

**Are You Holy Enough to See God? *or*
Are You Holy Enough that God Is Seen through You? Heb 12:14**
Dr. John Niemelä at Grace Chapel on Cinco de Mayo, 2010

Introduction

Hebrews: *Run for Your Lives* versus *Run for the Prize*

Heb 12:1 urges believers: *Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*. Does he mean, “Run for your lives” in the sense of: “Run well, so you don’t go to the Lake of Fire”? Or, does he mean, “Run for the prize—that you would be rewardable partakers (*metachoi*)”?

View 1: Some take it as *Run for your lives—escape the Lake of Fire*.

Throughout this book [*The Race Set Before Us*] we [Schreiner and Caneday] have maintained that we must run to win the prize of eschatological salvation. Those who give up in the race will not inherit [they understand this as “will not enter”] the kingdom of God. Some object to the thesis we advance by claiming that it smacks of works-righteousness.¹

In response, they claim to follow the example set by the author of Hebrews:

We reply that our conception of the race is no different from that of the author of Hebrews, who exhorts the readers not to “throw away your confidence” since “it will be richly rewarded” (Heb 10:35). The author then says, “You need to persevere in order that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He promised” (Heb 10:36). What is the reward and the promise that is placed before the readers here? The reward is given when Jesus comes to those who live by faith and do not shrink back from their confession (Heb 10:38–39). Hebrews 10:39 clarifies that the reward is eternal life: “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (NIV). . . . Thus the author summons the readers to belief unto final salvation. If they quit the race at this juncture, they will not be saved.² [Emphasis added]

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL; Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2001, 312.

² Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race*, 312f.

View 1 applied to Hebrews 12:14

Schreiner and Caneday say:

Nor is growing in grace optional. The author of Hebrews says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14 NIV). Holiness [in lifestyle] is necessary to see God, that is, to experience [that is, to obtain] eternal life.³

They equate see the Lord with obtaining eternal life. How tragic!

View 2: Run for the prize—to be rewardable partakers (*metachoi*)

Hebrews 12:7 raises a red flag with the model: *If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?* [emphasis mine]

*Fathering a son (human procreation) precedes the human father disciplining his son.
Regenerating a son precedes God disciplining his son (Heb 2:11 and 3:1 define son as believer).*

The co-authors of *The Race* fixate on their idea that people will not receive eschatological salvation (eternal life) until after they die and that “obtaining the eschatological prize [eternal life] requires ardent effort.” Amazingly, they did not notice that the issue of parental discipline in Hebrews 12 conflicts with their position.

How so? Consider Hebrews 12:7: *If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?*

*Fathering a son (human procreation) precedes the human father disciplining that son.
Regenerating a son precedes God disciplining him as a son.*

God’s relationship with the readers is analogous to their son-to-father human relationships. Thus, Hebrews 12:7 reinforces what the author says in 2:11 and 3:1. As an aid to the analysis, certain words are underlined and others are in bold font.

*For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them **brethren** (2:11 Author’s translation.⁴ Emphasis mine).*

*Therefore, holy **brethren**, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus (3:1 NKJV. Emphasis mine).*

The words *sanctifies* and *sanctified* appear in 2:11. Both forms come from the Greek verb *hagiazō* (to sanctify). The word *holy* in 3:1 is *hagios*. They are from the same root. The idea of setting (someone) apart to God is common to all three of these uses. Once it refers to Jesus Christ as set apart to God. The other references are to believers being set apart to God.

³ Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race*, 73.

⁴ The NKJV translates the second use of *hagiazō* in 2:11 as *those who are being sanctified*, as though it referred to progressive sanctification. Grammatically, that would be a possibility. However, context weighs against such an interpretation. The reason believers are God’s children is because Christ, the Sanctifier, has positionally sanctified them. Progressive sanctification does not render anyone into God’s children or Christ’s brethren. Thus, the author’s translation of the second use of *hagiazō* in 2:11 is *those who are being sanctified*.

Both passages refer to brethren, but 2:11 clarifies why the author refers to the readers as brethren. Both the Sanctifier (Christ) and the sanctified ones (believers) are of one Father. That is, both Jesus Christ and the sanctified ones have God as their Father, which renders believers into Christ's brethren.

