

HEBREWS CHAPTER 12

[VII] UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS CHRISTIAN FAITH (10:19 - 12:29)

1. Christian faith involves bold confidence towards God and stimulating provocation towards Christians (10:19-25).
2. Christian faith involves taking the warning (4th) about the wilful sin of apostasy seriously (10:26-31).
3. Christian faith involves the call to perseverance in doing God's will (10:32-39).
4. Christian faith involves following in the footsteps of the Old Testament believers (11:1-40).

5. Christian faith involves keeping the eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (12:1-3).

12:1-3. 1. Therefore (τοιγαρουν), since we are surrounded (εχοντες περικειμενον ημιν νεφος μαρτυρων)(participle present active)(participle present medium), let us throw off (αποθεμενοι<αποτιθημι)(participle present medium) everything that 'hinders' (a weight or impediment)(ογκον παντα) and the sin that so 'easily entangles' or 'easily ensnares' (την ευπεριστατον αμαρτιαν), and let us run (τρεχωμεν)(subjunctive present active) with perseverance (δι υπομονης) the race (αγωνα) marked out for us (τον προκειμενον ημιν αγωνα). 2. Let us keep our eyes continually fixed (αφορωντες)(participle present active) on Jesus, the author (τον της πιστεως αρχηγον) and perfecter of our faith (τελειωντην), who for the joy set before him endured (υπεμεινεν)(indicative aorist active) the cross, scorned (καταφρονησας)(participle aorist active) its shame and sat down (κεκαθικεν)(indicative perfect active) at the right hand of the throne of God. 3. 'Consider' or 'meditate on' (αναλογισθασθε)(imperative aorist medium) him who endured (τον υπομεμενηκοτα)(participle perfect active) such opposition (αντιλογιαν) against himself (εις εουτον) from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary (καμητε<καμνω)(subjunctive aorist active) and lose heart (εκλυομενοι)(participle present passive).

The present tense. The cloud of witnesses are continually witnessing to us. Christians should keep on throwing off whatever impedes their running. They should persevere in running the race. They keep their eyes continually fixed on Christ. They persist in not losing heart.

The perfect tense. Christ took his seat on the right hand of God and now forever sits on the heavenly throne ruling the universe. Christ endured all opposition against himself and now is the conqueror forever (cf. Jn 16:33).

12:1.

a. The cloud of witnesses witness to us about faith.

The cloud of witnesses are not the spectators watching their successors (us) as they in their turn run their spiritual race. They rather bear witness (proclaim) to us the possibilities of the life of faith! It is not so much they who look at us as we who look at them for encouragement! They bear witness to the faithfulness of God to his word in every situation, especially to his promise concerning the coming Messiah, who would inaugurate the new order. These witnesses lived during the Old Testament period in the good of that promise which has been realised in Jesus Christ. They were therefore witnesses of Jesus Christ before he was born as a human being on earth (his incarnation).

b. Christians witness to the point of martyrdom.

- Because Christians 'witness' (martureo) about Jesus Christ, they are persecuted and become 'martyrs' (merturoi)!
- Origen wrote in his 'Exhortation to martyrdom' (AD. 235) that " 'a martyr' (witness) is a person who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of religion rather than save his life by renouncing it".
- Nehemiah 9:26. The people of Israel slew your prophets that 'testified' against them to turn them again to you.
- Acts 22:20. The blood of Stephen, your 'witness' (martyr).
- Revelation 2:13. Antipas, my 'witness' (martyr), who was killed among you.

c. Christians still have to run the race of faith.

This cloud of witnesses and their testimonies encourage us to run our race, which 'is set before us' or which 'we entered'. The present tense is used: let us *keep on (persevere, persist in) running the race*. The Old Testament believers looked forward to the age of fulfilment. The New Testament believers live in the beginning of the age of fulfilment. They look at Christ who put away sin by sacrificing himself during his first coming (the end of the ages)(9:26), but also at Christ who is no longer present on earth in visible form, being in God's presence on our behalf (9:24), while they are waiting for his second coming, the end of the age of fulfilment (9:28). Also the New Testament believers must, like Moses, see God who is invisible (11:27)! The race of believers is also a race of 'not seeing, but of faith' (2 Cor 4:18)!

