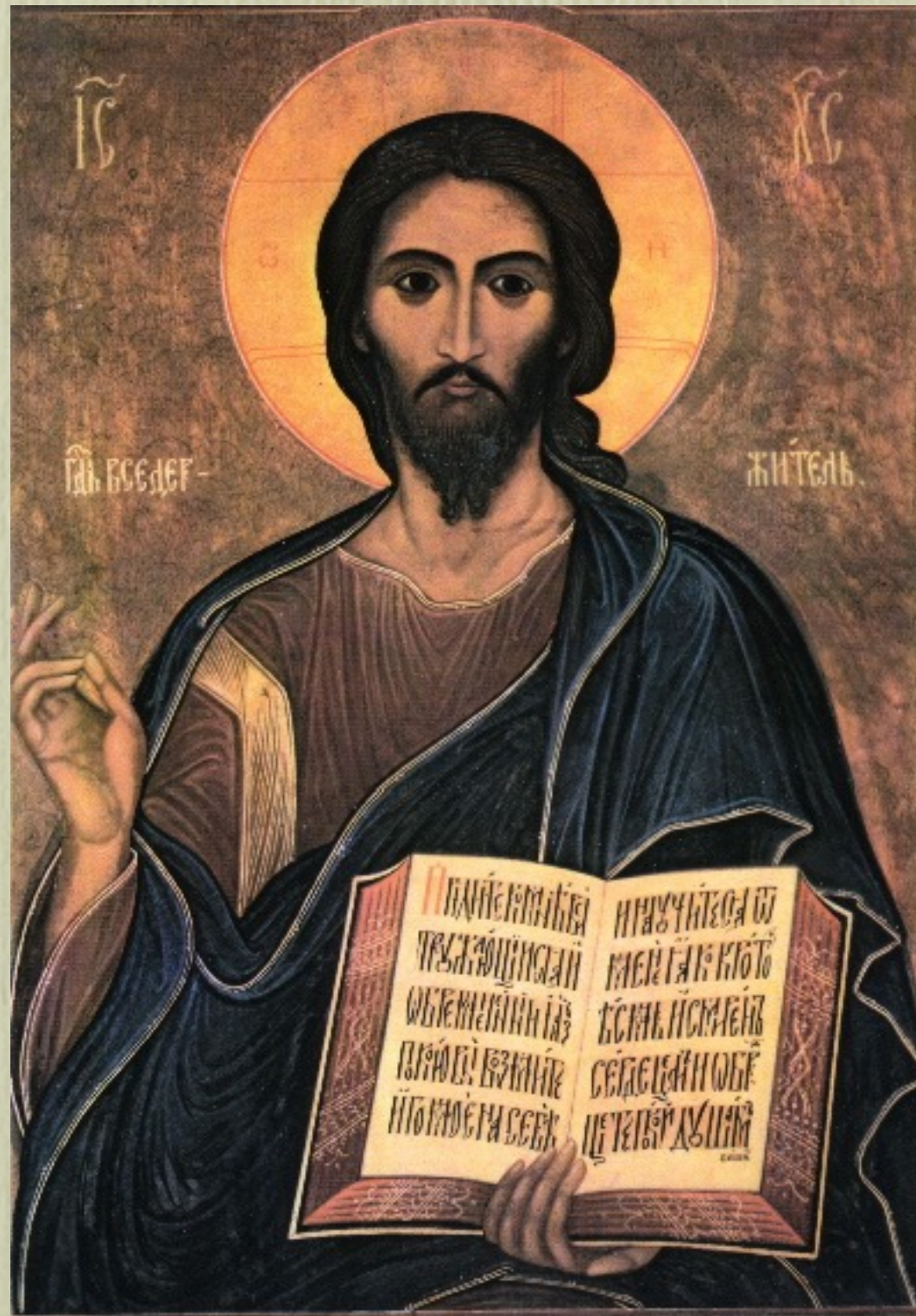


12. Hebrews 12:14 – 13:1



The goal of this oration is ultimately a practical one. Its author is encouraging and challenging the community to renew their commitment to Jesus. The way in which he summarises and draws together the exhortations that have appeared throughout the oration indicates that in 12:14-29 we have the climax of this eminently pastoral oration.

Hebrews 12:14

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Having just exhorted them to ‘make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed’ (12:13), the author demonstrates his concern that everyone in the community be cared for. No one is to be left behind as they pursue peace and holiness.

The peace of which he speaks is the peace enjoyed by a community that is in harmony with God. It is the peace to which the prophets looked forward, the peace that would be God’s gift through his Messiah, the peace of ‘the last days’ (1:1): ‘For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you’ (Isaiah 45:10).

‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces **peace**, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’ (Isaiah 52:7).

‘I will make a covenant of **peace** with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forever more’ (Ezekiel 37:26).

This peace is the gift of the risen Christ: ‘**Peace** I leave with you; my peace I give to you’ (John 14:27; see John 20:19,21,26).

‘Be at peace among yourselves’ (1 Thessalonians 5:13). ‘Live in **peace**; and the God of love and peace will be with you’ (2 Corinthians 13:11). ‘

Let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek **peace** and pursue it’ (1 Peter 3:11).

