

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 11, Hebrews 12:4-29: Citizens in Training

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In the quest for an outline and for breaking up an ancient text into somewhat manageable blocks of material, we tend to rend asunder what an ancient author has sought to join together. Thus, beginning a new section at Hebrews 12.4 is admittedly artificial; the result here of my own desire to emphasize that the typical break preachers and scholars make between 11.40 and 12.1 is even more problematic. Hebrews 12.4 continues quite naturally the athletic imagery that the author began to frame out in verses 1 through 3 of chapter 12 and segues quickly into 12.5 to 11 into the not unrelated topic of training or *paideia*, education, a hefty component of which included athletic training in the ancient world.

This lens of *paideia*, formative education or training, is a second framework that the author gives his addressees for viewing their experience of their neighbor's hostility. This leads the author to give some specific instructions on how to press on and also some instructions concerning menacing pitfalls to avoid in 12:12 to 17, all presented as a logical consequence of seeing their situation through the lenses of contest and formative discipline. As a supporting rationale for adopting these courses of action, the author presents in verses 18 to 24 a kind of summative contrast between the way in which God had formerly been approached, namely amidst severe taboos and with much fear and trepidation, with the celebratory and confident approach to God's eternal city with which he has privileged the addressees.

At 12:25, the author launches a final lesser to greater warning, urging them not to turn away from the one speaking to them from heaven. This, in turn, is followed by a forceful statement of the author's eschatological expectation in verses 26 to 29, the removal of the visible shakable realm, the heavens and the earth that are part of this material creation, and the believer's reception into the abiding unshakable kingdom. This is all supported by a rather distinctive interpretation of Haggai, chapter 2, verse 6. In light of the forthcoming promised good, the reception of this unshakable kingdom, the only appropriate response is, according to the author, showing gratitude, as he exhorts in verse 28.

This response of gratitude is one that he will flesh out, then, through chapter 13, verses 1 to 21, in practical and explicit terms. If the addressees maintain a response of gratitude, they are showing due reverence for God. The author reminds them, in verse 29, that this is indeed the only wise course of action since our God is a consuming fire.

And thus, with the close of chapter 12, the author returns to that hint of menace that has run throughout the sermon, urging the addressees to be afraid of falling short of

the display of gratitude, the response of loyalty and obedience that is due to this powerful divine patron. In 12, verses 4 to 11, the author encourages hearers to embrace the challenges of their situation as God's formative discipline. We had an opportunity already, in an introductory segment, to look at this passage in connection with our exploration of the author's own level of education since this passage exhibits a well-known pattern of argumentation, typically learned at the high school level, as it were, of rhetorical instruction.

In this segment, we will focus more on the passage's contribution to the author's pastoral goals, particularly his shaping of the hearer's perception of their experiences. He leads into this image of formative discipline in 12:4 by continuing the athletic imagery with which he had opened this segment of exhortation in 12:1 through 3. Competing in your bout against sin, you have not yet put up a fight to the point of blood. The author moves to another event in this triathlon of faith, from the foot race of verses 1 through 3 to some form of one-on-one combat.

He probably had in mind either boxing or the no-holds-barred sparring competition known as the *pancratium* rather than wrestling, which did not tend to draw blood. This is more than merely an indication of the extent to which the addressees have suffered, or more particularly have not suffered, for their Christian convictions to this point. This is an attempt to shame the hearers whose suffering for their loyalty to Christ has not yet come anywhere close to Christ's suffering on their behalf.

How could any of them already be close to fainting or giving up? Reminding the hearers that their boxing match is against sin is also rhetorically strategic. Their neighbor's pressures upon them are not benign or well-meaning. They are the manifestation of the power of sin, trying to get a stranglehold on them or to pummel them into submission.

Making peace with non-believers on their own terms of withdrawing from association with the Christian group becomes giving up disgracefully in this match against sin. The author has used one common rhetorical tool, athletic imagery, to facilitate perseverance in an unpopular course of action. He now transitions to a second such tool.

So, we read in verses 5 through 11 that you have also forgotten the exhortation that speaks to you as sons and daughters. My son, do not value the discipline of the Lord too lightly nor grow faint when being reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one whom he loves, and he chastises every son whom he receives.

Endure, then, for the purpose of educative discipline. God is behaving toward you as to his sons and daughters. For what son or daughter is there whom a father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, in which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not legitimate children.

Since we had our biological fathers as our disciplinarians and paid heed, shall we not all the more submit to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short while as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us to our benefit in order that we might have a share in his holiness. And all discipline seems to be not joyful but grievous for the present time. But later, it gives the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The difficulties that the congregation has endured and continues to endure as the price of perseverance are interpreted here as God's parental formative discipline. The passage is dominated throughout by the Greek word *paideia* and related forms, which appear no fewer than seven times, reinforcing this interpretative lens. The experience of rejection by the world is thus strategically transformed into a sign of the believer's very adoption into God's family.

