in order to teach us, because there is always a good end in view, and that's how we know we are partakers of his holiness. And we should be ready to submit ourselves to that cheerfully, if I might say it, readily, so that we might grow, that we might not be found recalcitrant, stubborn as children, not willing to learn, not willing to listen, because it never goes well, does it, in that way. But being ready to be taught and to grow through that discipline. And moreover, we've seen that our Lord's example is the example. He didn't need to be disciplined in that way, but he learned obedience from what he suffered, endurance. That's part of what this was, a successive endurance, that we endure through the Lord's discipline. We see beyond some mere trials, tribulations, God's hand teaching us something, humbling us, weaning us from this world, whatever it might be.

And here, as we move on into the concluding part of chapter 12, another sermon on it before we're through and done with, but, nevertheless, we are still taking something of that idea of his discipline. That's why there's a "therefore" in verse 12 that we're to be strengthened. That's what he's going to say. "Strengthen the hands which hang down and the feeble knees." That under the discipline that the people then were under, which we're all under to some extent, rather than just collapsing under it, getting discouraged, weary in soul, there are the hands hanging down, the ones so busy and active, well, the knees that were busy doing things, but now they're all feeling all full of aches and pains and can't do a thing kind of thing. Well, no, we continue to look to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's what we'll see in a moment. When we look to the right mountain, that amounts to the same thing. We're looking to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if we just remain for a moment there with what we have in verses 12 to 17, and a heading to go with this particular section, we're called to keep going. Called to keep going. Pretty much the theme, hasn't it, through chapter 11 and into chapter 12. Pilgrimage, one that it quickens the tempo, it's now a race. But it's this idea of keeping going. Just as that cloud of witnesses in the Old Testament saints kept going and had something animating them, motivating them. That was heaven that was taking them forward and causing them to part company with the world. That they may lay hold of that promise ahead. We're pilgrims like them. All runners in the race, as we saw earlier in chapter 12.

And the writer is saying, "Well, under the Lord's disciplines don't be discouraged. Don't sort of sink under it, or despise it, and feel that this shouldn't be happening, and kind of walk away from it." Because there is a real danger that we could sink and that we could subside into what we call apostasy, which is what some perhaps had already done and the danger was others would follow. Which means that you would end up renouncing it all, that you turn away from the truth in such a kind of emphatic final fashion that's it. That there's an end of it. You are not going to precede any further in the faith.

And so, that danger is always here somewhere in this letter, isn't it? Always just being brought out. That while there is so much encouragement, but then there are warnings that the writer keeps bringing the people back to. Just as they lay hold of some truth, they're also warned that there are boundaries that they should not cross. Because he warns them, doesn't he there, that without holiness no one will see the Lord in verse 14. That's that falling short of the grace of God, that declining away from surely trusting in the Lord Jesus. Apostasy in other words. Well, we won't see God. Not doing that. We will be condemned. We will be judged. And that will be a very, very sad and a very wretched outcome for our life to date.

So, with the idea of a race in view, and the children of God becoming weary in that race, their hands there, they're not sort of running energetically, the knees that should be sort of motoring ahead are now kind of slowing down almost to the point where they're actually stopped. Well, he would say, "No, keep going. You are to just keep going. Strengthen the hands. Give it attention." That's what he is saying. "Turn around to yourself. Give attention to what's not functioning here. Having heard all you've heard about this race that we're in, God's help and, indeed, his discipline, which may be painful, but it's going to do you good. So, therefore, turn around to yourself and those parts which aren't functioning as they should be, and give yourself, really, a stern address."

So, he advises them. Hands, well, hands perhaps which once in a Christian sense were busy serving the Lord, doing things, active in that way, but then sloped off, just as the people, many of them, had stopped gathering together. They had stopped that coming together as the Lord's people. Began to see no value in it. It was in a sense, they lost sight of what a church is. And so, no, they're to keep serving. Just as the church in Ephesus lost its first love and didn't do the things that it had been doing at the beginning. Perhaps

there was doctrine, but there was no love. There was no service, and so, this is what he is advising here. Instructing them “Keep serving. Keep on serving each other, serving the Lord.” And he’s going to have things, isn’t he, to say in chapter 13 about looking out for other people.

