



International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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Hebrews 12:14-29 **New Revised Standard Version** **November 19, 2017**

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, November 19, 2017**, is from **Hebrews 12:14-29** (some may only study **Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29**). **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Lessons Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

(Hebrews 12:14) Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12 begins by telling believers in Jesus to discipline themselves so they can obey God (run the race set before them); they are to keep their eyes on Jesus and the forever relationship they can have with Him as they patiently keep on keeping on. Then, Hebrews says that if we do not discipline ourselves that God, who is our Father, will discipline us because He loves us. Now, Hebrews turns our attention to some of the moral and spiritual qualities we need to see God, while warning us that we face many dangers and temptations in this life that if we fall into can have lasting consequences.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Making peace requires effort, and the letters to the Hebrews and the Romans tell us to make the effort to live in peace with everyone. Living in peace and making the effort takes practice that can become a quality of our character that others recognize, even our enemies. But as Paul wrote to the Romans, that may not be possible for us to do with everyone we meet. If it is up to us, making and keeping the peace is a proper goal. However, we must not try to keep peace with everyone by compromising the gospel of Jesus Christ or disregarding even in a small way the moral and spiritual requirements that God has set before us in the Bible. Our goal must be peace with holiness (moral and spiritual purity) or peace and holiness. We must not

disregard holiness to achieve peace. We cannot be at peace with someone (or remain at peace within ourselves) if we break any of God's laws to maintain peace with someone. Seeking to live in holiness in the presence of the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit is far more important than seeking to live in peace with everyone, because without holiness no one will see the Lord or have a lasting, meaningful relationship with God.

(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, and through it many become defiled.

Bitterness or resentment can begin in many ways, from not getting our own selfish way to suffering as the target of unjust slanderous lies spread by someone in our own church. If we do not turn from bitterness toward someone, it will cause us and others trouble; so, we pray for others, forgive them, and ask God to help us love them (which does not mean we need to become their friends, but it does mean we need to pray they will make any changes that are necessary, God being their helper). Grace is unmerited favor. God showed us unmerited favor when we came to trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We can show unmerited favor toward those who like us do not deserve it, so they may come to trust and obey Jesus too. If we cannot maintain peace and holiness with them, we can still pray for them and for ourselves and any bitterness that we need removed.

(Hebrews 12:16) See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Paul wrote: "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want" (Galatians 5:16-17). Sexual immorality also conflicts with holiness, and the Holy Spirit will never endorse or lead anyone into sexual immorality. Esau gratified the desires of his flesh when because of hunger and without thinking of the consequences he sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Because he was godless, he naturally practiced following his emotional desires rather than sound reason. When believers commit sins, their temptations overcome their reason and intention to live in holiness; they do not follow the Holy Spirit but follow the desires of their flesh; therefore, they temporarily act in godless ways. The consequences in this life for believers if they even temporarily follow the flesh can lead to results similar to those Esau suffered; so, the writer warns his readers to not for a moment turn from holiness to a sinful practice.

(Hebrews 12:17) 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 tearfully wanted the blessing of Isaac, his father, as well as the inheritance or birthright he had sold to Jacob. He had disregarded his birthright, and then he lost his blessing through Jacob's trickery. As one who was godless, he did not have the moral or spiritual resources to keep his birthright or rightly use his blessing. Even though he wept, he could not change what he and Jacob had done. Jacob fled the wrath of his brother because he had tricked him; therefore, it seems Esau received all his father's material inheritance that Jacob had left behind. But spiritually, Jacob received the blessing of Isaac, and God blessed him with an abundance of material possessions. He also became an ancestor of the Messiah. Unhappily, Esau continued to hate his brother, and he became filled with bitterness toward him. When he learned that Jacob was returning home, he gathered an army to destroy him (see again Hebrews 12:14). But Jacob (whose name God had changed to Israel, meaning "Triumphant with God") had eventually come to pursue holiness and peace; therefore, by grace Israel was able to make peace with his brother. The writer warns us against thinking shortsightedly as Esau did, but by God's grace through Jacob/Israel reconciliation and peace was achieved between the two brothers (see Genesis 25-37).

