

## *Bible Study Hebrews 12-13*

*“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”*

The cloud of witnesses referred to here are all the Old Testament saints mentioned in chapter 11. The Greek word for “witness” (μάρτυς) is the same word translated into English as martyr. The interiors of Orthodox churches are usually covered with icons of saints and martyrs.



We quite literally surround ourselves with icons of witnesses/martyrs as described in Hebrews.

*“...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”*

Many people take up running for all sorts of reasons. Running while carrying unnecessary weight is usually avoided because it makes running much harder. But there are exceptions.

**In the London Marathon there is a tradition of running 26.2 miles wearing ridiculous costumes:**



**But runners who wear heavy costumes are never serious about winning the race. Those who are serious about winning carry as little weight as possible:**



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**Competitive athletes underwent similar training in the ancient world.**



*“According to tradition, the most important athletic competitions were inaugurated in 776 B.C. at Olympia in the Peloponnesos. By the sixth century B.C., other Panhellenic (pan=all, hellenikos=Greek) games involving Greek-speaking city-states were being held at Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia... The victors at all these games brought honor to themselves, their families, and their hometowns. Public honors were bestowed on them, statues were dedicated to them, and victory poems were written to commemorate their feats. Numerous vases are decorated with scenes of competitions, and the odes of Pindar celebrate a number of athletic victories... During competition and training, athletes were usually naked and covered with olive oil to keep off the dust. They trained in the gymnasium or xystos (covered colonnade), often coached by past victors.”*

**In the ancient world, athletics was also associated with the military. The Spartans were known as fierce warriors. This is because they subjected their boys from an early age to fighting, exhaustion, hunger, exposure to heat and cold, and total obedience to their leaders, all enforced by severe punishments. These techniques were copied by the Roman legions.**



**Greeks**



**Romans**

Those ancient forms of military training are still in use today.



This verse calls us to *“lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.”* Sin, in all its forms, hinders our ability to win the races and battles of the spiritual life.

Being a dedicated soldier and/or athlete is to dedicate one’s self totally to self-control in order to win the contest. It governs one’s time, one’s labors, even the food one eats.

In Orthodoxy theology, there is a word that specifically describes the type of rigorous training that soldiers and elite athletes undergo as a lifestyle – “askesis” (ἄσκησις). It means “exercise, training, practice.” The English word “asceticism” comes from askesis.

All Christians are called to a life of askesis, of practicing spiritual discipline just like a soldier and athlete in order to win against competition. This theme is found in the New Testament.

*“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27)*

*“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier” (2 Timothy 2:3-4).*

*“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it” 1 Corinthians (9:24).*

When an athlete has won a race, or a soldier has won a battle, they are rewarded. All the hard work pays off. In ancient games, victorious athletes were rewarded:

*“During the original Olympic games in ancient Greece, champions were not awarded gold, silver, and bronze medals as they are today. Instead, ancient Olympic victors were awarded an olive branch twisted into a circle to form a crown. The wild olive, called kotinos, had deep religious significance for the ancient Greeks. At the ancient Olympics, only the champion was recognized—there were no prizes for runners up.”*



**Victorious soldiers were also publicly honored for their heroism:**

*“Polybius writes that "After a battle in which some of them have distinguished themselves, the general calls an assembly of the troops, and bringing forward those whom he considers to have displayed conspicuous valour, first of all speaks in laudatory terms of the courageous deeds of each and of anything else in their previous conduct which deserves commendation"*

**These public awards are still used today:**



**Hebrews points to Christ as the ultimate victor over death and His reward:**

*“...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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

**Part of the Christian hope is a heavenly reward for our labors in this life.**

*“Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads” (Revelation 4:4).*

**Towards the end of his life, St. Paul spoke of being crowned, and that others will be crowned also:**

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).*

All athletes have coaches. It is the coach who knows the sport, the specific techniques which must be mastered by the athlete to win in that sport, and is able to impart those techniques effectively. One of the important jobs of the coach is to motivate the athlete, and demand their best effort at all times. That motivation may sometimes be perceived as harsh and disrespectful. But the motivation is from fondness for the athlete, respect for their capabilities, and desire to see the athlete succeed.



We often forget that Christ sometimes rebuked his closest disciples:

*“But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Mark 8:33).*

*“Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14).*

Hebrews teaches us that God rebukes us sometimes, and for the same reasons; not because he hates us, but because he loves us, and wants better for us.

*“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:*

*“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD,  
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;  
For whom the LORD loves He chastens,  
And scourges every son whom He receives.”*

*“If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening*



*seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Hebrews continues. The purpose of chastening is to strengthen, not to weaken.

