

Sermon

Analysis of Hebrews: Chapter 12



Part 21/23

God's Last Word: An Exposition of Hebrews By Derek Prince

At the end of the previous session we just started into chapter 12 of Hebrews and we had considered the first two verses. I will simply read those two verses from the New American Standard and comment very briefly to bring you up to date, then we'll go on with the new material.

> "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

I pointed out briefly that the Christian life is compared to a race. There is a fixed course marked out which we have to complete. It's not a 100-yard dash but it is a kind of marathon. One of the essential requirements for success is cultivating endurance, staying power or stamina. Another requirement is looking away from ourselves to Jesus and finding in Him both the pattern and the inspiration for the race.

Two other points which came out were that there were two things we have to lay aside. One is sin which so easily entangles us, but the other is burdens or encumbrances. I pointed out the last time that "encumbrances" are not necessarily sin. They can be things which in themselves are completely neutral but if they get in the way of our running the race successfully, then we need to lay them aside. I suggested that it might be profitable for some of you to consider whether you are carrying any encumbrances on this race which you should do better to lay aside. So I'm just disposed to wonder if anybody went through that little exercise of self-analysis, and if so, whether any of you here are minus an encumbrance which you were carrying last week. Is there anybody that can say, "Yes, Brother Prince, I discovered that such and such [you don't need to tell us

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what] was an encumbrance and I've laid it aside." Good, there's one!

I think you need to realize that the assignments are very important. I do a certain amount of plowing. I plow the ground up, but you've got to do the sowing and the watering. So I would suggest that you do really give heed to the encumbrances and lay them aside. As a matter of fact, I thought of one myself so I benefited from the lesson, too.

Now we're going to go on with verse 3 and 4. I'll translate them from the Greek literally, not aiming at elegance, and then we'll make some comments on them.

> "Forgive consideration to the one who has endured such contradiction from sinners against Himself, that you may not grow weary fainting in your souls. You have not yet resisted combating sin to the point of shedding blood ..."

Let's pause now and look at the outline on those two verses. First of all, we need to note that again Jesus is the pattern, He is the one who endured such contradiction of sinners. He was very patient. He could have spoken the word and blotted them out of existence but He didn't, He endured.

Then we see here that, like Him, we are in a struggle against sin. This is part of being a Christian; you cannot be a Christian without being involved in this struggle. It's just what goes with being a Christian. We are engaged in a warfare. There are no options about that. The only option we have is whether we win or lose. There is nothing in between winning and losing. Not to win is to lose.

I'd like to turn to Romans 12:21, which is a very powerful verse of Scripture. The last verse of Romans 12:

> "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

You see, there there's no middle course. You say, "Well, I'm not overcoming evil, but I'm not overcome." I don't believe that's possible in the long run. If you don't overcome evil you will be overcome by it. The only thing that's strong enough to overcome evil is good. So it has to be positive goodness that gives us victory. Not neutrality, not an attitude of "I don't do anybody any harm" or "I'm as good as the next man," but a positive commitment to good and the application of good in our lives that enables us to overcome evil.

If you study the promises of the New Testament I think you'll find there are no promises of blessing except to overcomers. If you turn to the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, you find every promise to the people in the seven churches was "to him that overcomes." So we need to face the reality of this life. It is a serious thing, the Christian life. It's not a stroll; it's a race. We have to run by the rules, we have to meet the conditions and we have to be prepared to confront evil. I suppose many of you would agree with me—I speak from having lived almost seventy years—that in many ways the power of evil today is much more obvious and much more active in the world than it was when I was young. I believe the forces of Satan are intensifying their efforts to destroy the human race and, in a certain sense, that demands a corresponding intensity of effort on our part.

Now we'll go on to verses 5 and 6 which deal with the subject of divine discipline. The writer goes

on:

> "And you have forgotten ..."

That's one of the sad things about the Hebrews. So many times they had forgotten, they were slow of understanding, they didn't remember. And as I've said, but it's probably helpful to say it again, in many ways the position of the Hebrew believers in the first century is like that of Christians in the twentieth century. In those days they had all the benefits. They had a background in the true faith in the Scriptures, they understood the principles of worshiping God, they understood His basic requirements of righteousness. And yet, they were lagging behind Gentile believers who had come in very recently and who didn't have those advantages.

I think especially in the Western world today churchgoing Christians are probably very much in the same situation that the Hebrew believers were in the first century. Today it's we who have the benefits. We have the background, we have the knowledge of the Scriptures to some extent, we have certain standards which are based on the Christian ethic. And yet, I'm inclined to think that if we were to take a trip to some of the churches in the Third World today we might find that with much less background they are outstripping us. The problem is complacency, really. I think that's a problem that we really have to face. It is a form of evil. We have to overcome complacency particularly in the place where I'm giving this talk. I think the spirit of this area

of the country is a spirit of heathenism. People come here for vacations, they want to have a good time, they don't want to be bothered, and that spirit and atmosphere tends to prevail in this area. That again is something that we have to overcome.

