

Hebrews

Chapter Twelve

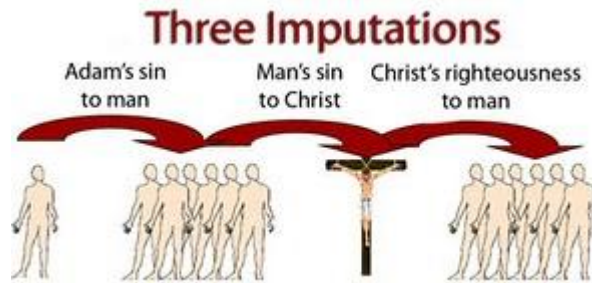
Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

Heb 12:1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

There is debate about the identity of the cloud of witnesses. Some people think this verse is telling us that Christians who have died for the faith are watching our activities in the world. However that is not likely the author's intent. Remember in chapter eleven the author of Hebrews tells us of many people who died for their faith and the "therefore" of this verse links it with the previous chapter. Therefore, current-day Christians have all of those people as examples of how to remain faithful. Thus we look toward them for encouragement and not that they look toward us. The Christians depicted in chapter eleven and many since then have demonstrated how to faithfully represent Jesus Christ to the world even through many persecutions including death. Early writings show the transition of the Greek word from a meaning of "witness" to "martyr" as so many of these witnesses died rather than deny that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul speaks of "the blood of Stephen thy witness" in Acts 22:20 in a similar manner.

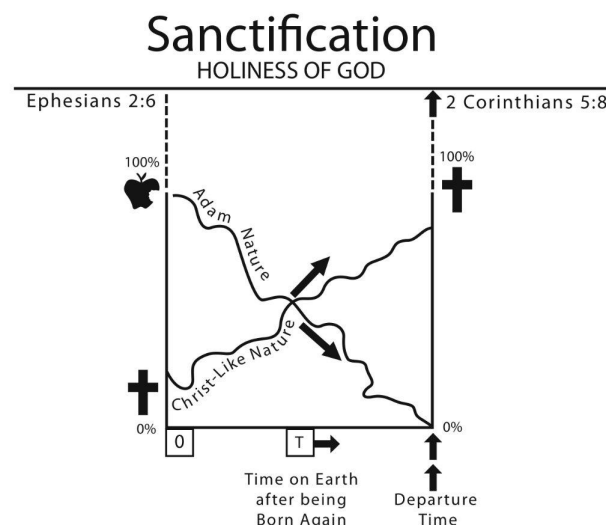
The encumbrances referred to in this verse are not in reference to sin for he speaks of that in the next phrase but these encumbrances are whatever exists in the life of an individual that is not sin but nevertheless retards success in this race. Each person has to examine his life to identify those encumbrances and remove them. An example of a component of this race is the importance of daily Bible study. We are told that those who love Jesus will obey His commands: *John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* How can one obey Jesus if he does not know His commands and His character? Christians are involved in serving Jesus Christ 24/7 and thus need to know what the Bible teaches about Him and being His disciple. This information is obtained by consistent, thorough Bible study and not just some rudimentary reading such as a proverb a day. So if there is something that you do rather than spend time in studying the Bible then it is an encumbrance that needs removing from your life.

Another example of an encumbrance would be any type of legalism. It is very natural for people to want to have some of their works count toward their righteousness with God. The people to whom Hebrews is written were tempted to turn back to the Jewish rituals. Paul wrote to the church at Galatia concerning some who were trying to gain perfection by their works (Gal 3:1-3). The Christian needs to understand double imputation (2 Cor 5:21) so that he can rest from any efforts toward self-righteousness.



Christians trying to “keep the Sabbath” or tithe to the penny (old covenant concepts) could be an encumbrance toward their Christian walk. Those items that you identify as keeping you from following the commands of Jesus are indeed encumbrances and must be eliminated.

