

A NEW KIND OF COMMUNITY

Hebrews 12:14-29

The earlier verses in Hebrews 12 used a word picture of the Christian life being like a race that we are running. In the world of track and field, the objective of those who are running the race is ultimately to win or cross the finish line before anyone else. In these verses we found encouragement for us to be conditioned and appropriately dressed and to not give up when it is difficult to go on. We have the testimony of those from the past who endured and faithfully finished the race even when faced with opposition.

Perhaps a better picture for us in the church is not the Olympics but the Special Olympics. The Special Olympics are for those who are not the top athletes who are in top physical condition but have some identifiable physical limitations. One of the differences in the Special Olympics and the regular Olympics is the willingness and maybe even the expectation of those who are running the race to help each other. The objective is not so much that of crossing the finish line first, but is to make sure that all the racers finish the race. Crossing the finish line is the objective and the order in which we finish is inconsequential.

Since the race we are running is a “spiritual” race, we realize that all of us have spiritual weaknesses and we still have a lot of room for improvement. Just as in the Special Olympics, we need to be helping others who are also spiritually weak to be encouraged to finish the race. We see that the Hebrew Christians were told that they should be doing that in verses 12 and 13 of Chapter 12 of this letter. They were called upon to strengthen the weak hands and feeble knees and help those who were lame or had deformities and other issues to go in the right direction around the race track so that they would not further injure themselves or others.

Why would runners in such a race focus on helping others rather than just look out for themselves? In a world that is absorbed by a mind set of “me, me, me” we know that helping others for no other reason other than to “help them” is an act of grace that flows from a heart that has compassion. This attitude of grace toward others that is motivated by compassion is the hallmark of the new and superior community that is possible for those who have experienced the grace of God and have become new creatures in Christ.

Not all Christians are functioning in this manner in their everyday lives. This failure of disregarding the special grace of God that we have received and being channels of that grace to others can happen if we drift from and neglect the message of salvation. Doubting that God is willing or able to do what He promised can also be an issue as well as letting dullness and lack of spiritual growth be a factor in our Christian walk. These things can result in a person simply ignoring the truth of the word of God by willfully doing sinful things even though they know those things are wrong. The culmination of such attitudes and action is that a person can find himself disregarding the special grace of God. Not only does the neglectful Christian not benefit from his salvation, he is not able to be effective in the new community of believers.

Consequences of Disregarding God’s Grace – 12:14-17

¹⁴ Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See 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; ¹⁶ that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. ¹⁷ For 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. Hebrews 12:14-17 (NASB95)

As we run the Christian race, what is our goal? In Hebrews 12:14 we find that it is peace with all men, and holiness before the Lord. These two goals should remind us of the high

priestly ministry of Christ – King of *peace* and King of *righteousness*.

To *live in peace with all men* means, at least, maintaining harmony in the Christian community of which we will see more of this in Chapter 13. The related challenge is to be holy. It is clear from verse 10 that God must work in our lives (provide discipline) to make it possible for us to share in His holiness. Verse 14 insists that we have a part to play. We must seek that practical holiness of life (consecration, sanctification) which flows from a genuine dedication to His service and obedience to His will.

Apart from such holiness *no one will see the Lord*. Some interpret this to mean that such persons will not experience eternal life. While that is absolutely true for those who have not been born again of the Spirit of God, the implication for true Christians is that they will not benefit from their eternal life while they are drifting, doubting, and going away from God and they will not participate in rewards in heaven.

Since no sin can stand in God's presence, Christians must – and will be – sinless when they see the Lord. Our sinlessness is a result of Christ's work on the Cross and as we identify with Him by dying to self and being born again, then we become partakers of His righteousness. That realization provides motivation for pursuing holiness here and now. The author may also have had in mind the thought that our perception of God even now is conditioned by our real measure of consecration and sanctification.

As a sobering reminder of what can happen among believers, the writer warned that a person who misses the grace of God may become like a bitter root whose infidelity to God affects others. Esau provides a classic example of someone who failed to act on God's grace. In the KJV, Esau was said to be "a profane person," which means "a common person, one who lives for the world and not God." Esau despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob, and he missed the blessing because it was given to Jacob.

Warren Wiersbe observed that "some people have the idea that a 'profane person' is blasphemous and filthy; but Esau was a congenial fellow, a good hunter, and a man who loved his father. He would have made a fine neighbor – but he was not interested in the things of God. God's grace does not fail, but we can fail to depend on God's grace. Esau is a warning to us not to live for lesser things."