One of the key phrases that's used in the New Testament is "stir up." Stir up the gifts, stir up the embers, don't let the fire die out.

Going on then with verse 5:

> "You have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you [or converses with you] as sons ..."

It's a rather familiar word; God is talking to His family.

Now, this is a quotation from Proverbs 3:11–12, but it's a quotation from the Septuagint version, that's the Greek version, made about the second century before Christ. You'll notice that there are some differences between it and the English translation we have of the Old Testament, which is taken from the Hebrew.

> "You have forgotten the exhortation in which God is speaking to you as sons, 'My son, do not despise the discipline of the LORD, and do not lose heart [or give up or faint] when you are reproved by Him; for whom the LORD loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.'"

Now let's turn to the outline. Scripture teaches that God disciplines all those who He receives as sons. I give you there the reference which was quoted by the writer; we won't turn there, Proverbs 3:11–12. The whole of Proverbs 3 and 4 is really a father's instruction to his son. One of the key phrases in it is "my son, my son." It' not addressed to unbelievers, it's addressed to God's sons and daughters. Scripture teaches that God disciplines all those who He receives as sons. This provides motivation for endurance in times of pressure. In other words, when we come under God's discipline, the key word is endurance. Don't lose heart, don't faint, don't give up. And in the reference there, Romans 15:4, you find motivation for endurance which comes to us primarily from the Scripture itself. Just reading that one verse:

> "For whatever was written in earlier times ..."

That means written in Scripture, whatever Scripture was given in earlier times.

> "... was written for our instruction..."

We need to bear that in mind. The whole of the Old Testament is for our instruction.

> "... that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

So one of the great purposes of the Scriptures is to give us encouragement in times of pressure. But the encouragement is only for those who persevere. So our contribution is perseverance. God's contribution is encouragement for those who persevere. And the outcome is hope, that we might have hope.

Then turning over the page to 12/2, the writer of Hebrews warns us against two wrong responses. The one is to despise or to regard lightly God's discipline. We kind of shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, I don't know what's wrong. I don't know why God isn't helping me, blessing me the way I ought. But I'm not going to pay much attention to it." That's one of the wrong reactions to God's discipline; it's to treat it lightly.

The other is more or less the opposite. To faint, to give up and say, "Well, I can't take any more of this, I don't know what God's after in my life but I'm just giving up at this point." So we're warned against two opposite reactions or responses to God's discipline.

Then we go on with chapter 12:7–8. It begins with a short sentence. I think personally the New International Version has the right translation.

> "Endure hardship as discipline..."

I think that's a very illuminating translation. When you encounter hardship, treat it as discipline.

Don't complain, don't give up, don't ignore it. Treat it as discipline.

> "... for God is dealing with you as with sons; for what son is there whom the Father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have been partakers,

> then you are illegitimate children and you are not sons."

Because the mark of sons is to be disciplined. If we complain about God's discipline, then in effect we're asking God to treat us as illegitimate children.

Let's turn to the note outline. We must interpret hardships as God's discipline and respond according. If we refuse discipline we are asking to be treated as illegitimate children. Notice that the writer has said all God's children have been partakers of discipline. We need to bear in mind that that applies first and foremost to Jesus Himself.

Let's turn for a moment to Hebrews 5:8, which we have commented on as we passed through. Let's look back for a moment, just the one verse, speaking about the experience of Jesus.

Although He was the Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

So even Jesus was treated as a Son by the Father, He was disciplined and He learned obedience by the things He suffered. I want to tell you very simply that there's only one way to learn obedience and that is by obeying. You can be very willing, very dedicated, very committed. "Lord, I'll do anything You ask." "Fine, well, this is what I'm asking you to do. Now let's see you obey." There's only one way to learn endurance, I think I've said that. That's by enduring. You can be ever so willing and ever so committed, but that doesn't mean you don't have to go through the process because it's the process that produces the result.

We'll go on to verses 9 and 10.

> "Moreover, we had fathers of our flesh ... "

That is, "natural fathers." But it's better to use the word flesh because it's going to be contrasted with Spirit.

> "... we had fathers of our flesh, who disciplined us, and we showed them respect [we reverenced them]; should we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits, and live? For they indeed, for a little while, disciplined us according to their best understanding [according to what they felt right], but He, for our own good, so that we may partake of His holiness."

Let's look now at the outline and learn some of the lessons from this passage. If we respected our human fathers, in spite of their limitations, we should much more respect our heavenly Father. I had basically a good father. He wasn't a strict disciplinarian by any means. He basically allowed me to find my own way through life. Perhaps he should have disciplined me more. Nevertheless, looking back, I can see things he did which were mistaken but I gave him respect and I honor his memory today. So if we did that to our human father, the writer says, how much more should we obey, submit to and honor the Father of our spirits.

And then it says "and live." This has become very vivid to me. The key to living is submitting to the Father of spirits. Rejecting His discipline, refusing His counsel is the path to death. But submitting to His discipline, accepting His counsel is the way to life. Do you want to live? I'm sure you do. Then be in subjection to the Father of spirits.

