

Before we move on to the final chapter in this letter to the Hebrews, I wanted to touch again on **12:29** which says that our God is a consuming fire. I do not want you to miss the imagery, the irony, and the implication that is communicated in this little statement.

First of all, the imagery of the fire represents God's judgment, purification, and mercy. This is why many offerings (not just sin offerings) were burned upon the altar. The fire destroys the offering and in so doing cleanses and purifies the one who sacrificed. So fire represents God's desire to destroy sin (His judgment) and at the same time purify His people (His mercy). In fact, God's judgment is always an expression of His mercy.

Second, there is the irony in this statement. As we have discussed, Jerusalem and Judea were soon to be put under God's hand of judgment via the instrument of Rome. And when Rome finally breached the inner wall of the city the attack was so intense that the Temple was inadvertently set ablaze and it became a consuming fire which spread to the royal portico and the whole thing became a massive consuming fire ball of judgment. In fact, the Temple had been layered and furnished with gold, silver, bronze and other metals but the fire was so hot that it all melted like wax and ran freely between every crack and crevice within the stone structure.

So the irony is that God was literally foreshadowing the judgment and dismantling of the Jewish system and the purification He would soon bring to those who had rejected their Messiah and had persecuted and brutally oppressed the people of God. And at the same time this imagery spoke to the mercy that God would show to His people whom He would keep safe from this consuming

fire. As we know, He sent an angel to timely warn the faithful believers and they fled the area and remained safe throughout the entire siege and destruction of Israel.

Third, we have the implication of this imagery for our lives. We must understand that our God is a consuming fire and He does bring about judgment for the purposes of purification and mercy. It is merciful to you and me when God brings about judgment upon our *Old Sinful Nature* and upon all the enemies that hide within our soul and which keep us from trusting ourselves to Him.

God knows that we are never more safe, secure, protected, and stable than when we find our life in Him. Thus, if necessary, He will bring this purifying judgment into our lives (and as I know from firsthand experience, it can be a consuming fire). But it is all for the purpose of setting us free from the bondage and oppression of sin brought about by the enemies within our soul which have rejected Christ. Think of how those enemies have tortured you: the mental anguish, the voices which barrage your minds with crazy ungodly thoughts, the emotional insecurity, and of course the pride which makes it all worse and keeps you from turning to Jesus and to others for help.

Thus, I want you know that God's consuming fire is about your freedom. It is about your protection. It is about your ability to live the abundant life that He has promised. It is about your living with the confidence that your ***New Creation*** is always safe and secure and is always protected by His powerful and mighty hand. Therefore, do not fear His fire of purification for by it you are sanctified and it will result in your knowing His life, His peace and His rest. It will all be yours!

Let's move on to final chapter in this letter. The author is going to wrap things up with various exhortations, some of which are connected with what we have discussed and some just address other functional concerns within the body.

If you remember from last week's teaching, we were exhorted to pursue peace and the separation, or holiness, which occurs when the Spirit of God occupies more and more of our bodies. We were also told to look diligently lest anyone fails the grace of God and a bitter root of unbelief springs up causing many to stumble. However, we cannot fulfill this exhortation very effectively if we are not in relationship with each other. So we begin with an exhortation to continue to love each other thereby giving the Spirit the opportunity to work in us and through us into each other's lives.

Hebrews 13:1-3

Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own.

Given the constant oppression at the hands of the Jews, and the fact that some believers had already gone back to Judaism to put an end to their own suffering, I am sure it was hard for them to trust anyone never knowing who might be next to throw in the towel and turn. Some had already been rejected (and some of them betrayed) by family and friends; so it is understandable that they were hesitant to trust themselves to others. It is also likely that the constant oppression had them

on edge so this was a gentle reminder that with regard to their brothers and sisters in Christ, they need to drop the walls, drop the defenses, and take a deep breath, as these relationships must be bound by love.

As we have learned in our body, the deepest kind of fellowship that we can experience is not based on family, race, or some social contract, but it is based on spiritual unity and the spiritual life that can be shared in Christ (Jesus spoke of this in **Matthew 12:48-50; Mark 3:33-35**). This is especially true when that spiritual life takes you deep into the lives of those you share it with, as you move together, as a family, toward the common goal of knowing Christ. As we war together, the Spirit of God brings us into a oneness and contentment that is just not experienced in other relationships.

