

Hebrews 12B (2014)

- Last week, we learned that all God's children should expect His discipline
 - In the writer's day, he was concerned about Jewish Christians who retreated from their witness and walk as Christians
 - In the writer's words, they had shrunk back from their new life in Christ
 - We know from history that this church was under growing persecution
 - And it's likely the persecution was responsible for driving these immature Christians away from the church during times of trial
 - So the writer gave the church a sermon on what faith requires and how it looks when lived-out to the fullest
 - The result was the Hall of Faith
 - Each example showed how men and women of faith respond to adversity
 - God brought them all tests and trials so that the world could see their faith and trust in God's promises
 - They set aside the world's priorities and were content to wait for the eternal rewards that awaited
 - And now in Chapter 12, the writer offers specific advice for all believers
 - How are we to react to trials and persecution?
 - Do we run back to our old lives?
 - No. We understand that trials are the Lord's discipline
 - And that discipline is intended to teach us perseverance and holiness
 - The Lord loves His children, which is why He won't leave us without the discipline we need
 - And by that discipline, we may please Him and enjoy the fruit of obedience

- The Lord's love for His children doesn't stop there, of course
 - Not only does He bring us trials as discipline, but He also provides us with brothers and sisters in the faith to support us in the fight
 - As the writer explains next

[Heb. 12:12](#) Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, [Heb. 12:13](#) and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

[Heb. 12:14](#) Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

- As I've said in the past, Christianity is a team sport
 - The Lord has designed the body of Christ so that we must work and fellowship together if we're going to excel in our walk
 - We might try to go it alone
 - We can choose to forsake the gathering on Sundays
 - We can choose to withhold transparency from others, hiding our sorrows and struggles
 - We can put on a smile and struggle silently against our flesh and the enemy and the trials the Lord brings
- But when we do these things, we forfeit one of the greatest weapons in our battle against sin: the encouragement of other believers
 - The writer asks the Body of Christ to work as one in staying the course that faith demands
 - He begins with "therefore," meaning "because we will all face trials..."
 - Therefore, we must work as a team
 - He says strengthen hands that are weak and knees that are feeble
 - You remember how Paul used the analogy of a human body in 1 Corinthians to refer to members of the Body of Christ
 - This writer does the same thing here

- He compares weak individuals in danger of falling back to weak hands and feeble knees
- We work to strengthen those among us who are facing trials and contemplating shrinking back, giving up on the race
- In the case of this church, the trials included various kinds of persecution
 - Being ostracized by Jewish family and friends
 - Losing employment or businesses
 - Physical threats
 - Seeing your family enduring similar mistreatment because of your confession
- These were trials and tests that the Lord allowed His children to experience for their spiritual good, just as He did those in the Hall of Faith
 - We face our own versions of the same
 - The world and the enemy are always looking for new ways to make living as a Christian difficult
 - And sooner or later they will find your weak spot
 - That's when your hands get weak and your knees are feeble, so to speak
- For those moments, the Body of Christ must come alongside us and make straight paths for our feet
 - The idea of a straight path is that it makes our walk easier and more direct to the goal
 - We aren't wandering, wasting energy
 - And we aren't in danger of going in the wrong direction
 - Moreover, when we have a weak limb, a straight walk is always the best
 - The writer extends the analogy by explaining that when we straighten these paths, the hurting limbs will heal
 - What specifically is the writer asking us to do for one another?

- First, in the Bible, the idea of walking a straight path is commonly used to describe living in the truth of God's Word
- John the Baptist brought the truth that the Messiah was coming, which Isaiah called making straight the crooked paths in the desert
- So this writer is emphasizing again the importance of knowing God's Word
- When we teach those who are weak and faltering on the importance of remaining on course, they will be strengthened
- But teaching is just one piece of the work, albeit the most important piece
 - Praying for one another, which leads to God changing the circumstances for the better
 - Meeting the physical needs of one another
 - Giving comfort, companionship, encouragement, and other support
 - These are all part of how the Body of Christ comes to the aid of those hurting in the Body
- Most importantly, pursue peace with all men and sanctification
 - The word for "pursue" in Greek means "chase down"
 - It's not passive, it's active
 - And the same verb refers to the second noun, "sanctification" (holiness)
 - The writer links these two ideas, because one follows naturally from the other
 - We will see the Lord face-to-face one day, because we will be fully sanctified
 - By the Lord's power to resurrect us, we will be glorified and fully sanctified
 - And without that positional sanctification, the kind that comes only by faith, we will not see the Lord