- Luke 13:24. 'Make every effort' or 'run the race' (αγωνιζεσθε) to enter through the narrow door.
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Runners run in the stadium. Run to obtain the prize. Runners exercise self-control or train strictly. They do not run aimlessly. They treat their bodies severely in order not to get disqualified.
- Galatians 2:2. Check the truth of the gospel with the apostles' teaching in order not to run the race in vain.
- Ephesians 6:12. The race or struggle (contest) is against the worldly authorities and evil spiritual forces.
- Philippians 1:30. The Christian struggle (contest) may include imprisonment.
- Philippians 2:16. Paul did not run (contest) or labour for nothing.
- Colossians 1:29. Paul struggles (contests) with all his energy.

- Colossians 2:1. Paul struggles (contests) for Christians.
- Colossians 4:12. Epaphras always wrestles (contests) in prayer for Christians.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Apostles told the gospel in much struggle (contest).
- 1 Timothy 6:12. Struggle (contest) the good struggle (fight the good fight) of faith.
- 2 Timothy 2:3-6. Compete as an athlete according to the rules (lawfully).
- 2 Timothy 4:7. Paul struggled (contested) the good struggle and finished the race (cf. Acts 20:24).

d. Christians face hindrances in the race of faith which may trip them up.

Every Christian has different kinds of hindrances (impediments): personality, character, circumstances, etc. Every Christian must get rid of 'sins' (things outside God's goal or purpose for his life) that so easily ensnare or entangle him.

An alternative reading 'easily distracts' (ευπαρισπαστος) instead of 'easily ensnares' (ευπεριστατος)(p46). Everything that distracts the competing athlete would put him out of the race.

12:2.

e. Christians keep their eyes continually fixed on the author of faith.

Jesus Christ is *the pioneer or trailblazer* of faith. He was the pioneer of faith even for the Old Testament believers, because it was his Spirit that spoke through all his prophets to his people so that they could believe in what he said (1 Pet 1:10-12) and because it was he as the Angel of the Lord during the Old Testament period that saved them from the house of slavery in Egypt (Jude 5) and that accompanied them in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

The Angel of the Lord during the Old Testament period.

- He is the Revelation of God (Ex 3:2-15; Jn 1:18; 17:6).
- He is the Presence of God (Ex 23:20-23; Mt 1:23; Mk 2:5-7).
- He is God as Protector and Deliverer (Ps 34:7; 35:4-7; Jn 10:9-10).
- He is God as Judge (1 Chron 21:15-19,27; Rev 19:11-16).
- He is the Mediator between God and man (Zech 1:8-11; 1 Tim 2:5).
- He is the Intercessor for believers with God (Zech 1:12-13; Heb 7:25).
- He is the Representative of believers with God (Zech 3:1-7; 1 Jn 2:1-2).
- He is the Mediator of the covenant (Mal 3:1-5; Heb 8:6).

Since his first coming his example of faith makes his pioneering leadership available to his people in a way that was impossible before.

f. Christians keep their eyes continually fixed on the perfecter of faith.

Jesus Christ is also *the one ran the race of faith to its triumphant finish*. In Jesus Christ faith reached its perfection!

- Mt 27:43. Even on the cross he kept on trusting God.
- Lk 22:42. Not his will, but God's will be done. His faith, unsupported by any visible or tangible evidence, carried him through the taunting of the people, the scourging of the whip, the crucifying by the soldiers, and the even more bitter agony of rejection, desertion and dereliction of his followers. In this he left the practical example for us to follow.
- He endured the cross and scorned shame. The cross was the most degrading death sentence reserved for non-Romans, for slaves and criminals of low degree. His suffering perfected him as the perfect pioneer of salvation (2:10; 5:8f). He is not only the perfecter of faith of also the perfecter of endurance!
- Christ becomes his people's *supreme inspirer of faith!*

Christ shares his joy with Christians.