Let me give you an example using the material from last week. We are to pursue peace and the separation (or holiness) of the Spirit with all. This means we are to: 1) pursue the elimination of all obstacles or obstructions in our relationships with each other and with God, and 2) help each other war against all the enemies of God (which dwell within our soul) which hinder our being filled with the Spirit of God. And, as we know, this is a very difficult process; thus, if love does not govern our relationships, we would just think others are being nosy, pushy, self righteous, preachy, and should mind their own business.

But if we are bound by this love for one another, we can trust ourselves to each other, or more accurately I should say we can trust ourselves to Jesus as He lives through us; and deep intimacy will grow from our choosing to war together. This will be an intimacy that few ever experience in this life for it is pure, righteous, true, and it forms a connection that is not easily broken.

“Keep on loving each other” is in the present active imperative tense. This means it is a command and is to be real to us all the time; not just when we feel like it. I think it is important that we ask ourselves whether or not we are truly connecting to each other on the basis of brotherly love or whether we are working harder at keeping others away. Remember, this is a command from the Spirit of God; and, as we know, since our God is a consuming fire we should not take His commands lightly.

The Greek word for brotherly love that is used here is “Philadelphia.” This is not referring to God’s agape love; it’s referring to the best that we as humans can produce unaided by the Spirit of God.

I think we are to understand this command like this. If we remain in deep fellowship with each other, working together, warring together, fighting to eliminate the enemies of wrong belief and unbelief, and removing all the obstacles to living in peace with God and with each other, then God’s Agape love—the love that flows from the divine and is a natural by-product of being filled with the Spirit of God—will be a natural byproduct of such relationships. It will be a fruit of obedience that flows from our faith.

But if we do not start with a tender affection and willingness to be intimate with each other, we will never get to the Agape part. One leads to the other, but we have to start with being committed to each other in brotherly love.

This next part of the passage regarding entertaining angels is also filled with a bit of irony. Most likely this looks back to the time in **Genesis 18** when Abraham entertained angels during the Sodom and Gomorrah story. But the irony is that it also looks forward to the time that God would send a messenger to them warning

them about the destruction of Jerusalem and giving them instructions to flee. Therefore, despite the dangers of letting in a stranger who might hurt them, the Lord wanted them to be open to travelers and be willing to care for them; for in the not so distant future one of those travelers would be God's messenger.

Keep in mind that in those days there were not a lot of public accommodations in terms of inns or hotels. People traveling were often placed at great risk having to sleep in the open squares or surrounding fields exposed to the menacing members of society. So it was custom for good people to bring travelers into their homes, which of course was also risky for the homeowner. You would never really know the type of person you were inviting into your home.

Today things are so different; but I think that this speaks to a willingness to care for those that God sends our way not knowing if they might bring with them a message from the Lord. In addition, this is also an imperative; it is a command from the Spirit of God. So we have to be open to care for those He sends our way; for He might just send them with a message or a blessing. In that regard, I have told this story before, but it is worth retelling as it fits perfectly with this passage.

When I was a boy, it was a weekly tradition for our family, and many other relatives, to go to my Great Grandmas on Sunday afternoon. My Great Grandma lived out in the country and was dirt poor. But it seemed that no matter how many people came over she always had enough food, which usually just consisted of a pan of beans with some meat and chili and some tortilla or homemade bread. I used to be amazed at how many people would eat full meals from that same pan which sat on the stove and never seemed to be refilled.

Then one day my Mom told me a story of when an angel visited my Great Grandma. There is an old legend in New Mexico about an angel who appeared in the form of a homeless man who traveled around from place to place by foot. He would come to various homes to see what kind of reception he would receive. The legend goes that if you invited him into your home and fed him that you would never be without. Now most of the people in this region of New Mexico were over the edge poor. They lived on beans and tortillas, macaroni and cheese, a little bit of meat; but nothing that any of us would consider to be plenty, abundant, or even good.

Well one morning this man who had a long white beard and an old bag on his shoulders showed up at my Great Grandma's house. He stayed out by the water pump (this was back in the old days where you had to manually pump your drinking water from a well). When she saw this man, she did not judge by appearances and refuse to let this man in because he was dirty and beggarly; she also did not judge by her own poverty, but was willing to share what little she had; she did not act inconvenienced despite the early morning hour and her responsibilities around the farm; she considered only that this poor man was in need and she was able to care for him.

She invited him in, he washed his face and cleaned up and ate the macaroni and cheese that she had prepared for breakfast. Then after he ate all that she had, he just left and no one saw where he went. As the stories were passed around it was told that the night before he had appeared at a ranch that was very far away; there was no way he could have walked over night the distance from that ranch to my Great Grandma's place.

