

Hebrews 12:12-17: Hell is No Longer a Threat, But a Miserable Life Is

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I. Introduction

Christians understand that hell is no longer a threat. Those who have simply believed in Jesus Christ are guaranteed heaven (John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 4:13-14; 5:24; 6:47, etc., etc.). Thus, eternity in the Lake of Fire, the second death, is not a problem. However, Christians still have to live in this difficult world which can cause great misery. Jesus came to save us from that too (John 10:10). How can Jesus keep us from having a miserable life?

II. Hebrews 12:12-17: Hell is No Longer a Threat, But a Miserable Life Is

This audience is facing serious persecution (similar to or worse than before, 10:32-34), which is why the author has gone to great lengths to encourage them to endure, to not go back to their former religion. There's nothing waiting for them there; real salvation and holiness is found only in Christ. Jesus is better than the angels, Moses, and the flawed system they had to deal with sin: the Levitical priesthood. Jesus is the only High Priest who could and has saved them from their sins, the only one who could and has enabled them to live holy lives. Therefore, they must imitate those who faced tremendous suffering before yet remained faithful to God, especially Jesus. They endured the suffering God allowed into their lives because they saw God as a Loving Father who wanted to mature and strengthen them not cause them pain. So he now encourages them to strengthen their weaknesses and help others do the same, lest they end up miserable like Esau.

12:12-17, whatever their weaknesses are, he wants them to get rid of them. Are they afraid of being kicked out of the temple, they have a better temple in Christ. Do they fear not being able to atone for their daily sins, they have a High Priest who's paid for them all and given them a way back to God whenever they need it. Are they afraid that they won't be able to do business and provide for themselves, the God who delivered Abraham, Moses, David, Joseph, Elijah, etc., etc., will provide for them, miraculously if He has to (1 Kings 17:6). Whatever fears, worries, and anxieties they have, God wants them to let Him heal them so that the things that are lame won't be dislocated.

And this is not just about looking out for yourself, but each other. They need to stick together like a family. Thus, they must strengthen their own weaknesses but also help those who are weak among them. They must be that "one another" to each other as he's urged them before (3:13; 10:24). They must not let anyone fall short of the help God promised each and every one of them in their time of need (4:16). If they let others falter due to their suffering and failure to access God's help, they may develop a root of bitterness that will affect others. Therefore, they must pursue peace among themselves and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. This last part is not a threat of hell but a statement of fact. It is true that no one will see the Lord without holiness, but they have been sanctified, thus, the danger of hell has been removed. They are God's children through and through: 2:11; 3:1, 14; 4:3, 16; 6:10, 20; 7:25; 9:24; 10:10, 14, 22, 29.

He wants them to pursue holiness because that's what God is doing with them; He is sanctifying them through sufferings as He did His Son (2:10-11; 5:7-9). The root of bitterness phrase is similar to one found in Deuteronomy 29:18. When one looks at that context, there's a choice God sets before the children of Israel: life and death, blessing and cursing (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

That's the choice facing this audience in Hebrews. They have a choice of following the Lord in spite of their suffering or end up like Esau who made an irrevocable decision and paid for it with bitter tears. The author had warned them previously about making such a decision (6:4-8; 10:26-31). The last thing the author wants is for them to suffer the way Esau did.

When some look at Esau and Jacob, Esau comes out looking like the good guy and Jacob like a swindler. But Jacob didn't steal Esau's birthright. In fact, according to God it always belonged to Jacob (Genesis 25:23). Thus, when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, it rightly belonged to him. Additionally, Jacob didn't steal it from him, Esau sold it to Jacob for a bowl of red stew. Some might argue, "But Esau was starving to death and Jacob took advantage of him." First, Esau wasn't starving to death. He may've been really, really hungry from working all day, but he wasn't about to die as he said (Genesis 25:32). Second, Esau didn't have to eat Jacob's stew; his father Isaac was a wealthy man with many servants, any one of whom could've made Esau something to eat had he asked. Third, Esau didn't sell his birthright because he was starving; he sold it because he despised it (Genesis 25:34). And after Jacob deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing (which rightly belonged to him because God said so and because his brother sold it to him), there was no way that Esau was going to get that blessing, even though he sought it with tears (Genesis 27:38). The problem was that Esau despised his birthright, which is why Hebrews 12:16 calls him a profaner. He hated the spiritual things of God; he was interested in the here and now, in material blessings, in momentary relief instead of the path God had for him.

The audience of Hebrews must not make that mistake; they must not seek momentary relief through sin by going back to Judaism and in essence crucifying again the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:6). If they do, they will suffer a fate worse than execution under the Mosaic Law (Hebrews 10:26-29), which indeed happened in 70 AD when the Romans come to town and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

Your life after death is settled, but what about your life now? Jesus knows how difficult this life is for us. He didn't just come to save us from hell, but the hell we're living right now. He offers us help anytime we need it (Hebrews 4:16). And He knows better than anyone else that suffering in this life doesn't have to defeat us. God can use it to mature us, to strengthen us, to complete us as He did His Son (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15; 5:7-9). His desire for us is not simply to get through this life, to survive it, but to thrive in it, to find life and peace in the midst of our suffering as Jesus did (Mark 14:32-50).

III. Conclusion

Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 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; 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.