*“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.”*

The text goes on to list some specific human weaknesses which we all have, yet need to be healed. The first is the pursuit of peace and holiness:

*“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord...”*

The second is self-examination, looking for bitterness towards others:

*“looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled...”*

Hebrews cites an example of bitterness from the Old Testament, and the serious consequences that followed:

*“Lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.”*

This refers to the rivalry between Esau and Jacob, twin sons of the Patriarch Isaac. The two sons were such bitter rivals that led to one manipulating the other out of his inheritance:



*“And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents...”*

*Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." ...But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day."*

*So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright." (Genesis 25:27-34).*

**This bitter rivalry was prophesied when they were born:**

*"And the LORD said to her:*

*'Two nations are in your womb,  
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;  
One people shall be stronger than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger.'*"

Rather than sharing brotherly love, the two boys went on to form two separate tribes – Israel and the Edomites - which were constantly fighting. Some see this as the beginning of the Jewish-Arab conflicts. This tragic legacy of hatred began with an attitude of bitterness between two boys who should have loved each other instead. No wonder Hebrews uses the story to teach us, *"look carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled..."*

This story of enmity between two brothers who were heirs of God's covenant with Abraham, but one gave away his inheritance, forms a profound backdrop for the next verses. They present two historic mountains. The first is Mount Sinai. It is described in fearful terms:

*"For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling."*

The next mountain mentioned is Mount Zion in Jerusalem. In contrast to fearful Sinai, Zion is described in glowing terms. It is the Church, representative of heaven. Note all the accolades:

*"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."*



In the preceding context, we see that Sinai is like Esau, and by extension Israel – a rightful heir of God’s covenant with his grandfather Abraham, who willingly gave up his inheritance. We also see that Jerusalem is like Jacob, and by extension the Church - who has received Esau’s inheritance, added it to his own, and is now the sole inheritor of God’s Covenant with Abraham.

Israel’s role as the Covenant people of God was temporary, but the Church’s covenant with God is eternal and unshakable. Christ said: *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18)*. The book of Revelation describes the final triumph of Christ and His Church over all the forces against it, which will last forever. The final verse of chapter 12 reads:

*“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.”*

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*“Let brotherly love continue.”*

The Greek used here is “Philadelphia” – a well-known word in English. There are several Greek words for love in the Bible, each with its own nuance. For example, one Greek word for love “eros” refers to sexual love (where we get the English word “erotic.” Another Greek word for love is agape, which was used by early Christians to describe unconditional love for God and humanity, often in terms of self-sacrifice. The Greek word used here is “philia,” which is loyal, brotherly love for familiar friends, family and community. Hebrews applies this word for the close relationships between the Christian community. The fact that it says brotherly love “should continue” indicates that this love between Christians is already being practiced, and is perhaps a strength.

*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.*

Hospitality towards strangers was (and often still is) highly valued in many ancient cultures. This was true in ancient Hebrew culture, where God commanded His people:

*“The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the foreigner residing among you” (Numbers 15:16).*

*“Therefore love the foreigner; for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).*

On Judgement Day, one criteria of Christ’s verdict will be how we cared for strangers:

***“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in...” (Matthew 25).***

The writer of Hebrews mentions “unwittingly entertaining angels.” He may have been alluding to the incident in Genesis:

***“Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant” (Genesis 18:1-5)***



Later in the story, Abraham realized that the three strangers he received into his tent were angels, and likely a visible manifestation of the Holy Trinity.

In what ways does the Orthodox show hospitality to strangers today?

***“Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.”***

Prisoners have a special place in God’s heart. Christ spent the last hours of His earthly ministry as a prisoner. The thief on the cross beside Christ was the first to enter paradise. In the book of Acts we read that Peter, Paul and Silas were all imprisoned for the Faith. Most of our saints were imprisoned as part of their witness. On Judgement Day, one criteria of Christ’s verdict will be how we cared for inmates:

***“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I***

*was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me* (Matthew 25:34-36).

Today, the Orthodox Church ministers to inmates:

## What is OCPM?

Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry (OCPM) is an agency of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States. For Orthodox Christians who have been arrested for crimes, OCPM helps them return to the Faith, offering forgiveness and reconciliation with Christ. For both Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, OCPM provides spiritual care, enabling prisoners to find hope and purpose in their lives.

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Learn More About the  
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ASSEMBLY OF CANONICAL  
ORTHODOX BISHOPS  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*“Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled;”*

Sexual fidelity between husband and wife is enshrined in the Ten Commandments.

*“You shall not commit adultery.”*

The Orthodox wedding service includes these prayers for the couple, which are based on this verse:

*“That the Lord God may grant unto them an honorable marriage and a bed undefiled; let us pray to the Lord.”*

*“Declare their marriage honorable. Preserve their bed undefiled. Grant that their life together be with be without spot of sin.”*

These verses and prayers confirm that marriage is based on absolute sexual fidelity between the husband and wife. Failure to maintain this fidelity leads to severe damage (and often destruction) to the marriage, with devastating consequences to the innocent spouse and children. That damage can last for lifetimes and even generations. That is why God punishes infidelity severely.

*“...but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”*

Adultery is a big problem in our world today. The problem is made worse because by the modern media which not only downplays it, but champions it. What do you think?