And the strange thing is that after that time no matter how poor my Great Grandma was, it seemed she never was without; and that little pan never seemed to go empty. It did not matter how many people came to visit and ate till they were full, that little pan always had beans.

So you never know; don't judge by your eyes alone. By the way, the Greek word translated angel just means "messenger." Perhaps some of us have encountered an angel who has brought us a message or a blessing from God and we did not even know it was an angel. So we have to stay open.

13:3 supports what I talked about last week. When our brothers and sisters are enduring the correction and discipline of the Lord, we are to help each other through these times, hurt with each other, cry with each other, and be there for each other. And the only way we can actually hurt for each other is if we truly care for each other. And this only happens in the midst of deep, personal, and intimate relationships.

In **13:3**, the Spirit circles back around to reinforce His point about brotherly love. The kind of emotional connection that the Spirit speaks about here is a fruit of our doing the work to pursue each other and our willingness to look diligently after each other lest anyone is taken over by unbelief.

I believe this is captured powerfully in the Greek. It is an imperative; we are commanded to remember those who are in bondage. And not just casually think of them, but "as if you were there yourself." This phrase is in the perfect passive tense indicating that the Spirit has already bound us together as one in Him, so we should naturally deeply feel for others and the pain they endure.

Wow, this requires a real shift in the normal kind of selfish, self-centered way we worry and care about our own suffering and obsessively dwell on what we are going through, and seem to forget entirely what others are enduring. But that is not to be our life. That is not to be how we live. We are to be others centric knowing that the Spirit of God has bound us together confident that He will ensure that we are also cared for when we care for others.

How aware are you of what others in this body are going through? If you have been at prayer you should have some idea as there has been a lot of sharing regarding the shaking that the Lord is doing in our lives as He readies the wall to tumble. But the real question is: have you been able to set aside your own pain or the turmoil of your life and think about your brothers and sisters in this body as more important than yourself? Have you felt their pain? Or are you still stuck on trying to care only for yourself?

If you are sitting on the sidelines in this regard and are not engaged in supporting others that are under God's hand of discipline, then it is tragic. You will be missing out on so much love, care, and affection that God wants you to experience as you let Him care for others through you. You are missing out on the supernatural. It is not natural to care for others when you are hurting, but that is what God desires; it is His way. It is not even natural to care for others when you are not hurting, but that is what God desires; it is His way.

I remember so clearly when God's consuming fire was tearing apart my life and I was a bloody mess, He still required me to care for others and place them above myself. He did not let me stay dwelling in my own pain very long. In His wisdom, He focused my eyes, my ears, and my attention on others, and the whole

experience was supernatural. It made no sense to me how I was able to bear their burdens and care for them as I could barely function as a person.

But what I discovered was that during the time I was caring for others, I found rest from my own pain. I found temporary relief and an assurance that God was in the midst of my suffering since He was still supernaturally using me to care for those who were following in my footsteps of faith. It was a really bizarre but amazing experience.

Please don't distance yourself, don't protect yourself, don't hide away and try to manage things on your own. That is not God's wisdom for your life, that is your own wisdom; and as such it is wholly inadequate. God has commanded us to continue in brotherly love and affection so that we can live as if we are bound to each other and thereby experience God in and through one another. It's a beautiful and satisfying thing and you don't want to miss out on it. By the way, this is what the whole "wall" thing is about; teaching us these truths as a family.

You might be sitting there all skeptical thinking about your situation believing that what I am saying is impossible. Your right, it is. That is why such things are a work of the Holy Spirit and His power in and through your life. Don't miss out on it just because of pride, selfishness, unbelief, or any other enemy that lurks within your soul. Choose the supernatural in this regard and, in addition to blowing your mind, you will find some relief for your soul from your own suffering.

Hebrews 13:4

Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the *marriage bed is to be undefiled*; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

I read this verse from the NASB. The italicized parts are not in the original Greek, but have been added for our understanding. So it should read: “Marriage in honor among all, and the bed undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

This may seem like an out of the blue instruction, but it’s not. Culturally, there was developing a wrong belief (stemming from both Gnosticism and Judaism) which held that marriage was not so much wrong but that it detracted from spiritual things and should therefore be avoided by the one who truly wanted to live holy. This is probably one of the “diverse and strange teachings” which is alluded to in **13:9** which we will get to next week.

But despite this instruction from the Spirit, this wrong belief continued to spread throughout Christianity and as we know some sects of the religion of Christianity still today hold that those in ministry cannot be married.

