

Studies in Grace and Faith

Toward a Better Understanding of Hebrews 12:14-29

VERSE 14¹

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

1. **Pursue peace with all (men):** One might rightly wonder why the first part of this sentence is even in the text. It seems out of place considering what came before it and what follows. The word “men” does not appear in the Greek², and the word with can also be translated “amid”. Pursue means “follow after” or “press toward” which implies active pursuit. So, this could just as easily have been translated, “Follow after peace amid all,” which gives us a completely different possible perspective and seems to make more sense in light of the preceding and subsequent verses.
2. **“And the sanctification”:** It is unclear why the translators used “sanctification” here. Most other translators use the word “holiness”. (They are the same word, so either is fine).
 - a. However, this verse is often used to threaten believers into **MAKING THEMSELVES HOLY**. It is **VERY IMPORTANT** that we understand the concept of holiness.
 - 1) Notice verse ten above: *“For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.*
 - a) “Share” means to *participate*; generally to *accept* (and use): - eat, have, be partaker, receive, take. It implies an active RECEPTION of something that is being GIVEN. It isn’t something WE GENERATE!!!
 - 2) Holiness is a GIFT WE RECEIVE BY GOD’S GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS. We are encouraged here that’s God discipline is to help us receive/partake/participate in this holiness.
Colossians 1:21-23
And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ²² in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

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² The KJV puts “men” in italics which is to indicate that the translators believed it was implied, but doesn’t actually appear. NKJV uses the word “people” instead of “men”, but also puts it in italics.

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1 Corinthians 1:30

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification (holiness), and redemption.

3. **“Without which no one will see the Lord”**: Exactly. If you have not partaken in/received His holiness (by His grace through faith in Jesus), you will NOT see the Lord.
 - a. For too long this verse has been used to threaten and beat up believers causing them to question their right-standing with God and come up with self-efforts to gain it.

4. **God wants us to actively receive/participate in His holiness**. Just remember it is by His doing. We simply receive and live it. You could not, cannot, and will not ever be able to make yourself holy. So, stop trying to be holy, and simply **receive** holiness and live in it. Face it. You ARE holy/sanctified, blameless, righteous, and everything else He has made you BY HIS GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS.

VERSE 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;

1. We come short of the grace of God by the sin of not believing in Him, or by falling from grace through living in mixture.
2. When we come short of God’s grace, bitterness can grow. We do not know His grace in our lives, so we do not extend it to others.

VERSE 16

(See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God) that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.

1. Many Bible translators miss the mark here and translate similarly to the NKJV which says, “that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau”.
 - a. Clearly the word “immoral” can be translated “sexually immoral”, but it is also used figuratively of “idolatry”.
 - 1) This point is important because of what follows. This is not a lesson on the possibility of losing one’s salvation for fornication.
 - b. The Old Testament account of Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup in no way indicates that he was a fornicator or that he lost his birthright for fornicating, so to what is the writer referring when he calls him immoral?
 - c. There are many instances in scripture that clearly teach us not to be sexually immoral, but we MUST take into context here that the author of Hebrews is not taking a side trip to talk about sexually immoral behavior. It wouldn’t make an ounce of sense considering what he said before (Chapters 1-11) and what he says after. We must see this in context. Why is he bringing up Esau?

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2. The author is using Esau as a negative example specifically to the Hebrews. Esau was the first born of Isaac. He was to receive the firstborn's inheritance. Yet, for a momentary pleasure, a stupid bowl of soup, he flippantly gave away his birthright to his brother Jacob.
3. He did not in any way treasure His birthright. **THIS WAS THE IMMORALITY** and is clearly demonstrated by the following verse.
4. The word "unholy" can also be translated as ungodly or profane.

The Greek word is bebelos. The word means first of all, "accessible, lawful to be trodden," used of places. Thus it means "profane, unhallowed, common." It has the opposite meaning to hagios "holy, set apart, consecrated." It speaks of the secular, the non-religious, as contrasted to that which is associated with the worship of deity. -Wuest

The profane character of Esau manifested itself in his act of selling his birthright to satisfy a physical appetite, that of hunger. The birthright consisted of the honor and privilege of being the next family priest at the death of the father. Esau had no appreciation of the spiritual side of life. His life centered about the gratification of the desires of the body. Thus, in parting with his religious privileges, he declared himself a non-religious person. He is, therefore, an appropriate warning to these Hebrews. They were in danger of selling their birthright, the offered salvation which would be theirs in answer to their faith, for freedom from the persecution which they were enduring, as Esau sold his birthright for the gratification of his physical appetite. -Wuest.

VERSE 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.

Genesis 25:32

And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?"

Genesis 25:34

And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

1. The Hebrews had been given a blessing and inheritance (the Messiah and the New Covenant). The author had previously warned them not to become sluggish, but to inherit the promise.