The sin to which the author of Hebrews is referring is not just some individual sin like lying but rather the sin nature that remains in each person throughout his life (the race). Trying to run the Christian race without dealing with this sin nature is like an obese person trying to run a marathon. The sin nature enters the mind in every sequence of the race and must be diminished for a successful race. This refers to the sanctification process in which every Christian participates with the Holy Spirit throughout the race. Success in this process involves Bible study and submission to the Word in every aspect of his conscience and behavior.



It is very important to understand the above diagram properly as it represents:

Rom 6:11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Rom 6:13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Christians are involved in this sanctification process their entire life. They will continue to sin in the world even though they are perfect before God with the righteousness of Jesus Christ

imputed to their account. Christians are saints before God and not people who continually practice sin (sinners). Whenever they sin, they will be prompted by the Holy Spirit and they will repent. But Christians will never be free of sin while they remain physically alive. Sanctification is a painful process for we long to be free of sin and the more we understand the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, the more sin we will confront in our lives. But we must remember:

Rom 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The race that Christians are depicted as running is not like a 100 meter dash but more like an ultra-marathon. To endure the race is to give all that one has for the entire race. Some people indicate a willingness to participate in Christian efforts for only a short time but this race lasts all of our life. The Greek word translated “race” is “agon” and is the word from which we obtain “agony”. In the army of the Lord there is no “at ease” command for the race is continuous. My son runs marathons and I have seen his personal efforts to be successful including proper diet and reasoned practices as he trains for the race. He also practices the same type of daily efforts in his Christian race and for that I am most thankful. For example he gets up early every morning for Bible study and prayer before starting a day in the world. There are many examples of carryover training concepts in athletics with the Christian race and they are very useful. Paul used running analogies in several letters such as:

1Cor 9:24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

The race for the Christian is not in competition with other Christians but against his own sin nature (as stated above), Satan, his demons, and those people who follow Satan. The power of the Christian in this race is not his own but by the Holy Spirit.

The key to success in obeying the command of Heb 12:1 is:

Heb 12:2-3 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

Probably many people reading this letter have had to endure a lot of hardship in the world. It is only by “fixing our eyes on Jesus” that we can not only endure those hardships but be conquerors over them, living in peace and even in joy through them. When one takes a picture he can choose something on which to focus and make other items a bit blurry. Similarly when we focus on Jesus the other things lose their power to entangle us and keep us from running the race with maximum efficiency. When compared to the glory waiting for us, all the hardships and sufferings of this world are insignificant: *Rom 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

Ideally we are to run this race while focusing only on Jesus. People put blinders on horses when they are racing so that they can only see in front and, although we do have to look at other things while we run the race, we should mainly be focusing on Jesus. We just finished studying chapter eleven where we briefly read about many people who were led by this faith. Jesus is the author and perfecter of the faith of all His chosen people throughout all ages and we can trust that He knows what He is doing! The Christian faith is not something we develop but a gift of God:

Rom 12:3 For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

Acts 3:16 "And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

Carol and I like to think of this definition of faith: "The enabling power of God". So wherever you read "faith", substitute that definition to clarify it. The enabling power of God allows us to believe, trust, and obey. Faith is the cause and believe, trust and obey are the effects.

The joy set before Him enabled Jesus to endure the Cross. He looked through the Cross to that joyful celestial city where He was reunited with the Father after completing His assignment. We saw in chapter 11 that the people looked beyond death to do their acts of faith. We also must often look beyond death to our entering that celestial city for life forever with God. That joy should allow us to endure our tasks here also. That Jesus despised the shame, or scorned the shame, means that He thought so little of what would be horrible to mere humans that He did not avoid it. Rather He endured it for such was the Father's will that He perfectly obeyed. After completing His task He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, which means that such is permanent. Since the work of atonement is finished, He sits in judgment at God's right hand forever.