Then in this passage we're given a very blessed revelation that the purpose of God's discipline is that we may share His holiness. Now holiness is an aspect of God's nature which is not found anywhere else in creation unless in relationship to God. So when God disciplines us to produce in us His holiness, many times we don't understand what He's asking because we don't understand the nature of holiness.

I look back over my own experience and think how slow I was to understand what God was after many times in my life. I think the discipline was sometimes extended much longer than it need have been because I was slow to learn. God wants to reproduce in each one of His children His own holiness. That's the purpose of His discipline. We should really count it a privilege that He has that desire for us. Then I added this statement which is always very vivid to me. God is a sharer but Satan is a tyrant. God doesn't sit on the throne and say, "I'm here; you stay there." God says, "If I can make you partaker of My holiness, I'll share My throne with you." It's just a beautiful illustration of the difference in the attitude of God and of Satan.

And I illustrate it from Romans 5:17 if you'd like to look there for a moment. It may not be obvious to you immediately why I referred to this but I'll try to make it clear. Romans 5:17 is speaking about the difference between Christ's righteous obedience and Adam's transgression and the difference in their results.

> "For if by the transgression of the one [that's Adam], death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of

> grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ."

See the difference? Death reigned as a tyrant. Satan is a tyrant. He dominates. He doesn't share, he lords it over us. But when Jesus has made us righteous, He invites us to reign in life with Him. And God disciplines us that we may share His holiness.

I've often said to younger men over whom I've had some influence, "If you are all twice as successful as I've been, I'll be the happiest." I have no monopoly over anything that God has given me. If I can impart it, I will. And if you can do more with it than I have done, that will bless me the most. I think that's really God's attitude. He's a sharer. The more He can impart safely, He will. But one of the safeguards is holiness. Without holiness if we just begin to receive the other attributes of God—His power and His wisdom and His knowledge—they will destroy us. Holiness is the safeguard that makes us capable of receiving the other blessings that God has for us.

Now let's look back in Hebrews 12:11. This tells us the right response. It's also very realistic. I think I said last time the Bible is a very realistic book. It tells it like it is.

For every form of discipline, for the time being [or for the present time], does not seem to produce joy, but pain; but later it produces peaceable fruit of righteousness for those who have been exercised by it.

I think one of the obvious marks of immaturity in a child is it cannot see beyond the present. The mother's gone to the rest room, the child gets in a panic because, Where's mother? It cannot accept the fact that in one minute mother will be back. The more mature we become, the better able we are, in a sense, to sacrifice the present for the future. I consider that to be a mark of maturity. So what God is saying is, "If you'll sacrifice the present, put up with the pain, you'll be very happy with the end result." Again, the danger is throwing up our hands and saying, "I can't take any more of this!" You never know how much more you might have to take. You might be just five minutes away from the moment when the discipline ceases. But if you give up five minutes too soon, you've lost all the benefits. God has to go right back again and start all over again.

One of my prayers to God is, "God, I realize I've got a lot to learn but I hope I won't have to learn the same lesson twice." I have seen young people that have had to learn the same lesson again and again and again and some of them still haven't learned it.

What then is the right response? The key word is to be trained and that word is the Greek word which gives us the English word gymnast, gymnastic and so on. It speaks about a kind of rather rigorous course of discipline. Every gymnast has to do a lot of exercises to strengthen certain muscles, to acquire flexibility and so on. There's this process of being made flexible, submitting to God. Not having a stiff neck and saying, "God, I won't bow." And that comes by being trained. If we're not willing to be trained we don't achieve the result.

In this way, temporary suffering produces permanent righteousness. See, it is naive to suppose that the Christian life bypasses all suffering. I think there's a certain tendency in some sections of the Charismatic movement to have that attitude. "Well, now I'm a Christian, I know I won't have to suffer if I have enough faith." Well, the people in the New Testament who had the most faith seem to me to have suffered the most. I don't know how you read the New Testament. I think Paul was a man of tremendous faith but there are few contemporary Christians who have suffered one tenth of what he suffered. I think I've quoted it before but I'll quote it again. There's a French proverb which says "To be beautiful, you have to suffer." I really believe there's a certain truth in that. I've looked at some people— some people in this congregation—and I've seen them go through things and I've seen them come out much more beautiful than they went in. In fact, there's a lady here to who I actually said that, I won't embarrass her by pointing her out. There's a kind of superficiality that's pretty easy to achieve. Mostly it's spiritual make-up. But in times of stress it wears off. But there's a deep, inner beauty which isn't superficial, which can't be put on and can't be washed off. That really only comes through submitting to God's discipline.

Going on in verses 12–13. Now we come to a therefore. You know what I said about a therefore?

You want to find out what it's there for.

> "Therefore, straighten up the limp hands [or the hands that hang limp] and the knees that are [actually the Greek word is paralyzed] no longer functioning ..."