And those knees. They were not making progress. We’re not growing in holiness. There’s some sluggishness that’s come in. And whereas before they made rapid movements, there was a taking of land, there was the parting with sin, unbelief, and all the things he’s going to go on to speak about here, fornication, profanity, unbelief. Whereas now, perhaps some of you that is creeping in, and that movement, that decisive heading for heaven has begun to fritter away. And he therefore tells them, “Get those knees working again. Don’t succumb to a sense of weariness and fatigue in the knees that you feel feeble.” No, he says, “Keep going.”

And about having straight paths for your feet. Thinking ahead. Thinking ahead what you’re going to face next, and making sure that decisions you’re making now are not going to leave you problems ahead. They’re going to give you a clear run rather than induce trouble down the road, which may indeed make you turn an ankle or two and give you a dislocation rather than actually give you strength in the heel, those parts of us which may be a little lame. And there we are called upon to think about choices we make in the here and the now as best we can with the light we have. And not to bring in a compromise which down the road is going to become a snag for us. It’s going to hinder us. It’s going to be a kind of pothole there. We’re talking bicycles now, aren’t we? But the pothole there that you’re going to go into, and end up falling off your bike, and twisting your ankle, and maybe do worse to yourself. Thinking ahead. Is what I am deciding now going to leave me with problems down the way? Compromise that’s going to then leave me. Weaken not strengthened. Bad decision. But people point the finger and say, “We did that then. We shouldn’t have done that.” And we’ll have to sort of agree with them. We’re on the back foot.

So, he says, “Be as wise as you can to be sure that the path ahead of you is one that you’re going to give yourself a clear run on.” As far as we can ascertain and forecast. There is not moral compromise there. There is nothing that’s going to be a problem later on and slow us down, even dislocate some our limbs. But then he goes on to say, doesn’t he, that, well, we’re to pursue peace with all people. This idea of service within the church, but unbelievers too we’re not looking to go out of our way to sort of be obnoxious to them, or to do something there, or go and frown at the wall, and be angry with them over things. But we’re looking to be a peaceable people among them. To do them good. But there are these dangers around us that will stop us from being able to see the Lord, holiness that is lost, and we end up falling short of the grace of God.

It talks there, doesn’t it, a root of bitterness springing up and causing trouble. That was unbelief. That’s the sin of unbelief. Of denying God’s Word to be true. Saying, “No,” to it. Denying its authority. Denying the content of it, its commandments, the clarity of those commandments. But introducing that as a sort of fog, or say, “It doesn’t really say what it says.” And the Ten Commandments which we read, that they don’t actually say

what they say. And introducing something different within that. And so, it warns against some of the things which can and cause entertains such sins, and then become a habit in a life, then that's apostasy. We've gone. We're lost. We've crossed the line.

And fornication, well, that's one of the things that is spoken of here. Sexual immorality. Then we had the seventh commandment, didn't we, where we read, "Do not commit adultery." And that's one that is actually lost to our present culture and society, isn't it? But it can come in the church. It can destroy the church in that way. And how often one reads, I am afraid how often, how often one reads, maybe I would say across the water in the United States, but we don't take any comfort that it's perhaps more of an endemic thing there, but failures in the ministry. Failures of significant Christian leaders who turns out men were indulging in, they call it sexting, don't we there, and sending pictures and all kinds of things. Incredible. And yet, that has brought many a minister into disrepute and led to them having to leave the ministry, and rightly so. But that's a wretched experience.

Then unbelief, profanity, somebody not valuing things of God, and, well, it's Esau that's picked out there, isn't it? Somebody like Esau. Just to refresh our memories about him. Two sons there, Jacob and Esau, born to Isaac and Rebekah. Let us turn then to Genesis 25 and reading on from there verse 19, and I will read to the end of verse 34 just to remind us what it was that Esau did that was the first real clear indication that he didn't value, didn't value the promises of God. Didn't value what if he was the firstborn amongst the twins, and he actually was. Would normally have come to him a special place that God would have for him. But it was of no value. Let me read Let me read. "This is the genealogy of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham begot Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian. Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If all is well, why am I like this?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: 'Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.' So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, 'Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.' Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, 'Sell me your birthright as of this day.' And Esau said, 'Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?' Then Jacob said, 'Swear to me as of this day.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright."

Well, we know from the narrative actually God always intended for Jacob, though not the firstborn, that we would inherit that birthright. But as far as Esau was concerned, he would have expected himself to have received it. But we see why God's plan was wise, because Esau had no interest in it. What was his birthright to him? Which had a spiritual connection to it. That you would have been the one in line to be the bearer of the promise of the Messiah to come. But he despised it. Same person. No interest in it.