‘Peace’, the gift of the Risen Jesus, is impossible without ‘holiness’ for it consists in communion with the All-holy God. Since only Christ can make us holy (see 2:11; 10:10,14), the pursuit of holiness means clinging to Jesus, ‘the Lord’. It is necessarily a clinging in faith, for we do not yet see him (see 11:1). We eagerly await his coming, for we know that he will come to save us (see 9:28), when he takes us with him into the eternal embrace of his Father.

Hebrews 12:15

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble (see Isaiah 29:18), and through it many become defiled.

Everyone in the community is responsible to see that ‘**no one fails to obtain the grace of God.**’ He is referring to the blessings of the new covenant gained for them by Jesus. We recall his opening plea that we do not ‘**drift away**’ from the one who is speaking to us (2:1) and miss out on salvation through ‘**neglect**’ (2:3). We recall also his plea that none of us have an ‘**unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.** But exhort one another every day so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’ (3:12-13). ‘**Make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through disobedience**’ (4:11).

Hebrews 12:16-17

See to it that no one becomes like **Esau** [Genesis 25:15-17], an **immoral** (πόρνος) and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

Esau was 'immoral' in the sense that he was unfaithful to the covenant with God (see Exodus 34:15-17), preferring his own momentary pleasure to the inheritance due to him as the first born (see Genesis 25:29-34). Our author is issuing a warning which he has given a number of times already. If we turn away from the only source of life and salvation, no amount of wishful thinking can gain us the blessings which we have rejected. The loss can become irreversible. That we '**who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance**' (9:15), it is essential that we '**seize the hope set before us**' (6:18).

Hebrews 12:18-21

You have not approached something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death' (Exodus 19:12-13). Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.'

'You approached and stood under the mountain while the mountain was a blazing fire while the very heavens shrouded in dark clouds with the sound of a mighty tempest. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice' (Deuteronomy 4:11-12, Septuagint)

Mount Sinai was a mountain that could be touched. God issued a special injunction to ensure that the people did not touch it (see Exodus 19:12-13). The trumpets and the fear of the people are also noted in the Exodus account: 'When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance' (Exodus 20:18).

Terrified by their experience, the people begged Moses: 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die' (Exodus 20:19).

Hebrews 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

By contrast, Christians have been called to approach another mountain on which darkness and fear are replaced by a festal gathering of angels and all those who share in the inheritance that belongs to Jesus, the ‘**first born**’ (1:6). This is ‘the city of our God, which God establishes forever’ (Psalm 48:8; see Psalm 87:1-7), the ‘**heavenly Jerusalem**’, the city prepared for Abraham (see 11:16), the ‘**city that is to come**’ (13:14).

Hebrews 12:24

You have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The blood of Abel cried out to God to be avenged, and led to Cain's desperation. The blood of Jesus cries out to God for forgiveness, and 'obtains eternal redemption' (9:12).

'We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus' (10:19).

Hebrews 12:25

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking;
for if they did not escape when they refused the one
who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape
if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

‘Listen, O Israel’ (Deuteronomy 6:4).

‘Speak, for your servant is listening’ (1 Samuel 3:10).

The oration opened on this theme: ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (1:1-2). ‘Therefore, we must pay greater attention to what we have heard’ (2:1).

Our author reflected on the words of the Holy Spirit, recorded in Psalm 95: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’ (3:7-8), at the conclusion of which he declared: ‘Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. Towards him [God] for us is the Word’ (4:12-13).

Hebrews 12:26-29

At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens’ (Haggai 2:6). This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.
(Deuteronomy 4:24)

He has already described how those who did not listen to God in the past died in the wilderness without reaching the goal of their journey. That was when God spoke to them on Mount Sinai.

Now God is speaking to us through his Son who is in heaven, in the sanctuary which he has entered and to which he calls us. We are being invited into the kingdom of God. Unlike Mount Sinai, it cannot be shaken. Let us, then, listen and offer our lives in worship **‘with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire’**. Our author seems to be expressing something of what is expressed in Psalm 96. This psalm makes a fitting reflection for us:

Psalm 96:6-11

‘It is the same GOD of majestic light
who fills the temple with beauty.
Acknowledge GOD, you nations,
acknowledge GOD’s glory and might.

Acknowledge the glory due to GOD!
Bring an offering. Enter the courts.
Worship GOD in holy splendour.
Tremble before God, all the earth.

Say among the nations, ‘GOD is king!’
The world is firmly established.
God will judge the peoples with equity.
Let the heavens rejoice and be glad.’

Hebrews 13:1

Let mutual love continue.

Having just spoken of the importance of offering acceptable worship to God (12:28), the author focuses on how this is to be done. His teaching is traditional. He begins by exhorting his audience to live the kind of love (φιλαδελφία) that is appropriate in a covenant community of ‘brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling’ (3:1), ‘brothers and sisters of Jesus’ (2:11). His appeal has special force in the light of the words of Jesus: ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:34-35)

‘Concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another’ (1 Thessalonians 4:9).