(Jn 15:11; 16:20-21,24; 17:13) Christians (those that overcome)(1 Jn 5:4-5) will sit with Christ on his throne (Lk 22:29-30; Rev 3:21).

6. Christian faith involves God's discipline of believers (12:4-11).

(discipline is training by instruction, correction, punishment and hardship)

12:4-8. 4. In your struggle (ανταγωνιζομενοι)(participle present medium) against sin, you have not yet resisted (αντι κατεστητε<αντικαθιστημι)(indicative aorist active) to the point of shedding your blood. 5. And you have forgotten (εκλελησθε<εκκλανθανω)(indicative perfect medium) the word of encouragement that addresses (δια λεγεται)(indicative present medium) you as sons: "My son, do not make light (ολιγωρει)(imperative present active) of the Lord's discipline (παιδεια) and do not lose heart (εκλυου)(imperative present passive) when he rebuked (ελεγχομενος)(participle present passive) you, 6. because the Lord disciplines (παιδευει)(indicative present active) those he loves and he 'punishes' or 'flogs with a whip' (μαστιγοι<μαστιγω)(indicative present active) everyone he accepts (παραδεχεται)(indicative present medium) as a son. 7. Endure (υπομενετε)(indicative present active) (hardship) as discipline (εις παιδειαν; God is treating (προσφερομαι)(indicative present medium) you as sons. For what son is not disciplined (παιδευει) by his father? 8. If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline) (μετοχοι γεγονασιν παντες)(indicative perfect active) then you are illegitimate (νοθος) children and not true sons.

The present tense. Christians should continually struggle against sin. God as father keeps on disciplining Christians as his children, because he loves them and seeks their best. Therefore Christians should persevere (persist) in enduring hardship.

a. The Christian race of faith includes the struggle or contest against sin.

They had already experienced persecution and the confiscation of their property (10:32-34), but have not yet experienced martyrdom (the point of blood). They experienced trials and temptations of sin (2:18; 4:15), but in their struggle against sin (of others) they have not yet been called to die.

b. Christian upbringing includes instruction, training, correction and punishment.

Hardship is God the Father's method of training and disciplining his people. The writer quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 from the Greek text. Discipline is 'upbringing of a child by means of instruction, by means of training or practising and by means of correction (cf. Jer 46:28). Punishment is 'upbringing by means of appropriate punishment. The instrument of punishment was originally a whip, but can be any instrument except the father's hand or foot, which a child should never fear. Compare discipline in Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15,17.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong."

c. The goal of Christian discipline is obedience that leads to conformity to Christ.

Christ learned obedience by what he suffered (5:8). Christians must also learn obedience by 'suffering hardship, correction and punishment'. To avoid discipline and punishment causes a person to be an illegitimate child, that is, not really kin to Christ (a relation or family of Christ).

12:9-11. 9. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us (παιδευτας<παιδευτης) and we respected (ενετρεπομεθα<εντρεπομαι)(indicative imperfect medium) (them) for it. How much more should we submit (υποταγησομεθα<υποτασσομαι)(indicative future medium) to the Father of our spirits and live (ζησομεν)(indicative future active)! 10. Our fathers disciplined (επαιδευον)(indicative imperfect active) us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our 'good' or 'profit' (επι το συμφερον), that we may share (εις το μεταλαβειν) (infinitive aorist active) in his holiness (αγιοτητος). 11. No discipline (παιδεια) seems pleasant at the time, but 'painful' or 'sorrowful' (λυπης). Later on, however, it 'produces' or 'gives back' (αποδιδωσιν)(indicative present active) a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained (γεγυμνασμενοις)(participle perfect passive) by it.

The perfect tense. Christians that have been trained and completed the training of discipline will produce a harvest of righteousness and peace. Such results do not come easily, but takes time and training.

d. The discipline of God is always for the best interest of Christians.

The way to eternal life and to living in a way that is pleasing to God is submission to God and his will. Disobedience destroys, but submission to the God of the Bible and what he teaches in the Bible is to our greatest profit. Discipline is unpleasant and painful, but it always leads to holiness of character and a harvest of righteousness with its accompanying peace. Peace is the absence of irritation, fear, anger, fighting, war and the presence of wholeness of relationships that were formerly broken.