And so, consequently, though we took time to go into the whole narrative there. It gets quite involved, doesn't it? How Jacob then finally receives the blessing of his father Isaac, and he has a bit of deception involved that. Nevertheless, the rightful recipient of that blessing, Esau realizes that he's not got that blessing of the firstborn, and suddenly he regrets it. But it's too late. And that's what the book of chapter 12 of Hebrews is telling us "that afterward," Esau in verse 17, "when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance." Isaac had given the blessing to Jacob, and Esau now couldn't receive that blessing, because Isaac had blessed Jacob already, and it was a completed matter. And so, Esau, for his unbelief there were the tears, but there is no way back. There was no real repentance in him. No real change in his heart, because of that unbelief, a hardness of heart, a hardness of conscience.

And a horrible thing about it is that it affects other people. We can see this in verse 15. Again, "lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." It's not just the person involved. It's other people. When somebody, it might have been a prominent Christian, suddenly falls, it's hugely discouraging. The whole church, if it's a big ministry with a world-wide reach, well, it affects a lot of people. A lot of people are discouraged. They wonder, "Well, is there anything right? Is there such a thing as true Christianity, or is it all just hip-hop Christianity. This person seemed to have got all the words and all the truth and seemed to work hard, but there was this horrible secret with them. Is any of it real?" And it can introduce sort of a sense of discouragement and of why bother about it all? And so, the writer says, "Step back. If you find yourself edging towards it, step back. Because the consequence is not just for yourself. You're going to have an effect on other people. God will hold us to account for that."

Well, I come then to my second heading, which brings us nearer to the title. As I say, there's a warning there, but now an encouragement. And having the right mountain in view. Looking to the right mountain. Which is in effect to say, "Looking to the Lord Jesus." You'll see, right at the end of the sort of list from verse 22, that the right mountain list, that there is the Lord Jesus in verse 24, and about his blood, and what that brings, Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant. So, that's the climax of this. That what the mountain that he's going to particularly advise us to look to brings to us.

Well, there's the first mountain, isn't there? Verses 18 to 21. And we read about that in Exodus 19. It's about Sinai. A mountain that the Lord's people, coming out of Egypt, were to go to, where they were to worship and where the Lord manifested such power. We read about it, didn't we, in Exodus 19, of the shaking, the smoke, the thundering, the trumpet, the voice, and the fear that it instilled. We can barely imagine it, can we, as we sit here in relative peace. We've got the windows open, a bit of traffic going by but in

relative peace. What it must have been like! The whole mountain quaking. And this wasn't just a little "Hey look!" Stand or something like that. Being to say just, hey look. But you know what I mean. It was a mountain. A huge mountain, and it shook. What it must have been to have been in the presence of it. Well, the result was, wasn't it, that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling."

And what did all of this represent? Well, this was the vehicle by which the Lord then gave the Law, the Ten Commandments, what the people were to do or not to do, as the case might be. And it was so full of threat and fear. That if you disobey, that's the God that you'll have to answer to. Who would want that? That just a token, a little token, of his power could shake that mountain, as blackness, and the tempest, and the lightning, that you would think it very wise to be very obedient and to not fall into the hands of the living God as manifested there. It's showing his holiness. Absolute holiness. That he's so set apart from anything and everything else. That he is so high and majestic. That we have, don't we, that repeated injunction not to touch the mountain. If anything, even a beast, should go on the mountain, don't lay a hand on it. Don't go near to touch it. Stone it. Kill it with an arrow. That it is to be kept absolutely sacrosanct. Stay away is the message, unless you have been given special invitation as Moses and Aaron were given. Otherwise, stay away. And there were threatenings. You will die if you come near. You will die.

And here is this law that you are to obey. What a law that it is. And that was the word that people all would have heard. Then Moses was called up the mountain, and there his approach is to God. And this law was ringing in their ears. What a law. What it meant. What it was saying to them, and what it asked of them. And it was really very, very high, very strong, a very powerful law. And they would have realized that we're well, well out of our depth. And if disobedience brings us into the hands of God, in all his indignation that we can see and witness in the tempest, and the shaking, and the blackness, this is indeed a terrifying sight. And if it was just to stand on its own, it would bring utter despair, wouldn't it? It would bring utter despair. What hope is there? How can we please God? That God! That any disobedience, any kind of backing away from this law in its entirety brings us into that kind of experience, this judgment.

