
The Warning Passages in Hebrews
Part 5 (of 5 parts):

The Failure to Heed His Speaking in Hebrews 12:25-29

Thomas Kem Oberholtzer
Pastor
Victoria Bible Church, Victoria, Texas

The fifth and final warning passage in Hebrews is 12:25-29. This exhortation is set against the backdrop of the superiority of the New Covenant in Christ over the Mosaic Covenant. The emphasis of this passage is on living in obedience to God's Word so as not to lose eschatological reward. The readers will have a part in the coming kingdom, but only those actions accomplished in obedience to the Son will be rewarded.

The Relationship of Hebrews 12:1-24 to 12:25-29

Hebrews 12:1-3 begins by encouraging readers to learn from the example of the Old Testament witnesses spoken of in 11:1-40. In Hebrews 11 the readers were exhorted with a variety of Old Testament examples to live by faith. Jesus was set forth as the supreme Example, being the *ἀρχηγός* ("author" or "pioneer," 12:2; cf. 2:10) of the readers' faith.

In 12:4-11 the readers were reminded that they had not suffered to the extent Christ suffered. They had forgotten the Old Testament admonition from Proverbs 3:11-12, which teaches that the discipline of the Lord is an expression of a loving Father for His erring children. For the readers to mature in Christlikeness, they must endure sufferings (cf. Heb. 2:10). Discipline is designed by God to produce the fruit of holiness and righteousness in His children (12:10-11).

The discipline of the readers appears as a divine corrective for their dullness of hearing and spiritual immaturity (5:11-6:20). This

educational process moves from lesser to greater intensity, as seen in the terms ἐλέγχω ("to reprove"), παιδεύω ("to discipline"), and μαστιγῶ ("to scourge"). God imposes discipline on His children to produce His desired effect. A final form of discipline for a continually disobedient child of God may be the loss of physical life (1 Cor. 11:27-30; 1 John 5:16-17). Continual sin and rejection of the Lord's discipline may lead to physical death. Among the readers of Hebrews there seem to have been varying degrees of discipline in process. The final goal of discipline is restoration as described in Hebrews 12:12-13.

The exhortation leading to the warning begins in 12:12 with Διὸ ("therefore").¹ The readers were called to exercise mutual care, concern, and encouragement for one another in view of the discipline all believers experience. The theme of care and encouragement is interwoven in previous warnings (3:13; 6:9-12; 10:19-25).

The Jewish believers were commanded in 12:14-17 to pursue peace and sanctification.² They were exhorted not to ὑστερῶν ("come short") of God's grace. Contextually the "coming short" would be a failure to watch over one another (vv. 12-15). Dunham writes concerning coming short of God's grace:

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

The coming short of God's grace may result in a "root of bitterness" springing up. The phrase "root of bitterness" is found in Deuteronomy 29:18, which refers to some Israelites who had become involved in idolatry. The "root of bitterness" parallels the developing of a hardened, unbelieving heart in Hebrews 3:12⁴ and includes leading others to withdraw from the community into apostasy.⁵

Esau had thrown away his inheritance to fulfill his immediate fleshly desires (12:16). This is an implicit warning to the readers not to forfeit their future inheritance for their present security. Thompson summarizes the significance of Esau's example:

¹ Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 4:245.

² Duane A. Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 227.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 366.

⁵ C. Spicq, *L'épître aux hébreux*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1952), 2:400.

The pericope 12:18-29 is closely connected to the exhortation in 12:12-17, as the *gar* in 12:18 indicates. The community has been encouraged to make its paths straight (12:12) and not to repeat the apostasy of Esau (12:15-17). The church, which is on its way to heavenly *katapausis* (3:7-4:13) or *polis* (13:14), has become weary in its pilgrimage. The exhortation, in 12:12-17 which comes as encouragement and as a threat, conforms to the author's usual manner of exhortation. Christian existence is pilgrimage to the heavenly *klēronomia* (9:15; 11:8; cf. 6:17; 11:7; 1:14; 6:12). Esau, who threw away his *klēronomia* for the sake of *broma* is the prototype of all who throw away the heavenly reality for the sake of an earthly one.⁶

The warning is lucid—after Esau forfeited his inheritance privileges, it was impossible for him to regain them. Esau's inheritance, by virtue of his firstborn status, was lost because of his lack of future perspective and because of his present physical distress. The issue under discussion is Esau's inheritance, not eternal salvation.

