

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART XIII

THE CLIMATIC APPROACH TO THE GREAT MOUNT ZION ABOVE ALL THINGS

I. In chapter 12, the letter goes from the history of Israel to a thundering climax of the gathering of all peoples around the great Mount Zion.

- It starts with a positive view of the current suffering as the discipline necessary to join the saints, comes to a great call to join with God and His whole kingdom in glory, and ends with a vision of this temporal realm giving way to the permanent one.

II. The first half of the chapter connects the description of the great figures of Israeli history to the current struggles of Christians and exhorts Christians that these struggles are necessary.

A. The chapter begins by referring to the heroes just described, and all other heroes of Israel's past, as a "so great a cloud of witnesses" giving us an image of them helping and cheering us on in this race of life.

- The letter calls this life a race in which we "rid ourselves of burdens" to run all the better. The letter thus picks up on the allegory of a race that St. Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 9:24-26 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8, and possibly Acts 20:24. See also Is. 40:29-31.

- Two aspects of this image are common to the other references, that of struggle and training that may be painful at the time, but that leads to glory. But the letter adds two more images: (1) the image of the saints surrounding us to help and encourage us; and (2) the need to avoid carrying a lot of baggage, which slows down or stops one. The latter image would presumably refer to such things as sinfulness and/or attachment to worldly things.

- The image of a cloud both emphasizes the mystery of the saints surrounding us and the idea of the clouds as reflecting the heavens, as with the Transfiguration. There may also be a reference to the glories of the nations being brought to Israel, as prophesied by Isaiah, who used the image of clouds coming in together. See Isaiah 60:8.

B. The goal is not any worldly reward, but Christ Himself, here presented as both leading us, perfecting us, and awaiting us at the end us at the end. See Catechism 2616.

- The letter exhorts us to have that same attitude of Christ, who suffered but also saw the joy in front of Him. See also Phil. 2:5-11. Suffering and joy are not contradictory, but rather combined together for the race of life.
- There is a notion that even Jesus, God though He was and is, had a sense of contemplation and vision of the glory that was His reward. So also we need a sense of contemplation and vision of Jesus.

C. The letter also reminds the recipients that they have not yet suffered as Jesus or even many of the great figures of Israel did.

- One thus gets the impression from this passage that there was a previous partial persecution, but not a violent one, and that a persecution is just beginning again.

II The letter then switches images to that of a father disciplining His son.

A. The letter quotes the Book of Proverbs, which in describes God's preparation for us to receive prosperity on earth. See Prov. 3:11-12. Here, the letter refers to the same image that God is disciplining us, but now for everlasting glory.

- Moses also used this image to refer to how God disciplines His people to train them, in that case for entrance into the Promised Land. See Duet. 8:5. Here the image is likewise fulfilled as the letter describes God disciplining us for entrance into the final Promised Land.

B. The letter encourages the readers to reflect upon how it is always necessary to discipline children, not only if they do wrong, but also even for the sake of training. This notion is a common theme of Wisdom literature. See, e.g., Prov. 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 19:15, Sir. 6:18, 30:1-13. The letter indicates that we are all likewise in training for nothing less than the rewards of heaven.

C. The image also taps into the image of the people of God (or their leaders) as His sons whom He disciplines, and the image Jesus commonly referred to in describing us as His children. See, e.g., Duet. 32:5; 2 Sam. 7:14-15, Is. 66:13-14; Hos. 11:1-7; Matt. 7:9-11, 13:38, 18:3-5. Likewise, St. Paul frequently refers to us as children of God through Christ. See, e.g., Rom. 8:14-17 (especially emphasizing the need for suffering), Gal. 3:23-4:30, Eph. 4:8, Phil 2:4-15. The letter picks up on this image to see all of this life as a progress from childhood to being full heirs of the kingdom.

D. The letter even goes so far as to indicate that, if we did not suffer, it would be an indication that we are either so immature or so far gone that God does not believe that even that would help. See Prov. 9:7-9.

- The image of children conceived illegitimately implies a father who wants to please his children, but does not really want them to inherit his property or power.

E. The author, writing to a Jewish context in which the command to have respect for parents could be assumed, puts this command together with the idea of God as our Father to encourage us to respect His role in disciplining us.

F. The passage ends with a series of metaphors indicating that the readers have been weakened and need strength, lest the weakness be disabling.

- The first images of physical weakness (i.e. drooping hands and weak knees) gives one the impression of one not in shape enough for a contest, as these Christians have not really been prepared for the contest of persecutions. It also recalls Isaiah's prophecies of a new glorious Israel. See Is. 35:1-6. There may also be a reference to a passage in Job referring to suffering as discipline given by God. See Job 4:3-4, 5:17-18.

- The second image is of a road that is straight so that even those who are lame can walk without injury. It implies that many of the faithful are lame in their faith, partially disabled and, therefore, in need of healing. The letter also taps into the image of the straight road of justice, and the way prepared for the Messiah. See, e.g., Ps. 16:11, 17:5, 27:11; Prov. 4:26, 12:28, 15:19-24; ; Is. 40:3, Matt. 3:3, Mk. 1:2, Luke 3:4; John 1:23.

III. Spelling out the path of righteousness, the letter begins to give practical instructions.

A. First, it calls for the readers to "strive for peace with everyone."

- The implication is that, even though the Christians will endure rejection from many because of their faith, they should not seek out the fight, but rather try to be conciliatory. See Ps. 34:15; Rom. 12:18-20; Matt. 5:9, 21-26.

B. The letter also says that one should strive for the holiness, for that is necessary to see God. The idea is that one must be set

aside for God to enter into His realm.

- There is call to glory here as well. The notion is that holiness is not restricted to the few, but rather a calling for all. See, e.g., Matt. 5:48; James 1:4. However, one cannot compromise with the world, but must rather be fully sanctified to be in heaven. See Ps. 15:1, Rev. 21:27; Mark. 8:34-38.

C. The letter then gives two balancing concerns. On the one hand, it says that no one should be deprived of God's grace, and thus the Gospel should be available to all. But, on the other hand it says that no "bitter root" should spring up to damage the faith in the church.

1. There is an idea that church should minister to the weak, but should not allow them to spread their errors. Jesus also gave such considerations when speaking of an erring brother. See Matt. 18:5-20.

2. The phrase "bitter root" appears to be from Moses' warnings that no one who worships a foreign god should be allowed among the Chosen People. See Deut. 19:17. There is perhaps also a contrast between the root of evil, see also 2 Tim. 6:10, and Jesus as coming from the root of the tree of David, and the root of faith. See, e.g., Is. 11:10, Romans 15:12, Rev. 5:5, 22:16; Eph. 3:17, Col. 2:7.

. E. Concluding the exhortation, the letter cites the example of Esau, who exchanged his birthright for a meal at the end of an exhausting journey.

- The image is both that one who seeks pleasure above all is exchanging something much greater, an eternal glory for something transitory; and it is also a warning against thinking that one can reverse a decision to abandon the faith easily.

- The passage in most translations compares Esau to a fornicator. The implication is not that he was guilty of that particular sin, but rather that he is an example of those who seek worldly comfort and pleasures and are willing to trade God's promises for them. Unfaithfulness to the covenant is often compared to adultery. See, e.g., Jer. 3:6-10; Ex. 23:47; Hos. 2:4-9.

– Again, there is a warning against presumptuously thinking that one could turn away from the faith now and easily come back later.