God is treating them as sons and daughters, and their struggles are the means by which God shapes their characters and fits them with the virtues appropriate for future citizens of the city of God, the kingdom they're on the threshold of receiving. The experiences of shaming and marginalization become, in effect, proofs of their honored and favored status in God's sight. The author begins this segment of exhortation by reciting Proverbs 3, verses 11 and 12, specifically citing this as the text that establishes the father-son and father-daughter relationship between God and the addressees.

There's a slight change at work here between the Hebrew version of Proverbs 3 and the Septuagint translation, the Greek translation of the same text. In the Hebrew text, the element of analogy is much clearer. As a father chastens the son in whom he delights, the Septuagint has obscured the quality of analogy, translating the verse thus, he chastens every child whom he receives.

Thus, the verse becomes a testimony to actual adoption by God rather than a useful analogy for describing God's chastening. This modification from Hebrew to Greek makes the text even more useful for the author's purposes. While Proverbs itself had articulated a punitive model of discipline, the author of Hebrews, like most Greco-Roman authors and Jewish authors removed from Palestine, tended to favor an understanding of God's discipline or training as formative or educative rather than punitive.

In the verses that follow the author's recitation of Proverbs 3, 11, and 12, the author will repeatedly speak of *paideia*, formative discipline, but will never reintroduce the aspects of the Proverbs text that lead in a punitive direction, such as being reprov'd or the verb *mastigoi*, he chastens, which is actually based on the same root that gives us the word whip. A striking comparative text for the author's exhortation in these verses appears in Seneca's short treatment on Providence, *De Providentia*, where

Seneca, the Latin philosopher from the first half of the first century, also speaks of the endurance of hardships as divine parental discipline. In this treatise, Seneca writes that the sage is God's pupil, imitator, and true offspring, whom that magnificent parent, no mild enforcer of virtues, educates quite sternly, just as strict fathers do.

God rears the wise person like a son. God tests, pardons, and prepares the sage for God's own self. Most impressive is Seneca's statement that quote, those whom God approves and loves, God toughens, examines, and exercises.

Seneca goes so far as to compare the paternal training of God with the way in which Spartan fathers whipped their children in public as a demonstration of the child's attainment of the prized virtues of endurance and courage. It is noteworthy that this Spartan whipping was not punitive but probative. It was a demonstration of the children's fortitude and formation, not a punishment in any way.

In both Seneca and Hebrews, there's the complete absence of the sense that these hardships fall upon the sufferers because they've done something wrong. Rather, the emphasis is on the positive fruits that the courageous endurance of such trials will produce in the trainee. I dwell on this because it is important that we understand the author not to be telling the hearers that they are suffering because God is punishing them but rather because God is shaping and training them.

On the basis of his recitation of Proverbs 3, the author goes on then to exhort the hearers once again to endure for the purpose of formative discipline. God is behaving toward you as toward sons and daughters. The emphasis of the exhortation remains on endurance, which the author has already urged upon the addressees repeatedly, for example, in chapter 10, verses 32 and 35, and as recently as verses 1 through 3 in chapter 12.

The author is developing his exhortation argumentatively here with a general analogy with the experience of all children raised by human fathers. For what child is there whom a father does not train? He follows this up with an interesting argument from the contrary. If you are without such training in which all children share, you are illegitimate children and not genuine children.

The author is pulling off quite a rhetorical coup here. He is making the experience of reproach and loss suffered for the sake of Christ a sign of favor and honor, and even more astoundingly, the lack of such hardship as a sign of disfavor and dishonor, a sign that God is not invested in shaping them and shaping their character very much in the way that God shaped the character of the son par excellence, Jesus, who learned obedience through what he suffered, as we heard earlier in the sermon. The hearer will no doubt recall Jesus' own experience of sharing in this discipline, on which the author dwelt in chapter 5, verses 7 through 10.

The hearers are called to share in this experience so that they may also have the benefits of sharing in the son's honor and virtue. Insofar as they are partakers of discipline, they are also partakers with Christ in the final state of glory. It may not be accidental that the author repeats the word *metachoi* here in 12.8 that he had used previously in chapter 3, verse 14, perhaps to connect this sense that sharing with Christ's experience of being disciplined leads to sharing with Christ in the final state of glory.

The author follows this argument from the contrary with a lesser to greater argument to further support his exhortation. We had our biological fathers as our trainers, and we submitted with reverence. Should we not submit ourselves all the more to the father of spirits and live? In this distinction between earthly fathers and the father of spirits, there's a sort of embedded rationale that assumes the superiority of spirits to the flesh.