That there is nothing really there to encourage. Nothing there for sinners to find any hope in standing just on its own, Mount Sinai, the law, judgment, what God expects, his holiness, and his justice, perfect obedience being required. But no, where as actually that was where they were backing into, they were beginning to drift, actually, into a whole set of understanding, which really would only bring them back to Mount Sinai. There is no hope in that. There is only despair there. You were trying to obey the law. You were trying to do those things, but there is no such thing as perfect obedience, and if you can't render perfect obedience, then that's the God that you'll meet. And that is not a happy prospect. The people trembled. Even Moses himself, a godly man who spoke to God face to face, trembled.

But the writer says, "But no. You are not at that mountain." Not at the base of that mountain, if you like, and its sort of physical representation that mountain that you can

actually find to it this day. We think you can locate it. "No," he says, "You're not coming to that. All of the things that happened there. But you've come to Mount Zion." Mount Zion. Well, it's in Jerusalem, isn't it? A city of the living God. Don't think ye of that as a kind of sight seeing tour that rather than go to the Mount of Ararat in Arabia, better go to this mountain in Israel, and it's a happier sight. No, he's talking about spiritual things here, isn't he, rather than a literal trip there. And he's saying, "What Jerusalem, and Mount Zion, and the temple, and actually now the cross, what actually you're seeing there is a sign of great hope. This is a different mountain." And this mountain doesn't bring you despair and a sense of hopelessness. Who can please this God and the law that he brings us? Who can reach to this? This is actually saying to you, "Be calm. Be at peace. No, in fact, be encouraged." For this mountain, when you get this mountain in view, right, and see what that represents, there is so much to encourage you.

For what does the mountain stand for? Well, in a sense, what we have here, the heavenly Jerusalem, is God's dwelling place. Whereas, in the Old Covenant times, the literal Jerusalem was a place where his presence could be very much met, known, and at least the High Priest could experience it on one day of the year on the Day of Atonement, now we would say, "But actually God dwells amongst his people. He is in the church. We're part of that heavenly Jerusalem still here upon earth. But we're also linked as it were with the glorious company above." That's what he's going to tell us, isn't he? You're actually in union now and connected with a wonderful, wonderful company of heavenly host and of fellow believers who have actually gone on ahead of you. And this is a wonderful, wonderful place to be. This Mount Zion. This city of the living God. This place that is the heavenly Jerusalem because this stands for God dwelling among his people, and he dwells among his people in the church, doesn't he? Even when just two or three are there, he is in the midst. And that's a happy, happy experience for us.

So, we don't come to church in a sense of absolute dread. Will there be fire? Will there be tempest? Will this whole building be shaken because of God's indignation that we haven't obeyed his law totally, absolutely, from the heart this week? No, God is pacified. God's anger has been met, as it were, through Christ's obedience and death. And so, we come now to this, to the living God, and we encounter here upon earth in the local church, but, of course, others are in a much, much more enlightened and privileged position, because he goes on to say, "an innumerable company of angels." Now you're part of that society. You don't have angels, as it were, coming, bringing vengeance on you. The sword there and the flaming fire that they might bring. No, you come to a company of angels. Go right back to the beginning of Hebrews 1. They're ministering spirits sent to help those who will inherit eternal life. And you are now in their society. You can't see them, but they're around. They're busy, and they're doing all kinds of things. And one day we'll realize just how much help we actually had from them.

And he goes on. Well, you've come to the "general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven." You're part of that company. All believers, all those people, this great assembly, this church of the firstborn, names are registered in heaven in the Lamb's book of life. Psalm 87 will tell you all of these things as well. This one is registered in Zion. And that one was born there. And we find that we're in good

company. If they've gone before us, people who are alive now, people who are not yet born, but all will be part of this general assembly and church of the firstborn which are registered in heaven, including of course all those who have gone before us. And they're worshipping now out of our sight, but they're seeing the Lord in a way that doesn't rely on faith anymore. Not in the things of Hebrews 11, faith. No, they're actually seeing him now. The time of faith is gone to them. They're now seeing. And we're in their society. We're a part of that. That's the communion that we have. We are part of this great work of God. There he is dwelling with his people. The glory of heaven dwelling with his people here on the earth in the church.

