

**Finishing Together
Hebrews 12:15-17**

Every culture has its strengths, but often those strengths have corresponding weaknesses. Americans are strongly individualistic and competitive and those are strengths! But when those strengths begin to interfere with cooperation then what are they? They are Weaknesses!

Why? It is because there are times when the only way to get something of importance done is through cooperation.

At a Special Olympics event in Spokane Washington in 1976 some mentally handicapped boys were competing in a race of 220 yards. One of the boys was named "Andrew" and as he was running he became aware that one of his friends had fallen down. So what would Andrew do? Would he continue to run toward the finish line and ignore his friend or would he turn back to help him? He very un-American-like turned back. And though they finished last, both finished. Why? It was because Andrew was willing to help his friend. If he had not done this he may have finished but his friend might not have.

So what does this story have to do with us? It has everything to do with us, for we also are running together in a race that will require us to help one another and to assist one another and to care for one another, if we in fact are going to finish this race and finish it together.

And what is this race? It is the long-distance race of faith that we entered when we professed faith in Christ. And how has God designed this race to be run? He designed this race, not to be run independently but inter-dependently, as we assist and help each other. For it is only when we are running this race in this way that we will be able to finish this race and to finish this race together. For this is the way that God has designed this race to be run.

And hopefully this thought will come alive for us this morning as we once again return to our study of the Book of Hebrews.

What was the setting for this book? The book of Hebrews was written to a group of struggling Hebrew believers living in Rome, who in the midst of a

great persecution were actually being tempted to turn away from Christ and the Gospel of Christ to return to Judaism or some form of it. In other words they were being tempted to quit their race of faith.

So how did the author respond to this threat? This author wrote the Book of Hebrews in order to strengthen their faith so that his readers would not quit the race of faith.

Where are we now in the course of our study of this book? We are now examining Hebrews 12.

What have we seen so far in this chapter? (1) We have seen the author exhorting his readers to run with endurance the race of faith that God had set before them in **Hebrews 12:1-3**. (2) We have also seen this author in **Hebrews 12:4-11** instructing his readers to view the sufferings that they would have to endure while running their race of faith as God's parental discipline intended by Him, not to harm them or hurt them but rather to train them and mature them. (3) And finally we have seen the author in **Hebrews 12:12-17** exhorting his readers to do certain specific things that would help them to finish their race of faith.

MESSAGE

This morning we will be examining the last of these exhortations in **Hebrews 12:15-17**. So let me now read this passage for you and see if we can isolate this particular exhortation. And I will be reading the NAS translation. And this is what it says, "**(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; (16) that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. (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.**"

Based on these verses what did author exhort his readers to do in Hebrews 12:15-17? The author in Hebrews 12:15-17 exhorted his readers "to see to it" that no one amongst them would come short of the grace of God.

So let us now begin to examine these verses, so that we might not only better understand this exhortation, but also the significance of it. And we will begin with the first three words of verse 12, "See to it".

The expression "see to it" translates from a single Greek word (EPISKOPEO), which is closely related to "EPISKOPOS" which is usually translated either "overseer" or "bishop" and is synonymous with the term "elder".

So what was the author calling his readers to do when he chose to use this Greek word "EPISKOPEO"? When the author chose to use the Greek word EPISKOPEO he certainly was not calling his readers to assume the office of overseer but he was calling his readers to engage in the work of spiritually caring for one another.

Why would this author have felt he needed to exhort his readers to engage in the work of spiritually caring for one another? It was because he believed that there were certain individuals amongst them who were in grave spiritual danger.

And what was the danger that he believed they were in? We do not have to guess. All we have to do is look at what his readers were being exhorted, **"to see to".** And what was that? The author was exhorting his readers **"to see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God."**

What was this "grace of God" that this author was so afraid that certain ones amongst them would come short of if they did not engage in the work of spiritually caring for one another? "The grace of God" that the author was fearful that some of them might come short of, if they did not spiritually care for one another, was heaven (Hebrews 6:13-19; 11:13-16).

This I believe was made clear to his readers and to us in **Hebrews 6:13-19** when he identified heaven as their future hope and as the anchor of the soul. And then again in **Hebrews 11:13-16** when the author spoke of how the Old Testament saints were able to persevere in faith, even in spite of all that they suffered, because they believed something. And what was it that they believed? They believed that if they continued to persevere in their faith

until the end, that there would be a reward awaiting them at the end of their long-distance race of faith. And what was that reward? It was heaven.

So, based on the context of Hebrews, what was this "grace of God" that this author was afraid that certain ones amongst would come short of if they did not persevere in their faith? It was heaven!

So will a professing believer in Christ actually "come short" of heaven if they do not persevere in their faith? Yes! Absolutely! The author of the Book of Hebrews has repeatedly made it clear that if a professing believer does not persevere in their faith until the end they will come short of heaven (Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:14-29).

(1) He emphasized this truth in **Hebrews 2:1-4** when he warned them about the danger facing them if they drifted away from what they had heard. (2) He emphasized this truth in **Hebrews 3:7-4:11** when he warned them about the danger facing them if they hardened their hearts toward God and His word. (3) He emphasized this truth in **Hebrews 10:26-31** when he warned them of the danger of sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth. (4) And he is again emphasizing this truth here in **Hebrew 12:15** when he warned his readers about the danger of falling short of "the grace of God" or in other words "heaven."

So does this mean that we can lose our salvation? No! We cannot lose our salvation. But if our so-called faith fails and we do not persevere until the end, we will indeed come short of heaven, not because we lost our salvation but because we never were saved. In other words though we may have professed faith we never truly did in fact possess faith for if we had we would have endured to the end.