God as a parent is one in a greater and more ultimate sense, the father of our life, our very soul, as opposed to merely being the father that engendered our biological existence. And thus, God is correspondingly more worthy of our reverent submission to God's training as opposed to our bucking at that training and trying to escape it. The result of such submission is that we shall live.

And the hearers will probably hear life here in the same sense that it was presented a bit earlier in chapter 10, verses 37 to 39. The author is referring not merely to physical existence as a result of submitting to God's formative discipline but to life as eschatological survival. In 10:37 to 39, the righteous person lives by faith in that only those who are of faith will be delivered from the eschatological cataclysm and live with God in the unshakable realm.

As the author continues, he again contrasts earthly parents with the divine parent. The hearers' earthly parents disciplined the hearers as seemed best to them for a short while. But God's discipline is absolutely for our benefit.

There is no hint of doubt as to the value of this discipline, unlike the discipline of earthly parents, which is sometimes on the mark and sometimes off the mark. The end result of God's training is a share in God's holiness, which is, in essence, the fulfillment of God's injunction at the heart of the Levitical law code to be holy as I am holy. The author concludes this segment of exhortation by adding an expansive paraphrase of the well-known maxim: the root of education is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.

In that maxim, we find the keywords *paideia* for education and *karpos* for fruit, which also appear quite prominently in Hebrews 12, verse 11, signaling to the addressees even more clearly the maxim on which he is riffing. All educative

discipline, *paideia*, seems for the present time to be not joyous but grievous but later yields the peaceful fruit, *karpos*, of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Given the widespread acceptance of the truth of the underlying maxim in the ancient world, the hearers are more likely to accept the application of this maxim as an interpretative framework for their experiences and, thus, to accept the author's call for continued endurance in the midst of those experiences.

The athletic metaphor enters again subtly here with the word training, *gegumnasmenois*, which is a verbal echo of the *gymnasion*, the gymnasium, where the future citizens of the Greek city-state were both educated and also trained for the development of physical prowess and strength. The goal of these exercises that the hearers are enduring for the sake of their Christian commitment is, according to the author, the formation of the virtue of righteousness or justice, *dikaiosune*, in his or her soul and life. This is one of the four cardinal virtues celebrated in Greco-Roman ethical philosophy and also, of course, a core virtue promoted in the Old Testament scriptural tradition.

Through these training exercises, the moral faculty of the believers is formed and strengthened so that the believer learns how to always choose to honor God and to honor his or her obligations to fellow believers, hence acting justly with righteousness. The outcome of their perseverance will be the formation of this prized value, this prized virtue, in their hearts and lives, fitting them to live as honorable citizens of the city that God has prepared for them. The exhortation that addresses them as sons and daughters calls the hearers to turn bravely toward these training exercises and to run the course that stretches and strengthens their commitment to righteousness rather than shrink away from such training or regard it as something to be avoided rather than embraced, a mindset that is evident among those who have begun to shrink away from the assembling of the Christians together.

The author urges that, on the contrary, their neighbor's hostility is actually serving God's goals as long as the believers refuse to give in to that pressure to abandon their noble pursuit. The expedient course, the one that preserves and augments their honor, is thus not to avoid but to embrace these formative exercises. The connection between educative discipline and training forms a bridge back to the athletic language that characterizes the resumption of direct exhortation in Hebrews 12, 12, and following.

Therefore make straight the drooping hands and weak knees and make straight paths for your feet in order that what is lame may be healed rather than disjointed. The author is here drawing richly upon scriptural language as he resumes direct exhortation. He recalls the language of Isaiah 35, 3, be strong drooping hands and weak knees.

Isaiah, in his context, was encouraging the hearers on the basis of an oracle of divine deliverance concerning the blossoming of the desert and the highway to be prepared through it so that God could lead back the ransomed of the Lord to Zion amid songs of celebration. Just as Isaiah encouraged his hearers to stiffen their resolve and raise their hopes in view of God's forthcoming deliverance, so the author of Hebrews is leading the new people of God to do the same in light of the eschatological deliverance for which God is currently training the hearers. They are to continue in their race to the celestial city where a festive gathering awaits, and the author will go on shortly to display.

They are to go on with their guard up, their hands raised in the posture of good boxers in their match against sin and their forward motion unfaltering. He also brings in language from Proverbs 4, verse 26, where we read, make right paths for your feet and strengthen, straighten your paths. The context of Proverbs speaks of choosing paths that are just rather than wicked, a connection that might have led the author who has been concerned with promoting what he perceives as the just course of action in response to the divine patron over against an unjust one to incorporate this text into his exhortation.