- Psalm 119:71, It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees.

- Act 14:22. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

- Matthew 5:10-12. Rejoice when you are persecuted, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

- C.S. Lewis. (The problem of pain, p81). God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it (pain, suffering) is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world!

e. Christians must submit to God the Father as the Father of their spirits (Num 16:22; 27:16).

As the father of our body is our physical or earthly father, so the Father of our spirit is our spiritual or heavenly Father.

7. Christian faith involves taking action to stay spiritually fit and fruitful in righteousness and holiness (12:12-17).

12:12-13. 12. Therefore, 'strengthen' or 'set up straight' (ανορθωσατε<ανορθωω)(imperative aorist active) your 'feeble' or 'drooping' (παρειμενας<παρημη)(participle perfect passive) arms and 'weak' or 'paralysed' (παραλελυμενα<παρалуω)(participle perfect passive) knees (Isa 35:3). 13. Make (ποιειτε)(imperative present active) level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be 'disabled' or 'turned aside' (εκτραπη)(subjunctive aorist medium), but rather healed (ιαθη<ιαομαι)(subjunctive aorist passive).

The present tense. Christians must never stop to make level paths for their feet.

a. Christians are commanded to remain spiritually fit.

The writer reverts to his athletic figure of speech and exhorts his readers to straighten their drooping arms and brace their wobbling knees. Dislocation of spiritual limbs and deviation on the spiritual road are not God's will. Sprains must be bound up and injuries must be healed, so that the whole Christian community may complete the race course without one loss (John 17:12). Modern physical fitness programmes should be complemented by spiritual fitness programmes.

12:14-15. 14. 'Make every effort' or 'pursue' (διωκετε)(imperative present active) (to live in) peace (ειρηνην) with all men and holiness (αγιασμον); without holiness no one will see (οψεται<οραω)(indicative future medium) the Lord. 15. 'See to it' or 'oversee' (επισκοπουντες)(participle present active) that no one 'misses' or fail' (υστερων <υστερεω) (participle present active) the grace of God and that no bitter root (ριζα πικριας) grows (φουσα <φω)(participle present active) up to cause trouble (ενοχλη<ενοχλεω)(subjunctive present active) and through this the many be defiled (μιανθωσιν<μιαινω)(subjunctive aorist passive).
The present tense. Christians should continually pursue peace and holiness.

b. Christians are commanded to pursue what is right and holy.

The writer abandons his athletic figure and speaks in direct ethical terms.

'Peace' is not only the absence of irritation, anger, strife and war (things that break into pieces), but the presence of wholeness (things that heal and restore to completeness).

'Holiness' or 'sanctification' is practical holiness, keeping apart from sin and being dedicated to righteousness (12:10)(cf. Rom 6:19,22; 1 Cor 1:30; 1 Thes 4:3,4,7; 2 Thes 2:13; 1 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 1:2).

c. Christians are called to reject what causes bitterness.

Grace to help in a time of need is constantly available (4:16), but then that grace must be sought, asked, received and lived! Christians should 'oversee' one another (like overseers or elders oversee the church) that no one in their community fail to seek and find grace. People who lack this grace may become the cause of bitterness (an unforgiving spirit) and the cause of defiling many within the Christian community. It is never grace that is inaccessible, but always people that do not avail themselves of God's grace! That is why they fail to reach the goal, which is only attainable through grace.

12:16-17. 16. See that no one is sexually immoral (πορνος), or is 'godless' or 'irreligious' (βεβηλος) like Esau, who for a single meal sold (απεδοτο<αποδιδομι)(indicative aorist medium) his 'inheritance rights as the oldest son' or 'the privileges of the firstborn son' (τα πρωτοτοκια). 17. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit (κληρονομησαι)(infinitive aorist active) this blessing (ευλογιαν) he was 'rejected' or 'disqualified' (απεδοκιμασθη)(indicative aorist passive). He could bring about (ευρεν<ευρισκω)(indicative aorist active) no 'change of mind' or 'repentance' (μετανοιας), though he sought (εκζητησας)(participle aorist active) the blessing with tears.

d. Christians do not add their own ideas to the Bible (Rev 22:18-19).

