

Message Sixteen: The Fifth Warning

Hebrews 12:1-13:25 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 16

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

We have walked through fifteen messages together, tracing one continuous argument from the opening verse of this letter: a coming kingdom, a coming rest, a coming reward, held out to believers who press on rather than drift back. That whole argument now reaches its conclusion. Chapter twelve gathers everything this series has covered into a single picture, delivers the fifth and final warning, and then chapter thirteen closes the letter with the practical shape faithful endurance actually takes.

I. Running the Race

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

That cloud of witnesses is not a vague crowd — it's every name from the previous chapter, Abel through the prophets, now pictured as spectators lining the course of a race still being run. And notice the direction built into "looking unto Jesus": from Him as the starting point of faith to Him as its finish. From the cross to the throne. From the shame He endured to the joy that was set before Him. That same trajectory — through hardship to a reward on the other side — is the shape every runner in this race is called to follow.

II. The Father's Discipline

"For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls" (Hebrews 12:3). The author then turns to something every believer experiences directly: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:5-6). "He disciplines us for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Discipline here means the ordinary shaping and correcting a father gives a child he intends to raise well, not to punish arbitrarily. Its aim is never punitive; it's formative — producing, in time, a settled righteousness in the one being trained.

III. Strengthen What Remains

"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" (Hebrews 12:12-13). A runner favoring an injury, if he keeps limping along a rough path, will eventually do lasting damage. Straighten the path, the author says — tend carefully to whatever is already weak — so that healing, not further injury, is the result.

IV. The Fifth Warning — Esau's Birthright

"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" (Hebrews 12:14-17).

Esau's story supplies the final, sharpest picture in this letter's five warnings. Famished after a hunt, he traded his birthright — his rights and blessing as firstborn — for a single meal, because in that moment satisfying his flesh mattered more to him than an inheritance he could not immediately see or touch. Years later, when his father was ready to pass on the blessing that belonged to the firstborn, Esau wanted it back desperately, "sought it diligently with tears" — and could not undo what his own choice had already settled. Notice what was actually irreversible here: not God's grace toward Esau as a person, but the specific consequence of a specific choice, made once, at a specific moment of testing.

This is precisely the pattern every one of this letter's five warnings has now traced from a different angle: don't drift from what you've heard, don't fail to enter the rest through unbelief, don't scorn a mature understanding once you've received it, don't sin willfully against that knowledge, and now — don't trade your inheritance as a firstborn son for the momentary satisfaction of the flesh. Every warning in this book has aimed at the same single danger, viewed five different ways: not the loss of salvation freely given, but the forfeiture of a reward that could have been kept.

V. Sinai and Zion

The author now paints the sharpest contrast in the entire letter. "For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore... And so terrifying was the sight that Moses

said, 'I am exceedingly afraid and trembling'" (Hebrews 12:18-21). That is Sinai — the mountain of the old covenant, fenced off, untouchable, meeting the people with fire and dread.

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:22-24). Believers have not been brought near a mountain that must be kept at a distance, but to a city, a gathering, a Mediator, and blood that speaks a better word than the very first blood ever shed in Scripture.

VI. Yet Once More

"See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven'" (Hebrews 12:25-26). That quotation comes from a promise given centuries earlier to a discouraged remnant rebuilding a modest temple, told that a far greater shaking, and a far greater glory, still lay ahead of them.

"Now this, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 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. For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:27-29). Everything temporary will eventually be shaken loose. What remains standing afterward is the one thing this whole letter has been pointing toward from its very first page — an unshakable kingdom.

This brings the letter full circle. It opened with a warning not to drift from "so great a salvation" (2:1-3), announced by a God whose voice once shook the earth at Sinai. It closes with the same voice, now promising to shake the earth and the heavens both, so that only the kingdom that cannot be shaken will remain.

VII. Therefore, Since — A Life Shaped by This Hope

The "therefore" that opens the call to serve God "acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (12:28) carries straight into chapter thirteen's closing instructions — the practical shape a life takes when it actually believes everything this letter has said. "Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them — those who are mistreated — since you yourselves are in the body also" (Hebrews 13:1-3).

"Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6). "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of

their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:7-8) — the one constant, unchanging point of reference amid every other instruction in this closing chapter.

"Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come" (Hebrews 13:12-14). That last line could stand as a summary of the entire letter. "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

The letter closes with a benediction: "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Applying "The Fifth Warning"

Esau's story is not told to frighten you into paralysis. It's told so that you would recognize, clearly, what is actually at stake when the desires of the flesh press hard against the value of what God has promised — and so that you would choose differently than he did. You have not been brought to a mountain of fire and dread, kept at arm's length. You have been brought to Zion, to a Mediator, to blood that speaks a better word. Serve Him, then, with reverence, but also with the confidence of a son who has already been welcomed near.

And let the practical instructions of this closing chapter settle the matter: this hope was never meant to stay theoretical. Love your brothers. Welcome the stranger. Remember the suffering. Stay content, courageous, unshaken — because the One who holds the future secure is Himself entirely unchanging, in every season and across every age.

Closing the Series

This letter opened by declaring that God, who once spoke through prophets, has now spoken finally through a Son. Sixteen messages later, that opening claim has unfolded into everything this series has traced: a Son who is King and High Priest, a people called to press on toward an inheritance still ahead, five warnings guarding that inheritance at every turn, and a kingdom, coming and unshakable, that will not disappoint anyone who holds fast to the end. May you run this race the same way the whole cloud of witnesses did before you — with your eyes fixed on Jesus, from the cross to the throne.