You know, when you're really in a state of shock, what happens to your knees? They start to knock and you give way and you have to find somewhere to sit down.

> "Therefore, straighten up the hands that hang limp, and the knees that have lost their

> strength, and make straight paths for your feet [which is a quotation from Proverbs 4], in order that that which is lame may not be put out of joint [or the lame member may not be put out of joint], but rather let it be healed."

This is the application of the passage we've been studying this evening. The therefore tells us what's the bottom line because we're going to go on to a new section after these verses. First of all, it speaks of two things, hands and knees. There are certain principles, I believe, in interpreting Scripture. Like when it speaks about your ear it speaks about what you hear. When it speaks about your fingers or your hands it speaks about what you do. When it speaks about your legs or you feet it speaks about the way you walk through life. For instance, the high priest in the old covenant had to be anointed with blood and with oil on his right ear, his thumb and his right big toe. Now that sounds kind of bizarre to some people but my way of approaching Scripture is that means he's got to be very careful what he hears, he's got to be correct in what he does, he's got to walk in the right way. So in this passage when it talks about lifting up the limp hands and straightening out the sagging knees it refers to what we do and the way we walk through life. We've got to put strength, determination into what we do and the way we walk.

I think in a certain sense perhaps the key concept here is determination. I'm not giving up, I'm not turning around, I'm not deviating. I'm going to stay to the path of God's will which is the straight path that He's set before me. All that, I think, is expressed by these words "straighten up your hands and your knees."

Bear in mind, he goes on to say, that the path you walk on is going to affect others. Some may follow your path. And if they're lame and you don't walk on a straight path, on a plain path, their lameness may lead to their whole limb being put out of joint. So again, we have to bear in mind that we have a responsibility for the way we live because, without any question, our lives affect others. Sometimes people we are not even aware of are watching us and by what we do, they will be influenced either for the better or for the worse.

Now we're moving on to verse 14, which is a kind of link verse. It sums up in a way what has gone before but it also looks forward to what's coming next. We'll just look at the verse itself and then we'll look at the passage which it introduces. I say here in the outline there are two objectives that God demands. Peace and holiness. They're not options. It says there "pursue peace." Pursue is a strong word. I didn't translate it, let me translate it.

Pursue peace with all people, and the sanctification without which nobody will see the Lord.

So we're to pursue peace and holiness. I think they go together. I think it's hard to conceive of holiness divorced from peace. That puts an obligation on us but our obligation is limited to what is possible. I think it's important to read also Romans 12:18. You'll notice that there's a considerable correspondence between Romans 12 and Hebrews 12. I think this is the third time that we've referred to chapter 12 and probably not the last.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

The Bible is a realistic book. It recognizes that there are times when some people you just can't be at peace with because they don't want peace. So it doesn't put us in the impossible position of trying to achieve that when it's not possible. But it says "as much as lies in you," as far as you can, pursue peace and holiness. And then he comes out with that very searching statement:

> "... without holiness, no one will see the Lord."

We could look for a moment there in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:8.

> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

So, to see God a pure heart is required. I think the writer of Hebrews says it in the same way, without holiness no one will see the Lord. And then I comment on that. Any brand of, quote, "salvation" that stops short of practical holiness is not acceptable.

Some people have got the Christian life so divided up into compartments that you get saved and then sometime or other maybe you get sanctified. But if you don't get sanctified, you're still saved. I think that's a dangerous doctrine, because it says "without holiness," without being sanctified, "we shall not see the Lord." What's the good of claiming salvation if it doesn't qualify you to see the Lord? Now I agree there is an experience of sanctification, it's part of the New Testament teaching. I think some people are just content with the minimum. What's the least I have to do to be, quote, "saved"? I think if you have that attitude it's very

unlikely you will be saved. I think that attitude is so totally wrong and contrary to God that you'll never get by with it.

I recall many years ago, and I have to say this rather discreetly, that I heard a well-known American Christian lady give her testimony. It was in London. I wasn't familiar with American Christianity at that time. She said something which just absolutely startled me, but she was a very sweet and gracious woman. She said, "I came to know Jesus early in life. I had received Him as Savior but I hadn't crowned him as Lord." And my doctrinal mind began to work on that. I said, "How come? Is that a possibility?" Because it says in Romans 10 that in order to be saved you have to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and confess Him as Lord. I don't believe there's any salvation that doesn't make Jesus Lord.

Now I'm familiar with American Christianity and I can pretty well pinpoint her background and she's turned out to be a beautiful servant of the Lord. But I just don't believe that was a valid presentation of biblical truth. I don't think there is any salvation without holiness. I don't think there is any salvation without acknowledging the Lord as Lord. You see, we'll be coming later in this chapter to the kingdom which Jesus has invited us to share in, which He's king. I believe the Bible teaches unless Jesus is king there is no righteousness. Those who are not ruled by Jesus are not righteous because by our nature we're rebels. Unless we come into submission to the Lord, we don't have any real righteousness.

We'll read verse 15 and proceed from there. Hebrews 12:15.

