THE GLORIES OF CHRIST IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

HELPS TO HOLINESS

Hebrews 12:1-29

Hebrews 12:1-17 might be called "Helps to Holiness," for this section presents reasons for seeking a closer walk with the Lord on the pathway of faith. Only our Triune God is absolutely holy in His very nature; but because He has redeemed us with His own precious blood, He has sanctified us, that is, set us apart from the Christ-rejecting world unto Himself.

God does not promise that we shall be sinless in this life; yet because we are set apart by His grace, He says to us, "**Sin shall not have dominion over you**" (Romans 6:14). He knows that a veritable warfare is being waged in us, a struggle between the old nature inherited from Adam and the new nature received by faith in Christ Jesus (Cf. Romans 6, 7). But thank God, there is the eighth chapter of Romans! And as we live in the power of its message, led by the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to control our motives, our thoughts and deeds, we shall be more and more "**conformed to the image**" of the Son of God (Romans 8:29), even during this earthly pilgrimage. Then "when he shall appear," whose we are, and whom we serve, "**we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is**" (I John 3:2; cf. Acts 27:23).

In that coming day, when we have our resurrection bodies, we shall bear no trace of sin! But meanwhile, as long as we are pilgrims and strangers in the world, journeying to that better country which is our eternal home, "we wrestle . . . against . . . the rulers of the darkness of this world" (Ephesians 6:12), even Satan and all his hosts, hence the Holy Spirit's exhortation and admonition in Hebrews 12:1-17 for our instruction as we walk by faith.

(For a more detailed consideration of New Testament teaching on *sanctification*, see comments on verse 14, topic 5 of this section, "The danger of missing the blessing.")

The early Hebrew Christians experienced the fiery darts or the enemy of their souls; and to them, as unto us today, the Spirit of God is saying these much needed words of exhortation.

Andrew Bonar has expressed the message in this terse statement, "There is no short-cut to holiness!

And what are the five helps to holiness in the passage before us? We have an attraction—a crowned Christ. We have an encouragement—a great cloud of witnesses. We have an urgent necessity—our besetting sins. We have a help—the chastening dealings of God, our Father. And finally, we have a danger—the possibility of missing God's best. Let us examine these, one by one.

1. The great attraction—Christ in glory (vv. 2, 14)

Our Lord draws us like a mighty magnet. Here the question does not have to do with our running a race in order to escape hell; it is our giving up earthly things for heavenly values.

In our last lesson we saw a little glimpse of what it meant for the Lord Jesus to endure the cross, despising the shame—"**for the joy that was set before him**." Although He was always pleasurable to heaven, He met with constant "**contradiction of sinners against himself**" during His earthly ministry. His death is presented in chapter 10 as that of a sin-removing offering but in 12:2, 3 it is seen as a pattern to us of faith in suffering; for as a Man, He put His trust in His Father (cf. 2:13).

In the first, He was alone; for "**by himself** [he] **purged our sins**." In the seconds we are to be in company with Him, even as the apostle Paul said, "**I am crucified with Christ** . . . **if we suffer, we shall also reign with him**" (Galatians 2:20; II Timothy 2:12). That is why the inspired writer bade the early-Hebrew Christians to "**consider him**" for comfort and encouragement in the face of persecution. Then he added,

"Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (v. 4).

In other words, those addressed in this epistle had not laid down their lives as martyrs for Christ. James, the brother of John, had; Stephen had; so had a host of others. But those then living were to remember that they had not *died* for their faith. And as they kept on looking unto Jesus, seated at the right hand of the throne of God, in the place of all power, they would be heartened for the race set before them, their eyes upon the goal.

2. The heavenly spectators (v. 1)

It is a sobering and vet stimulating thought that past generations are vitally interested in our demeanor. They are concerned that we, "**upon whom the ends of the world** [age] **are come**" (I Corinthians 10:11), be found worthy to be in the succession of the men of faith who have gone before.

3. The sin which so easily besets us (v. 1)

We are haunted and hunted by the propensities to evil to which in times past we have yielded. We need to flee them. The thought of being so beset is an incentive to run in the race, laying aside every impediment. The runner in the Greek games did not wear a flowing robe to retard his speed; neither does any contestant for the prize today wear an overcoat and boots. Yet how many of us try to run the Christian race, at the same time carrying the weight of worry, fear, worldly-mindedness, unbelief? In the words of another, Is the thing with which we are occupied "a weight, or is it a wing"?

4. *The discipline of the Father* (vv. 5-11).

Our heavenly Father wants us to become partakers of His holiness, and puts us through a course of discipline with that end in view. His Son, our Saviour, is our Pattern of faith through suffering; but now we part company. Never did He need the chastening of the Father! "**Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered**" (5:8)—not that He had to learn to obey. There was no spirit of lawlessness in Him.

As Son, it was His to command, but "**obedience**" in suffering became His lot when He voluntarily took upon Himself the form of a bond servant (Philippians 2:5-8). Therefore, while we walk with Him, praying with Paul that we may know "**the fellowship of his sufferings**" (Philippians 3:10), we are not in His company when the chastening of the Father is upon us in order to correct us and bring us back into the way of obedience. Our Lord knew the contradiction of sinners, but never of sin, except in others. We do have to strive against sin, and the discipline or chastening of the Father helps us in this.

That is why the Holy Spirit reminds the suffering Hebrew Christians of "**the exhortation**" which they had "**forgotten**," although it was written in their own Old Testament, with which they were familiar:

"My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (vv. 5, 6; cf. Proverbs 3:11, 12).

Seven times in verses 5-11 the word "**chastening**" is used. In the Greek language it carries with it the thought of "*child-training*" and "*correction*." shows that the life of the disciple of Christ is one of being at school. Now Titus 2:11, 12 tells us that "**the grace of God that bringeth** salvation" is our teacher.

But though the teaching is gracious, it is often accompanied by the rod of correction, because of our slowness of apprehension and our fleshly tendencies. And thus chastening becomes the practical application of the cross to our self-life. By submitting to it we may effectually crucify "**the flesh with the affections and lusts**" (Galatians 5:24), that we who are really Christ's may be marked off from the rest of men, recognized as the children of God.

Even though the child-training, through which our heavenly Father allows us to pass, seems severe, we are not to *despise* it, or be *discouraged* under it (v. 5); but we are to be *exercised* by it (v. 11). For the Father's chastening is a sign of *love* (v. 6); it is an evidence of our being genuine *sons*, not bastards (vv. 7-9); and it has our eventual profiting in view that we may be ever increasingly partakers of our Father's holiness! (vv. 10, 11)

Furthermore, our earthly fathers have chastened us, "and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?" (v. 9). Our earthly fathers have sometime made mistakes; our heavenly Father never! Now "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (v. 11).

The exhortation which follows in verses 12 and 13 is an exhortation to patience, perseverance and singleness of purpose on the pathway of faith.

5. The danger of missing the blessing (vv. 14-17).

Without this practical holiness, which we are to pursue, along with peace with all men (v. 14), no one can have the beatific vision. An unholy man, if placed in the presence of the glory of the heavenly Man, would be blinded by His dazzling brightness. Saul of Tarsus found the glory of the risen Lord Jesus "**above the brightness of the** [noonday] **sun**"; so that having beheld Him, Saul was sightless for three days (Acts 9:3, 9; 22:6, 11; 26: 13; cf. Hebrews 12:14).

We should inquire here two things: What is this holiness. without which no man shall see the Lord? And who is meant here by "**the Lord**"?

Answering the last of these questions first, we note the obvious fact that the Lord Jesus Himself cannot be meant; for Revelation 1:7 tells us that, when He comes with clouds, "every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him"—men who are certainly not possessors of the holiness here enjoined. They will see Him as the righteous Judge, not as their lasting portion and God, which is meant here. Further, we are told in Revelation 22:3, 4, that "his servants shall serve him; and they shall see his face," which is undoubtedly a reference to God the Father, who now, according to I Timothy 6:16, dwelleth "light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can [now] see."