Rabbinical (Jewish) literature enlarges the sins of Esau. The Palestinian Targum of Genesis 25:29 says that Esau came home exhausted on the day he sold his birthright to Jacob. On that day he had committed 5 transgressions, one of which consisted in adultery with a betrothed maiden (cf. 13:4).

e. Christians make a difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow.

The sorrow of Esau was a worldly sorrow. A person with worldly sorrow is sad because he damaged his own reputation and profit; because he lost wealth, honour and power; because he lost 'face' and is overwhelmed by the feeling of being shamed in front of people who know him. Worldly sorrow always seeks the fault with (blames) the other party.

But a person with godly sorrow is sad because he damaged his relationship with the living God; because he lost his perfect holiness, righteousness and peace. Godly sorrow always acknowledges that it is his own fault, repents and seeks to restore the broken relationship (2 Cor 7:8-11). Esau regretted his action, but God did not change his mind. Isaac had rejected and disqualified Esau and would not call back the blessing he had pronounced on Jacob (cf. 4:1).

8. Christian faith involves realising their citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem (12:18-24).

12:18-21. 18. You have not 'come' or 'drawn near' (προσεληλυθατε<προσερχομαι)(indicative perfect active) up to (a mountain) that can be touched (ψηλαφωμενω<ψηλαφαω)(participle present passive) and that is burning (κεκαυμενω<καιω)(participle perfect passive) with fire; to darkness (γνοφος), gloom (ζοφος) and 'storm' or 'hurricane' (θυελλα); 19. to a trumpet blast (σαλπιγξ ηχος) or to such a voice speaking words (φωνη ρηματων) that those who heard it begged (παρητησαντο<παραιτεομαι)(indicative aorist middle) that no word be added (προστεθηναι<προστιθημι)(infinitive aorist passive) to them, 20. because they could not bear (εφερον<φερω) (indicative imperative active) what was commanded (το διαστελλομενον): "If even an animal (θηριον) touches (θιγη<θιγγανω)(subjunctive aorist active) the mountain (ορους), it must be stoned (λιθοβοληθησετα<λιθοβολεως)

(indicative future passive).” 21. The ‘sight’ or ‘the appearance’ (το φανταζομενον<φανταζομαι)(participle present medium) was so ‘fearful’ or ‘terrifying’ (φοβερος) that Moses said, “I am terrified and trembling (εντροπος).”
The perfect tense. The Israelites had drawn near and were standing at the foot of the earthly Mt. Sinai. They had become proselytes of the Old Testament law.

The present tense. The sight of the holy and righteous God revealing his law to Israel continued to inspire the Israelites with fear and trembling.

a. Jewish Christians are sternly warned against falling back into Judaism.

The writer reverts to Hebrews 2:2-4, to the occasion of giving the law on Mount Sinai and the reception of the gospel. The giving of the law in the Old Testament was awesome, but the rejection of the gospel in the New Testament is far more awesome! The Israelites in the Old Testament approached Mount Sinai and then remained at a distance in fear of the awesome holiness and majesty of God. The Hebrews in the New Testament are sternly warned against having begun to make an approach to the heavenly Mount Zion and then to fall back due to unbelief and disobedience. They are reminded that the consequences of despising the gospel is even more dreadful than were the consequences of despising the law.

12:22-24. 22. But you have ‘come’ or ‘drawn near’ (προσεληλυθατε)(indicative perfect active) to Mount Zion (Ζιων ορει), the heavenly Jerusalem (Ιερουσαλημ επουρανιω), the city of the living God (πολει θεου ζωντος), and to thousands upon thousands of angels (μυριασιν αγγελων) in ‘joyful assembly’ or ‘festive gathering’ (religious festival in OT or sports in Greece)(πανηγυρις), 23. to the church (εκκλησια) of the firstborn (πρωτοτοκων), whose names are written (απογεγραμμενων<απογραφω)(participle perfect passive) in heaven, and to a Judge who is God of all people (κριτη θεω παντων), to the spirits of righteous men (πνευμασι δικαιων) made perfect (τετελειωμενων <τελειωω)(participle perfect passive), 24. to Jesus (Ιησου) the mediator of a new covenant (διαθηκης νεας μεσιτη), and to the sprinkled blood (αιματι ραντισμου) that speaks a better word (κρειττον λαλουντι) than the blood of Abel.
The perfect tense. The Jewish Christians had drawn near and were standing (present) in the heavenly Mt Zion. They had become proselytes of the New Testament gospel. Like with all other Christians, their names have been written in the heavenly book of life and remain forever recorded in that book. Like all other Christians, they have been made perfect by the blood of Christ.

The present tense. The blood of Christ continues through the ages to speak a better word (a much more gracious and hopeful message of forgiveness) than the blood spilled by revengeful murder and devilish terrorism.

b. Jewish and Gentile Christians have become permanent citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The events of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings are treated in the apostolic age as parables of Christian experience. The Christians have ‘come’ (the word is the basis for the word ‘proselyte’) to the heavenly dwelling-place of God and it denotes their conversion to Christianity.

i) Mount Zion was the site of the Jebusite stronghold which David captured and made his royal residence in the 7th year of his reign. He made it the religious centre of his kingdom by installing the ark there (2 Sam 6:2). Thus, Zion became the earthly dwelling-place of God, the city which the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to put his name there (1 Ki 14:21; Ps 78:68f). Later, when Solomon built his temple on the hill to the north of Zion and installed the ark there, the name Zion was extended to include this further area, and became in practice synonymous with Jerusalem. As the earthly Zion was the meeting point for the tribes of the old Israel, so the heavenly Zion is the meeting point for the new Israel (Rev 14:1).

ii) The heavenly Jerusalem. The moveable tabernacle in the wilderness was constructed according to the pattern of the sanctuary in heaven, so that the temple and the city of Jerusalem were material copies of the eternal archtypes.
- 1 Chronicles 28:19. The plan of the temple given by David to Solomon is made clear “as the writing from the hand of the Lord upon David”.
- Psalm 122:3 in a Jewish Targum. “Jerusalem is built like the city that is its fellow”.
- Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (II Baruch 4:2ff)(A.D.70). Baruch is told on the eve of the destruction of the first temple that this is not the true city of God; the true city was revealed by God to Adam before his fall, to Abraham when God made a covenant with him, and to Moses at the same time as he was shown the pattern in the mount”.
- Galatians 4:26. The Jerusalem that is above is free and is the mother of New Testament believers.
- Hebrews 12:22-24. The writer to the Hebrews views the heavenly Jerusalem as the spiritual realm to which believers on earth already have access. They have become fellow-citizens with Abraham of the city with foundations of which God is the architect and builder (11:10). It is a heavenly reality (12:22-24), which will become an earthly reality at the second coming (13:14). Its citizens on earth are still pilgrims treading the highways to Zion, even though their names are already written in the citizen register in heaven.
- Revelation 21:2. The holy city, the new Jerusalem, which has existed eternally in heaven, is seen coming down to earth, so that henceforth the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them as their covenant God.

iii) The myriads of angels in festive gathering.

- Daniel 7:10. Daniel saw uncountable angels serving God in heaven.
- Revelation 5:11. John saw uncountable angels worshipping God in heaven.

iv) The Church of the firstborn, whose names are recorded in heaven.

- Luke 10:20; Revelation 21:27. The names of believers still living on earth are recorded in heaven.
- The reference is to the Church of the Old Testament (Judges 20:2; Ps 22:22) and the Church of the New Testament (Mt 16:18).
- The firstborn (plural) refers to all believers in Christ, who together with Christ as the Firstborn (singular, 1:6) par excellence will inherit the rights of firstborn sons. Their inheritance cannot be bartered away, like Esau did.

v) A Judge who is God of all.

