

Chapter 12

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.

Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

For ye are come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (for they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake.)

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth; but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.

And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which

cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.

Commentary

Chapter 12 begins "Wherefore..." indicting that the following words are a conclusion based on the previous declarations.

The heroes of Israel's history gained a good report with God, but failed to receive "the promise." Still, they pressed ever forward, trusting that God would, without fail, keep His word. As they waited for the culmination of Abraham's promises and the return of Christ, it would have been easy - given the torture and death such faith often incurred - to give up.

Chapter 12 was an encouragement to the first Century Hebrew believers that the promise was still good. God would not allow one "jot or tittle" of His word to remain unfinished. The forefathers did not give up, and neither should they.

But, the message of these verses is universal. It has application for every believer. So, while it is obvious that the exhortation was meant for first century Hebrews who were still looking forward to "the promise," the author turned his (and our) attention to the "race of faith."

{ 1 } - *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,*

First Century Christians were under Roman domination, and Rome was highly influenced by Greek culture. So, the author exhorted his readers by using a very Greek simile. He reached into the Greek games and used the language of a competitive athlete. When Greek runners would train they would tie weights to their ankles. Then, when the weights were removed, it felt like they were running on air. So, the author admonished believers to do the same thing.

First, he said, consider the great "cloud of witnesses" who refused to succumb. Consider their faith in the face of danger and peril. Think about how they pressed forward, advancing toward the promise. And, just as a Greek athlete ran in the Coliseum, surrounded by onlookers, each generation of faithful disciples is encircled by their predecessors, witnessing the race and cheering them on.

Second, lay aside the weights. Remove every hindrance that would slow your progress. Set aside every encumbrance and run for all your worth. And, what is that hindrance when it comes to the race of faith? The sin that so easily besets us. And, what sin gets to us so easily? Unbelief.

It is easy to look at the world and forget who is running it. It is easy to sense that life is dragging on as it always has. It is easy to ignore the finish line and sit down beside the track; swigging Gatorade and watching the runners go by. The flesh gets tired - flesh is weak. It is easy to view the Word academically and forget to apply it. It is easy to get caught up in the "cares of this world" to the exclusion of eternal truth. It is easy to get weary of ducking Satan's darts and become an easy target.

Whatever it is that encumbers your faith - cast it off! Lay it aside. Put it off like a competitor casts off his ankle weights - and, run!

The word "patience" in this verse is more accurately translated "endurance." Runners who finish marathons are not simply "patient," waiting for the race to end. They battle their own bodies, fight their own fatigue, brace themselves against the pain, and "endure" the race.

That's how believers ought to be.

Faith calls for endurance. Life is not easy, and it is not always pleasant. As we battle against sin our bodies rebel and our wills become fatigued.

But, run. Stay in the race. Look toward the finish line.

{2} - Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Christ is the finish line. At His return, we will be changed. At His return, Israel will be redeemed. At His return, our faith will be rewarded and the things we hoped for become fact. But, He is more than the finish. He is also the start. We began this "race that is set before us" because Christ called us into it. He began our faith and He will finish our faith.

I take great comfort in knowing that Christ is "the author and finisher of faith." By the way, the KJV translators added the word "our," it is not in the original text. Christ is much more than the author of "our" faith. He is the originator, sustainer, and completion of faith - all faith - wherever and whenever you find it. My faith rests in Him, and He sustains my faith. The faith of Abraham began in Christ and remains as an example because of Christ. The faith that is "counted for

righteousness" is a gift of grace, authored by Christ and sustained all the way to Heaven because the author is unchanging and faithful.

Feeling low? Feeling fatigued? Ready to quit?

Look to Him. He started this race and He placed you in it. And, He spilled His blood to guarantee that you will endure all the way to the finish line. That is the only way to run this race. You must keep your eyes on the One who authored it and who will finish your race of faith.

You are going to make it. That's a promise. Keep running.

And, Christ is our example. He kept His eye on the prize. He knew the joy that was set before Him. He knew that His Father was going to restore Him to the glory that He had before the world began (John 17:5). Looking forward, faithfully trusting in God's promise to raise Him from the dead – "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption" (Ps.16:10) - Jesus endured the cross. He suffered humiliation as men of mere dust smote Him, spit on Him, plucked out His beard, drove thorns into His brow, stripped the flesh from His back, and drove nails through Him. But, today He sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Today, it was all worth it.

And, if we can see that our Master endured such affliction on our account, we can run with endurance and suffer the pain of this life. A million years into eternity, it will all have been worth it.

{3} - For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

Was there ever a greater contradiction than the Creator of all things allowing His creatures to destroy His body? The God of Ages - the ever-living One – died! The God who could not be contained in the expanse of the universe was found in the womb of a Jewish virgin, raised as a human being, tried by members of His own creation and attached to piece of wood. The One who said, "Let there be," and everything sprang into existence, stood dumb, like a sheep before his shearers, when evil men held Him in account.

The Son who existed eternally in perfect communion, face to face with God, cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Father turned His back on His Son. God punished God. What a contradiction. The Holy One of Ages fell into the hands of angry sinners, and though He could have called down legions of angels to destroy every breathing thing on planet earth, He suffered their ridicule and died under their scorn.

My point?

The servant is no better than his master. So, the next time the race seems too difficult and you are ready to give up, when your faith is thin and the trials of life are overwhelming, consider the contradictions. Then, pick up your head. Get on your feet. Get back in the race. And, look to the One who finished ahead of you and has promised you - as the "finisher" - that you are going to join Him at the finish line.

On your mark. Get set. Run.

So, to quickly recap: Consider the cloud of witnesses. Some were tortured, some were mocked and scourged, and some were put into bonds and imprisoned. Others were stoned or torn in two, were put to the test and slain with a sword. Some were homeless and destitute of the world's goods, wearing animal skins and living in caves, mountains and deserts. They were destitute and they were afflicted. Still, the world was not worthy to have such faithful men in its midst.