For the author of Hebrews, walking justly is almost the spiritual counterpart to the physical therapy that heals a lame joint through carefully guided and prescribed exercise. What constitutes the right path? The author goes on here to suggest pursuing peace with all and sanctification, without which no one will see the Lord. Watching out lest any fall short of God's gifts, lest any root of bitterness spring up to cause trouble and many become defiled through it, lest anyone be immoral or profane like Esau.

At the outset of these verses, the author recalls Psalm 33, verse 14, seek peace and pursue it. Peaceful relations within the Christian community are, of course, vitally important, but the author is also encouraging a peaceful disposition toward outsiders, even though those outsiders have a very different disposition toward the Christians themselves. 1 Peter gives a lot more attention to this dynamic in a hostile setting, not returning reviling for reviling or abuse for abuse, but rather living winsomely to the extent that one can without violating what is due God, thus not compromising on essentials for the sake of living peaceably.

Alongside pursuing peace, the preacher elevates the importance of pursuing sanctification, living fully into that state of holiness that Christ opened up for them when he sanctified them, setting them apart for their divine destiny. One might also note here that holiness was the outcome of divine discipline just a few verses before in chapter 12, verse 10. Thus, pursuing sanctification or holiness is, in part, a restatement of the exhortation to endure divine discipline and to keep pressing forward in this process.

Seeing God happens, in the author's mind, when the believer enters God's presence at the last day. If they continue on this path of pursuing peace and sanctification, of enduring God's formative discipline with hands raised and knees strengthened, they will indeed come to that point of seeing God at last. As the author continues then, watching out lest any one of you fall short of God's gift, he emphasizes yet again the communal responsibility that all believers share for each individual believer's perseverance toward the goal.

Every member within the community is charged with making sure his or her brothers or sisters are not deceived or cajoled into stopping short before entering God's promised rest, the heavenly homeland, just as the Exodus generation had fallen short of God's gift. The author also urges them to make sure no root of bitterness springs up in their midst, by means of which many might become defiled. This exhortation recontextualizes Deuteronomy 29, verse 17, particularly in the Septuagint translation, where Moses warns the people of the midst who refuse to keep the covenant but rather cling to their idols.

Such a person would indeed be a root of bitterness, springing up to cause trouble. The preacher applies this to the apostasy of a few, those who are drifting away. Defiling the many is a figurative way of expressing disillusionment and the weakening of resolve that will be felt by those who witnessed their former sisters and brothers giving up in their pursuit of this race.

The author moves then into a slightly more expanded exhortation based on the example of Esau, and by means of this example, the author hopes to put the final nail in the coffin of contemplating apostasy, whether formal apostasy or merely practical apostasy, as one drifts back into the arms of society. The hearers are still to watch out, lest anyone be a fornicator or profane as Esau was, who, for the sake of a single meal, sold his right as the firstborn. For you know, later, wishing to inherit the blessing, he was refused, for he did not find a place for repentance, even though he sought after it with tears.

This encapsulation of Esau's story recalls very strongly the warning of Hebrews 6, 4 through 8, with its assertion that there are no second chances for going back to the starting gate of repentance, as it were. Esau is not known in Genesis, particularly as a fornicator, but Second Temple period traditions do develop a picture of Esau as sexually immoral, particularly based on his marriage to Hittite wives, which we find in Genesis 26 verse 32. The author may be using fornication here as a metaphor for faithlessness.

The metaphorical use of the term in Numbers 14 verse 33, the story of the wilderness generation's failure on the threshold of Canaan, which is figured so prominently already in the sermon to the Hebrews, would support such an understanding. There, God decreed that the people would bear their fornication until

their bodies were spent up in the desert. Esau's godlessness or worldly-mindedness is displayed as he shows that he values all too lightly God's promises and benefactions, represented here by his birthright as the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, choosing temporary relief from the immediate hardship of hunger over the better and lasting possessions that would have come his way.

Esau's example serves as a foil to the community's own past example, to the examples of Moses or the martyrs or Jesus, all of whom continued to endure temporary hardship, some in the extreme, for the sake of the greater good promised by God. The author thus introduces a strategic analogy by means of Esau's example. Society's goods are to God's rewards, as a bowl of lentil stew is to a birthright.

Esau's poor evaluation of the relative worth and advantage of a meal to his birthright has tainted his memory across the millennia, leaving him the ridiculous anti-example of evaluating choices wisely and virtuously. The addressees are thus invited to think clearly about their own choices so as to avoid exhibiting the same foolishness by selling their eternal birthright for a few decades of peace and security among their non-believing neighbors. In crafting his presentation of the example of Esau, the author of Hebrews has conflated some elements to make his presentation all the more effective for the pastoral needs facing his hearers.