> "Watching [or taking care] lest there be anybody who comes short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up offend [or cause trouble] and through this many be defiled."

Though I said "many," the Greek says "the many." It's almost like most of them will be defiled. So this warning then is against coming short of the grace of God and that is described as a root of bitterness that springs up and causes trouble to many and many are defiled by it. We need to look back at the passage in the Old Testament to which that refers, and it's Deuteronomy 29:18–21. This passage here is one of the most terrifying warnings of the judgment of God impending that I know of anywhere in the Bible. I read it through this evening and I was quite astonished at how powerful it was. Deuteronomy 29:18–21. These are words of Moses and I'll not go back to the beginning of the sentence, which is a long one, but beginning at verse 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."

That's the passage that's referred to in Hebrews 12, "Lest there be any root of bitterness." But I want you to see that the root is a person, a person who turns away from the true faith of the Lord and is involved with other gods, which very frequently in our contemporary culture would be the occult. Listen to what Moses goes on to say:

> "And it shall be when he hears the words of this curse..."

The Hebrew says literally "he'll bless himself in his heart." Saying in effect, "I'm all right, that doesn't refer to me. I'm okay." He says:

> "I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered land with the dry."

The effect of this is that it destroys not only the dry land but the green, fertile land. I would suggest to you that God views this much more seriously than most of us would. Then listen to what follows, it's quite frightening.

> "The LORD shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and His jealously will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him."

And if you read just one chapter back, the curses are numerous. The whole of the latter part of chapter 28 consists of curses.

> "... and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. 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."

That's really a frightening pronouncement of judgment on the person who belongs to God's covenant people but turns away to another God. Such a person, he or she, is described as a root of bitterness that bears wormwood, it's poisonous. The suggestion is that not only does such a person err from the way of God, but he causes many others to err with him and many are defiled by that.

You could also look at the other two references. Second Timothy 3:5, which is the end of a long list of the kind of corruptness of character which will emerge among humanity in the closing period of this age. Speaking of such a person it says:

> "... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these."

It's a very strong word, "avoid them"—have nothing to do with them.

And then you could look in Ecclesiastes 9:18 if you know where to find Ecclesiastes. A rather little- read book most times.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

We have the saying, "One rotten apple spoils the whole bunch." So there's a warning against a certain kind of person who by his very presence and influence corrupts many others. You see from what I've said that this is a theme that runs right throughout the Bible.

Now we go on to the next verse and we'll see something very remarkable which is the examples of such a root. We're in Hebrews 12 and we're looking at verse 16. It's really interesting, I can't go into it, but it's written in Greek but it's written by somebody who thinks in Hebrew because the construction is not the least bit Greek, it's Hebrew. In Hebrew, as some of you know, they leave out the word "is." In Greek you can't do that. But continually this writer leaves out the "is" and you have to supply it. It's a very clear advertisement that whoever wrote it was a Hebrew. He thought in Hebrew and wrote in Greek.

> "... lest there be any fornicator [or immoral person] ..."

And that's one example of a bitter root. A corrupting influence is an immoral person. I have to say in the course of my ministry I've seen that happen. I've seen one immoral person tolerated and influence others to their destruction. This is not an idle warning.

> "... or profane person as Esau, who for one meal sold his own birthright [or his rights as the firstborn would be better]."

What impresses me is the second example of a bitter root, the kind of person that you shouldn't tolerate. We could all understand with our background in Christian ethics that an immoral person is not to be tolerated in the company of God's people. But here we have the other kind of person, profane. Whom would you think of as an example of a profane person? The Scripture gives us the example of Esau and I think that really needs to make us ponder because Esau was not an immoral person. He married two wives but he was legally married. Why is he held up as an example of something that must not be tolerated? What did he do? He despised what God had made available to him. He never did any wrong; he just wasn't interested in spiritual inheritance.

There's some amazing statements about Esau. Let's look at the story first. We'll have to turn to the Old Testament to Genesis 25:27 through the end of the chapter. Having lived in the land of Israel, this is so very vivid to me because I can picture the scene. I picture it more in a context of Arab culture than Jewish culture today because in the land of Israel the Arabs probably retain, in some respects, more biblical culture than some aspects of Jewish culture.

> "When the boys grew up [that's Esau and Jacob], Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game..."

You remember I had said that I once had a sermon on how a wrong attitude for food corrupted the family life is Isaac? Well, there's an example. He loved the wrong one because he liked game.

> "... but Rebekah loved Jacob."

Let me say this, there are many who can appreciate this. Rebekah is the first ?yiddish yamama?. She is the real pattern. She was going to arrange the future of their family no matter what happened.

> "When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, 'Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.' Therefore his name was called Edom [because Edom is the word for 'red']. But Jacob said, 'First, sell me your birthright.' And Esau said, 'Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?' [I'm so hungry I'm going to die.] Jacob said, 'First swear to me'; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew..."