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Hebrew 6:11-12

And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

2. The author had also warned the Hebrew believers that if they were to forsake Christ (their inheritance and blessing), there would be no way to renew them to repentance.

Hebrews 6:4-6

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

- a. Clearly, the reference to Esau being immoral and forsaking his birthright is associated with these warnings; that just as with Esau, if they rejected their inheritance, there would be no way to renew them to repentance. This thought is reinforced again in verse 25 (below).

While reading the next passage, form a picture in your mind.

VERSES 18-21

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." ²¹ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."

1. The author is now showing them that the consequences for rejecting the New Covenant are far more severe than that of rejecting the Old. He/she paints of verbal picture of the scene when the Ten Commandments were being given. It was such a terrible sight, that even Moses was trembling. The location is earth.

Now, picture this!

VERSES 22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³ 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, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

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1. The New Covenant is not a type or shadow. It is the real deal. The writer now paints a new image of majestic glory. This one is the New and final covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus. The location is the heavenly Jerusalem.
2. Instead of returning to Mount Sinai, the readers are urged to continue their approach to Mount Zion, the spiritual mountain and city where God dwells and reigns. Paul in Galatians 4:19-31 contrasts the First Testament with the New Testament by speaking of Sinai and the Jerusalem which is above. The writer here defines what he means by Mount Zion in the words "even unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.
3. "The blood of Abel" refers to the blood of the animal he gave as a sacrifice to the Lord. The writer is saying that the shed blood of Jesus is superior to the blood shed by animals.
 - a. Jesus' blood is speaking, this is not just a religious or philosophical debate!

When they come to New Testament truth, they come, not to the thunders of Sinai, but to the grace of Calvary.-Wuest

VERSES 25-27

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. ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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.

1. Jesus is speaking by His words, and by His blood.
2. Once again, the writer warns the Hebrews not to refuse Jesus. Whoever rejects Jesus will not escape. We believe this refers to those who have not yet received Him and those who after having received Him willfully and knowingly reject Him.
3. Verse 27 speaks of the end.

"But a future time will come when God will not only shake the earth but the heavens. The writer quotes the prophecy of Haggai (2:6). This will be fulfilled during the Great Tribulation period at which time the movements and functions of the heavenly bodies will be disorganized (Rev. 6:12-17, 8:12), and an earthquake will shake the entire earth, occurring at the moment the Messiah's feet touch the Mount of Olives at the close of the Great Tribulation (Zech. 14:4, 5; Rev. 6:12, 11:13, 16:18, 18:)." Wuest

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4. The writer calls the attention of his readers to the words "yet once more." They are especially significant because they indicate that the shaking predicted by Haggai is to be final. It precedes the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1).
5. It refers to the act of God transferring to a new basis, this present universe which is under the curse of Adam's sin, that new basis being a new and perfect universe.

VERSES 28-29

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; ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

1. Sometimes in our studies we are completely baffled by what would have been the motivation for translating a verse a certain way. NKJV more accurately translates verse 28 as, ***“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”***
 - a. The word which the NASB³ translates “show” in Verse 28 is “echo” (which means to have, to hold, to possess, to accompany) in the Greek and is used 35 times in the book of Hebrews, and 651 times in the entire New Testament. They translated it to be “show” ONCE. Why? We have no idea. It is most commonly used to show possession, and yet several versions insert the idea of “demonstrating” something. This is absurd.
 - b. Consider also that the word which the NASB⁴ translates “gratitude” is actually the word “charis” in the Greek. This word is used 159 times in the New Testament, and most commonly translated...GRACE in the NASB yet in this passage ONLY as the word “gratitude”. Imagine the theological differences that would be caused by using this translation in other verses where “grace” is used. “By gratitude you have been saved through faith,”????? Are you kidding?
 - c. Yet, by using these two words; namely, “show gratitude” instead of what they more commonly mean, the entire meaning of that verse is lost.
 - d. Think of this stunning statement that could easily be overlooked. The author is telling them that by means of having-possessing-holding onto grace they may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. THIS IS HOW WE LIVE...by grace through faith. It’s not that complicated.

³ NIV AND NLT also translate this verse similarly to the NASB speaking of thankfulness or gratitude. The AMP seems to completely ignore the word grace. While the KJV, NKJV, YLT, ASV, several others, and the GREEK translate the verse to read “have grace”. The Holman Christian Standard Bible puts it this way, ***“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe.”***

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- e. It is erroneous to say that the way we live this life is by gratitude. Of course, gratitude is important, but it is NOT how we are saved, and it is NOT how we serve God acceptably.
2. **Our God is a consuming fire, but we need not fear Him if we continue in faith. In context, this is in reference to those who turn back.**

The historical background of this last statement here is that of the apostate Jew who having left the temple sacrifices, and having made a profession of faith in Messiah as High Priest, now renounces that professed faith and returns to the Levitical system. To that person, God is a consuming fire.-Wuest