(Hebrews 12:18) You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,

The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* now describes the experience of the Hebrews in the wilderness with Moses. They came to the foot of the mountain, Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments. They had the ability to physically touch the mountain, but Moses warned them that if they did touch the mountain they would die (see Exodus 19:12). When God descended on the mountain to talk with Moses the people became frightened because the sight was so dramatic and terrifying, involving a blazing fire, darkness, gloom, a tempest, and a trumpet blast.

(Hebrews 12:19) and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

The people were so afraid of God that they did not want God to speak to them directly or face-to-face. They wanted Moses to be the mediator between God and themselves. They wanted Moses to tell them what God expected of them and wanted from them. From what they saw and heard, they learned that God existed, was holy, and powerful. Fear of God inspired them to obey God; still, they disobeyed God and rebelled against God almost immediately afterwards. Fear did not motivate them to obey God as they ought, and obeying out of fear for their lives did not lead to a lasting obedience or obedience with the right motive (the right motive is love for God).

(Hebrews 12:20) (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.”)

Here, the writer explained his meaning and referred to the Old Testament (Exodus 19:13) to prove his argument. For the early Christians, and all Christians since the time of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament is the authoritative Word of God that Jesus came to fulfill and will completely fulfill after He comes again. Therefore, Christians study both the Old Testament and New Testament as the inspired Scriptures and to learn how these Scriptures teach about Jesus Christ and how we can live for God (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). God expected His people to consider the mountain holy because of His spiritual presence; therefore, no person and not even an animal was permitted to touch the mountain. He expected them to obey Him so perfectly that they would enforce His law by executing the penalty for breaking His law. God would not do for His people what He expected them to do. God could, and probably did because He loves His creation, keep wild animals from wandering close to His holy mountain. God expected His people to watch over and restrain their domestic animals from coming near and touching the mountain. Perhaps His people could not endure the order because they did not choose to properly look after or restrain their domestic animals and some of them died. (Just as they disobeyed God on the Sabbath when He first sent them manna in the wilderness.)

(Hebrews 12:21) Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”)

Moses and the people experienced firsthand a manifestation of the holiness of God and learned about the obedience and reverence our holy God deserves. Since this quotation of Moses is not recorded in the Old Testament, it may have been handed down by word of mouth and became a part of the tradition about Moses on the mountain. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews to record this tradition to show that the Hebrews in the time of Moses had good reasons to fear God because of His holiness, since even Moses trembled in fear before God when he first met God at the burning bush (when Moses received the commission to go to Pharaoh to demand that Pharaoh free God’s people from slavery and let God’s people go to serve God) and when he ascended the mountain at God’s command in the sight of the freed Hebrews.

(Hebrews 12:22) 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,

Unlike what Moses and the Hebrews saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears, and what was so terrifying for them, Christians have come to Mount Zion instead of Mount Sinai. When reading about Mount Zion, readers might have first thought of

Jerusalem in Israel, until the writer explains that he means “the heavenly Jerusalem.” Today, believers in Jesus gather spiritually with “innumerable angels,” and we find true joy in worshiping God as at a festival or party. Some interpreters identify Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem with the true, invisible Church of Jesus Christ on earth. When the Church of Jesus Christ gathers for worship, believers join with “innumerable angels” in the worship of God.