Now this is what makes it so vivid to me because in amongst the Arabs still today, and also amongst Oriental Jews, this is what's called in Arabic ?shore-o-but addis?. It's a soup made of lentils, and when we lived in that country in 1946, around about there, we had an Arab maid named Jameela who made the most delicious ?shore-o-but addis?, lentil stew. And it's got a very pungent smell. I mean, when it's in the house and you're hungry, all you can think about is that lentil stew. There you see "that red stuff" simmering there on the stove and your mouth begins to water and your sense of values disappears and all you think about is that stew. So I'm not justifying Esau, but I can understand his reaction. So:

> "... he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way."

Then there's that little comment on the end that you mustn't miss.

> "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

That's why he's held up as an example of a profane person, the kind of person who's dangerous to have in the company of God's people.

And again I have to say I have seen persons of that kind in the company of God's people whose company has been harmful.

Let me go back to my outline. He attached no importance to the inheritance promised to Abraham and Isaac. He was entitled to it because he was the firstborn by a few minutes. Then my comment is God hates this attitude. Let's look for a moment in Malachi 1:2–3. The Lord is remonstrating with Israel, the descendants of Jacob.

> "'I have loved you,' says the LORD. But you say, 'How hast Thou loved us?' [Now the Lord's answer:] 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the LORD. 'Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau...'"

One of the important things in the spiritual life is to get God's standards of value and that attitude God says I hate. Esau was not immoral, he wasn't a thief. He was a good guy. As I said in my outline, today most people would consider Esau the good guy and Jacob the heel, the bad guy. His name means "heel."

I want to point out to you that once Jacob had purchased the birthright of the firstborn he was legally entitled to the blessing that went with it. So all he did when he got the blessing was make sure he got what was his legal right. I'm not justifying what he did to his brother, but I'm pointing out that the blessing was legally his and the Holy Spirit prophetically bore testimony to that because once Isaac had pronounced the blessing on him, even though he thought it was Esau, he knew he could never retract that blessing.

The problem with both Rebekah and Jacob—and it's a problem some of us share—is they couldn't leave God to work it out. They had to help Him. And helping God is a dangerous thing to do because if you read the story you'll find that almost immediately Jacob became a fugitive and spent the next twenty years out of his inheritance working for his uncle. And as far as I understand the story, Rebekah never saw again the son she loved. So let that be a warning. If you've got something coming from God to you, you don't have to work it out yourself by some very carnal means. Have the faith to let God bring it to you.

I still want to emphasize this fact of how different God's standards are from those that would be accepted in the world today. You see, in a certain sense, if God has made something available to you that He believes is very precious and you despise it, what have you done? You've despised Him and you've insulted Him. So I think we need to examine ourselves that there be no Esau attitude in any of us, that when God makes the unsearchable riches of Christ available to us we don't shrug our shoulders and say, "That's nice, but I've got other things to do," because that's really being an Esau. Let's go on, verse 17.

For you know that even afterwards, when he wished to inherit the blessing, he was rejected [he was found unfit], for he did not find a place of repentance, although having sought it with tears.

Because of the genders in the Greek language, place is masculine and repentance is feminine. If you know any language with genders, like French or Italian or German, you'll understand that. Because of the genders, the Greek makes it clear that what Esau sought was the blessing, not the place of repentance. He wanted to bypass repentance and still get the blessing. There again, he's a warning. If you've ever stepped out of God's will, there's only one way back and that's repentance. You can't say, "God, I made a mistake. But anyhow, it's really mine." God says, "No, there's no way back if you bypass the place of repentance."

One of the greatest needs in the contemporary church is a real understanding of repentance. I've come to the conclusion when I was counseling people—which I don't do much today—that if people knew and practiced what repentance really is, half of the counseling problems wouldn't exist. Their problems are basically due to a failure to meet the basic requirement of repentance.

The word repentance that we have here in Greek is "change of mind." It's not emotion. It may be accompanied by emotion, it may not. But emotion is not the point. Esau was very emotional. He sobbed and wept, but he didn't meet the conditions.

Going on now, first of all, we'll look at what's referred to in verses 18–24. It says the seventh comparison between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion—Mount Sinai being the place where the covenant or the Law was given; Mount Zion being the headquarters of the new covenant in Jesus. Let's read the passages that are referred to. First of all, we'll read verses 18–21. Here the writer is portraying what was involved in the covenant of the Law as represented by Mount Sinai. He says:

> "You have not come to a mountain [or to something] ..."

Then he lists seven features of the scene of Mount Sinai.

> "... you have not come to something that could be touched, that burned with fire, to gloom, and to black darkness, and to tempest, or to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words which those who heard besought that no word further should be added. For they could not endure that which was commanded, [this is what was commanded:] 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' And so fearful was the spectacle that Moses said, 'I am exceedingly afraid and I tremble.'"

Now that's where we stop, that's the scene at Mount Sinai. I think we need to turn there and look at it. Let me just read the outline first. Mount Sinai represents the covenant of the Law based on carnal sacrifices and regulations. I think the key word is the word tangible. It was in the realm of that which could be touched, apprehended by the senses. It had seven physically perceptible characteristics. If you go through this note outline and count the number of things that are in sevens, I think it will astonish you.