The consequences of Esau's trading his inheritance for a bowl of stew were irreversible. Even in Esau's approach and pleadings with Isaac, repentance (i.e., a return of the birthright) was impossible. Similarly for readers who drift into apostasy the consequences of their actions are irreversible. They will experience a permanent loss of future inheritance (i.e., rewards; cf. Col. 3:23-25) which could be theirs in the coming age. Loss of reward is to be understood in the sense of any future gains, not a loss of salvation, which one has already obtained.

In the New Testament there seem to be two kinds of inheritance for believers.⁷ The first inheritance is eternal life (Titus 3:7). All believers receive inheritance in this sense. A second kind of inheritance for believers is conditioned on merit or works (Col. 3:23-25). This inheritance (i.e., rewards) may be gained by obedience to the will of God revealed in the Scriptures or may be forfeited by failing to obey. In Hebrews future eschatological inheritance is clearly conditioned on works or perseverance. Again the issue in view is rewards, not salvation.

Hebrews 12:18-29 gives reasons why the readers should avoid being like Esau. The section opens with the explanatory *γάρ* ("for"). The connection of the paragraphs recalls the teaching that higher

⁶ James W. Thompson, "That Which Cannot Be Shaken": Some Metaphysical Assumptions in Heb. 12:27," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (December 1975): 580-81.

⁷ For discussion of the topic of inheritance as eschatological rewards see Zane Clark Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); *The Gospel under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981); *Grace in Eclipse* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1985). For a discussion of inheritance as eternal life see William E. Brown, "The New Testament Concept of the Believer's Inheritance" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984).

privilege demands higher responsibility.⁸ In this passage the writer was attempting to discourage his readers from apostasy by reminding them of the differences between the Old and New Covenants. He demonstrated that the New Testament is superior to the Old.

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion point up the contrast between the two covenants. Mount Sinai recalls the terror associated with Yahweh's delivering of the Law, whereas Mount Zion is associated with future joy in the coming age. At Sinai when the Law was given to Moses by Yahweh, the people were terrified by the awesome cataclysmic occurrences. Kent describes this picture in Hebrews 12:18-21:

The rugged heights of Sinai rocked with thunder and crackled with lightning which set the mount aflame. God's presence descended upon the mountain in fire and smoke accompanied by an earthquake. The smoke doubtless produced darkness (Ex. 20:21) and gloom, and the mighty flames would cause strong air currents that would produce a most frightening storm.

The sound of a trumpet, possibly blown by an angel, grew louder and louder (Ex. 19:19); and when Moses spoke, God answered him with a sound of words (Deut. 4:12). These words were so terrifying that the Israelites begged Moses henceforth to act as God's spokesman rather than have God address them directly (Ex. 20:19).⁹

This portrait of fear and trembling was symbolic of the Mosaic Covenant and Yahweh's dealings with Israel. Standing in stark contrast to this picture is Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:22-24. The writer wrote of Mount Zion and its inhabitants as follows: (a) Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; (b) myriads of angels in festal assembly and the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven; (c) God the Judge of all; (d) spirits of righteous men made perfect; and (e) Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant and sprinkled blood.

The city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is to be the home of God's people. This is the city for which Abraham is said to have searched (11:10).¹⁰ The New Jerusalem is also spoken of in Galatians 4:26 and Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10-27. As Pentecost wrote, "From this consideration, then, it may be stated that the city is to be inhabited by God, by the church, by the redeemed of Israel, and by the redeemed of all ages, together with the unfallen angels."¹¹ The

⁸ James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), p. 213.

⁹ Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 269.

¹⁰ Jean Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth Press, 1970), p. 117.

¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand

words "myriads of angels" are to be linked with the term *πανήγυρις* ("festal assembly").¹² Michel connects the festal assembly concept with apocalyptic descriptions of Daniel 7:10 and Hebrews 1:6.¹³

The "church of the firstborn" is a reference to living New Testament saints. Though these saints are still on earth, they are awaiting the eschatological "city to come" (13:14).¹⁴

The phrase, "God, the judge of all," brings to a focal point the perspective of the Lord's judgments. The warning is implicit in the terminology. To abandon the New Covenant relationship will result in having to face the living God as Judge (cf. 10:31-39).

The "spirits of righteous men made perfect" are Old Testament saints (12:23). They are referred to as spirits because they have not yet been united with their bodies in resurrection.

The final inhabitant of the New Jerusalem will be Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant. Why would any of the readers desire to return to Sinai? To return to Sinai would be to imitate Esau, to forfeit their inheritance, and to go back to the Old Covenant.

