

SESSION TWENTY-SIX

A FINAL WARNING TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE NEW COVENANT

Heb 12:14-29

I. INTRODUCTION

The second major movement of the book (8:1–10:39) concluded by the author telling his readers that their primary need was to have endurance in their Christian pilgrimage. This would be the path to God's reward and promises, as well as assuring that God's judgment would not fall on them.

The third and final movement of the book (11:1–13:17) opened with a lengthy discourse on faith (11:1-40), for it is faith that enables one to endure and "gain approval" with God. Yet endurance is accompanied by God's *discipline* (training), and the believer who wishes to endure and walk on with God must be willing to accept God's discipline in his life. Successfully responding to discipline will eventuate in "holiness" (12:10), which in turn furthers an obedient life.

Having confronted his audience with their need for faith and submission to discipline, the author now pauses for a final time to warn them of the dangers of not responding positively to his message. In 12:14-29, we have the fifth and final "warning passage" of the book.

II. A WORD OF CAUTION FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT OBEY (12:14-17)

In vv 14-17, the author's concern turns back to those who may make the wrong choices and fail to respond in obedience. So, he calls on the whole community to be on the lookout for those who might be headed in the wrong direction. He knows that the negative influence of a few can adversely affect the whole community.

A. Verse 14

In general, one should pursue peace with all men and sanctification.¹ We should be concerned about each other's "peace." What does the idea of pursuing *peace* have to do with the context? Here, the author may have in mind the Hebrew word for peace, namely, *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם). To the Jewish mind, "shalom" means not merely peace but one's welfare. The idea, then, would be that believers are to look after each other's welfare (especially their sanctification). Another possibility (though closely related) is that the reference to peace has some connection to the "peaceful fruit of righteousness" mentioned in verse 11Xthe outcome for those who had successfully submitted to discipline. In either case, believers must help

¹ Lane (2:449) takes the peace as referring to the objective reality of Christ's redemptive accomplishment at the cross. This peace, then, is God's salvation gift which we must earnestly pursue along with other members of the believing community. Keep in mind that for Lane, salvation (our *peace* with God) can be forfeited.

other believers by looking out for early signs of defection from the faith (vv 15ff.).

Each believer also needs to pursue "sanctification," for without this "no one shall see the Lord." This could mean a couple of different things:

1. By sanctification, the author may be thinking of justification through faith in Christ (*positional sanctification*), for the word is used that way in Hebrews (Heb 2:11; 10:14; and 13:12).² No one can have any hope of seeing the Lord (*in the future*) if they have not been sanctified through the blood of Christ. For Lane, this would be contingent on *holding fast* one's confession. He states, "Christians have within their reach the holiness that is indispensable for seeing God" (2:451).
2. On the other hand, the author may have in mind *progressive sanctification*. This would fit the context better, since he has been speaking of responding to discipline **that we might share His holiness** (recall 12:10). If that is the case, then the phrase "without which no one shall see the Lord" may have in mind a *present experience* of the believer, i.e., one's perception of God (in the here and now) is conditioned by his real measure of holiness. Note how this idea had already been displayed in the case of Moses: "for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (11:27). So, progressive sanctification is valuable for the matter of endurance. As one is sanctified and experiences holiness in his life, he is better enabled to *perceive God* and thereby motivated to endure.

B. Verse 15

While it would be desirable if the whole community were to grow in sanctification, the possibility remains that not all will do so. In fact, they may "come short of the grace of God." This need not be taken to mean coming short of "salvation in Christ" (i.e., saving faith and regeneration). In light of the context of Hebrews, this probably looks at the failure to appropriate God's grace for successfully completing one's Christian pilgrimage. Recall how in 4:16, the readers were encouraged to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace" to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. This is God's grace of appropriating the benefits of Christ's high priestly ministry (recall 7:25). Duane Dunham notes,

"The writer has just referred to the need for helping those who are weak and failing in their faith. It would be logical that this still is in reference to them, providing a more specific instance in which some are failing. It is a failing with reference to the grace of God, especially as it relates to seeking forgiveness for failure. It is uncalled for to take this reference and make it a general designation of the plan of salvation."³

Failure to respond to the "grace of God" can lead to a root of bitterness in the believer's life. This may have allusion to Deut 29:18-21:

² Lane (2:450) takes sanctification, not in an ethical sense, but as that holiness we receive at the moment of trusting Christ as Savior.

³Duane A. Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1974), 227.

"The Root of Bitterness"

Deuteronomy 29:18-21

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.** ¹⁹ "And it shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered *land* with the dry.' ²⁰ "The LORD shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. ²¹ "Then the LORD will single him out for adversity from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law.

In Deut 29:18, this "root of bitterness" described a man who turned away from God and defected from the covenant. A similar thing is possible for the New Covenant community. Oberholtzer notes, "The 'root of bitterness' parallels the developing of a hardened, unbelieving heart in Hebrews 3:12 and includes leading others to withdraw from the community into apostasy."⁴ The danger, then, in such a "root of bitterness" being tolerated in the community is that "many may be defiled." In other words, the unbelief and hardness of heart is like a bad disease that can spread to others and infect them as well. Early detection and correction is needed!

C. Verses 16-17 - The Tragedy of Esau

The verb ἐπισκοποῦντες at the beginning of vs 15 calls for a community concern: "look out for" or "see that." The concerns are threefold (signalled in Gk by μή τις):

1. no one comes short of the grace of God
2. no embittered believers that may defile others
3. no immoral or godless person like Esau

The last concern is addressed in vv 16-17. Immaturity in the Christian life can degenerate to an immoral lifestyle, and further harden the heart of the believer. This is the opposite of what submission to discipline brings (i.e., holiness - Heb 12:10). Esau, as an immoral man, is a paradigm of those who forsake the New Covenant community, and he becomes an example of the consequences of neglecting our future eschatological salvation.

In Esau's case, he was the first-born son and therefore entitled to the first-born's inheritance rights. Yet he did not regard this as valuable, and sold it for a mere meal (temporal pleasure). He surrendered his first-born inheritance rights for a small temporary relief. Later on, however, he wanted it again, but it was too late. Not even tears could restore the privilege he had forfeited. This is a similar situation to the audience of the book of Hebrews. God has

⁴Kem Oberholtzer, "The Failure to Heed His Speaking in Hebrews 12:25-29," *BibSac*, 68.

given them the inheritance rights to reign and exercise dominion with Christ in God's future eschatological "rest" of the Messianic kingdom. Nevertheless, such privilege can be forfeited through unbelief, hardening of heart, and abandoning the confession of Jesus as Messiah.

III. THE CONTRAST OF TWO COVENANTS (12:18-24)

The thought of Esau forfeiting his inheritance rights leads the author to think of those among his audience who are in danger of forsaking the New Covenant to return to the Old (notice the γάρ linking the paragraphs). Earlier in the book, he persuasively argued for the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old. Nothing more needs to be said, but a choice must be made. Hence, in vv 18-24 he paints a contrast of these two covenants. Note the way each is introduced:

Old Covenant (vs 18) - "For you have not come to" (Οὐ γὰρ προσεληλύθατε)

New Covenant (vs 22) - "But you have come to" (ἀλλὰ προσεληλύθατε)

A. The Covenant at Sinai (12:18-21)

Vv 18-21 are drawn from four passages in the Old Testament describing the frightful giving of the Old Covenant at Sinai (see *Suppl. 26.1* for details). The terminology of vv 18-21 is strongly influenced by Ex 19:16-20; 20:18-21; Deut 4:10-13; 5:22-27. The author's point seems to be that the Old Covenant was frightful and uninviting. The scene at Sinai was terrifying to the Old Covenant community. There was darkness, gloom, the mountain on fire, etc.

The "trumpet sound" (12:19) refers to Ex 19:13, 16:

"When the **ram's horn** sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain. . . . So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very **loud trumpet sound**, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled."

The "sound of words" (12:19 - φωνῆ ρημάτων) refers to the Lord speaking:

"Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the **sound of words** (φωνὴν ῥημάτων), but you saw no form—only a voice." (Deut 4:12)

"If even a beast touches the mountain it shall be stoned" is an allusion to Ex 19:12-13.

Hebrews 12:21 in which Moses said "I am terrified and trembling" actually alludes to Deut 9:19, after the incident with the golden calf (not at the time of the giving of the Law). However, the situation was much the same: it was this same awesome spectacle that caused him to be terrified when they sinned.

B. The New Covenant (12:22-24)

In contrast to the terrifying setting for the giving of the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is much more "inviting." He begins by saying "you have come to Mt. Zion and the city of the living God." Here, the focus is not on the initial circumstances under which the covenant is

established, but on the eventual goal that it leads to. Care must be taken not to conclude that these "blessings" are the present reality of the New Covenant believers (the author seems to have in mind the *future* realization of the kingdom). Though he says "you have come to the city of the living God," he does not intend that we understand this to mean that this is in operation at the current time. The idea of *God's city* as the believer's hope occupies a lot of attention in the closing chapters of the book (11:10, 16; 12:22; and 13:14). Heb 13:14, however, clarifies that this *city* is a future reality for us: "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come." Undoubtedly, he is thinking of the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 3:12; 21:2, 10-27). Presumably "the city of the living God," "Mt. Zion," and "the heavenly Jerusalem" all refer to this same thing (so Lane, 2:465). This will not be our experience until the establishment of the Messianic kingdom.⁵

Who will be in attendance in the *New Jerusalem*? This is answered in vv 22-24:

- myriads of angels
- the general assembly and church of the first-born⁶
- God, the judge of all (probably referring to God the Father)
- the spirits of righteous men made perfect (may have 10:14 in mind)
- Jesus, the mediator of a New Covenant
which prompts the author to mention the "sprinkled blood" as the hallmark of the New Covenant. See 10:22 - "having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience"

When the author mentions God as "the judge of all," this is a subtle reminder that believers will face the living God as judge. We will have to "give an account" unto Him!