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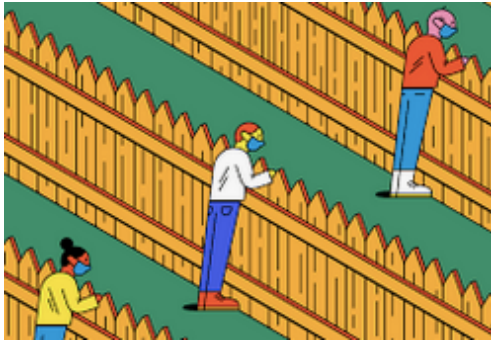


*“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have.”*

Like the sin of adultery, the sin of covetousness is enshrined in the Ten Commandments:

*“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”*

Like the sin of adultery, the sin of covetousness is rampant in our culture. It is also cultivated and nurtured through every form of media. Does this look familiar?



The problem with envy is it robs us of joy. Instead of being thankful for what we DO have, envy makes us upset about the things we DON’T have. The Christian antidote for envy is thankfulness. “Give us this day our daily bread.”

*“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.”*

The text repeats this message in verse 17:

*“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.”*

This verse demonstrates that the leadership structure of the early Church was hierarchical. Spiritual authority flowed from “the top down;” first, from Christ to the Apostles.

*“And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease... “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (Matthew 10:1, 40).*

*“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth <sup>[a]</sup>will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).*

*“And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me” (Luke 22:29)*

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*“...the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20)*

This spiritual authority was passed down from the Apostles to their successors:

*“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you...” (1 Thess 5:12).*

*“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (2 Timothy 5:17).*

St. Paul wrote to one of his successors, *“Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you” (Titus 2:15).*

Note that there is no democracy here. No one voted Christ into authority. No one voted any of the Apostles into their authority; they were appointed their positions by Christ. No one voted into office the successors to the Apostles because they were appointed by the apostles in a long chain of “Apostolic Succession.” The Orthodox Church is the successor to the early Church and maintains its hierarchical, apostolic form of Church government. This is in contrast to a variety of Protestant, non-biblical leadership structures.

*“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”*

We live in a world of constant change, like the software on our telephones almost every day. What forms of societal change do you see?

This frantic pace of change in our world affects the religious beliefs of many. What was formerly considered truth is now considered falsehood. What was formerly considered sinful is now considered virtuous and vice versa. As a general rule, the Orthodox Church is skeptical of attempts to change our faith and practice. This is largely because our faith is based on God, Who does not change, and as this verse says, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”* We also believe that humanity has not changed, our need to have relationship with God has not changed, and the means by which we find healing relationship with God has not changed. Our challenge is not to change our beliefs, but to apply our ancient beliefs to an ever changing world.

*“Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.”*

Orthodoxy rejects all doctrines not already within Holy Tradition. We follow the Apostle Paul’s instructions:

*“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).*

*“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”  
(Galatians 1:8-9).*

*“For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.”*

Scholars and archaeologists confirm that the place of Christ’s crucifixion (“Golgotha”

*Therefore, let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”*

This mention of “outside the camp” is significant. The Hebrews rightly considered Jerusalem a holy city. Therefore, anything that they considered ritually impure could not take place within its walls. For example, the Old Testament required all stonings to take place outside city, and lepers could not enter the city.

Archaeologists and historians have confirmed that the place of Christ’s crucifixion (now the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) was outside the walls of Jerusalem at the time, just as Hebrews described. It was symbolic of the shame and rejection that public executions had to be away from the community. The text draws a symbolic conclusion: just as Christ was crucified outside his community. We are called to *“go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”* We must be willing to experience the rejection and scorn of the world around us. After all, this world is not our home, but the next one will be. It says, *“For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.”*

*“Therefore, by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”*

We have seen this theme mentioned before in Hebrews – that all Christians are part of *“a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”* The primary function of priests is to offer sacrifices. Ordained priests offer the sacrifice of the Holy Mysteries, but the laity exercise their priesthood as well. They offer, *“...the sacrifice of praise to God,”* and, *“Do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”*

*“Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably.”*

Even Apostles, their successors the bishops, and priests, need prayers from others. Their labors are taxing and demanding. That is why in our services we pray for them in our services:

*“For our Archbishop Alexios, for the honorable presbyterate, for the diaconate in Christ; for*



*all the clergy and the people, let us pray to the Lord.”*

### **The Final Benediction**

*“Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

This benediction includes a noteworthy detail. It says God is, “...*working in you what is well pleasing in His sight.*” We often look at our good works and think of them as things we do for God. According to this verse, it is more accurate to think of our good works as things God does through us. We merely yield ourselves to Him and cooperate with Him in what He is doing.

*“Know that our brother Timothy has been set free, with whom I shall see you if he comes shortly.*

*Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.*

*Grace be with you all. Amen.”*

This mention of Timothy (who was a disciple of Paul) and the mention of Italy (where Paul lived at the end of his life and was martyred) lends weight to the belief that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews.