

**A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT – AND WARNING  
HEBREWS 12:12-17**

**AUGUST 26, 2012**

It was during my seminary years that I first encountered the strange teachings of Zane Hodges. He was one of my New Testament professors, who was well-known for his belief that one can be a Christian without being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Like so many in his theological camp, Zane Hodges rejected the notion that the call to repentance involves turning from sin. He argued that the only requirement for salvation is a profession of faith in Christ as Savior, but not as Lord. He insisted that saving faith does not necessarily lead to a changed life. He believed that professing Christians could be characterized by flagrant and continued sin, without any fear of God's eternal judgment. He taught that the only consequence for such behavior would be a loss of one's heavenly rewards. He also insisted that even if a person repudiates his profession of faith and rejects Christ altogether, that person will still be saved.

But in the passage before us this morning, the author of Hebrews is insisting on precisely the opposite. Continuance in the Christian life and faith is the test of reality. What is clearly expected for all Christians is holiness; "without which no one will see the Lord" (v. 14). This is not a salvation by works, as all believers have already been made holy by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:10, 14). But the pursuit of holy living is a part of the perseverance of the faith that is encouraged throughout the book of Hebrews.

Within these verses, this call to continuance is two-fold. First, our author offers a word of encouragement to press on, one that is couched in the poetic language of the Old Testament Scriptures (vv. 12-13). What then follows is a word of warning against falling away, with Esau serving as an illustration of the dire consequences for doing so (vv. 14-17).

1. The Encouragement to Press On (vv. 12-13) The opening "therefore" of verse 12 links this exhortation to what has gone before (vv. 4-11). Because we can now view hardship as a sign of God's loving and fatherly discipline, we must continue to move forward in the face of adversity. The first part of this exhortation (v. 12) is drawn partly from the words of encouragement originally addressed to God's people in exile. They were fearful that the promised restoration to their homeland would never come to pass (Isaiah 35:3). The full quotation of this Old Testament passage reveals how aptly our author is using this text, *as persevering faith is grounded in our mutual encouragement and in the promises of God's Word*:

"Strengthen the weak hands,  
Say to those with fearful hearts,  
'Be strong, fear not!  
Behold, your God will come . . .  
He will come and save you.'" (Isa. 35:3-4)

The second part of the exhortation (v. 13) is drawn from the wisdom that a godly father is passing on to his son (Proverbs 4:26; “make straight paths for your feet . . .”). The context of this passage reveals that this is a *call to single-minded adherence to the path of righteousness*, a mindset that is essential to persevering faith:

“Let your eyes look directly forward,  
And your gaze be straight before you.  
Make straight paths for your feet  
And take only ways that are firm.  
Do not swerve to the right or to the left,  
Turn your feet away from evil.” (Proverbs 4:25-27)

2. The Warning Not to Fall Away (vv. 14-17) Throughout this epistle, our author’s concern is that God’s people *live* as God’s people. Therefore, we must put forth “every effort” to live in harmony with others and to pursue holiness (v.14). Holiness simply means being set apart for God, so that we live differently from, and separate from the world. Contrary to the teaching of Zane Hodges and his followers, this is not an “optional extra” in the Christian life. Without a readiness and willingness to pursue this course of action, *no one* will see God (Cf. Matthew 5:8).

Therefore, in our pursuit of peace and holiness, we are called upon to watch out for one another so that no one within the fellowship will fall short of the gift of eternal salvation (i.e., “failing to obtain the grace of God;” v. 15). Specifically, we are warned against allowing “the root of bitterness” to spring up in our midst. This is language borrowed from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (29:18) where Moses warns the Israelites against turning away from the living God and pursuing other gods. It is a reference to the sin of apostasy, which can easily spread like a contagious poison, defiling many (Cf. Deut. 29:16-21).

The sad example of Esau serves as a sober reminder of the consequences of such apostasy (vv. 16-17). As a professing member of the covenant community, he despised his inheritance rights as the oldest son (v. 16). His loss proved to be irrevocable; though he later wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected. Why? Because “he found no chance to repent” (ESV), even though he “sought the blessing with tears” (NIV) (v. 17). In other words, he had reached the point where he could not be brought back to repentance. It’s the point of no return (Cf. Deut. 29:20-21).

This warning is clear enough: “Esau’s failure to win back the inheritance he had rejected (Genesis 25:33-34; 27:34-40) also serves to caution the Christian community against rejecting the inheritance offered to believers (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:25; on inheritance, see 1:4; 6:12; 9:15; ESV Study Bible notes). When such people do “fall away” in the permanent and irrevocable way described in these verses, it is clear that they are not true Christians. They have never made a true, saving response to the Gospel. Worse yet, having committed such a sustained and willful repudiation of Christ, it is impossible for such a person to be restored to repentance.