- Genesis 18:25. The Judge of all will do right.
- Hebrews 4:13. The eyes of God to whom we must give an account.
- Hebrews 10:30. God says, "I will avenge. It is mine (God's prerogative) to repay".

vi) The spirits of just men made perfect.

- Hebrews 11:40. They include believers of the Old Testament period, who could not be made perfect apart from the first coming of Christ (10:14). It is equally true that New Testament believers cannot be made perfect (complete) without them.
- Hebrews 11:35. They looked forward to a better resurrection. The souls of believers do not need to wait for the resurrection to be made perfect. They are perfected already in the sense that they are with God in the heavenly Jerusalem (Phil 1:20-23; 2 Cor 5:1-9).

vii) Christ, the Mediator between God and men.

- Hebrews 7:25. People coming to God through him are saved.
- Hebrews 10:19. People enter the presence of God through the blood of Christ.
- Hebrews 11:28. The sprinkling of blood during the Passover has as its antitype the blood of Christ symbolically applied to the hearts of believers, sprinkled clean from an evil conscience (10:22). The removal of the evil conscience does away with the barrier between man and God. That is why the blood of Christ speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground, protesting against his murder and appealing for vindication (11:4), but the blood of Christ brings a message of cleansing, forgiveness and peace with God for all who believe in him.

9. Christian faith involves paying heed to the voice of God (12:25-29).

(and not refusing him who speaks, who will shake everything, who is a consuming fire)

12:25-26. 25. See to it (βλεπετε)(imperative present active) that you do not refuse (παραιτηθησθε)(subjunctive aorist medium) him who speaks (τον λαλουντα). If they did not 'escape' or 'flee successfully' (εξεφυγον<εκφυγω)(indicative aorist active) when they refused (παραιτησαμενοι)(participle aorist medium) him who warned (τον χρηματιζοντα) them on the earth, how much less will we, if we turn away (αποστρεφομενοι)(participle present medium) from him who warns us from heaven? 26. At that time his voice shook (εσαλευσεν)(indicative aorist active) the earth, but now he has promised (επηγγελται<επαγγελλομαι)(indicative perfect medium), "Once more I will shake (σεισω)(indicative future active) not only the earth but also the heavens" (Hag 2:6, LXX).

The present tense. Christians must continually see to it that they do not refuse God when he speaks to them.

The perfect tense. God promised to shake the universe once more and that promise stands unshakeable until it is fulfilled!

a. Jewish and Gentile Christians are warned that the present universe will once more be shaken.

The Old Testament history about the wilderness wandering of Israel records how Israel time and again failed to pay heed to the commandments of God. They suffered for their disobedience. The New Testament Hebrew believers are likewise warned to give heed to God's voice (3:7ff).

God spoke the statutes of the old covenant (law) from an earthly mountain (Mt. Sinai). But he spoke the gospel from the heavenly Jerusalem (Mt. Zion). When God spoke from Mt. Sinai, the whole mountain quaked (Ex 19:18).

In the Old Testament the earthquake is also expected to mark the coming of the Lord (Isa 2:19,21; Hag 2:6-7). In their context, these words declare God's purpose in the day when he arises to vindicate his cause, to put down Gentile dominion, to exalt the throne of David and to make Jerusalem and its temple the centre of worship and allegiance for all the nations.

The writer to the Hebrews interprets these words as the end of the present world order, similar to the words in Revelation 20:11 and 21:1. The present heavens and earth will flee away from the presence of the Judge on his great throne and will be replaced by the new heaven and new earth on which righteousness dwells (Mt 24:35; 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 6:12-14; 16:18-20; 20:11; 21:1).

12:27-29. 27. The words 'once more' (απαξ) 'indicate' or 'make clear' (δηλοι<δηλω)(indicative present active) the removing (την μεταθεσιν) of what can be shaken (των σαλευομενων) - that is, created things (ως πεποιημενων) (participle perfect passive) - so that what cannot be shaken (τα μη σαλευομενα) may remain (μεινη<μενω) (subjunctive aorist active). 28. Therefore, since we are receiving (παραλαμβανοντες)(participle present active) a kingdom that cannot be shaken (βασιλειαν ασαλευτος), let us be thankful (εχωμεν χαριν), and so worship (λατρευομεν)(subjunctive present active) God acceptably with reverence (ευλαβειας) and 'awe' or 'godly fear' (δευος), 29. for our "God is a consuming (consuming completely) fire" (ο θεος ημων πυρ καταναλισκων <καταναλισκω)(participle present active).

