

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS – PART TWELVE

We have recalled a long list of superb examples of faith in Christ in action, through the Old Testament. The list included many very fallible people who messed up their lives and the lives of those around them. What is exciting is that God used them despite their weaknesses, which are not even mentioned in chapter 11 because God no longer remembered their sin, and would not therefore use it, even by way of illustration. Their stories are very different but what they all had in common was faith which listened to what God said and did it however ridiculous it seemed. All of them were acting in the light of the future coming of Jesus whose life, death, resurrection, ascension and indwelling were pictured in the events of their lives. They are to be our inspiration as we live our lives like athletes competing in front of a stadium of spectators, the unseen witnesses of chapter 11. The shouts and cheers of the crowd of Old Testament heroes are to spur us on to the ultimate commitment, in which we happily discard any baggage which might have slowed us down.(12:1)

As we put everything into the race of life, our eyes are to be on Jesus who waits for us at the finishing line. As a matter of fact, He was also at the starting line and ran every inch of the way within us because He is 'the author and perfecter of faith'. His own example of running the race of His life on earth is powerful. He fulfilled in every detail the Father's plan for Him right to the cross when He shouted 'It is finished!'(Jn.19:30). His race was run not before a crowd of supporters, because His friends were a tiny handful, but before a hostile mob who jeered and persecuted Him at every point. He won, and was taken to the right hand of the King like the supreme victor of an ancient Olympic Games.(12:2)

Even the best athlete needs a good trainer, as the best child needs a great father. As the trainer works to bring out the full ability of the athlete and a father the potential of his child, so God is our trainer and Father. To win in a long distance race we need to toughen up. Living life under pressure is the best training available because it is then we will really have to apply faith, by listening to the plan of our Heavenly Trainer and keeping focused on the finishing line. What exactly is the Father's discipline? Does He send adversity in the way of opposition, suffering and disaster? James 1:2-14 makes it quite plain that temptation or trial, which are the same word in Greek, do not come from God. The first two chapters of Job spell out the source of suffering whether from human attack, natural disaster or sickness, as the work of the Devil, not God as Job's friends so wrongly assumed. Discipline is not the infliction of pain but the process of teaching a follower. As parents we need to teach the truth concerning Christ to our children, but the most powerful lesson will be in our own example. Jesus disciplined us by running in front, facing all the adversity first, and encouraging us to follow, always assuring us of His presence and strength as we run after Him. How does the Lord 'reprove' us? According to II Tim.3:16 and 4:2 it happens through the inspired word being preached to us. Jesus did not beat His little group of disciples when He was on earth. He taught and showed them. When a child ignores the father's teaching, what does the father do? He stops the behaviour which is unacceptable by correction using whatever means seems best. How does our Heavenly Father correct us? Again by His word and the process of conviction in our hearts by which He lets us know He is grieved by our rebellion.(Eph.4:30) When the writer of Hebrews talks of how the Lord 'scourges every son whom He receives', what process is he referring to? The two passages being quoted in verses 5 and 6 are Prov.3:11,12, which is talking of disciplining by reproof and Ps.119:75 which is from a Psalm, every verse of which is about the power of the word of God. Some people struggle over the use of the word 'scourge' which is also used to describe the whip with which Jesus was beaten. We talk in English about giving someone a 'tongue-lashing' which is also the image used in Job 5:21, in 'the scourge of the tongue'. God's discipline of us by His word, read or preached,

causes the deep pain of knowing He disapproves of our behaviour while loving us, but beyond it, as soon as we respond by faith, is the joy of being right with Him again. We are therefore encouraged to do this for ourselves first and then each other and by accepting our Heavenly Father straightening us out with His word.(12:3-13)

This process alone will keep us at peace with each other, and unreservedly available to God, not missing out on the wonderful gift of the grace of God. The example of rejecting grace which is used is of Esau, who right back as a hungry young man, chose to pay for a meal from Jacob rather than depend on however God might have provided had he trusted Him. It established in him a determination to earn blessing whether from his earthly father or from God, rather than receive it as a gift. His choice was expressed as a life long bitterness.(12:14-17)

The chapter ends with an expansion of the solemn warning at the end of chapter 10 of the immense seriousness of taking God's holiness lightly. The example used is of the Israelites at Mt Sinai who had to learn of the holiness of God and the huge responsibility to choose His way, which looked forward to the work of Jesus and a better covenant and sacrifice. The alternative is the terrible judgement of God on those who finally reject Him. Only one sacrifice is needed, our thanksgiving for the gracious gift of Jesus.(12:18-29)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Identify all the ways in which living by faith is pictured as being like an athlete running a race. How does each one help us to understand the secret of Christian living? How did the heroes of faith in chapter 11 also demonstrate a long distance race? What were the most impressive features of the way Jesus ran the race of His life on earth? How do they relate to our own lives?(verses 1,2)
2. What pictures of fathers bringing up their children are used to illustrate the role of a good trainer in preparing an athlete? How do they apply to us? What means does God use to discipline us? Does God cause bad things to happen to us to punish us? How does He use adversity to train us?(verses 3-11)
3. How does God's discipline seem painful at the time but joyful later? How can we strengthen our hands and knees and straighten our paths, and help others to do the same?(verses 12,13)
4. How can living the race of life by faith change our relationship with those around us and make us useful to God? When and why did Esau miss out of the grace of God? How did it affect the rest of his life? What can we learn from him?(verses 14-17)
5. How did God discipline His people when He met them at Mt Sinai? What was He teaching them which He also wants to teach us? At which mountain do we meet God and on what basis? What is the alternative to a life of faith according to this passage? How are we to come to an absolute certainty about the outcome of our race of life?(verses 18-29)