And we read, "We've come to God, the judge of all." Wait a minute. That's the God we just read of at Mount Sinai, isn't it? That's the God who makes the mountain quake and an obedience that we cannot meet. "No," the writer is saying. "You can come to him. That God, because he hasn't changed. He is still a God of justice, and he will still punish sinners for their disobedience. But you now have reconciliation, and you're not his enemies. And he doesn't say to you, 'Don't come near this mountain. Don't come near or else you die.'" He now invites us near. So, we actually come near to our judge, and we can worship him, and we can approach him and not fear suddenly a Sinai happening, because of what go on to read about.

And here he is, "the spirits of just men made perfect." We think probably that's best understood to be all of the saints of Hebrews 11, those godly men, godly women too, who have gone before, made perfect now, because they're in heaven. All of the imperfections of their faith, now made good. But we come to the judge of all, because we've come to Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant. He's made all the difference. That's what this mountain is all about it, isn't it? This is what makes this a mountain we can approach, and this gives us a fitness to mix in the society of angels and the spirits of just men made perfect that allows us to be shoulder to shoulder with the apostle Paul and all of the great saints of the New Testament.

It's because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done. And there he is. This covenant, New Covenant, this has taken us beyond Sinai. That Sinai couldn't give us this. That's where they were making this mistake. They thought somehow they could still get to heaven with Sinai, with the Old Covenant, with obedience to the law. The writer is saying, "No, a failure. All the way. That's falling from grace. If you've seen, grasped, what you should have done in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no going back, because this is the New Covenant. And this is speaking to us better things. Good things." Because this arrangement whereby God is at peace with us, despite us still being sinful people, has been brought about that the Lord Jesus by his blood has made up for all of our guilt. Has given us there a death that counts now as our death, so what we were to face didn't judgment from the God of justice, that we'd have been at Mount Sinai destroyed and condemned. No, because of this wonderful agreement that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have, that we should be brought near through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and now, instead of wrath, should receive mercy, and, instead of judgment, should receive friendship, and, instead of quaking in fear, should actually be able to approach boldly and confidently.

This is one of the big things, isn't it, throughout this book, be able to approach boldly. Taking as it were all of this in mind. Then, well, this tells me that I'm accepted, and that I'm welcomed, and that Christ's blood has made this solid secure agreement, and I can rely upon it, and I can worship. Not fear that somehow now suddenly I'm going to be at Mount Sinai. That's not the mountain and if we're looking to that mountain, it's failure. It's guilt. It's going to be a miserable Christian life, and it's not going to help us. It's not going to sanctify us. It's going to leave us wretched, and if we're not Christians, and we're thinking that obedience is somehow going to bring us there, it's telling us, "No, you just have to rely upon the Lord Jesus Christ. He's done all the obeying that every could be done. And he's done it perfectly. And he's done all the dying that needs to be done, because he's given himself at the cross by his precious blood."

And it is blood it finishes with, isn't it? The blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. Well, Abel right back again to Genesis in chapter 4, Abel's blood. That he was murdered by his brother Cain. And blood, as it were, spoke from the ground to God vengeance. That here gross sin had been committed. Judgment should follow. The blood demanded a recompense. Well, that would demand of us a recompense that we would have to give to God. That would be us finished and concluded with. We'd join with Cain in that way under judgment. But this is the blood of Christ. That's not there shouting back to us that there is sin to be atoned for. That we are those who still are responsible, and we will be held accountable. But it's the blood that actually sprinkles, cleanses. It pacifies the conscience. It tells us, "Now, all is well." God is not looking for vengeance still. He's not looking to punish sin, not our sin. He's done that. He's done to his Son.

And that blood now applied to our conscience, and given there to the depth of our soul to purge out those dead works and make us feel all is well actually. All is well. I have angels that I am in fellowship with them. I am in fellowship with other believers, with the great saints, the catalog of saints from Hebrews 11, and many other saints. We're actually in their company. We may not feel very worthy of it, but we are in that company. And that we have even the God who is judge of all, who is with us, and who looks at the blood of Christ and is satisfied, and that's justice. All is secure.

So, how important then to look to the right mountain. Sinai, that's no help. That's despair. There is darkness. There is gloom. There is judgment. But that's not the mountain of the believer. It's this one. It's Mount Zion with all of its happy commendations, and we've got at the heart of it our Lord Jesus Christ. So, one could only stand with the writer here and say, "Well, that's what you've come to. Remember it. Look always at that mountain. Consider its beautiful summary of companionship that we have, the society that we're now keeping, and that we will keep for eternity." One day we will be one of those spirits of just men, just women, made perfect. That will be us. We're in past tense because we've gone from this place, and we're now in that. We then seeing this innumerable company of angels. We strain to sort of see that, don't we, by faith on a quiet October evening in our evening service, we're just a handful of us here, isn't it, but

we're part of something big, dear friends. And this mountain is all bound up with that.
And it's all bound up with our Lord Jesus Christ, and we ever keep him in view.

