

### The Possibility of Falling Short of the Grace of God

#### Hebrews 12:12-17

Hebrews 12:12-17 - *“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: <sup>15</sup> looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; <sup>16</sup> lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. <sup>17</sup> For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.”*

#### Background Notes

Notice that the first word of verse 12 is *“Therefore.”* This is an obvious clue for us to look back at the first eleven verses of the chapter. There we learned that the Christian life is like a marathon race. God does not make the race quick and easy, because it’s designed to train us and teach us along the way. That’s what God’s discipline and training regimen is all about. We need to learn how to endure over the long haul.

In addition, the author mentioned that it’s possible to get discouraged along the way. That’s why it’s so important to keep our spiritual eyes focused on Christ: *“For consider Him [Jesus] who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (v3).*

In view of all this, the author started this section of Hebrews 12 with the word *“Therefore,”* and then he continued with the exhortations of verses 12-17. There is a close connection between verses 1-11 and the exhortation of verses 12-13: to *“strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 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.”*

Marathon runners need strength to keep their arms up and elbows bent; they need strength to keep their knees from collapsing; they need concentration to watch where they’re going, to avoid potholes and anything that would trip them up or cause falls and injuries.

In the same way, we Christians who are running the race need strength for the long haul. It’s easy to get weary and discouraged. There are many potholes and lot of debris along the way, just waiting to trip us up and prevent us from running well. We need to set a straight path so that the areas where we are spiritually weak won’t be further disabled, but rather be healed.

Here's an illustration. Last summer I was trying to show off before my grandchildren by pulling myself across the rungs of one of those elevated horizontal playground ladders. To make a long story short, I injured the rotator cuff in my right shoulder. Either my upper body strength had decreased or my lower body weight had increased! Now everything I do is affected by that injury, including running. It hurts!

That's the way it is in the Christian "race course" that God has set for us. Injuries can affect everything we do - including our relationship with other runners. We need to stay strong and focused, and we need the strength to encourage fellow runners to do the same.

Remember, the Christian life is a marathon! It is possible to get weary and discouraged, so it's important to heed the warnings in Hebrews 12.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. It is possible to fall short of the grace of God.

Verse 15: *"Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God."*

All of Hebrews 12:12-17 was an exhortation to elders or church leaders. They were to encourage the flock to grow strong, and to endure, and to move on and grow in the faith. Some members of their congregations may not have been true believers – only professing to be Christians. Some of these borderline Christians had become so weary and discouraged and afraid of the Roman persecution that they were tempted to turn back to Judaism.

That was why it was very important for the elders and leaders to do whatever it took to strengthen the people in their faith - and to encourage them, build them up, and make the pathway for their race as straight as possible.

The reason why we believe this passage was particularly addressed to the church leaders because of the phrase *"looking diligently"* in verse 15. This is the same Greek phrase that's translated "serving as overseers" or "exercising oversight" in 1 Peter 5:2, which is addressed to church leaders or elders.

So the elders and church leaders were to encourage fellow believers to pursue peace with all people (v14) – even in the midst of persecution, and the temptation to go back to Judaism, maybe even when enduring arm-twisting by family members or friends to turn back. But they were not to pursue peace at the expense of holiness or sanctification! Verse 14: *"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."* The "sanctification" and "holiness" mentioned here was not a reference to our positional righteousness. Every believer receives the righteousness of Christ the moment we trust Christ. The sanctification here is *practical holiness*. It's progress in holy living, or practical holiness - and that is the Holy Spirit's work in our lives right now.

If this pursuit of holiness is not going on in a believer's life, it may be an indication that that person is not a true believer. Only true believers (those who are experiencing the ongoing work of sanctification in their lives) will see the Lord and enjoy His presence forever.

It is possible to fall short of the grace of God (v15). Threshold or borderline Christians who are only "going through the motions" of being a Christian, and are only professing to be believers will never see the Lord in Heaven (v14). I trust everyone hearing this Talk is a true believer, because it is possible to fall short of the grace of God.

## **2. It is possible to harbor a root of bitterness.**

Verse 15: *"...lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled."*

Life is not easy. Many things that happen in our lives can cause us to become bitter - bitter against fellow believers, and even bitter against God for allowing "negative" things to happen. If we don't deal with bitter and angry feelings before the Lord, they can become a "root of bitterness." And a root of bitterness invariably does not stay private. It works its way out and causes great trouble for many others (v15).

I know of some situations in which entire congregations have "*become defiled*" and even destroyed because of the bitterness of just one believer. That one believer's bitterness has worked its way out in criticism, complaining and destructive gossip. No wonder the author exhorted church leaders to make sure that no root of bitterness would have a chance to spring up and cause problems in their churches. Pull out that root before it has a chance to grow! This is still excellent advice for all elders and church leaders.

The particular root of bitterness that the author of Hebrews had in mind was the bitterness of apostasy - being embittered and rebellious towards God and turning way from Christ. How do we know this? We know it because the author quoted Deuteronomy 29:18: *"...so that there will not 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; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood.* The root of bitterness in Deuteronomy 29:18 was the sin of turning away from the one true God of Israel to the false gods of the surrounding nations. It was possible to turn away from God under the Old Covenant - and it is possible to turn away from God under the New Covenant as well. It is possible to harbor a root of bitterness.

## **3. It is possible to conceal the character of Esau.**

Verses 16-17: *"Lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears."*

The author of Hebrews presented the particular example of Esau. Esau was an Old Testament apostate. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob (Genesis 25), and Esau did not receive the patriarchal blessing (Genesis 27).

It's important for us to understand that the birthright and blessing were not just entitlements to the greater share of the family inheritance. The birthright and blessing also involved the great privilege and responsibility of caring for the priestly and pastoral responsibilities for the family - and in Isaac's case the birthright and blessing included carrying on the promised Messianic line. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau all knew these facts. Jacob was wrong in the way he went about getting the birthright and blessing - but at least it appeared that Jacob had a spiritual hunger and understood spiritual responsibility.

However, Esau could not have cared less about spiritual things or the spiritual responsibility for the family. He despised the birthright. He said, "What good is it to me!" His lifestyle of immorality and godlessness was evidence that he was an unbeliever. Even though he later regretted his mistake, and showed remorse, and wept when he realized that he had lost the blessing - there was no true repentance in his heart.

When you first look at Esau, you would never guess that he was an apostate. He was good looking, a hunter, and a man of the fields. He was his father's favorite son, and he probably would have been voted "Most Likely to Succeed" by just about everyone. But his deceptively good-looking exterior concealed a heart of unbelief.

Is it possible that an "Esau" is listening to this Talk? It is possible to conceal the character of Esau.

## **Practical Application**

### **Let's watch our hands and knees and feet.**

Have you ever been on a mountain hike, and you became so tired that you felt like quitting - but then a fellow hiker came alongside and encouraged you? Once, during a 50-mile ultra-marathon race, our son David had to literally support an exhausted fellow-runner and uphold his "feeble knees" to help him get to the end of the race! This is the picture the author used to help us understand the difficulty of the Christians "race."

It's interesting to notice the specific parts of the body that were mentioned in verses 12-13. Hands may speak of serving the Lord. Knees may speak of persevering in prayer. Feet may speak of walking with the Lord in long-term and courageous discipleship. Let's encourage one another in these areas.

It's easy to become weary and discouraged in these vital activities. In running the Christian marathon, we need each other for encouragement, and in times of weariness for strong support. Together, let's watch our hands and knees and feet!