The Warning in Hebrews 12:25-29: The Failure to Heed His Speaking

HEBREWS 12:25

The warning opens with a sharp command *βλέπετε* ("see to it"), by which the author sought to catch his readers' attention. The present tense of the verb suggests a call to continual diligence.

The warning is *μη παραιτήσησθε* ("do not refuse") him who is speaking. The same word is used in 12:19 of the Israelites who "begged" that God not speak any other words to them. "The Hebrew Christians he is addressing were in danger, like their forebearers under Moses, of stopping their ears to the voice of God Himself."¹⁵

At Sinai the people "begged" not to hear the voice of Yahweh (12:19),¹⁶ and in the eschaton the voice of Yahweh will shake

Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 576.

¹² Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964), pp. 230-31.

¹³ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), p. 316.

¹⁴ Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 273.

¹⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 556.

¹⁶ Scholars differ on the identity of "him who warned them on earth" and "him who warns from heaven." Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 234; Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 118; and Hans Windisch, *Der Hebraerbrief* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1931), pp. 114-15, view the passage as having two speakers—Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, and Jesus, the Mediator of the

heaven and earth (12:26).

Those under the Old Covenant did not escape various temporal judgments for refusal to heed the Law. This being the case, how could one turn away from the New Covenant and expect to escape judgment? For those who neglect, fail to hold fast, fall away, forsake the assembly, or refuse Him who was speaking there remains "no escape" from God, who is like a consuming fire (12:29).

HEBREWS 12:26-27

Whereas God's "voice" at Mount Sinai "shook the earth" (Exod. 19:18), in the future He will shake the earth *and* the heavens, as indicated by the quotation from Haggai 2:6. This citation from Haggai was often used in Jewish apocalyptic writings to describe a coming eschatological earthquake.¹⁷ The event will be a cataclysmic occurrence, for the entire cosmos, the earth and the heavens, is to be involved (cf. Heb. 1:10-12).

In 12:27 the writer gave a further explanation of the citation from Haggai. The *τὸ δέ* ("and this") is understood as being the explanatory use of *δέ*.¹⁸ The shaking of the earth and the heavens will result in their *μετάθεσις* ("removal"), which is best understood as complete removal and destruction and not a simple transformation (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12).¹⁹

The phrase *πεποιημένων* ("created things") is in apposition to the *τῶν σαλευομένων* ("things which can be shaken"). The purpose of the shaking and removal of creation is "that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." Only those things which are unshakable, those things of eternal value, will remain after this eschatological event of "shaking."

HEBREWS 12:28-29

The writer introduced the application of the entire warning with *Διὸ* ("therefore"). That which cannot be shaken is the kingdom which those of the New Covenant order are receiving. The

New Covenant. Others such as Spicq, *L'épître aux hébreux* 2:410-11; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 381-82; and Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 419, argue for a single speaker, Yahweh. This seems best, since He was the sole speaker at Sinai (Exod. 19:18) and will be in the coming eschaton (Heb. 12:26).

¹⁷ For examples of Jewish apocalyptic writings that quote Haggai 2:6 to refer to a coming eschatological earthquake see Jubilees 1:29; 1 Enoch 45:1; 4 Ezra 6:11, 17; 10: 25-28; Sibylline Oracles III, 675; and 2 Baruch 59:3.

¹⁸ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 244.

¹⁹ Thompson, "'That Which Cannot Be Shaken': Some Metaphysical Assumptions in Heb. 12:27," p. 585.

readers were identified as believers because they were those who receive the unshakable kingdom. The use of the present tense *παραλαμβάνοντες* ("receiving") is understood in a futuristic or proleptic sense. This is similar to the reception of rest in 4:3.

The present tense of *παραλαμβάνοντες* suggests that the readers are in process of receiving, not that they have already received the kingdom. If the kingdom had actually been received, there would have been no need of this final exhortation. For the kingdom is the kingdom of God, described earlier in verses 22-24.²⁰

The kingdom the believers will receive is the millennial kingdom in which they will reign and rule as *μέτοχοι* ("companions") with the Messiah-King (Rev. 20:1-6). The theme of receiving the kingdom has permeated the entire epistle (Heb. 1:9, 13-14; 4:1-11; 6:9; 10:25, 37-38; 12:28). The exhortations of the book revolve around the readers' perseverance so that they will not lose their inheritance-rest (i.e., rewards) in this coming kingdom.

Faithful perseverance on the part of the readers will be the basis on which they will be evaluated to determine if they will receive rewards in the kingdom. There is a present sense of receiving the kingdom, in that endurance or perseverance insures a laying up of treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21). Reward or loss of reward in the eschaton is determined by present faithfulness.