Number one, it was tangible. Number two, there was blazing fire. Number three, there was darkness. Number four, there was—I prefer to put it the other way around. Gloom, darkness, a whirlwind, a trumpet blast and audible words that terrified all who heard.

Then I add this comment, which is very important. Notice, the Law did not bring the people near to God. On the contrary, it kept them at a distance. It's very, very important to see that.

Now let's look at the description in Exodus 19. We'll read verses 16–25 rather quickly.

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. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

See the emphasis on thunder, fire, smoke, earthquake?

And the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses [up] to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. And also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate

themselves, lest the LORD break out against them." And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for Thou didst warn us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.'" Then the LORD said to him, "Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break forth upon them." So Moses went down to the people and told them.

The whole of that scene is in the realm of that which can be perceived by the senses. It was awesome, frightening, but not inviting. And as I've said already, its effect was to keep the people away, not to bring them near.

We go on to the passage which describes the Mount Zion. We need to bear in mind that according to the revelation of the New Testament there are two Mount Zions. The one is the one actually on earth near the city of Jerusalem. The other is what's called the "heavenly Mount Zion." Let's read the words now in Hebrews 12:22–24.

> "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, in festal array ..."

There's two different ways of translating that according to the way you put the comma. But to me that makes much better sense. Myriads of angels in festal array.

> "... and to the church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men who have been made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks a better word than that of Abel."

Now we'll look at the features of the headquarters of the new covenant. I'll read my outline because I can't improve on it. Mount Zion represents all that is made available through the new covenant in Christ. And it has seven spiritually discernible features. Notice the difference between "physically perceptible," which was the mark of Sinai, and "spiritually discernible," which is the mark of Mount Zion.

The first feature is it's God's city, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is referred to also in Galatians 4:26. It would be good to turn there. We'll read 25 to get the context. Paul is here using Abraham's two wives as an analogy of the two covenants. Hagar the bondwoman, an analogy of the covenant made at Sinai, and then Sarah, the free woman, the mother of the son of promise, as an analogy of the new covenant. This is what he says:

> "Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [verse 26:] But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother."

In Hebrews 12 we have a picture not of the earthly Jerusalem but of the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above which is free.

Then the second feature of this Mount Zion is myriads of angels in festal assembly. That really blesses me. Note that Scripture says we have come there. It's not in the future. It's not in the physical, because this is not speaking about the physical or that which is physically perceptible. This is in the Spirit. When we meet together in divine order we have come to the heavenly Mount Zion. I believe that's why Paul gives instructions about how we ought to behave "because of the angels." I think we ought to bear in mind that we're in the presence of angels and we should do the things which make angels feel at home, not the things which embarrass them.

The third feature is it's the gathering of the first-born, those who've been born again of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus. That is, it's the New Testament church enrolled in heaven. Notice that the roll of the New Testament church is not kept on earth. There are a lot of church rolls on earth which serve certain purposes, but to have your name on the roll of a church on earth is no guarantee that you have your name in the heavenly roll.

Let's look at the Scriptures there, James 1:18. Speaking about God and how He brought us into His family and made us His children:

> "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth [brought us forth in the new birth], so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures."

See? The world is not yet changed. It's going to be brought in line with God's purposes but we are the first fruits, the guarantee that the harvest will follow. We who are already

born again by the Spirit of God in this time. Let's look at Luke 10:20. The disciples had just been telling Jesus how excited they are that they can cast out demons in His name. He takes note of that but He gives them a warning:

> "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

He says, "When you have become My disciples, born again of the Spirit of God, your names are recorded in heaven."

The third passage is Revelation 21:27 speaking about the heavenly Jerusalem.

> "... nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

So three times we have this picture of the roll of God's people kept in heaven.

Going back to the outline, the fourth aspect of Mount Zion in heaven is God, the judge of all. I think it's rather significant that it's right in the center, it's the fourth. There are three before and three afterwards. I think we all need to bear in mind that God is still the judge of all. I think sometimes Christians tend to forget that God is not only a Savior but He's also a judge. He's the judge of all.

Now, if it weren't for the things that follow, we would have no hope of ever gaining access to that city. If it stopped with God the judge of all, we would be excluded. But you see, there's something added. The next one is the spirits of just men who have been made perfect. That is, I believe, the great saints of the Old Testament. If you turn back for a moment to the end of Hebrews 11, speaking about these heroes of the faith, verses 39 and 40:

> "And these all, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

The way was not opened for them to take their place until Jesus had died and risen from the dead.

And then they and we in the Spirit meet together in the New Jerusalem. The sixth aspect of the heavenly Mount Zion, the sixth presence there is Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. Because of the new covenant we understand we need the seventh which is the sprinkled blood of Jesus. And only because of that sprinkled blood can we have access there. If it stopped merely at God the judge of all, we would have no place.