Hebrews 3:1 also contains an important clue in regard to the issues mentioned in 2:11: the timing of regeneration and the timing of positional sanctification. The author addresses the readers as *holy* (i.e., sanctified) *brethren*. That is what they were at the time he wrote (while they were alive on planet earth). He wrote to living human beings as Christ's sanctified brethren.

Furthermore, Hebrews 13:22 (the verse that tells the readers why he wrote to them) addresses the readers as *brethren*, those who already have become regenerated and sanctified children of God. Yet, if the co-authors of *The Race* were right, *brethren* would be an inappropriate term for the author of Hebrews to use in referring to believers. So much for their claim to be faithful to the book of Hebrews as a whole. Hebrews 2:11 has defined brethren of Christ as believers (who share a common Father with Christ). Their interpretation of Hebrews 12:14 flies in the face of the book of Hebrews. So much for their claim to replicate the argument of Hebrews.

Hebrews 12:14 Issues (The notes give one-sentence answers to 1–2; longer ones to 3–4)

1. What is needed to see the Lord? Peace + holiness? Or holiness alone? [Grammar says the latter].
2. Is it positional holiness that is required? Or is it a holy lifestyle? [Context says the latter].
3. When will the Lord be seen?
4. By whom will the Lord be seen?

When Will the Lord Be Seen?

Hewitt says that it may refer to a figurative seeing in time (fellowship with Him now).

The difficulty here, however, is the limitation of the vision to that definite revelation of God, which is the result of Christ's second advent [imposed by commentators], whereas it may also mean an emblematic representation of an innermost vision through intimate personal fellowship with Christ.⁵

Zane Hodges was an interpreter who did not come under the critique of Thomas Hewitt. Zane did not limit the passage to the eschatological future. He said,

Since no sin can stand in God's presence, Christians must—and will be—sinless when they see the Lord (cf. 1 John 3:3). That realization offers motivation for pursuing holiness here and now. But the author may also have had in mind the thought that *one's perception of God even now is conditioned by his real measure of holiness* (cf. Matt. 5:8).⁶ [Emphasis mine].

⁵ Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, [first series], ed. R.V.G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 197.

⁶ Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 810.

Zane's course notes for his class in Hebrews also show that he did not limit the seeing to physical sight when come into the Lord's presence:

Its importance is attested by the fact that those who see God must have it [holiness].

(1) *All Christians will have it* at the moment when Christ comes: 1 John 3:2.

(2) But the ancient world made much of the "vision" of God.

Such spiritual *seeing* required purity.⁷ [Emphasis in original]

He refers to *the vision of God as spiritual sight* and regards this as something that should be part of the believer's life while on earth.

By whom Will the Lord Be Seen?

Heb 12:14 does not say: [*You*] *pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which you will not see the Lord*. Lane is close, but errantly thinks its point is to minister to pagan unbelievers in society. Heb 12:14 aims at visually impaired believers. Apart from that, Lane is on target.

They are to participate in the process of being made holy by cultivating a life-style that is pleasing to God. When the preacher [the writer of Hebrews] instructs his friends to "pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" he is urging them to reflect the essential quality of the Father so that *a pagan society will recognize in them the family likeness!*⁸ [Emphasis mine]

MacArthur also comes close (but also thinks Hebrews views all non-seers as unbelievers).

The passage does not read "without which *you* will not see the Lord," **but** *without which no one will see the Lord*. In other words, when unbelievers see a Christian's peacefulness and holiness, they are attracted to the Lord. . . . Our love for each other . . . is a means of drawing people to Christ, apart from whom *no one will see the Lord*. As we run the race, leaving a straight path, showing love to men by peacemaking, and showing love to God by holiness, people will see the Lord.⁹ [Italics in original. Underlining and bold are mine]

Conclusion

The time to *see the Lord* includes now: seeing (fellowshipping with) Him. Sanctified lifestyle helps other believers *see the Lord* and escape warning-passage discipline. Heb 12:14 is not: *Am I holy enough to see the Lord?* It is: *Am I holy enough for Him to be seen through me?*

⁷ Zane C. Hodges, "Class Notes: Greek 225: The Epistle to the Hebrews," Spring Semester 1986, 231. That was the last time he taught the course at seminary, since he retired at the end of the semester.

⁸ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 167.

⁹ John F. MacArthur, *Hebrews*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 405–6.