(Hebrews 12:23) 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,

Jesus Christ is the “firstborn,” the only begotten Son of God, and the “firstborn” to be raised from the dead and receive a glorified, resurrected human body. The “assembly of the firstborn” is the “assembly of Jesus Christ,” believers who gather around Him and in His name. Christians who love and follow Jesus Christ assemble or gather with other believers here on earth and in heaven. When we come to Jesus by grace through faith and trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are “enrolled in heaven” (for example, think of going to be enrolled as a student in a school). To be “enrolled in heaven,” we must comply with the standards or requirements to be enrolled, which is faith in Jesus Christ, He enrolls us. The “spirits of the righteous made perfect or holy” are those Christians in heaven who have gone before us. They lived on earth “righteous” in Christ Jesus, because He guided and empowered them. Jesus Christ is the One who forgives sin and cleanses from sin the “righteous” in Him, which is part of the way He makes believers “perfect.” God, “the judge of all” approves our enrollment in heaven and the work of Jesus in making believers perfect in heaven.

(Hebrews 12:24) and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

God is “the judge of all,” and Jesus is our living mediator in heaven; the only mediator between God, “the judge of all,” and ourselves as “the assembly of the firstborn.” Whereas Moses represented the old covenant with its laws and sacrifices, Jesus established a new covenant that leads believers to works of faith, hope, and love – not works motivated by fear of punishment for disobeying a law. Abel died a martyr’s death for his faith; he did not choose to die. Jesus lived faithfully in obedience to God and chose to die for sinners, and Jesus’ sacrificial death enables God to justly forgive and cleanse believers from all sin.

(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!

In the Bible and through the Holy Spirit, the living God, the judge of all, is speaking to us and warning us from heaven. Just as we have a better covenant and can gather spiritually with others in heaven — though we cannot see them with our physical or mental eyes or imagination — so we want to always trust and obey Jesus Christ. Jesus warned people about the consequences of sin while He preached on earth and God still warns us from heaven. Just as the disobedient Hebrews did not escape God’s discipline when they wandered in the wilderness and could not enter the Promised Land, so we will not escape if we reject Jesus Christ and refuse faithful obedience to Him.

(Hebrews 12:26) 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 heaven.”

When God spoke to Moses and the Hebrews from Mount Sinai, the earth shook. When Jesus Christ comes again the earth will shake once more (and also the heavens). Heavens may mean the area where airplanes and spacecraft fly and also the area where demonic principalities and powers abide. Jesus will defeat death and all His enemies, physical and spiritual, human and demonic.

(Hebrews 12:27) This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Though we are created beings living on a created planet in a created universe in space and time, some day we will live where our surroundings cannot be shaken. Earthquakes can destroy property and lives, and the ruined areas can be rebuilt, hopefully stronger, but they can be shaken again. After the old creation is removed, the new heaven and earth will never be shaken. Paul wrote: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22).

(Hebrews 12:28) 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;

In contrast to life in the Promised Land, those who trust in Jesus Christ receive a kingdom that Jesus said, “is not of this world.” When we consider what it means to live in “this world,” we have even more reason to give thanks to Jesus Christ for all He has done for us. Moreover, we have good reasons to love God and worship God through Christ in ways acceptable to God. We should come to God with respect for His holiness and in true amazement that He loves us and saves us from our sins and sins’ eternal consequences. Understanding this about God should move us to love Him more and

more, and move us to want to do everything He says to bring happiness to Him and others.

(Hebrews 12:29) for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Our God is a consuming fire; therefore, if contemplating the gracious love and forgiving Spirit of God in Jesus Christ will not move us to repentance, to love for God and neighbor, to faith, and obedience to God; then, we need to contemplate what it may mean for God to become a “consuming fire” for us. Perhaps fear of God and the consequences of disobedience will lead us to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, to faith in Jesus Christ, to ever deepening love for God and Jesus Christ, and to changing our ways of living to a walking in holiness of thought and life.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How does the writer describe the experience of those who came to God in the time of Moses under the old covenant?
2. How does the writer describe the experience of those who come to God since the coming of Jesus Christ under the new covenant?
3. What does the writer say that should make believers think of heaven as a happy place?
4. How does the writer warn people not to reject Jesus?
5. Read Hebrews 12:28 again. How should believers approach God? Why?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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