Let's look at just two passages. First of all, turning back to Hebrews 9:23–26, which we've already commented on earlier, speaking about the necessity of blood for the purifying of the things that belong to God:

> "Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in heaven to be cleansed with these [with the blood of the sacrifice], but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own."

The implication is that Jesus entered into the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood, which is what the writer of Hebrew says. The sprinkled blood of Jesus that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Now if we turn back to the record of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4—we remember the story, we don't have to look into that—how, through jealousy of his brother's faith and righteousness, the older brother Cain murdered the younger one, Abel. Then disclaimed responsibility when God held him accountable for it. Verse 9:

> "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' And He said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground.'"

Abel's shed blood cried out to the Lord from the ground for vengeance, for justice. It was sprinkled on the earth. But

the blood of Jesus sprinkled in heaven cries out to the Lord for mercy and forgiveness.

To me, it's always important to remember that the blood is continually speaking in the presence of God. Even when I'm not praying, even when I'm not being extremely spiritual, the blood is still there pleading on my behalf for mercy and forgiveness. I am so glad for that. Turn back to Hebrews 12 and we'll just look at one more verse to close this session. Verse 25.

Take care that you do not reject the one who speaks. For if they did not escape who rejected on earth the one who was speaking on behalf of God ...

There's a word there that means "to speak on behalf of God." It's used in secular Greek for the answer of an oracle.

> "... much less shall we who reject [or turn away] from Him who speaks from heaven."

Because we have a better covenant, because of all that God has done for us, the writer of Hebrews says take care about your attitude. I think his mind goes back to Esau. Don't be like Esau who despised what God offered him. Treat it with reverence, realize what it cost to purchase your redemption and walk carefully. I have to say again, I don't think that message is heard often enough in contemporary Christianity. We're really presenting a false view of God if we talk only about His mercy and His forgiveness and His grace.

Paul says in Romans, "Behold then the goodness of God, and His severity." A coin which has one side defaced is no longer valid currency. I think that's true of our presentation of God. If we deface the side of severity and only present the side of goodness, it's not valid currency. It's not true. I don't say that to bring anybody under condemnation but if you read on to the end of the chapter, which we'll be considering in our next chapter, it speaks about how we ought to serve this God. And the words used are reverence and awe.

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Sermon

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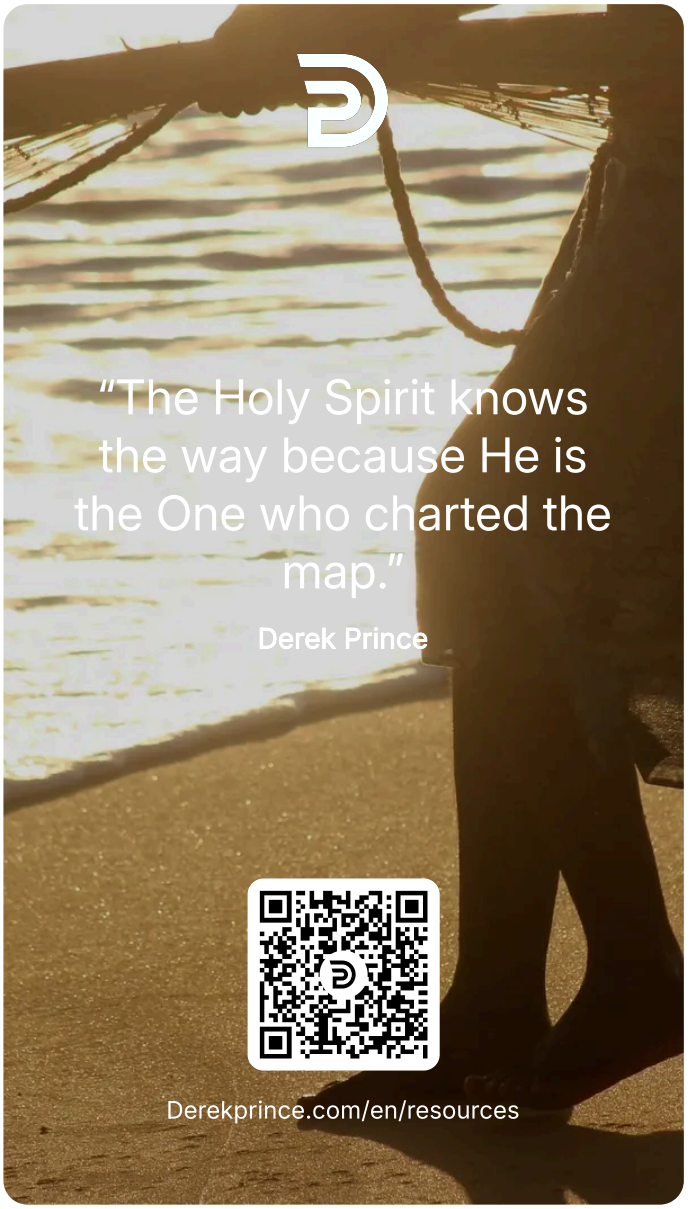

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