Next, concerning the nature of this "**holiness**" of verse 14, it should be noted that the Greek word used here is different from the one in verse 10, where the intrinsic holiness of God, as one of His attributes, is in view. The word here in verse 14 means literally "*a process of purifying*," as in I John 3:3. Furthermore, the Greek for "**follow**" is the same word used by Paul in Acts 22:4, "**I persecuted this way unto the death**," and in Philippians 3:14, "**I press toward the mark**." So that this holiness is something which we are commanded to seek diligently.

Now, in the New Testament we find holiness, or sanctification, spoken of in three different aspects, as we saw in Lesson 2 of this course.

There is first of all *the redemptive phase*, referred to in II Thessalonians 2:13, as "**the sanctification** [or, 'setting apart'] **of the Spirit**" by conviction of sin, unto salvation.

Then in Hebrews 10:10 we see that sanctification is also a work of the blood or body of Christ, setting us apart *positionally* unto God once for all.

Finally, there is the sanctification effected by "**the washing of water by the word**," mentioned in Ephesians 5:26 and John 17:17—the Christian's practical and progressive growth in cleansing "**his way**," resulting from "**taking heed thereto**" according to God's Word (Psalm 119:9). Of these three phases of sanctification, it is apparent at once that only the last named can be pursued by us, and so only the last is in view here in Hebrews 12:14. But it should be remembered that the last definitely presupposes the existence of the other two.

To express it very simply, "**No man shall see the Lord**" (v. 14) without the new nature received by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit (II Corinthians 5:17). This holiness, or sanctification—set-apart state—God *gives* to all who believe in His Son as the only Saviour. "**Christ Jesus is** . . . **made unto us** . . . **sanctification**" (I Corinthians 1:30). And because of His great love for us, we should want to *pursue* holiness, to follow after it, in order to be well-pleasing unto Him, as well as to bear faithful witness to His grace before a godless world. It is to accomplish this in us that the Father chastens us "**for our profit**," and bids us "**follow after peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord**" (v. 14).

In the closing words of this first part of chapter 12, the Holy Spirit sounds a threefold warning:

(1) "lest any man fail of the [or 'falleth back from'] the grace of God," that is, an apostate;

(2) "lest any root of bitterness, springing up" among the believers, trouble them, "and thereby many be defiled" (cf. Deuteronomy 29:18);

(3) "Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright" (vv. 15, 16).

For God's Word concerning fornication among professing Christians, read I Corinthians 5. And remember that the Greek word used here for "**profane**" does not mean blasphemy, but rather it describes the man who has no thought for God. Esau was such a man.

Jacob, with all his faults, was one of whom it could be said that God loved him, because he was a God-seeker. The face of God was his mystic quest (Psalm 24:6), and he did finally see Him "**face to face**" at Peniel. He became an "**Israel**" then, "**a prince with God**," as he clung to the One who had mastered him (Genesis 32:24-31). Though Esau was of Abraham, through Isaac, he shut himself out from what was then God's best—to be in the line of the Messianic genealogy.

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

Remember that the Scripture does *not* say here that Esau could not be saved by faith in the promised Redeemer. As long as he lived, salvation by God's grace could have been received by him. But verse 17 does tell us that he was *seeking* the blessing which he had despised; and that his father, Isaac, would not change his mind and take it away from Jacob.

Had God not intended that Jacob should be the one through whom the Christ should come—not that he deserved it, but because he did love God? Esau was seeking the blessing, not the Lord.

Judaism and Christianity Contrasted 12:18-29

As a means of yet further encouragement to the suffering Hebrew Christians, and as a further exhortation to holy living, the inspired writer reminds them once more of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, linking verses 1-17, which we have been considering, with verses 18-29 by the significant word "**for**" (v. 18).