The Greek word translated "consider" is "analogisasthe", which is a word used in calculations. Readers are told to "take account of" Jesus for He is our example of how to interact with sinful people. The word "endured" is in perfect tense, which means a continuing effect, one which will not pass away regardless of the circumstances. The Greek words translated "grow weary and lose heart" are used in Greek writings for what runners do **after** they have crossed the finish line of a strenuous, long race. Readers are urged to not do this prematurely for they must endure across the finish line and then they will be given rest: *Rev 3:21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*

Verse three states that Jesus is our supreme inspirer of faith and when we become weary of our suffering we should always remember Him for He suffered much at the hands of many sinful people. Nobody else has been called to endure such suffering.

Heb 12:4-11 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; ⁵and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; ⁶For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives." ⁷It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. ¹¹All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The writer brings up two situations the readers face. **One** is the sinful actions of those who oppose the body of Christ. Some people think he is referring to the sins the readers commit but context forces us to take this sin in reference to how the people of chapter eleven were sinfully treated. Jesus and many of those mentioned in chapter 11 had been killed and the recipients of this letter had not yet faced such a fate. Since he used the words "not yet", it is apparent that some of them would face that ultimate test. The readers then and now should be encouraged that resisting the rescinding of Jesus Christ as our Lord had not yet resulted in shedding of blood. We face much persecution in 2011 as Christians but not yet to that pinnacle.

The **second** is the inevitable discipline that God will place upon His people. Evidently he knew that they would have some trouble accepting that God would discipline them in ways that was very unpleasant for he wrote much more about this second situation. It is interesting that he phrases this as an exhortation, which is an encouragement. Being disciplined by the Lord is indeed an encouragement for we are then assured that we are His children. The word used for discipline combines chastening and education for such encouragement is meant to educate the child of God in ways to act as such. God only disciplines those He loves and He disciplines every one of them. Modern permissive attitudes of parents toward children make our understanding of this discipline somewhat difficult. But the Roman father had absolute authority over every child born as he first decided whether to keep or discard him. He had absolute authority to discipline his children in any way he decided, even execution if deemed required. The reader at the time this letter was written then understood that every child would be disciplined. In the home today, most children still expect to be disciplined and some even push such to assure themselves that they are loved. Christians endure the Lord's discipline for they understand that God has plans for His children and they must all be prepared for those plans: *Eph 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Those who are not disciplined are not members of God's Family. Being illegitimate may mean that they assume because they are members of a visible church that they are also members of the invisible church. But if they are not members of the invisible church God will not discipline them. So freedom from discipline is not a favored position but indicates that they are illegitimate. The writer then appeals to the human family model for discipline in the Family of God. The result of discipline should be respect and not resentment. Being disciplined by God brings us closer to being like Jesus and should be something that all His children anticipate. The Father of spirits is an unusual statement that is only used here in the Bible. Some translations render this as "our spiritual Father" and this is probably the correct understanding since our perfect righteousness from Jesus is presently in our spiritual state as our physical existence is being transformed.

Our earthly fathers disciplined us for the relatively short time that we were children but God disciplines us for our entire earthly existence as we are in the sanctification phase of salvation. That their discipline was "as they thought best" implies that such was imperfect but the discipline of our Father is perfect as He makes no mistakes. This discipline brings us closer to our spiritual state of righteousness so that we begin to share His holiness to some degree. Just as discipline by earthly fathers seems sorrowful initially, as we mature we understand that our father meant it for our best. The earthly training brings us closer to being a worthwhile person but the discipline by God brings us closer to His righteousness and that indeed is a peaceful state. The word translated trained is generally used in an athletic reference as such brings pain but results in better practice. This discipline can make us focus more on how far we are from God's standards but they should encourage us to know that He is bringing us closer to the goal of sanctification. God's discipline is to bring us into a disciplined state of being more like Christ in our walk here. Christians are being fitted for the Kingdom of God:

2Thess 1:4-7 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

⁵This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. ⁶For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,

Heb 12:12-13 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The word "therefore" is following the discussion on discipline. Thus the writer is now showing how this discipline applies in our daily walks in the world. Some people receiving the letter were discouraged and without the effort to continue the needed efforts. Other members were then

encouraged to help those who were struggling. Hands that are weak cannot accomplish anything so our discipline should result in strengthened hands that can accomplish His tasks. Knees that are feeble cannot uphold a person to walk a straight path. He includes a proverb: *Prov 4:26 Watch the path of your feet, And all your ways will be established.* The reference to the lame refers to members of the congregation of believers who are less spiritually able to proceed in straight paths. The more spiritually able among the congregation are not to put the lame aside but rather to help them to be healed so that the entire body of believers can walk more spiritually mature. Christians do not function independently of other Christians but they are to walk together in the paths directed by the Lord. The saying, “No Christian left behind”, is a good way to summarize this section.