How important is it for us to continue to follow Christ or in other words to persevere in our faith until the end? It is extremely important.

Will persevering in our faith until the end be easy? No! Our faith will be repeatedly tested. And there will be times when we will become spiritually weary. And there will be times when we will be spiritually battered. **But we are not alone, for God according to His perfect plan has commanded our church family to "see to it that no one amongst us comes short of the grace of God."**

What are we doing in respect to this work? When we are with professing believers are we looking for ways to spiritually encourage them and to provide them the help they might need in order to help them to keep keeping on? Are we or are we not?

I would hope to think that we are. For this is what God wants from us. And if we do this well, with the strength that God provides, hopefully one day when we are in heaven what will we discover? Hopefully we will discover that none of us have fallen short of "the grace of God."

But there is more! If we see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God we will also be seeing to it that something else does not happen. So what would that be?

If we see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God we will also be seeing to it "that no **root of bitterness** springing up, causes trouble and defiles many" according to Hebrews 12:15.

So what is this "**root of bitterness**"? We will understand what this root of bitterness" is if we understand the Old Testament verse from which this expression was taken.

What was this Old Testament verse? It was **Deuteronomy 29:18**. In this verse Moses warned Israel about the consequences if they turned away from God and His covenant to worship other gods.

How did Moses, in this verse describe this sin? In Deuteronomy 29:18 Moses described the sin of turning away from God to serve other gods as "**a root**".

And how did Moses describe the fruit that would be produced from that root? In Deuteronomy 29:18 Moses described the fruit that would be produced from that "root" as "poisonous" and "wormwood."

"Wormwood" is a woody shrub that grows in temperate climates that produces bitter fruit that in the Old Testament became a metaphor for bitterness, rottenness, and death.

So now we come back to **Hebrews 12:15**. So how should we understand what the author meant by the "root of bitterness" in **Hebrews 12:15**, based on **Deuteronomy 29:18**?

Based on Deuteronomy 29:18 the "root" in Hebrews 12:15 is the sin of apostasy. In other words it is the sin of turning away from Christ to someone or something else. And this is exactly the sin that was threatening this group of struggling Hebrew believers living in Rome.

And why did this author describe this root as the "root of bitterness"? The author in Hebrews 12:15 described the root of apostasy as a "root of bitterness" because, if it did in fact spring up, it would produce **bitter fruit** or in other words the defilement of many.

Do you believe this? You should for this is the truth. When an individual in a church fellowship such as ours, turns away from Christ or from following Christ in order to pursue the things of this world or in other words the gods of this world, could they, by their example or even by their words, encourage others in our fellowship to do the same thing? Absolutely! And if others, through their encouragement join in with them, what will be the impact of this fellowship? It will be devastating!

So if we are concerned about the spiritual health and vitality of our church fellowship what must we do? We must see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God for if we do that then we will also be seeing to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and defiles many.

But there is still more. If we see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God we will also be seeing to it that "no immoral or godless person like Esau" would arise amongst us (Hebrews 12:16,17).

Let me now read for you Hebrews 12:16,17 **"(16) that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. (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."**

What is this author trying to say to his readers and to us in these two verses? In order to answer this question we need to first of all understand why the author described Esau in this way.

The word used to translate "immoral" is a word that typically is used to refer to "sexual immorality" but in this case it is more likely that the author chose to use this word metaphorically or in other words to refer to spiritual adultery which would fit very nicely with the second word that this author chose to describe Esau, which was the word "godless."

The word "godless" (BEBELOS) refers to a **profane** person who has exalted the things of this world above God and the interests of God.

So what was the author's basis for describing Esau in these ways, as "immoral" or in other words as spiritually adulterous and "godless". The author tells us in verse 16. He "sold his own birthright for a single meal."

As the first born son of Isaac Esau was not only entitled to inherit a double portion of his father's estate but he would be also more importantly entitled to inherit his father's role as head of the family and not just any family, but the very family that God had entered into a covenant with through Abraham. Wow!

But did Esau value his very special and privileged position as the first-born son of Isaac? No, he sold it for a bowl of soup. God and the things of God was not nearly as important to Esau, at that moment in time, as was that single bowl of soup (Genesis 25:29-34) which this author made clear to us at the very end of **Hebrews 12:16**.

But that is not the end of the story. Later it would appear that Esau did come to regret the bargain that he had made with Jacob. But this was only after he realized that the blessing that his father had intended to bestow on him, as his first-born son had been, through the deception of his brother and his mother, bestowed upon his brother Jacob. And how did he respond when he came to this realization? He wept and pleaded with his father to give him the blessing that he had given to Jacob. Was Esau able to change the mind of Isaac? No!

And this was all succinctly summarized by this author in Hebrews 12:17 when he told his readers, "**For you know that even afterwards, when he (Esau) desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.**"

So what is the point that the author was seeking to make in **verse 17**? If after professing faith in Christ a believer chooses to turn away from Christ and the blessings of Christ in order to elevate the things of this world above Christ, they could easily end up like **Esau**.

They will have exchanged the blessings of God for a bowl of soup. And if they do what will happen to them? They will "**come short of the grace of God.**" And this is something we need to see to it does not happen.

CONCLUSION

How will we see to it that no one ends up like Esau? We will see to it in the same way as we will see to it that no root of bitterness springs up. We need to see to it that every person in our church fellowship finishes their race of faith so that there would be no one amongst us that would come short of the grace of God.

May God give us the grace to spiritually care for one another in such a way that none of us will fall short of the grace of God but all of us would **finish** our race of faith and receive the prize.