The present tense. Christians received the unshakeable kingdom at the time they believed. But it is only the beginning, because they will receive the experience of the kingship of Christ more and more in their hearts as they submit more and more areas of their life to his reign. God is all the time a consuming fire that continues to completely consume the godless and wicked in his present judgements.

b. Christians receive the beginning stage of the unshakeable kingdom.

The present created world is not eternal (Plato), but temporary. The heavens with its uncountable stars and the earth will pass away (perish), but Jesus Christ will remain; in time they will all wear out like old clothes; Jesus Christ will fold them up like a robe; they will be changed (not annihilated) like any old garment, but Jesus Christ will remain the same for ever (1:10-12). The present created world, including created human beings must be changed and will be changed, because "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor 15:50). In Hebrews 1:10-12, the writer emphasises the transitoriness of the present world in order to set in contrast the eternity of the Son of God. In Hebrews 12:26-27 he emphasises the transitoriness of the present world in order to set in contrast the eternity of the new world order into which the Son of God has brought his people.

At the first coming of Christ, he made atonement for sins, bound the devil and threw this accuser out of his presence. At his first coming Christ began to rule from his heavenly throne at the right hand of God. The unshakeable kingdom has come on this earth at the first coming of Christ (Mt 10:28-20; 28:18; Eph 1:20-23; Phil 2:9-11; Col 2:13-15; Rev 12:10). The people of God (their souls or spirits) receive eternal life at the moment they believe in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:16; 5:24; 10:28). That is why the present tense is used: "We are *receiving* a kingdom that cannot be shaken". Christians enter the unshakeable kingdom of God when they are born again (Jn 3:3-8; Col 1:13). From that time onwards they have the unshakeable kingdom of God in them (Lk 17:20-21). And when Christians die, their souls are translated alive into heaven, where they will sit with Christ on his throne and reign together with Christ (Rev 3:21; 20:1-4).

c. Christians will certainly receive the final phase of the unshakeable kingdom.

At the second coming of Christ, the whole universe will be shaken 'once more'. Then only what cannot be shaken will remain (survive)(cf. Rev 21:27). Then Christ and Christians will inherit the unshakeable kingdom of God in its final phase (Mt 25:34; Rev 11:15,18). The kingdom of God in its final phase is the same as the heavenly Zion or heavenly Jerusalem that has descended onto the new earth to become the new Jerusalem on the new earth (Rev 21:1-2). This unshakable kingdom is the Sabbath-rest in its final form, when not only the souls or spirits of departed believers find rest with God in heaven (Rev 14:13; cf. Phil 1:21-23), but also their bodies will be resurrected from the dust and find rest on the new earth (Rev 21:4; cf. Phil 3:20-21). The resurrected Christians will reign together with Christ over the new earth forever (Rev 22:5).

d. Christians are therefore people that are thankful, deeply respectful and hopeful.

The transitory nature of this present world and its final renewal at the second coming of Christ is a fact and a matter of faith and hope for believers (Rom 8:17-25). In the face of the transitory nature of our lives the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to be thankful for all our privileges and blessings at the present time and to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (cf. Jn 4:24-25).

God is a consuming fire. This is a symbol of his perfect holiness and righteousness that will consume all evil either on the cross or in judgement. This fact causes sinners to be terrified and the godless to tremble. Isaiah asks, "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?" And he answers, "He who walks righteously and speaks what is right; who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes; who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil" (Isa 33:14-15). In the white heat of his perfect purity he still consumes everything that is unworthy of himself (1 Cor 3:13-15).

Reverence and awe before God's holiness and righteousness are not incompatible with thankful trust and love in response to his mercy.