The quotation from Haggai 2:6 refers to the eternal aspect of the kingdom after the destruction of the old order of the cosmos and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth mentioned in Revelation 21:1. As Hodges has written, "The reference to Haggai 2:6 was understood by the author as speaking of the ultimate remaking of the heavens and earth which will follow the millennial kingdom (cf. Heb. 1:10-12). What remains after this cataclysmic event will be eternal."²¹ The language of 12:27-28 seems to indicate that when the shaking takes place the result will be an eternal kingdom (i.e., what cannot be shaken). The millennial kingdom will usher in the eternal kingdom.

In light of receiving an unshakable kingdom the writer wrote in 12:28b, *ἔχωμεν χάριν* ("let us have gratitude"). This phrase may also be translated, "Let us have (i.e., obtain) grace." The exhortation to obtain grace recalls that grace is available only from the great High Priest as mentioned in 4:14-16. The translation "obtain grace" is confirmed by the phrase, "by which we may offer to God an

²⁰ Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 229.

²¹ Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, 1983), 2:811.

acceptable service with reverence and awe." The writer was reminding his readers of the need to appropriate God's grace. This appropriation is the only proper way to approach the Lord in order to serve Him.²² Approaching God with reverence and awe, the readers must never forget whom they are privileged to serve in this New Covenant relationship.

The writer closed this warning passage with the reminder that those who choose to depart from these New Covenant privileges will receive God's discipline. The emphasis of 12:29 is on the fact that God is a "consuming fire" (cf. 6:7-8; 10:27). This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 4:24 in which Israel was warned that she would face Yahweh's discipline for idolatry.²³ The writer's choice in citations from the Old Testament is poignant. Those who choose to return to the Old Covenant (i.e., Mount Sinai) are acting like Esau, who forfeited his future inheritance to obtain temporal fleshly satisfaction. For these individuals there remains only discipline from God, who is described as a consuming fire.

Conclusion

This fifth and final warning in the Book of Hebrews is stern in its tone.²⁴ Hebrews 12 opens with an exhortation to faith and diligence, a call to perseverance based on Old Testament witnesses (11:1-40) and Jesus' example (12:2-3).

God's temporal discipline of believers (12:4-11) is for the purpose of encouraging them toward maturity, holiness, and righteousness. In light of God's discipline the readers are to encourage and care for each other. Failure to do this would be tantamount to their "coming short of the grace of God."

Esau is the prime example of one who irreversibly forfeited his future inheritance for temporal satisfaction. For the readers of Hebrews, the warning is lucid: failure to endure will result in loss of future inheritance (i.e., rewards).

Hebrews 12:18-24 contrasts the Old Covenant, Mount Sinai, with the New Covenant, Mount Zion. Implied is the question, Why would anyone desire to defect to the Old Covenant which offers only fear?

²² Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981-), pp. 144-45.

²³ J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), p. 107.

²⁴ For a discussion of the eschatological perspective of each of the five warning passages in Hebrews see this writer's work, "An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984).

The warning proper is found in 12:25-29. The readers are called to heed Yahweh, for an eschatological shaking is coming in which the earthly material order will pass away, leaving only an eternal kingdom. The faithful readers who endure will have a part in the eschatological kingdom—the millennium and the New Jerusalem as "companions" of Jesus, the Messiah-King (1:9, 13-14). This kingdom will become an eternal kingdom (12:27-28).

In light of their part in the eschatological kingdom, the readers are to "have grace," which is available from their High Priest (4:14-16) as the basis for a proper approach to and fear of God. Only service accomplished by the grace of God will last for eternity.

The warning closes with an ominous reminder that those who apostatize will receive temporal discipline from the Lord (12:28). Those disobedient to God's speaking were equated with the idolaters of Israel, by the reference to God as a "consuming fire," which quotes Deuteronomy 4:24. For these God would become a "consuming fire" as they experienced His discipline on disobedient believers.

All five warnings in the epistle have a positive thrust and a negative impetus. For the believer who obeys the Word of God, present sustaining grace and eschatological inheritance-rewards are promised. Present obedience in difficult life situations will result in believers becoming μέτοχοι ("companions") with Jesus in His millennial rule. Failure to obey the Word of God may result in present temporal discipline similar to what Israel experienced. Disobedience to God and His Word will result in a forfeiting of eschatological rewards; obedience to God and His Word will result in a gaining of eschatological rewards.