IV. THE CALL TO MAKE A CHOICE (12:25-29)

Having painted a contrast of these two covenants, the author now calls upon his readers to make a choice. The only *biblically logical* choice is to move ahead with the New Covenant, to leave behind the Old Covenant and faithfully serve Jesus Christ. This will avert God's judgment upon our lives and will result in reward in Messiah's kingdom.

A. The Warning Not to Disobey (12:25-27)

"See to it that you do not refuse **Him who is speaking**" (12:25). This is an obvious return to the opening of the book where we were told, "In these last days, He has **spoken** to us by His Son." God's will is that we understand His plan: the Old Covenant served its purpose and has now been replaced by the New Covenant. Therefore, we need to move ahead with God and faithfully follow the Lord Jesus. The word "refuse" (παραιτήσθε) is only used twice in Hebrews, the other case being Heb 12:19 where it is translated "begged" - the Old Covenant members **begged** (παρητήσαντο) that no further word should be spoken to them. Unlike

⁵ Premillennialism teaches that the Lord Jesus will reign from an earthly Jerusalem during the 1000 year millennial kingdom. After this, the New Jerusalem will be introduced with the new heavens and new earth.

⁶ Lane (2:468) points out that ἐκκλησία is probably not being used in its technical sense of "the Church," but in a general sense of "an assembly" of redeemed people. Recall Jesus as "the First-born par excellence" (1:6). Contrast Esau (12:16-17) who gave up his first-born rights.

those who (in fear) did not want to hear more from Him, we are not to close our ears to Him!

Vs 12:25 represents another *a fortiori* argument. If the Old Covenant members did not escape when they turned away from the One who spoke to them at Sinai, certainly New Covenant members will not escape the Lord who warns them from Heaven. The One who speaks in both cases is probably God (note the reference in vs 26—"And His voice shook the earth then"). Lane (2:476) concurs,

"It is necessary to recognize that the text gains in clarity when the speaker is identified as God, whose voice shook the earth at Sinai, who swore that those who broke covenant would not enter his rest (3:7-11), who promised that he would establish a new covenant with the house of Israel (8:6-12), and who now continues to speak to the new covenant community through his Son (1:1-2a)."

By the words "See to it that you do not refuse him," the author seems to be addressing the New Covenant believers with an allusion to the refusal that took place at Kadesh-Barnea. The author had elaborated that rebellion earlier in chapters 3–4. Should the present generation also "refuse Him," they will be subject to temporal judgment in this life, and eventually be denied their inheritance rights and reward when they stand before the Lord.

Vv 26-27 draw upon Haggai 2:6 (though the word order has been altered to emphasize "heavens"). We are reminded that the present world order is not always going to continue. At some point, God is going to intervene and radically change things. All things will eventually give way to Messiah's kingdom, which will endure forever.⁷ That "shaking" (which accompanies Messiah's kingdom) will far supersede the shaking of the earth at Sinai!

B. The Demand of a Response (12:28-29)

Messiah's Kingdom will last forever. It will not be "shaken," i.e., it will neither be toppled by the efforts of the enemy nor will it be replaced by God (especially since God had promised "Yet once more"). Though we may have to bear His shame in the here and now, our ultimate destiny is to participate with Christ in exercising dominion over this kingdom. Such a thought ought to make us grateful to God that in His grace He would do so much for us. The words *εχωμεν χαριν* probably should be translated "Let us be thankful" (so *NIV*; note the similar wording in Lk 17:9).

If we are thankful, then we will want to respond obediently and in faith by being responsible believer priests to offer our spiritual service to Him. A *thankful response* will be shown by an enduring faith and submission to God's discipline. In addition to these, the author will make other suggestions in chapter 13.

⁷The Messianic Kingdom will have two phases to it: an earthly phase of 1000 years in the present creation, and an unending phase after the New Creation. It is not altogether clear which phase the author of Hebrews has in mind. In any case, the main point is that Messiah's Kingdom will never be overturned. That is where history is moving, and we certainly want to be loyal subjects for what is coming.

Should we choose not to respond positively, the author reminds us that "our God is a consuming fire." These words are drawn from Deut 4:24, "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." In Deut, this verse follows a warning about forgetting the covenant and venturing into idolatry. The following verses in Deut, however, describe the temporal judgment God will bring for turning to idolatry, and provoking the LORD to anger.