- But it is because we have the assurance of sanctification by faith that we must spend our days now chasing down every opportunity to live in holy ways
 - Pursuing peace among men means pursuing the process of living in a more holy way
 - Pursue harmony in the Body of Christ
 - Pursue the goal of bringing God's peace in Christ to the world
- Most of all, pursue peace with God through obedience to His commands
 - Chase down every opportunity to grow more holy in your life
 - Pursue that like you're chasing a school bus as it leaves without you
 - So why does he say, "without which we won't see the Lord"?
 - It falls to us now to pursue it, chase after it, because we desire to see that day
 - And because we know we gain eternal benefits from the pursuit
- With that, the writer has made his best argument for perseverance and faithfulness
 - He's explained why it's important, given us examples to emulate and called us to assist one another in the face of God's discipline
 - But what happens when someone among us fails at this walk?
 - As a community, there comes a point where we must act to protect the flock, even at the expense of the individual
 - And this leads us into the writer's fifth and final warning

Heb. 12:15 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;

Heb. 12:16 that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.

Heb. 12:17 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.

- Before we dive into the specifics of this warning, let's look carefully at whom the writer is speaking to and who he's speaking about
 - First, notice whom he's speaking to
 - The writer addresses the church leadership
 - The writer begins with the word "see to it"
 - In Greek this word is *episkopeo*, from which we get the word "episcopal"
 - It means to watch over, referring to the oversight of someone in a position of authority
 - He's speaking of the responsibility of the church elders and other leaders to act in the best interests of the body
 - In that sense, the writer says, "see to it that the following does not happen in the church"
 - Secondly, notice he's speaking about a representative third person in the church
 - Do not allow someone to come short of the grace of God
 - From the Greek, we could also say, "watch diligently over the Body to ensure no one lacks the grace of God"
 - At first, "coming short of the grace of God" sounds like someone who simply missed the Gospel altogether
 - Someone who hasn't accepted it or believed it
 - But the phrase coming short in Greek could also be translated to be "failing in the grace of God"
 - In other words, it's someone who is neglecting the grace of God, neglecting their salvation and all that comes from it
 - Imagine a Christian walking away from their Lord, from the Church, and from their eternal rewards
 - They just declare they give up, they're going back to their life before Christ
 - They're falling short of the grace given them in Christ

- When someone in the Body makes this decision, he doesn't just damage his own walk...he also has the potential to bring others with him
 - That's why the writer says this individual is a root of bitterness
 - When life is tough, and the trials comes upon us like one wave after another, we're likely to feel like giving up
 - It seems an easier and better option to retreat, to find an escape and to take it
 - In the writer's day, the Jewish believers were returning to Judaism, rather than facing the struggles and persecution that came with being Christian
 - In our day, the struggles and temptations are different, but the outcome is still the same: bitterness
 - We grow bitter at our circumstances
 - We succumb to self-pity and despair
 - We make excuses and rationalize our behavior
 - And in the process, we become a root of bitterness in the Church Body
 - Perhaps we only cause trouble among our close friends or family
 - Or perhaps our fall is more public and the circle of collateral damage is much wider
 - Either way, such a person is a root of bitterness, in the sense that they are just the start of something that grows if left unchecked
 - It holds the potential to defile many
 - The word "defile" means "to stain", "to contaminate"
 - It means to cause others to make the same mistake
 - The eternal consequences of our mistakes are magnified when we cause others to stumble as well
- We're talking about believers who fail to take the writer's advice in how they face trials and tests that the Lord brings our way, in whatever way
 - Brothers and sisters who know the grace of God, but they are neglecting it

