

SERIOUS ABOUT SANCTIFICATION

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

By Steve Zeisler

All of us are familiar with the fable about the race between the tortoise and the hare. It is probably the most famous race in all of history. The hare had all the natural advantages of speed and ability, while the tortoise's sole advantage was persistence. But persistence was the telling factor. The distracted hare turned aside to rest and lost the race.

In chapter 12 of the book of Hebrews, the Christian life is compared to a race. We Christians are exhorted to "run with endurance the race set before us." Like the tortoise, we need to develop persistence, we need to develop endurance. This chapter also declares that Christians, as they run, are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses"—Abel, Sarah, Moses, and the other great men and women of faith. They are observing us as we race, cheering us on as we run faithfully for Christ in our day.

Today we have come to the verses 14-29 of this chapter. In this section, the vision of a great cloud of successful witnesses surrounding us gives way to a warning of what can cause us to fail in the race. The fable of the tortoise and the hare is not so much the tale of the tortoise's success strategy as it is the story of the failure of the hare. The hare, of course, ought to have won hands down. He had all the advantages, but he became distracted and turned aside. That is the example, albeit a negative one, that we have before us this morning: we are warned against complacency.

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 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; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Hebrews 12:14-17)

This paragraph begins with the word "pursue," which translates a strong Greek word. Like the earlier imagery of running in a race, this term suggests striving or pressing toward a goal. We would do well to recall, also, that the book of Hebrews lays out a series of stern warnings to Christians to be serious about their commitment. Today, we come to a passage that is going to open up into warning again, reminding us of the serious issues that are at stake. Christians are implored to live in such a way that their lives reflect the truth they believe. Using a bad example this time, the author illustrates his point by referring to Esau, who treated lightly his inheritance.

In the image of fruit-bearing, we also encounter a negative example that contrasts an earlier positive example. Verse 11 of this chapter refers to the discipline that God brings to bear in our lives as we run the race, the kind of discipline that "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Here in verse 15, however, by contrast, there is a warning that a "root of bitterness," bringing forth bitter, poisonous and destructive fruit, can spring up and cause us trouble.

What, then, do these warnings and the exposure of bad examples teach us? In these verses we are being urged to live out our Christian commitment in two areas of life: responsibility to humanity and to God. We are urged to: first, "pursue peace with all men," and secondly, to pursue "the sanctification (or holiness) without which no one will see the Lord." This summary recalls Jesus' words when he was asked to summarize the law and the prophets: "Love the Lord your God... and your neighbor as yourself," he said (cf Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:33; Luke 10:27).

“Pursue after peace with all men.” Be about the business of doing good for the people God has put in your life. Be a peacemaker, one who seeks to know the hurts of others because he wants to help them. Christians should be diligent to promote *shalom*, the Old Testament term, which does not mean merely the absence of warfare, but the growth of wellbeing and health. The nuclear stalemate assures a tense peace between the United States and the Soviet Union, but that is not at all what Scripture means when it talks about peace. The Bible equates peace with the promotion of wellbeing.

So we have a human side to our responsibilities: love your neighbor; pursue after peace with all men; determine to do good for everyone around you. And, observe that we are to pursue peace *with all men*, not just Christians, not just people who are apt to treat us well in return. We should have as one of our responsibilities in Christ the glorious commitment to bringing about inner peace and restored relationships among hurting people.

Our second responsibility is to pursue sanctification (or holiness)—to vigorously pursue a relationship with God that is so close and so certain that you begin to reflect the character of God more and more in your actions and emotional responses. We are to seek to live a life that looks like the life of Christ—one of purity, godliness, and holiness. We pursue after sanctification by cooperating with God. He is the sanctifier, the one who makes us like Jesus. Our assignment is to cooperate with him, to confess our sins, to humble ourselves, to resist the devil, to flee immorality, to restore one another.

So if the summary of responsibilities for Christian life includes both God and your neighbor, then that summary is given us here. Pursue after peace. Pursue after holiness. Only those whose lives have matched their creed, only those who have truly believed, and who increasingly have begun to live on that basis, will “see the Lord.” You and I were made to see God, to have a face to face relationship with him. Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face...” (1 Cor. 12:13 KJV).

In his helpful book, *Knowing the Face of God*, Tim Stafford writes this about “seeing” God:

When the Bible speaks of the new age when we will be fully satisfied, when we will be intimate with God in a way that no one on earth has ever experienced, it speaks this way—in terms of “seeing” God’s face.

What this means I confess I do not know; I am not convinced that anyone knows. Our metaphysical speculations are likely to carry little weight at the time when God clears up our confusion. And since we have not seen God, our ideas about his face amount to guesses. We lack more than information; we lack the substance. We must be transformed to see, and we will only be so transformed in the very act of seeing.

We were made to see God, to have the glorious, majestic, face-to-face relationship with God that Jesus Christ had. Sanctification, growing in Christ-likeness in our thoughts and actions, is the process that fits us for seeing God. The urging of the writer of Hebrews is this: pursue after holiness, because that is where you are headed. Cooperate with God in the process of having your life transformed so that it reflects more and more the things you believe, recognizing that, when at last we see him, in that very act the final transformation will take place.