He compares the seven visible, fear-inspiring signs of the old covenant (vv. 18-21) with eight blessed features or personages of the new covenant (vv. 22-24). And what a contrast! Then he closes the chapter with another warning to the enlightened, but unregenerated, concerning the terrible consequence of apostasy (vv. 25-29).

Observe that the inspired writer reminded the Jewish believers of their heritage in Christ by saying, "For ye are not come unto" Mount Sinai (v. 18), "but ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). In other words, they were no longer under the Law of Moses, but were under grace (Romans 6:14; cf. John 1:17).

Therefore, the Spirit of God urged them to separate themselves completely from the ceremonies of Judaism for the better things of Christ. But let us look more carefully at the contrast before us.

1. The seven outward and visible signs of the old covenant (vv. 18-21):

- a. The mount that might be touched
- b. The fire
- c. The blackness
- d. The darkness
- e. The tempest
- f. The trumpet
- g. The voice of words, that is, the Ten Commandments

"... which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake)" (vv. 19-21).

Read Exodus 19 for this story of the giving of the law. Then compare the fear and trembling of Israel with the peace and assurance which the voice of our Lord gives to our hearts as we hear Him say,

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Over against the seven old-covenant characteristics, we have the eight features and personages of God's present order, the inward and spiritual realities of the more glorious covenant.

They call for the closest scrutiny for they are "**the things above**," on which we are to set our hearts and minds (Colossians 3:2).

2. Eight features or personages of the new covenant (vv. 22-24).

- a. "Mount Sion"
- b. "The city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"
- C. "Innumerable company of angels . . . the general assembly"
- d. "The church of the firstborn which are written in heaven"
- e. "God the Judge of all"
- f. "The spirits of just men made perfect"
- g. "Jesus the mediator of the new covenant"
- h. "The blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel"

This inspired summary of our "**spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ**" (Ephesians 1:3) encourages us to press on in the Christian race, our eyes upon the goal. And as we meditate upon each of these eight blessings (listed here, we marvel anew at the grace of God.

(1) "Ye are come unto Mount Sion"

God's purposes of grace for Israel, as a nation, are associated with the literal Mount Sion; for when Christ reigns on earth, Jerusalem will be the metropolis of the world. Although the millennial restoration of His chosen people is still future, the Holy Spirit, in Hebrews 12:22, was reassuring the Jewish Christians that, by faith in the Lord Jesus, they had already "**come unto Mount Sion**"—the place of blessing through the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

In the verses which follow, He goes on to explain that they were members of the Bride of Christ, "**the church of the firstborn**," that theirs was a heavenly calling.

Therefore, "**Mount Sion**" in the passage before us expresses to Hebrew believers a moral and spiritual thought. It speaks of God's eternal rest in Christ, who is God's resource when everything committed to man has broken down.

Sion does not appear in history till all was failure in Israel. Priesthood had disgraced itself in the house of Eli (I Samuel 2:12-4:22). The glory had departed, and never returned to the Tabernacle which Moses had fashioned, and which was afterwards set up in Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

The sons of Samuel walked not in their father's steps, and the people clamored for a king like the kings of the nations. But Saul's regime ended as a bitter disappointment, and he and his sons fell on the mountains of Gilboa (I Samuel 31).

The Philistines became masters of the land and gave it their name, "**Palestine**," meaning "*the land of the Philistines*."

"Then" we are told, when things were as black as black could be, "**the Lord awaked as one out of sleep**," and "**chose**... **the mount Zion which he loved**" (Psalm 78:65-70).

First, David had completed the conquest of the land by winning Zion, the last stronghold of the Jebusites, and had made it both the political and religious center of a united Israel (II Samuel 5:6-12).

Then God selected Zion as His earthly center. Grace—sovereign, triumphant grace—is thus set forth in Zion (Cf. Galatians 4:26). And in the risen Christ, raised to power and glory after the seeming disaster of the cross, God has found, and we find, a resting place.