Heb 12:14-17 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

There are differences in understanding among interpreters as to what is meant by “all men”. Some think he is referring to all men in the body of Christ so that the sanctification, which certainly only refers to Christians is then included. Others think he is referring to peace with everyone and then the pursuing means with everyone and sanctification is, of course, only meant for Christians. But even Jesus did not come on earth to bring peace to the planet: *Matt 10:34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.* The peace that He came to bring was peace between some sinners and holy God: *John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.* It is only through Jesus that we can have peace with God due to double imputation discussed above. Once we have peace **with God** we can have the peace **of God**.

Some translators use “holiness” instead of “sanctification” but they both have the same meaning for sanctification is the process by which a Christian is made more holy in his walk in the world. Jesus also said that only the pure in heart will see God: *Matt 5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* Jesus also referred to peacemakers and such refers to the application of peace to everyone: *Matt 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.* Certainly the body of Christ (the church) should always be at peace with each other and individual Christians should also be pursuing peace with everyone so it seems that both meanings apply. Paul also similarly urged his readers: *Rom 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*

Certainly beginning in verse 15 the writer is referring to the body of Christ. He mentions three particular items that should be avoided in the church. **One** is coming short of the grace of God. God freely gives grace to His children and they should all be sure that they are availing themselves of all grace offered to them. He has previously referred to the throne of grace: *Heb 4:16 Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.*

Some may fall away from grace:

Gal 5:4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Gal 5:7 You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?

Falling away from grace does not mean losing salvation but it means trying to run the race under their own power rather than appropriating the available grace of God. So Christians should always go to that throne to receive grace needed to help walk the Christian path in the world.

The **second** is that no root of bitterness causes troubles. A bitter root is one that produces bitter fruit. This metaphor regards the slow growth of plants that will eventually produce what their genetic structure predicts. It may be that no problem is seen initially but in time the bitter fruit will be produced. Such will inevitably cause trouble in the community. Moses also warned of such a contamination of the group: *Deut 29:18 lest there shall be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood.* Such poison is like leaven that will ruin the entire loaf if not removed: *1Cor 5:6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?* Many may be damaged by such a bitter root so it must be dealt with immediately upon being observed. The writer had earlier similarly warned the readers: *Heb 3:12 Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.*

The **third** warning is a reference to the sexually immoral person. The OT does not give evidence that Esau was a fornicator so it seems that the warning is for actual fornicators and godless people like Esau. The word for godless is “bebelos” and it means unhallowed or profane so the writer is saying that such people are not spiritually minded but only concerned with worldly affairs. In the instance of Esau mentioned here, we know that he did not value his inheritance that would come later but preferred to take the meal that he could have now. He bartered away something of infinity value for gratification of his immediate physical needs and this is typical of the apostate. The writer will repeat this warning: *Heb 13:4 Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.* Verse 17 states that Esau could not change what he had done so that there was finality to his action. It is not a question of forgiveness for God had already stated that He hated Esau before he was born. Thus Esau sinned because he was a sinner and there was no repentance available to him.

Heb 12:18-24 For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. ²⁰For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." ²¹And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am full of fear and trembling." ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

Now the writer contrasts the Jewish and Christian methods. He first states that the Christian readers did not come to something that can be touched. Mount Sinai represents something with which one can interact with his senses and certainly brings terror. The trumpet represents Sinai (Exodus 19:16, 19; 20:18) where the people heard the voice of God (Deut 5:24) and the effect was terrorizing to them. Verse 20 states that the mountain was holy and no living thing should touch it: *Exodus 19:13 'No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.'* *When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.* If a beast did touch it then it could not be touched but would have to be stoned from a distance. He further illustrates the terror of it all in verse 21 by stating that even Moses, who was known as having a close relationship with the Lord, was terrorized by the event.