But the problem is that such ideals, while sounding so pious and lofty, never stopped anyone from pursuing sexual gratification whether it came in the form of fornication or sleeping with a married person. In fact, as this wrong belief grew the concern over “marriage” was not even an issue of morality at all, for celibacy proved to be a melting pot of evil. In fact, for the Catholic Church the rule for celibacy was not the prohibition of sex, but of marriage.

Pope Alexander II (1061-1073), for example refused to discipline a priest who had committed adultery with his father’s second wife because he hadn’t committed the sin of matrimony. Marriage was the great evil that had to be eliminated for the priesthood to be totally devoted to the church. Yet one Bishop

complained that if he excommunicated un-chaste priests there would be none left to administer the sacraments, except boys.

Tragically, over time Rome became a center of prostitution such that Pope Pius II (1458-1464) said, Rome was the “only city run by bastards” himself admitting to fathering two illegitimate children, by different women, one of them married at the time. Even the famous dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London, John Colet, wrote after a visit to Rome: “Oh, the abominable impiety of those miserable priests, of whom this age contains a great multitude, who fear not to rush from the bosom of some foul harlot into the temple of the Church, to the altar of Christ, to the mysteries of God!”

So this notion that celibacy aided anyone in their pursuit of God and holiness cannot be supported by history; for the history of this poisonous wrong belief is nothing more than a dark tale of immorality.

So it seems that the Spirit included this exhortation about marriage as a way to pre-empt this kind of ridiculous and hypocritical behavior. Marriage is to be honored by all and it is not to be looked down upon or dismissed as something unholy. For such notions will produce all manner of sexual evil for which God will bring judgment.

Now this kind of immorality was not only amongst those who identified themselves as Christians, but it was also wide spread amongst the Jews. When we studied the gospel of John we learned that in Jesus’ days (which was probably only 25-30 years before this letter was written) adultery and fornication was common place among the Jewish priesthood. It was so common that they had to

cease to put the law in force against it; in other words, it was a crime that was just not prosecuted.

In fact, the waters of jealousy mentioned in **Numbers 5:11-41** were no longer drunk because the men were afraid that it would not work on their wives because their own guilt was so widespread. You see the law set forth a process whereby a man could determine if his wife had been unfaithful. He brought her to the priest and she would be made to drink water mixed with some dust from the temple floor and if she was guilty we are told that her thighs would wither and her abdomen would swell. But again, this practice had stopped because it seems that everyone was guilty and the men were afraid that even if their wives had cheated the curse would not work because of the personal guilt they brought to the proceedings.

So this was the spiritual and cultural environment that the Spirit was addressing. In Jerusalem and Judea there was widespread immorality; yet, at the same time, a ramping false sense of spirituality that was based only on outward appearances, as celibacy became an emblem of holiness which masked a sea of corruption and wickedness. This was probably in part why the judgment of God fell on Israel. His consuming fire purged this cultural evil preserving those who chose to honor marriage and refused to surrender to the cultural decay.

Hebrews 13:5-6

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

“I will never leave you nor forsake you” is a quote from *Joshua 1:5* and “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” is a quote from *Psalms 118:6*. These verses address one of the other major stumbling stones in life that we have to constantly face and that is a concern for our own welfare. When I read these verses I was totally floored. This to me speaks of God’s sovereign rule over the details of our lives and reminded me that the only reason I have worried and fretted so much about such things as money and financial security is because I have not really trusted that He will care for me.

This is such a beautiful passage and I don’t want you to miss the key. The phrase translated “be content” is not a command; it is not an imperative. Rather, it is in the present passive tense which means that it could read: let the Spirit of God bring you contentment now with what you currently have while you trust in what the Lord has said. So as we trust ourselves to Jesus and believe that He will never leave us nor forsake us and that He is our helper, we will experience contentment in our here and now. But the key is letting the Spirit have enough room within your soul that He is able to release within your being this confidence (hence, we have to keep warring against our enemies).

Just think about the phrase: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." The immediate context is covetousness and deals with our desire for money but I think it is to be understood so much more fully. The Lord told this to Joshua right when He assumed command of Israel from Moses with the instructions for Joshua to be strong and very courageous, telling him that none of his enemies will be

able to stand before him all the days of his life. This was a promise that he would conquer all the enemies in the land; and we can apply that promise to our lives.

Worry, anxiety, nervousness, apprehension, and fretting about the practical aspects of our lives all flow from the enemy of fear. This enemy needs to be conquered. It is rooted in unbelief and tempts us to try and take matters into our own hands and provide for ourselves (in one way, shape or form) because we are simply too afraid to wait on the Lord and trust ourselves to His wisdom for our lives. We don't like the way He tends to view the demands of our life for it is usually quite a bit differently than we do. But He said He will never leave us nor forsake us. We need to let this truth sink into our being and be our truth!