Despite their "good report," they died in faith looking forward to "the promise." "God," said the author, "having some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." Seeing that this great audience of witnesses is observing from their Heavenly grandstands, we need to run the race of faith that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the author and finisher of faith. He endured a greater shame and underwent a greater torture, at the hand of men and God, than any of the forefathers. Still, His heart was set toward the joy that would be His when He had accomplished all that He had come to do. So, when this race gets tough, we are to look to Him and fashion our confidence after His, enduring the struggle and keeping our eyes fastened on the joy that is set before us.

Now, to the first century audience, and in keeping with the context, the prize they (and we) must look forward to is "the promise," the return of Christ when everyone who shares the faith of Abraham will be "made perfect." Just as Christ endured the "contradiction of sinners against himself" for the joy that was set before Him, we must endure the hardships and trials of our own race while looking for the joy that is set before us. But, how much should we endure? How much is enough? When do we have the right to cry out against God and say that we have endured all we can stand?

{4} - *Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.*

That is how far Christ went. In His triumph against sin, He prayed until His sweat poured from His brow like great drops of blood. Then His captives beat Him bloody. His blood dripped down His thorn-pierced brow. His back bled under the jagged flogging straps. His hands and feet bled from the nails, and His side bled from the Centurion's spear.

So, adjured the author, until you have given your all and bled for your faith, refusing to deny your Lord and accepting His sovereign providence, you still have no place to complain. God has not yet treated you the way He treated His Son.

Now, a point of theology: This race of faith is more than just an intellectual assent to ideas and notions about God. It is more than just having faith that Jesus paid for all our sins and we are now free to live a carefree life. The race we are commanded to run trusts Christ's finished atonement, but also strives against sin. And, that striving never ceases until we are perfected.

Meanwhile, if we are prone to complain against our lot in life (and, who isn't?), we need to remember our relationship to our Heavenly Father.

{5} - *And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:*

That's a verse from the life of Job.

“Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth; therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty. For he maketh sore, and bindeth up; he woundeth, and his hands make whole.” (Job 5:17-18)

If any man knew the chastening hand of God, it was Job. Yet, Job was never out of God's hand or out of His protection. Job endured the test and was restored more than he lost. But, the key to understanding the story of Job is knowing that Job endured his trials for the glory of God. Too often we think that God gets glory solely by blessing His people. But, He also gets glory from testing His people,

“...that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 1:7)

The great promise of these verses is that God not only tries us, but He binds us up. He may bring trouble, but He also brings comfort. He may bring a temptation, but He also brings the escape.

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” (1st Cor.10:13)

{6} - For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

Now, here is a tough verse to wrap our theology around. The current wave of mushy "God is Love" folk never preach on this one. I must admit that I was even taken aback the first time I bumped into this notion. But, as I have grown older and raised children, I have come to understand it. Let me convey it by way of some humor.

Jeff Foxworthy recently said that he was having trouble with his little kids because the "experts" on child rearing no longer advocate spanking. In its place, they advocate "time out." "When I was growing up," says Jeff, "time out meant my dad was going to take time out of his busy day to come over and whup us."

There's a lot of truth in that. What the current "experts" are missing is that sometimes love requires drastic action. And, only a parent who loves his child will take "time out of his busy day" to correct that child. A parent who is loveless does not care and will let the kid wander straight down the path of destruction.

Now, apply that to God. I assume He's busy. Not meaning to be trite, I figure that being Lord over everything is a very consuming task. But, even as He is keeping the stars burning, the worlds turning, the seasons repeating, the animals eating and Satan at bay, God Almighty takes the time to reach down and involve Himself in the details of one, single sinner's life.

Isn't that something? How great a love is that? From the throne of absolute majesty, from the splendor of eternal glory, the only self-sufficient, omnipotent One takes the time to correct His beloved children. I have come to cherish that fact. After all, if He did not correct me, it would be proof that He really did not care.

{7} - If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?

I am a dad. I have two young kids. I chasten my kids. I do it for their own good. I do it because I love them. I do it because they are my kids. I do not expect anyone else to take that responsibility and I would be highly upset if anyone else ever laid a hand on them. That is because they are my kids. I love them. No one else can correct them with the amount of love with which I correct them.

Apply that to God. The proof that we are His children is the fact that He loves us enough to chasten us for our own good.

{8} - But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

There is a certain universality to Christian chastisement. As we are conformed into the image of Christ, those things that are an offense must be chipped away. God never promised to pay for our sins and then leave us to our own devices. He bought us with a price and now He is refining His precious property.

And, if you have not undergone the process of God-given trials, you are not in the family. It's a plain and simple, axiomatic fact – God chastens those He loves. If you have not been under the thumb of His correction, you are simply not His child.

{9} - Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?

There is that dad-type comparison. My dad loved me. I am very fortunate that way. And, my dad spanked me, corrected me, punished me and set me on the right path, over and over again. I love my dad. He died a few years ago and I miss him more than words can say. His punishments were no deterrent to my love for him. His correction kept me out of jail. His loving discipline made me a good student and an honest son. I look back and thank God that I had such a dad.

Apply that to God. I have a Heavenly Father who also corrects me and sets me on the right path. How much more do I love and reverence the Father who kept me from Hell? His loving discipline made me a student of His word and a faithful son. I thank God continually that I have such a Father.

{10} - For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.

Our earthly dads chastened us after their own set of values and in accordance with their own level of tolerance. I know, now that I am a dad, that sometimes my kids get punished because they deserve it and sometimes they fall under my discipline because I am worn out and my fuse is short.

But, God always chastens us for our profit. We learn spiritual truths when we are under His disciplinary hand. I once heard a man declare, "I never learned anything really important when I was comfortable." Hard lessons are the ones we remember. And, the end result of God's plan for His children is that we learn

to avoid the pitfalls, resist "the sin which doth so easily beset us," and look to Him for our deliverance.

I know I pray more when I am in trouble. I look to Him with much more urgency when I need His help. I yearn for His fellowship much more when I am under His discipline. And, if I have figured that out about myself, I am sure He has, too. God's goal is to draw us to Himself and perfect out faith through trials.