Zion speaks of the supremacy of grace when man's ruin has been fully demonstrated. That is what we have come to—the reign of sovereign grace.

(2) "The city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"

All the saints of every age will find their eternal home in the city which God has prepared for them. Abraham looked for it, and in the light of it was a stranger and a pilgrim here.

For God's description of the heavenly Jerusalem, read the last two chapters of Revelation.

(3) "Innumerable company of angels . . . the general assembly"

Our unseen friends and helpers are the executives of the divine providence toward the heirs of salvation (1:14). In our first lesson of this series we saw that this "**innumerable company of angels**" is referred to in Revelation 5:11 as "**ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands**."

(4) "The church of the firstborn which are written in heaven"

This is the called-out, believing company which is the Bride of Christ. The Greek word for "**firstborn**" is in the plural.

The redeemed of this Church Age are, as James tells us, "**a kind of firstfruits of his creatures**," samples of the great millennial ingathering, which will be the harvest. The names are already registered in heaven. They may be still on earth, but their *names* are written in heaven, as those for whom grace has made reservation before their arrival.

(5) "God the Judge of all"

This reference is in immediate connection with the preceding; for the Church of the firstborn (ones) is in direct contrast with Esau, who threw away the privilege of the firstborn, and failed to obtain it afterwards, in spite of his tears. But Jacob, who cherished what Esau despised, had to come under the disciplinary ways of God.

All of God's true sons are thus dealt with. As Father, He judges their ways and reaches His end concerning them by methods often humiliating and painful to the flesh (See also I Peter 1:17).

(6) "The spirits of just men made perfect"

It is not that they come to us in dark séances. We are united to them in the mystic fellowship that binds all "**the saints in light**" in one unbroken family, some on earth, others in Paradise. The holy union of the redeemed in Christ is not interrupted by death.

(7) "Jesus the mediator of a new covenant"

The Greek word for "**new**" here means "*fresh*." The new covenant, sealed with the "**precious blood of Christ**" (I Peter 1:19), will never lose its freshness. We shall never cease to wonder at it and adore.

(8) "The blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel"

The sprinkled blood is mentioned last as the basis of all our blessings. It is the blood of the new covenant. It is "**precious blood**." It will never lose its value. It is to us the abiding token of the love of God, who, in the person of His Son, bore "**our sins in his own body on the tree**" (I Peter 2:24).

A Warning—"Refuse Not Him That Speaketh" 12:25-29

And now we seem to come back to the beginning of the epistle. In the opening words of chapter 1 we are told that God hath spoken in His Son. In 2:1-4 we are warned against neglecting "**so** great salvation," which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord.

There is no escape for those who are guilty of this neglect. And here at the end of the epistle we read, "**See that ye refuse not him that speaketh.**" He spoke on earth, but He is still speaking, and that "**from heaven**" (v. 25).

He is still speaking in grace because He speaks from off the blood-sprinkled mercy seat. But the hour is not far distant when He will speak in judgment. When He descended on Mount Sinai, He shook the earth as He spoke in holiness. His present voice is one of loving entreaty and of wooing tenderness. But when He speaks in judgment, He will shake both earth and heaven.

Whatever can be shaken will then be removed. The mystery of the divine passivity will then be ended. Only those things which cannot be shaken will remain.

Into this realm of the permanent we are already brought; for we receive a "**kingdom which cannot be shaken**" (v. 27). We are anchored in the eternal and the unchanging (vv. 26-28).

This should not make us careless, the inspired writer is saying to the persecuted Hebrew Christians. On the contrary, because our "**spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ**" are so far superior to the things of Judaism, let us press on toward the heavenly Jerusalem, looking unto Jesus. To those suffering saints, as to us today, the word of exhortation is searching:

"Wherefore, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace [or, 'thankfulness']**, whereby we may offer serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear**" (v. 28).

The closing verse of the chapter sounds a final warning to any enlightened souls who might still "**refuse** . . . **him that speaketh**" in love in the person of the Son of God.