- They are hurting, fearful, tired, and wavering
- They need our help, not our condemnation
- They may not be asking for help, though they should
- They may be ready to give up, or they may have already quit
- This is the group we must strengthen
 - Doing nothing is not an option
 - Not only because we love them
 - But because they are a potential root of bitterness in our families and church and we need them to be strong so we can be strong
 - And vice versa
- Left unchecked, they become like Esau, in the sense that they are immoral and godless
 - These terms are harsh
 - And to some, they suggest that the writer is speaking about unbelievers within the Church
 - But notice that the writer's entire argument going back to Chapter 10 has been focused on believers retreating from their walk of faith
 - There's been no time in these chapters when the writer has moved to concerns over unbelievers
 - And yet, the example of Esau seems misplaced, since Esau was clearly an unbeliever in Scripture
- So how do we apply this example to the case of a disobedient, wavering believer?
 - Well, the writer isn't drawing a comparison to Esau's nature, but to his behavior and to the consequences of his behavior
 - First, Esau traded something very valuable for something very trivial
 - By convention as the firstborn, Esau was first in line for the birthright of Isaac

- This was an incredibly valuable right, guaranteeing Esau would receive the eternal inheritance God promised to Isaac
- But, Esau was willing to trade away this incredibly valuable eternal reward for something temporary and earthly: a bowl of soup
 - Could anyone make a worse bargain?
 - Well, yes...any Christian who would trade their eternal reward for the sake of some temporary, earthly pleasure
 - Whether that be escape from persecution, or relief from financial pressure or scorn from family or friends or classmates
 - Or some other escape...anything that allows us to circumvent the trials and test of the Lord, which have the potential to qualify us for eternal reward
- Such a Christian is immoral and godless
 - The word “immoral” is *pornos*, from which we get the word “pornography”
 - It means someone who engages in illegitimate sexual activity
 - They are immoral, in the sense that the person is living a lie when they depart from their faithful dependence on the Lord
 - And when we devise our own means of stepping out from under the Lord’s trials, we are living a lie
 - We are despising the discipline of the Lord, like the grounded child sneaking out the window at night
 - Our relationship with the Lord is illegitimate in that sense
- Furthermore, we’re godless in the sense that we are living apart from God
 - The Greek word for “godless” can be translated “worldly” or “unsanctified”
 - We’re living as if we don’t know the Lord, because we’re not living under His authority or counsel
 - Every unbeliever is godless by nature, but even a Christian can live in a godless manner

- And that's who we become when we give up in face of trials and tests
- Finally, notice the lesson of Esau at the end of it all
 - At some point, Esau realized that he had made a bad bargain
 - He had despised something very valuable
 - And once he realized his mistake, he sought to undo it
 - He was so determined to regain what he had lost, he cried tears of sorrow
 - But, the writer says it was too late for that
 - No matter how hard Esau sought to regain the birthright he previously despised, he couldn't get it back
 - Sometimes, the things we toss aside are gone forever
 - And if by our disobedience we decide to forfeit the eternal inheritance the Lord makes available to His children, then in our day of judgment we'll discover the foolish bargain we made
 - We'll realize that those earthly comforts we sought were nothing compared to what we lost
 - And in that day, it will be too late to regain it
- That's why we're called to steel ourselves in the face of trials and tests, while strengthening others when it's their turn to face these things
 - We serve a God Who loves us, saved us and desires to show us wonderful things
 - For a short time, He asks us to serve Him by enduring many trials in a fallen and sinful world
 - This world is set against God, and so it's set against us
 - It wants to suppress the truth and tempt us away from obedience
 - It will persecute us, just as it did Christ
 - And the enemy is so crafty in all his schemes

- He has countless ways to bring us into a decision moment where our faith is tested
- And the Lord uses those moments as opportunities to please Him and earn reward
- Let's strengthen each other as we face these moments in turn
- Everyone faces them eventually...but together, we can persevere and pass the tests with flying colors
- But if we pretend they don't happen to us or if we try to face them alone, we're going to fail
 - Sooner or later, we'll crumble and let our flesh or the enemy win the day
 - We'll shrink back, become a root of bitterness and bring others with us
- Or we can reach out in the Body of Christ
 - Ask the Lord to send us friends, brothers and sisters who will remind us of the things in God's Word that tell us the fight is worth it
 - Send us prayer warriors to win the battle on our behalf
 - Send us encouragers and counselors and helping hands to strengthen us
 - Send us support in whatever form, so we can meet the test with faithfulness and please the Lord
 - Let's make sure no one comes up short of the grace God has given them