Remember the illustrations in this section mainly raise warnings on what to avoid; warnings about things that might keep us from succeeding in this pursuit. The first of these is in verse 15: “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.” Notice that this is not saying, see to it that you do not come short of the grace of God, but rather, see to it that no one does. Consider it your responsibility that everybody should grow. Be concerned for your brother and sister.

Many believers want to succeed in their Christian lives, but they act as if they had to depend only on their own strength to do so. Thus, some Christian organizations become just like secular organizations—just as bureaucratic,

just as manipulative, setting about their work and ignoring the grace of God. We act as if everything were up to us. So, falling short of God's grace, the "hare" is shunted aside, away from grace to the path of self-effort. It fails to win the race as a result.

A second illustration warns against something else that would keep us from completing the race: "See to it that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled." Deuteronomy 29:18 says, "Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison" (NIV).

The figure here is a root that produces bitter, poisonous plants; in this case human bitterness. I have done battle for many years with oxalis in my lawn. I have done everything I can to kill it: I have sprayed it, I have cut it, I have even yelled at it. I have succeeded in stunting it on occasion, but it always returns, its invisible root system sending out shoots that produce more weeds in other places in the lawn. It is extraordinarily difficult to get at the roots. You can attack what appears above the ground, but as long as the roots remain, new plants keep coming up.

That exactly describes the figure of speech here. If we allow resentment—and I believe resentment is the root that produces bitter fruit—to attach itself to our hearts, if we do not confess it and deal with it, then over and over again in various areas of our lives, at various times in our lives, it will send forth a plant that produces a bitter fruit. We will experience its bitterness and so will everyone else.

Some people who have had bad marriages resent so much the hurt they suffered that they will never again allow themselves to become close to anyone. As long as that resentment remains there is no opportunity for a healthy relationship to grow. Recently I spoke to a man in his 40's whose life has been one series of disasters and choices for misery after another. He told me he had just lately forgiven his father. He had finally come to realize that hatred of his father is what had made him so miserable all his life. For years he resented him and refused to repent of that resentment. The result was that bitter fruit kept coming up again and again, sending out shoots that bore more bitter fruit. It was not until he finally was willing to say, "I will forgive what my father did to me," that the root system itself was destroyed.

We will lose the race, we will be sidetracked and shunted to the side so long as we allow anger at God or anger at others to fasten itself on our hearts. As long as that root system is in place it will send up poisonous and bitter plants. "See to it...that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled."

The third illustration here is given in the story of Esau. His problem was lethargy and unconcern for things that were tremendously valuable. Esau was a sensual man. His desires led him to marry outside the people of God. He loved to hike and hunt and fight and eat and explore and enjoy. He gave into every whim, every feeling, giving vent to his sensual appetites. He didn't really care much whether or not God could be known. He was not concerned about his family's destiny as the people of God.

On one occasion his brother Jacob, who cared about God and wanted his blessing—although he thought he could achieve it by scheming and manipulation—offered the hungry Esau a pot of lentil stew. His price for the meal was Esau's birthright. Esau responded by accepting the offer, thereby giving up his right to serve in the plan of God. What incredible complacency—to set aside God, and his own place in the plan of God, in order to satisfy his physical hunger! Those choices that made Esau such a bad example are to be avoided at all costs. He repented later, but only of the results of his choice. There is no suggestion that he ever repented of the actual choice to devalue the things of God.

Do not be an immoral or godless man like Esau, allowing your appetite for the things of this life to become so important that you grow complacent about the things of God. Christians will never win the race if they are complacent, if they stop pursuing, caring for, and seeking the things of God.

Pursue peace with all men. Pursue holiness and recognize that there are danger signs along the way, places we could turn off and quit, side attractions that might keep us from the race. Even with all the advantages of the hare, we might find ourselves not winning at all.

Beginning in verse 18, the warning becomes even sterner:

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "" I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." This expression, ""Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:18-29)

In keeping with this theme, here is how the giving of the law on Mount Sinai is described, in Exodus 19 and 20:

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him...When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." (Exodus 19:18, 19; 20:18, 19 - NIV)

It was an awesome occasion when Moses, the leader of the children of Israel, was given the tablets of the law at the foot of Mt. Sinai. On that mountain the character of God was displayed; the demands upon human life that were necessary in order to live righteously were set forth. Those fearful circumstances existed because the message itself was intended to produce a kind of fear that brought people to their knees, calling out for mercy from their Heavenly Father. The law was given to allow us to see the terrible condition our rebellion had brought upon us, to make us call out for God's mercy. Its introduction was a frightening, thundering, trumpet-blaring, earth-shaking event.