Such would do well to remember that the God of Mount Sinai, who spoke there in fire, is the same holy God who must judge sin. "**Our God**," who hath spoken in grace by His Son, will one day speak in judgment upon the ungodly, and as the righteous Judge, He is a "**consuming fire**."

Assignment for Exam 11

1. Memorize the quotation from Proverbs as it is recorded in Hebrews I 12:5, 6. Memorize also Hebrews 12:11.

2. Remember that legalists today would take us back to Mount Sinai, whereas we must realize the wonders of Ephesians 2:8, 9, at the same time heeding the challenge of Ephesians 2:10, and appropriating the helps to holiness of Hebrews 12:1-17. *"Liberty is not license."*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NOTE: PLEASE DO NOT CONTACT THE MOODY CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL FOR GRADING OF YOUR EXAMS – IF YOU WISH TO COMPLETE THEM, CONSIDER THEM AS AN OPEN BOOK EXAM

1. In the right-hand margin write "True" or "False" after each of the following statements. (20 points)

a. In Hebrews 12:2, 3 the Lord Jesus is presented to the believer as a pattern of faith in suffering.

b. In His earthly life Christ endured the "contradiction of sinners" against Him.

c. Worry is consistent with faith.

d. A warfare is being waged in the Christian between the old nature and the new nature.

e. We may be conformed to the image of Christ by yielding to the Holy Spirit.

f. God's Word says that sin shall not have dominion over us.

g. We are to "run with patience" the race which is set before us in order to be sure we are saved.

h. Hebrews 12:4 speaks of some who had laid down their lives as martyrs

for Christ. i. Believers are to lay aside the weights which hinder their progress in the Christian race.

In the blank space write the letter of the correct answer. (16 points)

(1) Esau is referred to as a "profane person" because

- (a) He hated his brother
- (b) He blasphemed God
- (c) He had no thought for God
- (d) He had no respect for his father

(2) Hebrews 12:17 describes Esau as a man who

(a) Could never repent

(b) Could never be saved

(c) Sought God later

(d) Was interested only in the blessing, not in the Lord

(3) Mt. Zion is

- (a) Characterized by fire, blackness, darkness and tempest
- (b) Prominent in the Bible in the time of the conquest of Canaan by Joshua
- (c) A mountain near Shiloh where the Tabernacle was pitched by David
- (d) Intended to illustrate the supremacy of sovereign grace

What does "holiness" mean in each of the following expressions? (6 points)

a. "Partakers of his holiness" (12:10)

b. "Follow after. . .holiness [or, 'sanctification']" (12:14)

4. In the Bible, holiness, or sanctification, is mentioned in a threefold way. Define each of these in a word or phrase, and give one Scripture reference for each. You may use your Bible. (9 points)

| Definition | Bible Reference | |
|------------|------------------------|--|
| a | | |
| b | | |
| c | | |

5. Name the five "helps to holiness" in Hebrews 12:1-17, as given in your textbook. (10 points)

| (a) | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (b) | | |
| (c) | | |
| (d) | | |
| (e) | | |

6. In the right-hand margin write "old" or "new" according to the covenant to which each of the following belongs. (10 points)

| a. Mount Zion | |
|---|---|
| b. Hosts of angels | |
| c. Sound of trumpet | |
| d. The Ten Commandments | |
| e. God the Judge of all | |
| f. The mount that might be touched | |
| g. The blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abe | 1 |
| h. The fire | |
| i. Jesus, the Mediator | |
| j. Heavenly Jerusalem | |

7. Complete the following statements concerning the warning of Hebrews 12:25-29. (9 points)

| a. God hath spoken | |
|--------------------|--|
| b. He now speaks | |
| c. He will speak | |

8. Tell in your own words what chastening should mean to a child of God. (10 points)

9. In view of suffering in the Christian life, what do these words mean to you ? (10 points) "Jesus . . . is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2).

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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