In the episode of Genesis 25, verses 29 to 34, Esau was aware that he had traded away his birthright, his right to the larger share as the eldest son. In the later episode of Genesis 27, verses 30 to 36, however, Esau shows no sign that trading away his birthright as the firstborn also included giving away the blessing that should have come to him as his father Isaac lay near death. Indeed, Jacob had to go to some lengths to trick Isaac into giving him the blessing that falls to the firstborn also, and Esau shows no awareness that he ought not to receive the blessing as a consequence of his former deal with his brother so many years before.

The author of Hebrews, however, conflates birthright and blessing so as to make Esau more sharply an example of the impossibility of regaining what one had previously devalued and thrown away. Thus, giving away his rights as the firstborn many years before had consequences for the remainder of Esau's life. There was no second chance, as it were, to get back what he had lost as he stood beside Isaac's deathbed.

Those who read the Genesis story will no doubt find the scene of Esau before his father Isaac quite lamentable as he besought his father with tears. Father, is there no blessing left for me? This creates a vivid impression upon the hearers of Hebrews of the die being cast, although now for quite a different reason. This is precisely the image that the author wishes to connect with the consequences of trading peace with God for peace with society.

Like Esau, those who throw away God's gifts and God's promises will find no space for repentance. Repentance itself is God's gift to grant or to withhold. This is a doctrine that would not be unique to the author of Hebrews.

We find something similar in the Wisdom of Solomon, where repentance itself is God's gift to people, and they cannot attain repentance unless God grants it. In this way, the author reinforces again that it is dangerous indeed to presume God's favor by valuing it too lightly. Esau's example thus strongly reinforces the warnings, particularly in 648 and 1026 and the following.

Those who have received God's repeated benefactions and then throw them away can't expect any return to favor, any second chance to start along that road again, just as Esau found there was no chance at the end to undo the damage he had done in his relationship with God. The author follows up his exhortations to persevere with a depiction of the difference between the way people were known to have approached God under the old covenant and the far more celebratory, winsome, welcoming way in which people are invited to approach God now that the new covenant has been inaugurated, for you have not drawn near to something palpable and burning, to fire and darkness and gloom and a whirlwind and to the reverberation of a trumpet and the sound of words.

The hearers of that sound begged that the speech not be prolonged, for they could not bear the command. If even an animal touches the mountain, it will be executed by stoning. Indeed, so terrifying was the phantasm that Moses said, I am afraid and trembling.

But you have drawn near to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels in a festal hymn and to the assembly of the firstborn inscribed in heaven and to God, the judge of all and to the spirits of the perfected righteous and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and the blood of sprinkling that is speaking something better than that of Abel. The word for, in Greek, *gar*, indicates that the author presents this pair of contrasting images as a rationale for accepting and heeding the author's exhortations. The advantages they enjoy all but demand that they continue to press forward toward this unprecedentedly welcoming and beautiful reception that God has prepared for them.

The contrasts between the two approaches to God could not be more pronounced. The first took place in the material realm, and the second in the abiding invisible realm. The first was marked by fear and hedged about with purity taboos that carried severe penalties.

The second is marked by celebratory worship of God. The author brings together a wealth of images in a short compass to make a cumulative effect on the hearers, one

that goes beyond the individual meaning of each individual component or the minute analysis of such details. The first half of this passage draws extensively on accounts of the experience of meeting God at Sinai, especially in Exodus 19:12 to 19, and Deuteronomy 4:11 to 12.

The verb approach here, in you have approached, is another form of the same verb that has been prominent throughout the sermon, as the author has urged the hearers to continue to draw near. Its recurrence here provides a sort of summation to those invitations throughout the sermon. The author negates the fearful approach hedged in with taboos, which explicitly forbade human beings and animals from even touching the mountain where God was descending.

The foreboding gloom, the terrifying sounds, the voices, none of this is part of the hearer's fresh new approach to God that Jesus has opened up. Moses' confession of fear here actually appears only later in Deuteronomy chapter 9, and the author admittedly takes it somewhat out of context. It had originally referred to Moses' trepidation concerning God's anger in the aftermath of the golden calf incident, which came quite later than the theophany, the divine appearance at the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

It has now made the capstone of the author's presentation of the fearful and restricted access to God which has been broken through for the Christians by Jesus. Juxtaposed then with this frightful picture created by 12 verses 18 to 21, the author presents his vision for the goal at the end of the Christian pilgrimage, which now appears all the more radiant. Not Mount Sinai with its terrace, but Mount Zion, with its celebratory joy, awaits them at the end of their journey.

The author depicts this as a scene of worship with a festal gathering of the angels in a heavenly liturgy. Not fearsome and depressing meteorological phenomena surround this mountain, but the angelic hosts gathered in a panegyric, a festival song in praise of the ruler of the unshakable kingdom. Here, too, is the assembly of the multiple firstborns.