I remember a Saturday afternoon when I was quite young, sitting alone in front of a TV, watching a movie of the Edgar Allan Poe story, *The Cask of Amantillado*. The bad guy finally was done in in a dark, creepy basement, with scary organ music in the background. He was walled up in a wine cellar, screaming and pounding all the while as the bricks were laid. I was absolutely terrified. There was no one there to turn the TV off and save me from my foolishness. Months later I would wake up with terrible nightmares of being walled up inside a wine cellar, the same organ music playing in the background. Fear is indeed a powerful influence on human life.

The trembling and the darkness of Mount Sinai, however, although it produced at the time a holy anguish, ultimately did not lead to righteousness. It was an inadequate message. As much as the Israelites trembled at the giving of the law, before long they ignored it. They gave way to idolatry, sought other sources of supply, and rejected the Lord their God. Their long history of hardship and wasted opportunity was the result. The comparison made here is this: if the Israelites did not escape the consequences of having rejected the message that was given on Mount Sinai, what will become of us to whom God now speaks from heaven? He does not speak from just the top of a mountain that can be touched, he speaks from Mount Zion, which is perfect and cannot be touched.

The city of God on Mount Zion is not filled with darkness, but with light. It is not a lonely experience of approaching the mountain by yourself, it is filled with relationships: a myriad of angels and in the company of the first-born. It is a totally different picture. There is light and probably music and beauty rather than darkness, foreboding and crashing thunder. But the essential point is this: it is immeasurably more important to listen to that message of acceptance, of hope, and of sanctification that can produce a life that is worth living.

If, in fact, those who heard the first message suffered consequences for their disobedience, how much more will we who have the good news? We who have the hopeful answer? How can we possibly treat this as if it were worthless? How can we grow complacent? How can we stop caring? How can anything else mean more to us than the good news of the shed blood of Christ?

There is a warning from both the past and from the future suggested to us in these verses in Hebrews. The warning from the past is the warning of verse 25. If the Israelites refused, how much more dangerous will the consequences be if we refuse to hear, if we stop the pursuit, if we quit the race, if we allow ourselves to be seduced by something else? So we look back into the past and we see what happened to the nation of Israel, the suffering they went through, the dishonor they experienced. That lesson ought to stir us to obey.

But there is also a lesson from the future, which speaks of the time when “everything that can be shaken will be shaken.” The ground trembled at Mount Sinai, but there is coming a much more profound trembling. Every human philosophy that has raised itself in defiance of God, every claim that this world can produce security, every hedge that we have built around ourselves, every source of supply that is not of the Lord—the honors, prestige, prominence—all of these things will be shaken. Everything that can be shaken will be shaken in order that the things that cannot be shaken will remain.

Verse 29 says “our God is a consuming fire.” He is not only an earth-shaker, he is a consuming fire. Gold and other precious metals are placed in a crucible and heated so that what is impure will rise to the surface and be discarded. Our God is a consuming fire in exactly that sense: he is a purity producer. There is coming a day in which every arrogant idea or institution raised in defiance of God will be shaken; when every impurity will be consumed by fire.

Because these things are so, we find a conclusion is drawn in verses 28 and 29: “Since we have a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude.” We are now citizens of the kingdom which cannot be shaken. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. For his sake, his purposes and his people are invulnerable to any shaking that this universe must face. Let us therefore show gratitude, giving thanks to God for what he has given us because we know what is coming. Let us live lives of service. Let us be diligent to be involved in the purposes of God precisely because we are grateful that we have been given a kingdom that will not be shaken.

Further, it says, we should show this “acceptable service with reverence and awe.” Not only gratitude but reverence, a *holy fear* because we see that our God is a consuming fire.

Earlier we discussed a root that produces bitter fruit. What is the opposite of resentment and bitterness? It is gratitude. If we are grateful for who we are and what we have been given, we have the magnificent answer to the fearful results that accrue from the root of bitterness. What is the opposite of Esau's complacency? It is reverence. When we again hear the warning of Scripture that sets before us the person and work of Christ in such a way that we respond to it from our hearts, and when that response includes gratitude and reverence to God and we find ourselves back on the path, then we will not become as the hare, ceasing to care and growing complacent; then we are pursuing peace and holiness.

I have a friend who works for the City of Palo Alto fire department. His job is to try and convince local citizens that we ought to get serious about the fact that the San Andreas fault is almost certain to become active before very long. The earthquake in Taiwan last week caused many of us to think, "Yes, indeed. We ought to be prepared. It's time to check the bottled water, the canned food and the charcoal." If past responses are a guide, however, I expect that, before long, most of us will stop caring and become complacent about earthquakes. So my friend's job is made increasingly difficult by lethargy and complacency. The ordinary citizenry does not want to think about earthquakes. We hope that ignoring them will make them go away. We do not want the responsibility of being prepared for them.

How much more serious is the warning in Hebrews! How much more dire the consequences! There is coming a day when everything that can be shaken will be shaken, when everything that fire can consume will be consumed. We have an opportunity to serve God, to live a life of service based on gratitude and on reverence. We are alerted to the dangers of complacency, of bitterness, of self-effort. Hebrews warns us of what is coming. Let us take the warning to heart. "See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven."

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