As we go through this war to kill the enemies within our soul, as we move forward to conquer our Promised Land, not a single one of our enemies will be able to stand up against us. They will all fall when confronted with both the truth about who God is and who we are to God and our willingness to bet our lives on that truth. Therefore, like Joshua, we must be strong and very courageous.

For all of you who have so much fear due to the various ways you have been abandoned and forsaken by "men," you are going to have to practice not projecting that experience on to God. What you went through at the hands of men was necessary and a vital part of what God is going to do with your life. Remember, they were just the tools and He was the one wielding the tool. He was there with you through every minute and He did not let it go beyond what He determined was necessary.

He had a purpose for all of it and one day it will be played out in your life and when you come to understand the "whys" of God's correction and discipline, it

will lead to contentment. When you embrace the truth that the generational sin that has wreaked havoc in the lives of your ancestors will stop with you and pass no further, I believe you will rejoice. When others walk in your legacy free from such destruction, I believe you will rejoice and you will say it was worth it!

In the Greek, the words in this sentence are especially emphatic. There are five negatives in this short sentence. A literal translation would be: "No, I will not leave thee; no, neither will I not utterly forsake thee." The manner in which these negatives are placed in this sentence are meant to strengthen our understanding of the empathic affirmation they pronounce. The Lord will not leave us nor forsake us; He will always be with us in and through everything! In this you can rest as these are the Words of the Living God!

This promise was made to those who were patiently bearing affliction and persecution for Christ's sake; but they may also be applied to each of us who are experiencing God's correction and discipline, which plays out in our soul being afflicted, tempted, or suffering any kind of adversity. Trust in the Lord with your whole heart, and do not lean on your own understanding; for He says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This is powerful!

So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" If God is your God, if He is the omnipotent Lord who, by definition of the title "Lord" is involved in and delights in the details of your life, then seriously what do we have to fear from men? The answer is nothing. Man can do nothing against us that God has not allowed; and if He allows it we know that it is always good and is always intended to work His purposes in and through our lives.

Honestly, this is such a radical way of thinking that I have a hard time even teaching it. I shudder at the power of this truth and my weakness in basing my life on this reality. The Lord has been working this truth in me most diligently over the last 9-10 years and, even though I have not necessarily liked what He has allowed in my life, I believe I am just starting to understand this as my truth and rest in this amazing truth.

And, if it is how He has asked me to live, then you know that it is something that will also be expected of each of you. We are a family here and what God teaches me tends to flow down to your life; it's just a matter of time. Hopefully though, you will choose to learn this through what you have been taught, by following the example set for you, and by committing it to prayer, instead of having to learn through your own experience.

We are to confidently say: the Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me? Now this is not some psych job of which we have to work hard to convince ourselves; rather, we need to be able to look over our entire life and know that the Lord is our helper. If you are not sure about that statement then I would ask you to ask Him to show you how He has been there for you and has helped you. I believe He will answer that prayer. He wants you to understand.

The Lord is my helper must become our truth and if it becomes a solid rock of truth in our lives, then the Spirit will empower us and we will not live in fear regardless of what we have to go through. We will know that His will for our life is good, pleasing and perfect (**Romans 12:2**) and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God (**Romans 8:38**).

Romans 8:35-37 says it something like this. Just because we have trouble, calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death, does it mean He no longer loves us? No; just the opposite. **Psalm 44:22** says: "for your sake we are killed every day, we are being slaughtered like sheep." In other words, we are in a daily war to kill our *Old Sinful Nature* and God uses the circumstances of our lives to accomplish this. Therefore, despite our suffering, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loves us. Overwhelming victory is ours! ***So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"***

In closing, I would like to read the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew which speaks to our fear regarding the practical things of life and our need to not give in to covetousness and worry, knowing that the Lord will not leave us nor forsake us.

Matthew 6:25-34

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Well, I think that instruction pretty much covers the whole shebang and gives us the perfect perspective on our lives through the eyes of our Father. Let's not be those of little faith. Let's not live in fear. Let's seek first the kingdom of God and be very strong and courageous for our God will never leave us nor forsake us and He is our helper! Yes; the sovereign Lord God is your helper and is my helper even in the practical aspects of our lives!

There is no reason to fear; not one! Overwhelming victory is ours and not a single one of the enemies within our soul can stand when we stand in Him and trust ourselves completely to His love for our lives.

Let's Pray.