An old preacher told me once, "It's one thing to stop banging your head against the wall because it hurts --- it's another thing to figure out where the wall is." Man, it took a long time to learn what that meant. But, I think it means that it is one thing to obey God because we know He is going to discipline us. But, it is another thing to stop courting the temptation and follow the path of holiness.

{ 11 } - Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

I am certain that Christ hated the time He spent under His Father's wrath. But, He concentrated on the joy that would be His when His redeemed people would be gathered to Him in eternity. I know I hated it when my dad would reach the boiling point and his belt would come off. But, I learned to watch my mouth, obey my mom, clean my room and not lie.

Sometimes God decides that the only way to get Jim's attention is the hard way. But, age and experience have taught me to endure and look to Him as my sufficiency. Every time I trust in my ability to make money, He breaks the bank. Every time my pride rises up, He drops me like a bad habit. Every time I think I'm something special, He wrecks my health. Little by little, I am figuring out where the wall is.

May I share one last story with you? You preachers will relate. I had been invited to preach at a little church for a series of weeks. I was nervous the first few times, but it got easier as the relationship developed between the congregation and me. One week I really studied up. I had extra time to do research. I made copious notes and practiced my oratory skills. Boy, were they in for a great Sunday morning! I walked to the pulpit full of self-assurance and grandiose purpose. But, when I got there, I was all alone. God opted to leave me to myself. If there is a catalog of "worst preaching moments" in Heaven, I'm on the list. I was so sure of myself I left out the most important element of preaching God's word --- God.

I am thankful that He gave me more opportunities. I am thankful that my Heavenly Father chastises and teaches us. I am happy that He loves us enough to take time out of His infinite responsibilities to correct His children. I am

overwhelmed that our Abba-father sits on the throne in Heaven and is enthroned in our hearts. These days I long for the "peaceable fruits of righteousness."

{12} - Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees;

Now, it is also good to remember the larger context. The overarching subject of the last two chapters has been faith, by which the forefathers obtained a good report. They believed that God would keep the Abrahamic promise, which they all died without attaining. So, likewise, the first century Hebrew converts were to exercise a similar faith, until both "they" (the forefathers) and "us" (the New Covenant believers) were "made perfect." Chastening at the hand of God was part of the "perfecting" process. Perfection had yet to be attained, hence "the promise" had yet to be attained.

The author's Hebrew audience would be familiar with the words of Isaiah 35. Just as Jeremiah 31 - which he quoted at length - was rich with promises of God's faithfulness to Israel, Isaiah 35 is right in the middle of some of Israel's most profound and wonderful promises of restoration and redemption, as well as God's certain judgment on their enemies.

So, the author started with, "lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees". That phrase would draw them back to Isaiah's own exhortation –

“Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees, say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you.” (Is. 35:3-4)

Lift up those sad, defeated hands. Raise them toward Heaven. And, stand on your own two feet, even if your knees are shaking. Rise up. Gather your faith and look toward God.

{13} - And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.

And, start walking! Walk the "straight and narrow path", paving a way for those who will come behind you. As you blaze the "straight paths" you become a guide to those who are less stable, less courageous. But, rather than their inability turning them out of the path, the straight, level, firm path helps them keep on track.

Again, the author paralleled the flow of Isaiah's sentiments –

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” (Is.35:5-6)

So, forge a straight path that even the lame can traverse. Then, rather than being lost or unable to complete the journey, healing and restoration will occur.

{14} - Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

Despite the abuse the First Century Church took at the hands of murderous authorities, the author reminded them to "follow peace." That is one of the most remarkable aspects of genuine Christianity. Rather than rise up in rebellion against the evil generations, we are instructed to seek peace, knowing that God will recompense both our enemies and us. Only men who are convinced of God's absolute sovereignty are able to seek peace with those who despise them.

Paul advised, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21) And, that is the key. Not only must we "follow peace," but we must also follow "holiness," or goodness. We must exhibit the behavior that befits people of our estate. As children of the King, we act as emissaries of the "Prince of Peace." Our lives are an open epistle of those things we believe. As "separated" (or sanctified) people, we are in the world, but not of the world.

As God chastens us, cutting away the rough edges and conforming us to the image of His Son, we are to lift up our tired, ragged, fleshly bodies, raise our shaky hands and walk on our knocking knees, pursuing the holiness that only faithful people ever attain.

And, let me take one last second to encourage the "sinners saved by grace" out there. "Holiness," in this context, does not mean "personal perfection." We will never reach absolute sinlessness on this side of glory. What it means is, "to be separated to God for His exclusive use." Without that attitude of surrender, taking sides with God against ourselves, we will never see the One who sits in eternal splendor.

Oh, and to follow the Isaiah parallel –

“And, an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it...” (Is.35:8a)

{15} - Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

Let's first look at what this verse does not say. I've heard preachers use this verse to imply that we may fall out of God's grace. But, the context says something quite different. Inasmuch as grace is essentially "unmerited favor" or "unearned kindness," then our actions or sins (which were removed at Calvary) cannot remove us from the gracious love of God. If we did not deserve it in the first place, our lack of merit cannot cause Him to give up on us. So, this verse is not saying that we are to exercise diligence in order to maintain our standing under God's grace.

Rather, what this verse is saying is that as we seek to live peacefully with all men and live a sanctified life, we are an example of the kindness of God. Just as we do not deserve His gracious dealing with us, we demonstrate that grace in our dealings with our enemies. So, we are to look diligently - pay attention - to how we act and behave. We are examples to all men, light in a dark world. And, all men ought to see the grace of God in us.

But, there is also a larger aspect to these words. The author was admonishing the Church to watch closely the type of people with whom they fellowshiped. The body, at large, must also maintain a sanctified, separated character. And, if any bitter person were to rise up in the body there was the danger of infecting others.

It is easy for me to imagine that the first century church would become bitter. Living under the persecution of Emperors like Nero or Domitian, it would be easy to let hate well up. As they watched their loved ones being tortured it would be easy to let bitterness take hold. But, that reaction is never befitting Christians who know the power and kindness of God.

Again, people who know they are beloved by the single, most powerful Being in the universe do not need to defend themselves. They know that God will reward their patience and judge the offenders.

So, the exhortation is - Lift up your hands, walk in straight paths, seek peace with everyone and demonstrate holiness. Watch closely to see that you are a testament to the grace of God rather than allowing bitterness to bring shame and ridicule to the name of Christ. And, watch that no angry, ungracious person infiltrates the body and defiles the church.

{ 16 } - Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

The church body is also defiled by any fornicator. A person who will not turn from sexual sin is at variance with God, rebelling against His clear dictates. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, uses sexual purity as a simile for spiritual purity. When Israel chased after strange gods, it was likened to

"whoring" or chasing illicit lovers. The church is betrothed to Christ as a "chaste virgin." (2Cor. 11:2) So, controlling the fleshly urges is more than just an arbitrary command, it typifies our relationship with our Bridegroom.

And, we need to watch diligently for "profane" people. It's interesting how our notion of "profanity" has changed over the years. Now we think of profanity as "dirty words." But, it's much deeper than that. According to the Bible, the root of profanity is the inability to discern the things of God. For instance, Esau was Isaac's firstborn and should have received the Abrahamic birthright blessing from his father. But, in order to satisfy his flesh, he was willing to give away the blessing as though it were worthless. He traded his lineage for pottage. That, says the author, is truly "profane."

{17} - For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

And, sure enough, when Esau went in to Isaac to receive his inheritance, it had already been promised to his younger brother. The hands had been laid, the words had been spoken, and the birthright had been passed on. Esau begged and pleaded with his father, but no amount of regret could reverse his state.

So, watch for such people. Give diligence to root out those who do not cherish the things of God or who would trade "the promise" of salvation for the things of this world. Mark people who treat the things of God as worthless.

The church is a "separated" people, called out for God's exclusive use. Both the corporate body and the individuals who make up the body are instructed to live peaceful, holy lives.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto god, which is your reasonable service. And, be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Rom.12:1-2)

Now, lest the author's exhortation began to sound legalistic, he reminded his audience that they were not under the yoke of Moses' commands, but recipients of grace – a much higher calling that ought rightly to achieve a much higher standard.

{18-21} - For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which

voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more. (For they could not endure that which was commanded, and if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart. And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said,) exceedingly fear and quake.)

Three months after leaving Egypt the Hebrew forefathers gathered in the wilderness of Sinai. There, God called Moses up onto Mt. Sinai and spelled out the conditions of the covenant He would establish in that place. The people answered, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." (Ex. 19:8)

Then, God decided to demonstrate His choice of Moses. He told Moses to instruct the people to wash their clothes and be ready, because on the third day the Lord would come down upon Mt. Sinai in the sight of all the people. But, there were ground rules. No one could go up into the mountain, or even touch the border of it, or they would be put to death - stoned or shot through with a dart. It did not matter if it was man or beast.

So, Moses instructed the children of Israel and they got ready. They washed, they refrained from sex, they set boundaries around the bottom of the mountain, and on the third day there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud descended. There was also the sound of a trumpet, so loud that all the people trembled with fear. Then, as the smoke got darker and thicker, God came down as fire and the whole mount quaked. The trumpet got louder and louder. God spoke and called Moses up onto the mount. But, once Moses got up into the cloud, God instructed him to hurry back down and instruct the people not to try to break through to gaze on God and perish. So, Moses went back down to the people and returned with his brother Aaron.

When Moses and Aaron returned to the mountainside, God spoke the words that have ever after been called "The Ten Commandments." But, when the people below saw the lightning, heard the thunder, heard the trumpet and knew the threat of instant death, they distanced themselves, moving away from the mountain. When Moses came down, they requested that he speak to them and tell them what God had said, "But let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Ex. 20:19)

Moses replied, "Fear not; for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not." Then, he turned and headed back up into the darkness. But, according to the author, the scene was so fearsome that even Moses quaked at the sight.

The good news in all this is that the author was setting up another one of his contrasts. As he pointed out, speaking to his audience of faithful believers, "ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched..." Mt. Sinai was an earthly,

physical locale where God descended with the law that would convict, condemn and hold guilty. But fortunately, men and women of faith are imputed a righteousness from above and are not held in fear by the thundering, quaking, trumpeting law of Sinai.

{22} - *But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels.*

As the author started winding toward the close of his epistle, he drew one of his most expansive contrasts. In one quick turn of a phrase he swept across the panorama of Hebrew history and drew his audience into his magnificent conclusion.

The contrasts between Christ and angels, Christ and Moses, Christ and the Aaronic priesthood, Christ and animal sacrifices, and faith in Christ verses confidence in the endless succession of fleshly works, culminates in a contrast between the Old and the New Covenant.

However, I would like to take a moment to clarify these terms. In order to avoid confusion, we must identify some specific agreements that God established at specific times. The Hebrews author went to pains to lay out what has come to be called "The Abrahamic Covenant" in the sixth chapter –

“For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee...wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.”

That is NOT the Old Covenant. That is NOT the covenant that was done away with by the arrival of the New Covenant. The author was very specific about what that eclipsed Old Covenant was. It was the one established at Mt. Sinai. It was the one that Moses brought down from the mountain. It was the one that engulfed the people in terror. THAT is the Old Covenant which believers are "not come unto..."

The onset of the Sinai law neither diminished nor did away with the Abrahamic Covenant. As the Apostle Paul explained -

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ;

that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” (Gal. 3:13-14)

Paul started by stating that we have been redeemed - purchased, bought and paid for - by Christ's vicarious death. The Sinaitic law promised death to everyone who broke it, but Christ took that curse of death on our behalf. The result of that redemptive work was that the Gentiles were able to participate in the blessing that was promised to Abraham - to wit: righteousness in exchange for faith. Paul continued -

“Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto.” (Gal. 3:15)

Making clear that he was constructing a simile, he declared that even covenants established between two men, once they were confirmed, could not be done away with or added to. A covenant is a covenant, and it must be fulfilled. So, what was the spiritual/historic significance of Paul's example? -

“Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” (Gal.3:16)

God formed an immutable covenant with Abraham. And, the promises that made up the content of that covenant were promised not only to Abraham, but to his seed. That distinct descendant - the particular, singular seed - is Christ. But, to address our question, is that Abrahamic covenant promise still in effect, or has it been swept aside along with the Old Covenant?

“And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.” (Gal.3:17)

Nope! The advent and eradication of the law had no effect whatsoever on the Abrahamic Covenant. Why? Because the promise that was made in the time of Abraham, with Abraham's heirs as participants, was made "in Christ." The Abrahamic covenant was a matter of inheritance. It was promised to the families that Abraham sired. And, the law could not interfere with that flow of generational promises. It had Christ as its surety.

“For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise.” (Gal. 3:18)

I have contended several times that the covenant God struck with Abraham was "unconditional." In fact, Abraham was asleep when the "two immutable things, in

which it was impossible for God to lie" passed through the severed animals. Paul used that premise as the basis of this statement.

The law, on the other hand, was completely conditional. It said, "Do and live - fail and die." So, Paul argued that if the law could effect the inheritance promised to Abraham's seed, then it was no longer based on God's immutable promise. But, Paul emphatically stated, "God gave it to Abraham by promise."

So, if the law had no effect on, and added no conditions to, the Abrahamic Covenant, what was its purpose?

“Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Gal. 3:19)

It was added because of Israel's rebellious, stiff-necked attitude. It was added to Israel because of their sin. But, did it do away with the promise? Absolutely not! The law only survived "till the seed (Christ) should come to whom the promise was made."

So, let me summarize. Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection were the culmination of God's promise to Abraham. Through Christ, all the blessings and promises would be fulfilled. And, to whom would those promises be fulfilled? To Israel, of course. They were the specific "heirs of the promise." But God did not limit the blessings to Israel. He "in-grafted" Gentiles, as well. As Paul pointed out, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ."

God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the lineage through whom Christ would come. And, God promised those descendants the land of Canaan, innumerable offspring, possession of their enemies' gates, and a blessing that would go out to the whole world. Those Israelite descendants were a rebellious bunch, so God added the Law to judge them and convict them. However, in keeping with His immutable promise, He sent His Son as their deliverer and redeemer, to remove the curse of the law from them and bring in the New Covenant through His shed blood. So, Christ's death both eradicated the curse from Sinai and established the Covenant with Abraham.

Okay, back to the verse at hand –

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels.

There is a great use of emotive terminology, here. Rather than commanding his Hebrew audience to return to the terror of Mt. Sinai, the author beckoned them to "Mount Sion." It's a great contrast. Only three months out of Egypt, the children

of Israel encountered Mt. Sinai. The law that came from that mountaintop served to kill every one of them over 20 years of age (Num.14:29). 40 years later, after the older generation had all died, Joshua (the type of Christ) led Israel into the Promised Land. One of the areas of Canaan they conquered was –

“...from Aroer, which is by the bank of the river Arnon, even unto mount Sion, which is Hermon, and all the plain on this side of Jordan eastward, even unto the sea of the plain, under springs of Pisgah.” (Deut. 4:48-49)

Later, Israel's greatest king established that area. After Saul's death, the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and anointed him as king. He was a mere 30 years old and he reigned for 40 years. For the first seven-and-a-half years, he ruled from Hebron. But, after uniting Israel and Judah, he desired to move his throne. So, he took his armies to Jerusalem and faced the Jebusites who inhabited the land.

“Nevertheless, David took the strong hold of Zion; the same is the city of David.” (2Sam. 5:7)

He ruled from that city for 33 years.

So, Zion (alternately spelled with an "S") is another name for Jerusalem, the city of David. (2Kings 19:21, 31; 2Chron. 5:2; Ps. 147:12) But, it is also God's city, "...the city which I have chosen me to put my name there." (1Kings 11:36, 1Kings 14:21)

It is the city that David extolled in his Psalms -

“Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Zion...” (Ps.65:1)

“Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.” (Ps. 2:6)

“Sing praises to the Lord, which dwelleth in Zion; declare among the people his doings.” (Ps.9:11)

“Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.” (Ps. 48:2)

"Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined." (Ps. 50:2)

“Let the heaven and earth praise him, the seas, and every thing that moveth therein. For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah; that they may dwell there, and have it in possession. The seed also of his servants shall inherit it; and they that love his name shall dwell therein.” (Ps. 69:34-36)

“The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.”
(Ps. 87:2)

“The LORD reigneth; let the people tremble; he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved. The LORD is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.” (Ps. 99:3)

“For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell; for I have desired it.” (Ps. 132:13)

It is a place of blessing -

“Blessed are they that dwell in thy house; they will be still praising thee. Selah. Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them, who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.” (Ps. 84:5-8)

“Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD. The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion; and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life.” (Ps. 128:4-5)

“Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD, which by night stand in the house of the LORD. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD. The LORD that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.” (Ps.134:1)

It is a place of great eschatological importance, which God will preserve -

“But thou, O LORD, shalt endure for ever; and thy remembrance unto all generations. Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion; for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come. For thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and favour the dust thereof. So the heathen shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth thy glory. When the LORD shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory...This shall be written for the generations to come; and the people which shall be created shall praise the LORD. For, he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from heaven did the LORD behold the earth; to hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death; to declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem; when the people are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.” (Ps.102:12-16, 18-23)

It is the city where the Deliverer of Israel would appear -

“Oh, that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! When the LORD bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.” (Ps. 14:7 and Ps. 53:6)

“Moreover, he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim; but chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved.” (Ps. 78: 67-68)

“The LORD said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion; rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.” (Ps. 110:1-2)

And, it is the place where the Deliverer actually DID appear -

“Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.” (Mat. 21:5)

“As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion, a stumblingstone and rock of offence; and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” (Rom. 9:33)

“And so all Israel shall be saved; as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” (Rom 11:26-27)

So, Sion is the city of David, Jerusalem, the city God chose wherein to place His name, the place of Israel's regathering, the place where the Deliverer would (and, did) come, the place where Israel's sins and ungodliness would be removed, the place where "all Israel shall be saved."

Now, please allow me to make an obvious point. The author of Hebrews was himself a Hebrew, writing to a Hebrew audience. Nowhere in his epistle did he mention Gentiles (with the exception of Rahab). He did not create any theology that replaces or displaces the nation of Israel. Rather, he used strictly Hebraic terminology and history to preach hope to these descendants of Abraham. And, vitally important, there were no Gentiles at Mt. Sinai. These promises can only be applied to those who have been called away from Sinai to Mt. Sion. Yes, granted, Gentiles were later included in Israel's blessing, but the language here is decidedly "Jewish."

So, historically, Sion and Jerusalem are synonymous. But, the author went one step further. Knowing that his audience would immediately think of David's city when he mentioned "Sion," he drew a new, spiritual parallel. Rather than the

"City of David," he beckoned them to "the city of the living God." He called that city "the Heavenly Jerusalem."

The regathering of Israel and Judah will not be to the beaten-up, dusty, divided city currently residing in the war zone of Israel. They will be gathered to a new, better, God-built city - the very city Abraham is said to have been searching for.

"He that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God; and I will write upon him my new name." (Rev. 3:12)

"And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21:2)

"And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel. And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones...And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life." (Rev. 21:10-27)

I included that last, lengthy passage because of its decidedly physical tone. "New Jerusalem" is a place. That's important. It is not the people. The people live inside the city. The nations of the earth bring their glory and honor to the city. But, the city is an actual, locatable place with physical attributes. Just as Jesus was God, incarnate - both spiritual and physical - the dwelling place He prepares for his elect is a city from Heaven - a spiritual city with physical attributes. New Jerusalem is not the Church. It is the place where the Church will dwell.

By the way, this city has yet to descend from Heaven. As such, the ingathering of Israel has yet to happen. The redemption and forgiveness of Israel has yet to happen. The "re-grafting" has yet to happen. They are all part and parcel of the same event.

One last observation - (no, really, I promise!) -

Israel's deliverance from Egypt brought them to Mt. Sinai. But, their final, eternal deliverance from sin will come from Mt. Zion. They will not be justified before God by the law, which they failed to keep. They will be sanctified before God through Christ, who "shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob."

For the First Century Hebrew convert, they had already "come" to that place they had hoped for. Just as we are already considered residents of Heaven, though we are still traversing this earthly plain, so the believing Hebrews were (and are) already considered residents of the Heavenly city which will one day come down from Heaven. And, they will share that residency with believers from every age, both Jew and Gentile. Not only that, but they will be joined by "an innumerable company of angels." Nice neighborhood.

{23} - To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

Let's take this in parts ---

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn...

These two terms denote the two groups of people amassed in the New Jerusalem. To a Hebrew, the general assembly was a very common idea. Three times every year, each and every adult male in Israel was required to assemble in Jerusalem for God's "feasts," or "set times of the Lord" (Ex. 23:17). The "whole assembly" was required to perform sacrifices and keep the Holy Days (Ex. 12:6). This idea of gathering the "whole assembly" of Israel was a very

common and important Hebrew concept, repeated more than 40 times in the Old Testament.

So, the author grabbed that phrase and announced to the redeemed Hebrew believers that they had been called away from the gathering at the foot of Mt. Sinai to a new, better general assembly of Israel. The Greek term translated "general assembly" is "*paneguris*," from "*pan*," or "all," and "*agora*," which is a mass assembly, distinguished from a private meeting. So, it is synonymous with the Old Testament "whole assembly."

But, they will not be alone. The Church of Gentiles and Israelites who first partook of the blessings will join them.

Christ likened salvation to being "born again," or "born from above" (the Greek "*anōthen*"). That experience of the new birth was unique to New Testament theology. Only after Christ's passion and resurrection did the Holy Spirit take up residence in humans, creating people in whom, "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2Cor. 5:17)

As such, the church - the "*ekklesia*," the "out called" ones - are the firstborn of the Holy Spirit. But, there is more to it than just that. Not only will the church of the firstborn be spiritually alive, they will be physically perfected.

In Paul's great defense of the resurrection from the dead, he started with the fact that Christ Himself raised. That fact gives every believer the hope and confidence that they, too, will be raised.

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.” (1Cor. 15:20)

So, Paul concludes, just as everyone under Adam's curse dies, everyone under Christ's redemption will be raised -

“But every man in his own order; Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.” (1Cor. 15:23)

So, not only is the church spiritually reborn, they are physically renewed. But, according to Ezekiel 37:12-13, God will also raise up "the whole house of Israel."

“Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And, ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land; then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.”

And, just to put an exclamation point on it, God was talking to an enormous host of people who had only moments before been nothing but dry bones!

So, both the general assembly of Israel and the church of the firstborn share the promise of eternal life, resurrection, and participation in the promised blessings, made to Abraham and accomplished by Christ. The author's comments perfectly parallel Paul's theology in Romans 11 where the remnant of Israel is saved while the balance are blinded. But, after the Gentiles are brought in, grafted contrary to their nature, the natural branch will be regrafted and "so all Israel will be saved." Both the general assembly of Israel and the Church of the Firstborn are welcome in New Jerusalem.

...which are written in heaven...

It's interesting that both the general assembly and the church are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. But, it puts a fine point on Christ's supremacy in all these events. Only through Christ can any man find entrance into Heaven. Those names, written from before the foundation of the world, are a testimony to the foreknowledge and sovereignty of Christ, securing the elect's (individually and/or nationally) position in eternity.

...and to God the Judge of all...