Now he introduces verse 22 with the great word “but” to show the contrast. He uses the perfect tense that indicates something done and continuing when he writes “you have come”. Mount Zion was one of the hills on which Jerusalem was built and here it represents the home of God’s people. This now represents the heavenly city of the living God so that it is a dynamic place where God is accomplishing His many tasks. Myriads of angels originally meant 10,000 but it evolved to mean a very large number that cannot be counted by humans. Verse 23 states that this city is the home of the angels and the entire membership of the visible church whose names are written in a book (Luke 10:20; Rev 21:27). Such membership includes those who have already died and those who continue to live until the End Times. Also in the city is God who is the perfect Judge of all beings. Continuing in the city are the spirits of all those people of God who have been made totally righteous by the actions of Jesus Christ.

Finally in verse 24 we see the reference to Jesus whose blood initiated a new covenant between those chosen by God and God. His blood speaks better than that of Abel for Abel’s blood (Gen 4:9) was to speak against the inclusion of Cain because of his sinful act of murder. What a contrast the writer has made! The old covenant could not remove the terror of sins but the new

covenant removed the sins completely: *Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

Heb 12:25-29 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. ²⁶And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." ²⁷And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.

Here we see another comparison between Judaism and Christianity. The basic contrast here is between the way God spoke in the old covenant and the way He speaks in the new covenant. Certainly it is not wise to refuse God whenever He spoke! What God said "on earth" is what He said at Mount Sinai. There were many then who refused Him then and certainly they did not escape His wrath: *Jude 1:5 Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe.*

Now that Jesus speaks from heaven certainly nobody who refuses Him can escape. The Bible tells us that the earth shook when God appeared on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18; Judges 5:4-5; Ps 68:8) in a manner that was awesome and terrifying as the writer has already stated (Gen 12:21). But one day God will shake heaven and earth as foreseen by Haggai: *Hag 2:6 "For thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. This probably refers to a new heaven and a new earth: Rev 21:1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. Such shaking was also foretold by another prophet: Isaiah 13:13 Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, And the earth will be shaken from its place At the fury of the Lord of hosts In the day of His burning anger.*

Verse 27 refers to the final differentiation between those things of temporary existence and those of permanent existence. The phrase "yet once more" infers a final event, which will happen when God tests everything through the fire of His judgment and what is temporary will be removed and only that which is holy will remain. The Kingdom of God is a topic of great significance in the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels but is only mentioned twice in this book. The Kingdom is permanent and cannot be shaken because it is God's permanent creation that we receive as a gift. The temporary nature of our present created order has already been mentioned: *Psalm 102:25-27 "Of old Thou didst found the earth; And the heavens are the work of Thy*

hands. ²⁶"Even they will perish, but Thou dost endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing Thou wilt change them, and they will be changed. ²⁷"But Thou art the same, And Thy years will not come to an end.

Membership in the Kingdom cannot be earned but is part of the free gift of God to those He has justified. Since Christians have received this gift they should always be grateful to God and offer Him service that is acceptable to Him: *Rom 12:1 I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* This service must be offered in reference and awe as we serve an awesome God. This last verse should be paramount in our thoughts about God. It is similarly stated in the OT: *Deut 4:24 "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.* Yes, He is love and He has shown us His great love by offering His chosen people the free gift of double imputation that justifies us before Him because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. But His wrath is very real and often is repeated in Scripture. Everyone but those who love Jesus Christ will personally experience His wrath: *John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* When this verse says that the wrath of God abides on him, it means that this wrath has always been there and will always remain on him. This is a terrifying thought that is often ignored in modern churches and the leaders (watchmen) of such churches will receive a horrifying judgment: *Ezekiel 33:6 'But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.'*