This portion of Hebrews is also a blend of warning and encouragement that we saw in earlier passages. The stress in this fifth warning is not simply on the need to persevere in faith and obtain what God has promised. God's plan for us to 'share in his holiness' lays upon us the obligation to 'be holy' in the present. The warning is built around the example of Esau about the danger of missing out on the grace of God. The encouragement is found in the assurance that 'we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' and becomes the basis for a call to gratitude and acceptable worship which is the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

Terrifying Fear – 12:18-21

¹⁸ For you have not come to a *mountain* that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹ and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which *sound was such that* those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." ²¹ And so terrible was the sight, *that* Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." Hebrews 12:18-21 (NASB95)

When the Old Covenant was given at Mount Sinai, there was an awesome display that communicated a message that this was an experience way beyond the ordinary in that they were dealing with an all-powerful God who was not readily approachable. The encounter was characterized by several physical things that added to the fear of the moment.

There were a total of seven evidences associated with the giving of the Old Covenant. The mountain with a blazing fire could be related to the overwhelming greatness and glory of God. The darkness would point to the mystery associated with our lack of ability to understand the spiritual realm. Gloom would indicate a foreboding atmosphere produced by the aura of power that was associated with this encounter. The whirlwind points toward that immense power that God has. These five visuals were accompanied by sounds of a trumpet which would be a call to assemble and by the words of the message from God which were the provisions of the covenant. These were so awesome and terrifying that the people pleaded for them to stop.

All this was very physically intense and was meant to get their attention and to emphasize the seriousness of what was being given to them. The people were very immature in their spiritual development and understanding which is implied in the statement that God took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt as if they were little children. Of course, God had to impress on His people the seriousness of His Law, just as we must with our own children. This was the infancy of the nation, and children can understand “reward and punishment.” The commandments and the laws were given to them to protect them and help them grow into an understanding of God and their relationship with Him.

Just as adults should not have to have stringent rules imposed upon them as we would for a child, these Christians did not need to go back under the law and abandon their position, privileges and freedom they had under grace.

Joyful Freedom – 22-24

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood* of Abel. Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB95)

In this “age to come” which is the gospel dispensation, we find ourselves at a different mountain other than Sinai. We are at Mount Zion. Mt. Sinai represents the Old Covenant of Law, and Mt. Zion represents the New Covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul compared Mt. Sinai and that covenant to the offspring of Hagar who were destined to be slaves with the physical Jerusalem and Mt. Zion as the offspring of Sarah which would be the spiritual Jerusalem which is free. The heavenly city is God’s Mt. Zion. This is the city that the patriarchs were looking for by faith. The earthly Jerusalem was about to be destroyed by the Romans, but the heavenly Jerusalem would endure forever.

The inhabitants of this spiritual city are themselves spiritual such as angels and those who have been saved who are residing in the spiritual realm by virtue of the fact that they are “in Christ.” Since Christ Jesus is the “firstborn” of the new spiritual humanity (contrasted with Adam being the firstborn of the physical humanity) and the church being the Body of Christ whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life are included as citizen of the city of the living God. Of course, God the righteous Judge is there and the spirits of righteous people made perfect which is probably a reference to those saints who died before Christ’s death on the Cross. We would expect to find Jesus there as the mediator of the new covenant that was ratified by His blood.

The blood of Jesus is contrasted with the blood of Abel in that Jesus’ blood was associated with the perfect sacrifice for sin while Abel’s blood was shed apart from the animal sacrifice that he presented to God. Abel’s blood called out for vengeance and justice, while Christ’s blood calls out for forgiveness and mercy.

If the readers of this letter were to compare the two situations of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion

and honestly ask themselves where they would rather be, the logical choice would have to be Mt. Zion. The implied question to them was “Why are you even thinking about returning to Judaism?” They might have thought that it would have given them some stability in a world that seemed to be falling apart as they were experiencing the persecutions happening to them. They were not remembering all the shaking that had happened from the beginning of time and that the place of safety was to be in God’s will since He is unshakeable.

Stability in the Midst of Shaking – 25-29

²⁵ 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 *will we escape* who turn away from Him who *warns* from heaven. ²⁶ And 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.” ²⁷ This *expression*, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, 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; ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:25-29 (NASB95)

Here we see a reference to the very first sentence of this letter. “In times past, God spoke through prophets and angel, but now He is speaking to us through His Son.” In the past, people were motivated by reward and punishment but the motivation now is to flow from our freedom that we have in Christ. Those who turned from God under the old covenant suffered the consequences and if we follow the same path of turning away from God even though we have a much better motivation, then we will also suffer consequences.

From the accounts of the Mt. Sinai experience there were physical tremors of the earth shaking when God spoke from the mountain. God is still speaking and He is still shaking things that are not firmly anchored to the “Rock of our salvation” which is Christ Jesus. Things that are not based on the firm foundation of faith in Christ will fail like a house built on the sand.

The only place of real stability is in Christ and we have that confidence assurance that we are secure in Him. The kingdoms of this world have fallen and will continue to fall as God shakes not only the earth but the heavens. Those who have been born again of the Spirit of God inhabit a new kingdom that cannot be shaken. The proper gracious response that shows that we are thankful for such a great salvation is to worship God in everything we do as we carry out the work He has for us to do. We do this with reverential awe since we know that even though God is a consuming fire, we have a relationship with Him like that of a Father and child. How great is that!