The Hebrews were well aware of God's willingness to judge righteously. They knew about their progenitors who fell in the wilderness. They knew about the years of captivity when Israel failed to follow God's commands. They knew about Korah's band being swallowed by the earth. They knew all the judgments that God had meted out against their enemies. But, this time they meet God as the One who, instead of judging against them, sits on His judgment throne declaring His people to be innocent and welcome in His eternal presence.

...and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

The law could never make anyone perfect. No amount of sacrifice and good works could advance sanctification or perfection. Only faith in the finished work of Christ, exchanged for righteousness in the court of Heaven, will ever render a man "perfect."

God will surround himself with His people, redeemed and perfected in the Son. They will have a perfect righteousness imputed to them, justifying them before the court of God's perfect standard. And, they will be wholly complete, lacking nothing, made perfect.

And, here's the best part - how was all of this accomplished? How was such an assembly gathered? How were the firstborn established? Who has raised this great throng into the heights of eternal glory? ---

{24} - And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

It is all done through Christ, to whom goes all the glory and honor. He is the One who "stands in the gap," mediating the enmity between God and man. He is the One who reconciles sinners to their Maker. He is the One who authors and finishes the faith that saves. He is the One who wrote the terms, and kept the terms, of the New Covenant. It was His blood that established the New Covenant –

“This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.” (Luke 22:20)

But, let's take the time to establish what the writer means when he uses this term "New Covenant." He's been very methodical in his use and definition of the term.

The New Covenant

The first place where we find the phrase "New Covenant" in Scripture is Jeremiah 31:31 –

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.”

In plain terms, the New Covenant was first promised to national Israel and it included the guarantee –

“Thus saith the Lord which giveth the sun for a light by day and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; the LORD of hosts is his name; If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus saith the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD.” (Jer. 31:35-37)

It is impossible to understand Jeremiah's prophetic promise in any other way than as a New Covenant made with the nation of Israel – the very people who were under the Old Covenant.

"So," you ask, "does the New Covenant retain its Israelitish focus when it is presented in the New Testament Scripture?"

Yep.

The author of Hebrews took great pains to quote this passage of Jeremiah, verbatim and at length, in chapter 8:8-12. As I've said before, it is the longest Old Testament quote imported into the New Testament documents. But, what is really important is what the author did with these verses.

Did he reinterpret them? No.

Did he use them as a basis for Israel's national rejection? No.

Did he use them to establish a church/Israel replacement theology? No.

Did he use them to prove that the blessings promised to Israel have fallen to the Gentiles instead? No.

Did he use them to create the (totally unscriptural) concept of a "true Israel" that replaces national Israel in God's economy? No.

What did he do with them? He left them alone. He let them stand as a valid, functioning, ongoing, uninterrupted promise from God. The only reason he brought Jeremiah's verses into his text was to contrast the New Covenant with the old Mosaic Covenant and declare that the old was decaying and ready to vanish away.

So, when he beckoned his First Century Hebrew readers to come to the New Covenant in Christ, he was never excluding national Israel. On the contrary, he was establishing God's promise to Israel.

And, just as the Old Covenant furniture and priests were sprinkled with the blood of goats and bulls, the New Covenant participants are covered by the blood of Christ, the blood that is superior to every sacrifice, reaching all the way back to Abel.

Christ is the guarantor who established the New Covenant in His blood. That blood purchased the church and it purchased Israel. It wiped away the sins of the elect believers and it wiped away the sins of Israel,

“...for I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.” (Jer.31:34 and Heb.8:12)

That blood paved the way for the Holy Spirit to indwell the elect believers, teaching them of Christ -

“...but the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” (John14:26)

Likewise, the blood of Christ will send the Spirit of God to indwell Israel –

“I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. And, they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.” (Jer. 31:33-34 and Heb. 8:10-11)

One more observation and I'm done - really, honestly done.

Some theologians believe that Jeremiah 31:33-34 is fulfilled in the New Testament Church, which is currently at work on earth. However, in order to believe that, they must undermine Jeremiah's words, or make them say something different than they actually say. For instance, Jeremiah wrote,

“They shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord.”

However, Paul said that God provided specific workers to the Church –

“And, he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” (Eph.4:11-13)

So, I ask, why has God provided teachers for the Church if the Church is living under a condition in which "they shall not teach every man his neighbor"? Or, why has Paul stated that the ministers will work until we all come in the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God if "all shall know me, from the least to the greatest"?

It gets too confusing if we impose Israel's future promise onto the Church. The only way to allow these words to say what they say and not create new contradictions is to understand the distinction between the New Covenant Church of the firstborn and the future "whole assembly" of Israel.

To summarize ---

In simplest terms, when it comes to the New Jerusalem, Mount Sion, the innumerable company of angels, the general assembly, the Church of the firstborn, and the spirits of just men made perfect, Christ is "all and in all." Every soul who stands forgiven before the great "Judge of all" will be sprinkled with the blood of the New Covenant in Christ Jesus, immutably promised to Abraham, reestablished with Israel, extended to the Gentiles, and guaranteed in the death, burial and resurrection of the One who wrote their names in a book before the foundations of the world.

And, that is some of the best news I've ever heard.

{25} - See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:

Throughout this epistle we have seen the author follow this pattern. He demonstrates the superiority of New Covenant in Christ and then follows the contrast with a sober warning. In this case, he returned to the two major figures who are the living embodiment of the two covenants - Moses and Jesus.

"You are come unto Jesus", said he, "who is the mediator of the new covenant. You are come to the blood atonement that was foreshadowed by every other offering of blood, all the way back to Abel. So, do not refuse the One who is speaking to you."

Back in chapter 3 the author reminded his Hebrew brethren of one of darkest periods of their history. The Israelites who had been delivered from Egypt hardened their hearts and died faithlessly in the desert. In chapter 10 he warned of their forefathers who despised the Law of Moses and died without mercy at the hand of two of three witnesses.

"Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Heb.10:29)

That same warning rings through this passage. For, if they (the Hebrew forefathers) could not escape punishment when they refused Moses, who spoke on earth at Mt. Sinai, we can be sure that no one will escape who refuses the only One who spoke directly from Heaven.

"For Moses truly said unto the fathers, a prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And, it shall come to pass, that

every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.” (Acts 3:22-23)

{26} - Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.

The author looked down the eons of history in advance, putting weight behind his warning. At Mt. Sinai, the voice of God spoke with thundering and lightening. The earth shook and the Israelites were so afraid that they pled with Moses to go up and talk with God on their behalf because they could not withstand the awesome presence (Exod.19:18, Heb.12:19-20). That was the first time the voice of God shook the earth.

But, the author recounted the prophet Haggai –

“For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.” (Hag. 2:6-7)

The author saw tremendous significance in the fact that God predicted yet another shaking, a greater shaking. And, he saw it as an event yet to come. Being yet future to him, it stood as warning a to unbelievers.

[A brief aside: I contend that the events the author is referring to are future events. If they are not, and the event he describes - the shaking of heaven and earth, the shaking of nations, and the coinciding events listed in verses to come - are already past, then this whole passage is a moot point. If the judgment that undergirds this warning is already complete, there is no basis on which current Christianity can consider these verses. But, if the events are future, and as literal as the Biblical writers make them out to be, then this a very stern warning, indeed.]

Israel's' prophets had foreseen this time of "shaking" -

“And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; To go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.” (Isa 2:17-21)

“Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.” (Isa 13:9-13)

“And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare: for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake. The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall, and not rise again. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth. And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited. Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.” (Isa 24:18-23)

“For in my jealousy and in the fire of my wrath have I spoken, Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; So that the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground.” (Ezek. 38:19-20)

“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining. The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.” (Joel 3:14-16)

“Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth.” (Hag 2:21)

{27} - And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

The author saw God's promise to shake the heaven and earth "yet once more" as significant. It gives credence to the yet unfulfilled time the prophets foretold when God would remove those things that were unstable, ungrounded, or infirm, and purge the earth of the wicked nations. God "made" or created each and every one of them. They are His to do with as He pleases. Only those things that are securely held in place by God's strong hand will remain after the great shaking.

“Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed. But, thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end. The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee.” (Ps. 102:25-28)

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” (Mat. 24:35)

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” (2Pet. 3:10)

“Hast thou commanded the morning since thy says; and caused the dayspring to know his place; that it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it?” (Job. 38:12-13)

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken; and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Mat. 24:29-30)

“And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken, and then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:25-26)

“And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And, the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” (Rev. 6:12-17)

Okay, let's put this all together. Remember that the author was reminding his readers of this concept within the context of a stern warning. Just as the Israelites who tempted God fell in the wilderness, there will be a much greater punishment due those who refuse to hear the Son of God speaking from Heaven. And, what form will that punishment take? The time of God's wrath, when the Lamb will return in victory and vanquish his enemies. The heavens and earth will shake and every wicked thing will tumble down into ashes. But, the Word of God will remain, and those who are under His protective wing will withstand that day of terror and judgment.

It is an incredibly somber warning. Listen to the One who speaks of Heaven as though it was His own back yard. Only He knows the secrets. Only He knows the way. Only He knows the Father with such intimacy that He can guarantee our entrance. But, what if you refuse? "...a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." (Heb.10:27)

Again, I'll point out the obvious - these events have not occurred as yet. That's good news to the unsaved. There is still time. But, it is also fair warning.

{28} - Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

On the other hand, we who believe in the finished atonement do not look forward to the fiery judgment; we look forward to receiving a kingdom that is eternal, unshakable and filled with the righteousness of God. That unshakable kingdom was just described by the author - "Mount Zion...the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

Knowing that we ought to act accordingly. We should be gracious people, considering our gracious salvation. And, in serving one another we serve God,

understanding that He is willing to judge and willing to be gracious. But, we must not esteem Him lightly.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Prov. 1:7)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.” (Prov. 9:10)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do his commandments; his praise endureth for ever.” (Ps.111:10)

We are not cowering before God in slavish fear, but we hold Him in reverence and understand that our Abba/Father is also the One who will reform the universe by His mighty hand.

{29} - For our God is a consuming fire.

This verse is the perfect counterbalance to the current "God is love" theology running rampant on the airwaves. The "God is love" crowd wants us to believe that God is solely, essentially, and only "love." They have overemphasized one attribute of God to the exclusion of other, greater attributes.

God's primary attribute is His holiness. All other characteristics of God flow from that essential quality. To raise God's love above His holiness necessarily limits God's ability to act in accordance with His revealed nature. For instance, how can a God who is all-loving put people into eternal darkness? Questions like those have been the springboard for all sorts of errant thinking. The Roman Catholic notion of purgatory exists as a way of allowing God to be all-loving and still somewhat judging. In the end, the Catholic notion of God's love will bring everyone back into His good graces --- even Satan!

But, the writer of Hebrews was keenly aware of all the prophetic visions of God's fiery indignation. God spoke of His "wrath." Certainly, an all-loving God could never demonstrate wrath. But, a holy God can. Holy wrath, holy judgment, righteous indignation - these are all characteristics of the God revealed in Scripture.

So, our God is more than just love. Thank God that He IS love! But, He is far more than just a mushy, lovey, gooey old man in the sky hoping that someone will come along, accept him, and validate his claim to rulership. No, our God is a consuming fire. He will avenge His elect, He will destroy His enemies, He will shake His creation, and He will set up His eternal kingdom.

“And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”
(Dan 4:35)

Listen to the One who speaks from Heaven. One day He will burn the elements of Earth with a great heat and shake both Heaven and earth. Don't be part of "the removing of those things that are shaken." Rather, look to the kingdom that cannot be moved. Take up residence in the New Jerusalem, which the elect of Christ will receive. Pay attention to the Word of God. Serve Him with reverence and a fearful respect.

Remember - our God is a consuming fire.