Unlike Esau, who threw away the inheritance of the firstborn, these people of faith have held on and have arrived at the reception of their eternal inheritance, sharing the inheritance of Jesus the firstborn par excellence. The fact that their names are inscribed in heaven suggests the common practice of citizens' names being enrolled on a city's roster. These are enrolled as citizens in the city of the living God and enjoy full participation in the rights of citizens for which their experiences of formative discipline in this world have prepared them.

That which the people of faith now dead had sought, for example, as the author told us in Hebrews 11:13 to 16 about Abraham and the patriarchs seeking a city with foundations, a city of God's own foundation, and that for which the hearers now

themselves are being trained, stands before them in this inviting image of the city of God, the new Jerusalem. God is present at this festival as the judge of all, a reminder to the hearers of the surpassing importance of God's evaluation of their lives over that of any other court of reputation, such as that of their neighbors. The spirits of the perfected righteous is a phrase that helps clarify the meaning of perfection or make perfect throughout Hebrews.

These righteous ones are perfected in that they have finally entered into God's presence, having gone themselves where Christ had gone as the forerunner. And the Old Testament people of faith and the New Testament people of faith are perfected together, as we read in Hebrews 11, 39 to 40, as all are brought together into the unshakable realm and city of God. Also present here before the hearers is the mediator of a new covenant, Jesus, whose priestly work and offering of the blood of sprinkling made possible their entrance into God's real presence.

These images will recall the central exposition of the sermon. The blood of Jesus is here elusively said to speak a better word than the blood of Abel. Jesus' blood, of course, speaks a word of pardon and acceptance by God, in contrast to the blood of Abel, which cried out for justice and vengeance.

Hebrews 12:18 to 24 presents the good that lies in the sure possession of the hearers if they continue to persevere in their new life together in Christ. This is an implicit appeal to the topic of expediency or advantage, as the hearers will be concerned to preserve these present advantages and not, by acting foolishly, exchange such favor for wrath. The following section, Hebrews 12, verses 25 to 29, will return to such deliberations explicitly.

The author presents an image that suggests that there is nothing lying ahead of them from which they need to shrink back, as he fears some might continue to do if they consider only the pressures that their neighbors have put upon them. Rather, ahead is a jubilant celebration in the heavenly city, in the company of Jesus, their mediator, and all the righteous brought together to their final home, beckoning them to continue their forward movement to perfection. The contrast of the spoken word on Sinai and the better word from heaven has also set up the final warning in Hebrews 12, 25, the final lesser-to-greater argument, which corresponds very closely to the lesser-to-greater argument that opened the first exhortation of the sermon in chapter 2, verses 1 through 4. Watch out, lest you refuse the one who is speaking to you.

For if those people did not escape after refusing the one who is warning them on earth, how much more will we not escape when turning away from the one warning from heaven, whose voice shook the earth at that time but now has promised, saying, only once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven. And this only once more signifies the removal of the shakable things as things that have been

manufactured in order that the unshakable things may remain. Therefore, as we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us show gratitude through which let us worship God in such a way as pleases him with reverence and awe, for our God is indeed a consuming fire.

The one warning them on earth could be heard as Moses, the spokesperson for the Sinai covenant, were it not for the immediately following verse, which seems to suggest that God is the source of both warnings. God's voice was said to have shaken the earth at Sinai. God's voice shook the earth at that time.

In Judges 5, verses 4 to 5, and in Psalm 67, verse 8, the earthquake as a response to God's voice is part of the memory of that event at Sinai. The author now introduces Haggai, chapter 2, verse 6, as the divine oracle for telling the decisive shaking and removal of both earth and heaven. Yet once for all, I will shake the heaven and the earth.

The author has modified this Haggai text to emphasize the inclusion of heaven in this future shaking along with the earth. So, the author adds the words not only to his quotation but also inverts the order of heaven and earth in order to make the contrast more evident and the shaking of heaven more prominent and climactic. The initial two words of the recitation, in Greek the words *eti hapax*, in English three words only once more, provide the key to this interpretation of this verse.

Since God will shake the earth and the heavens *hapax*, once for all and not merely again, the author reads this as a promise of the decisive eschatological shaking and removal of the visible creation, both the earth and the visible heavens. One might recall here the author's contrast between the temporary nature of the visible material realm and the eternal nature of God and God's realm introduced as early in chapter 1, verses 10 through 12. All things created and shakable will be removed in order that what is unshakable and only that may remain.

The author's distinctive eschatology emerges again here. Heaven and earth are not renewed, nor does the age to come begin after the passing of the present age. Rather, the kingdom of God already exists beyond the material and visible creation, and it will simply be all that remains after the removal of the temporary secondary created order.