LOOKING TO THE RIGHT MOUNTAIN

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Hebrews 12: 12 – 24.

We have seen the Lord's intention to treat us as his true children by disciplining us. Painful though this might be, it is helping to produce holiness in us. We are to ever look to Christ's example as an encouragement to us in endurance. In the passage before us today, we are to make sure that we are looking to the right 'mountain'. Because if we are looking at the wrong 'mountain', it will also mean that we are not looking to the Lord but to something else.

1. A call to keep going

The day that we are in requires us to persevere and remember that we are pilgrims, or, as we have seen earlier in Hebrews 12, in a race. We have to be strong because the danger of apostasy is a real danger that we must not minimize. We must seek to be holy otherwise we should not presume that we will see the Lord on the Day of Judgment in a happy sense (v14). With the thought of being in a race in mind, we must not allow our hands and knees to grow weak. We must make sure that we are making the path ahead of us safe and secure, and not making future troubles for ourselves.

Our hands in this passage speak about the things we do (vv12-13). This is faith in action, serving the Lord. Even though such service can be exhausting, we are to persevere in it and not allow ourselves to grow weak by giving up. Our knees can also let us down and this speaks about our will to make progress and keep going in our pursuit of peace with people and holiness. We need straight paths ahead of ourselves, paths without barriers and obstacles. Sometimes we can make decisions today that leave us with obstacles in the future or reduce our ability to serve the Lord. We should therefore think ahead as to what the implications are of decisions we take today for the future.

There are ever the dangers that sin presents to our spiritual wellbeing, such sins as unbelief and immorality. These are destructive both to ourselves and to others. Sin ruins all that it touches. There is fornication (v16) and the false promise of what fulfilling lust will actually accomplish for us. There is unbelief, such as in the case of Esau (see Genesis 25-19-34). He despised the blessing of God and he reached a point where there was no way back for him. His conscience and his heart had become hardened.

Then such apostasy destroys others too (v15). It discourages people and sows doubts in people's minds. It diminishes the Lord in the eyes of other people. It makes people ask, 'why bother?' when they see others failing to continue in the faith. So, we have to step back if we are beginning to lapse into unbelief and hear the warnings of the Lord to us.

2. Looking to the right mountain

This passage then speaks to us about the advantages that our belonging to the new covenant community, where we have Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem in our sights. For ultimately, as we see in v 24, this is about the Lord Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant.

The first mountain is Mount Sinai. We read about the powerful demonstration that accompanied the giving of the law in Exodus 19:16-19. This shows us what the law brings by way of fear for disobedience, and warning and threat for failing to obey it all to the letter. The words that the people could hear were the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). The result was that the people, Moses included, were very fearful (Exodus 20:18-21). Moses was warned that nothing should be allowed to approach the Lord on the mountain, on pain of death (Exodus 19:12-13). It was not a mountain where the scene was filled with hope for disobedient sinners.

By contrast, Mount Zion, is a place that has happier prospects for sinners and where the message is one of hope, not judgment. This is the dwelling place of God with His people, where there is access and approach that is encouraged and provided for. It is the heavenly Jerusalem, which stands for the church where the Lord lives among His people. This is like what we read in Ephesians 2: 19-22.

This mountain has plenty to encourage us. We are there in the company of angels who work in this world to minister to us. There are fellow-believers whose names are written and registered in the Lamb's Book of Life. The spirits of just men made perfect might well be in particular the cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 11. God is still the Judge there, but He is satisfied that the demands of the law, represented by Mount Sinai, have been met and therefore allows pardoned sinners to meet with Him (see Ephesians 2:17-18). And, of course, there is the Lord Jesus Himself, the Mediator, the one who satisfies the terms of the covenant on our behalf and ensures the covenant is satisfactory to both parties, both God and man. The benefits that flow to us include justification, sanctification, and glorification. Whereas the blood of Abel speaks to us of the cry for justice and vengeance, the blood of Christ speaks to us of mercy and reconciliation. Mount Zion is the right mountain to look to as we find acceptance through the cleansing of our guilt by the blood of Christ.