Being and remaining a part of the Christian community is essential to survival itself, which is one reason, perhaps, that the author conceives of salvation as that which the believer is about to inherit in chapter 1, verse 14 as the gift that is only fully received at Christ's second appearing in Hebrews 9 verse 28. Deliverance from the material world that is slated for dissolution and entrance into the abiding realm that alone survives the shaking is the deliverance, the salvation that, in the final analysis, matters most for this author. The removal of the things that are to be shaken

corresponds to the removal of the first chamber, which blocks access to the holy place; if we recall here the author's discussion of the physical layout of the tabernacle in chapter 9, verses 9 and 10.

After this eschatological shaking and the removal of the visible heavens, the way into the divine holy place will become evident, and the sons' clients, the many sons and daughters, will be ushered in. This expectation undergirds the author's consistent devaluing of worldly possessions, worldly citizenship, and worldly status. All such things are guaranteed by God's promise to pass away, and only the believer's better possessions in God's realm will remain.

The only proper response to God's desire to confer so magnificent a gift on the people of faith is to show gratitude. The Greek here is *echomen charen*. *Charen* from *charis*, which we tend to translate as grace, here must denote gratitude since the author offers this exhortation as a suitable response to receiving a gift, namely the unshakable kingdom.

The summons to gratitude and to perseverance in gratitude is the essence of the author's argument and exhortation throughout Hebrews. The immensity of the benefits God is conferring, an eternal homeland in which the beneficiaries will be enrolled as citizens, requires a proportionate commitment to living gratefully. This gratitude will express itself through worshiping God with piety and reverent fear in ways that are pleasing to God.

We come across here another of the words built on the stem *euarest*, here *euarestos*, well pleasingly. This was a word group that was introduced in Hebrews 11 verses 5 and 6 where *pistis*, steadfast trust or faith, was asserted to be prerequisite to pleasing God. And the same term will return later in chapter 13 verses 16 to 21.

That verbal link between 12:28 and those later verses in chapter 13 signals that 13 1 through 21 will develop a picture of what gratitude toward God looks like in terms of everyday activities, of sharing with one another and doing good to one another in the believing community and engaging in that mutual support that makes resistance to society's assaults possible and which also continues to acknowledge God's beneficence. By urging the hearers to be grateful, the author reminds them that what they have gained is ever so much greater than what they have lost. Perhaps those who are wavering in their faith feel defeated.

They're sick at heart with the losses they have sustained and the daily reminders of that loss. Throughout this sermon, the author has dwelt on what the believers have instead, what they have gained through their connection with the son, gains so great as to render the losses insignificant by comparison. Hebrews 12 29 rounds out the paragraph with a fitting image of God as a consuming fire, an image taken from Deuteronomy 4 verse 24, where we read your God is a consuming fire.

This image reinforces the warning of 12:25 and also recalls the warning of chapter 10, verses 26 to 31, where the ingrate faces the prospect of the eager fire ready to consume the adversaries. Hebrews 12 verses 28 to 29 repeats, in a nutshell, the pastoral technique of the author throughout the sermon employed to reinforce his injunction to offer God reverent and pious service and thus to show God the gratitude he merits, namely for the consideration both of the magnitude of his generosity on the one hand and also consideration of the danger of his judgment upon those who respond unjustly toward him and his gifts on the other hand. The author advances his rhetorical goals for the hearers in several important ways in Hebrews 12 4 to 29, complementing the interpretive lens of the athletic competition that he introduced as a framework for thinking about their experiences in 12 1 through 3. The author adds the interpretive lens of God's formative discipline, turning difficult experiences and hardships into proofs of honorable adoption into God's family and opportunities for character formation.

With this lens in place, the author impels the hearers forward to continue to face those experiences head-on as an honorable path to pursue as opposed to a debilitating path. They begin to see that their experiences of hardship reveal God shaping them more than society shaming them. The vision of the heavenly Jerusalem that the author develops is a beckoning invitation to the hearers to continue to draw near and move forward together in the paths of loyalty to Jesus.

There is, in the end, nothing to fear in front of them but only a celebratory welcome into their eternal inheritance. With his final warning and the cosmological rationale for that warning, the author again places before the hearer's eyes very, very clearly what he believes to be the overarching challenge for which the hearers are to prepare themselves and which the hearers dare not fail to meet. It is not the challenge of continuing to get along for the rest of this life in an unsupportive society but it is the challenge of meeting and surviving the eschatological shaking of the heavens and the earth so that one does not share in the fate of the temporary cosmos but rather enters into the eternal home that God has prepared for those who show themselves loyal.

Toward the end of this chapter, the author has returned quite explicitly to his summons to gratitude, the core value that holds together the majority of both his exhortations and his warnings to the hearers seeking to impress upon them that a grateful response to God must guide their deliberations in every circumstance in which they find themselves. As we contemplate how to appropriate this chapter into our own discipleship and the formation of our communities of faith we should be attentive to the ways in which the contents of Hebrews 12 5 to 11 have been criticized by modern scholars and interpreters. Some read this passage as presenting abusive parenting as sanctioned by God or as a warrant for domestic violence or they criticize it for interpreting suffering as deserved punishment.

All of this might be true of the Proverbs text that the author recites, but none of it is true of the author's own application of that text in this passage. The author of Hebrews mutes those aspects of the text of Proverbs that speak of punitive discipline, moving instead in the direction of formative discipline. He also says nothing to suggest that the hardships the hearers experience are their own fault.

These hardships are the result rather of the hostility of sinners of people who are opposed to God and do not yield themselves to God's will. It is essential for both the exegesis and the application of this passage to understand what sufferings the author has in mind. He is not speaking of disease or illness in itself or domestic abuse or poverty or subjection to an oppressive regime.

He is speaking particularly of the censure, insult, abuse, and deprivation suffered and willingly endured by the believers as a result of their association with Jesus and the people of God and as a result of their commitment to remain loyal and obedient to this God's commands. It is problematic to try to apply this passage outside of the author's original pastoral context. This passage offers encouragement, especially to the persecuted church in repressive settings where confession of faith, we're gathering together with a Christian group, and we're shaping one's life after the commandments of God and the demands of the gospel bring people into conflict with their host society.

That's a setting that is very similar to the setting addressed by the author and therefore interpreted with this image of formative discipline by the author. It remains, of course, an encouragement to Christians in any setting whenever doing what God desires means self-denial and embracing difficulties and hardships for the sake of loyal obedience to God. In Hebrews 12, verses 12 to 17, the author gives us another reminder of our responsibilities toward one another in the faith.

He calls us again to push past perhaps the limitations imposed on us by our society's privatization or individualization of religion to continue to discover instead how to invest ourselves in making sure our brothers and sisters do not fall short of God's gifts even as we allow them to help us stay on track and keep moving forward. The example of Esau continues to challenge us in the many contexts in which we might find ourselves trading our birthright as sons and daughters of the living God for what is proportionally a single meal. Esau's example confronts Christians in hostile or repressive nations quite directly, very much again, as the author confronted his own hearers, encouraging them that even decades of life and comfort are nothing compared to holding on to the integrity of one's committed obedience to God.

Thus, giving in in the face, even very serious repression, amounts to selling one's birthright for the equivalent of a single meal. Esau's example, however, also confronts Christians in Western nations where Christianity has largely been tamed to

become a harmless, private, and fundamentally irrelevant religion that can be safely tolerated since it never interferes with business as usual. The author challenges us to ask if we have sold our birthright by buying into domesticated discipleship. Have we fashioned a God who serves our needs when we need him rather than seeking after the God who calls us to serve him and his vision for our community, our nation, and the world? Have we fashioned a savior who loves and tends us but is content to allow us to pursue our own goals and ambitions rather than to pursue his calling upon us to serve his goals? The example of Esau challenges us to ask how often our choices reflect our hunger for God, our love for God, our desires to be God's instruments in this world, and how often our choices show a preference instead for this world's trivial entertainments and pursuits. Finally, the author's elevation of grateful response to God at the end of this chapter suggests to us that gratitude is a core value that has the potential to bring integration to our lives.

The author invests considerable energy in this sermon to make us more and more aware of what we have received from God, replacing our sense of entitlement, our notions that we have earned what we have, our insatiable desire for more of this world's goods or entertainments or distractions with an understanding of how deeply graced, favored, and enriched we have been by God. And he does this to lead us to invest ourselves single-heartedly in making a fair return to God for his generosity. Witness, obedience, service, tending those whom God would have us tend, extending God's reach on God's behalf as God's grateful clients, looking for any opportunity to bring honor to and serve the interests of our great patron.

These things form an agenda that brings integrity to every part of our lives, and a commitment to show gratitude to God becomes the core value that we seek to embody in every situation. We do this both because he deserves no less from us and, as the author reminds us because our God is indeed a consuming fire. The author challenges us to set aside the non-biblical view that salvation is a no-strings-attached gift that we can enjoy while pursuing our own interests over the course of our life and to adopt rather the biblical view that salvation is the final outcome of the ongoing dance between God's favor and beneficence and my responsiveness, honoring God's gifts as God deserves and giving myself over to God's interests as God has given of himself to me.

The God who has given us our lives, our goods, and our eternal hope and the Savior who died for all and was raised on their behalf deserve the full expression of our thanks as we dedicate our own lives to live no longer for ourselves but for Jesus who died on our behalf and was raised up, which Paul himself identifies as Jesus' purpose in dying for us in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 15.