Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews - Lesson 14

Louis T. Talbot

Biola University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/talbot-pub

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Louis T. Talbot Archive at Digital Commons @ Biola. It has been accepted for inclusion in Talbot Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Biola. For more information, please contact eileen.walraven@biola.edu.
As we enter upon the study of the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, let us remember that it is a continuation of the great "faith chapter" which we considered in our last lesson. We have seen that chapters 1:1—10:18 are primarily doctrinal, presenting the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest, by far "better than" the very best that Judaism had to offer; whereas chapters 10:19—13:25 present the practical lessons to be drawn from the main teaching of the epistle. This concluding section of the book offers repeated encouragement, exhortation, and comfort to the persecuted Hebrew Christians of Paul's day; and it sounds repeated and searching warning against the temptation to return to Judaism, in order to escape persecution, a warning to the enlightened but unregenerated souls who were turning their backs upon their Messiah and the only Saviour of the world.

In our last lesson we called attention to the fact that there is no break in thought between chapters eleven and twelve; that the Old Testament heroes and heroines of faith mentioned in chapter eleven are the "great cloud of witnesses" to the transcendent power of faith referred to in the opening verse of chapter twelve. Even as they endured trials and suffering "by faith" in the Saviour to come, so the New Testament saints are exhorted to be patient and faithful under trial, "looking unto Jesus," the supreme Example of faith, as they run the Christian race in a world of sin.

This exhortation to patient endurance, with which the chapter opens, is enlarged upon by the explanation that chastening through suffering is a proof of sonship. It is followed by another exhortation to diligent watchfulness against
hypocrites in their midst who would surely be a source of trouble to the children of God. Then once more there is a striking contrast between the old and the new covenants, represented by Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. And the chapter closes with yet another warning against apostasy and judgment to come upon the unbelieving, as well as another promise of an imperishable, unmoveable kingdom for the children of God.

How faithfully the Holy Spirit presented the claims of Christ in this wonderful epistle, at the same time exhorting, encouraging, warning, always taking the things of Christ and showing them unto us! Like the Hebrew Christians of apostolic times, we also must experience trials for Jesus' sake. We also are called to run the Christian race, ever "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." Even as those early Hebrew Christians were called to a full acceptance of the new covenant, a complete separation from the Christ-rejecting nation with its continued temple worship; so also we are called to separation from legalizing teachers who limit the grace of God and would lead us back to Mount Sinai and our own paltry works as a means of salvation.

This, in brief, is the message of the chapter before us today—encouragement for the Christian race and a call to full acceptance of the new covenant by faith through grace alone. May the Holy Spirit be our infallible Teacher as we read these comforting, searching, reassuring words.

**EXHORTATION TO PATIENT ENDURANCE**

Heb. 12:1-13


"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us . . ."

We saw in our last lesson that these Old Testament "witnesses" are not described here as spectators, looking down upon us; but rather, that their lives bear testimony before us to the power of faith in the earthly pilgrimage toward the heavenly city. The word "witnesses" is used here in the same sense as that of Acts 1:8, where our risen Lord told His disciples that they were to be "witnesses" unto Him as they went into all the world with His Gospel. We have seen something of the power of faith in the lives of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham, in the lives of the long list of Old Testament men and women who trusted the God of Israel, even in the face of persecution and trial of every sort. Looking back to their faithful testimony, we take courage and press on in the Christian race by the power of the same God-given faith in things eternal.

Sometimes spiritualists pervert the true meaning of this passage to present their satanic teaching, falsely claiming that they can call up the dead, and erroneously applying to them the word "witnesses." On one occasion I went to a chapel to conduct a Christian funeral; and upon my arrival before the service, I heard a spiritualist apply this text in such a perverted way in another funeral message. To the bereaved he said, "The spirit of this loved one is here in our midst"; and then he quoted Heb. 12:1, seeking to prove his statement, falsely claiming that the departed spirit was a "witness" in that chapel. Such teaching is prompted by the devil, and is definitely forbidden by the Word of God. Repeatedly in the Old Testament the curse and judgment of God are pronounced upon all who deal with "familiar spirits," as the following passages indicate: Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:10-12; I Chron. 10:13, 14; Isaiah 8:19-22. Many other references might be given, forbidding God's people to have a part in this dangerous work of Satan.

The spirits of the dead in Christ are with the Lord, and do not return to this earth. When David's child died, he said, "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (II Sam. 12:23).

And Paul wrote those inspired words that have spoken comfort to God's bereaved children throughout the centuries:

"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8).
... to depart, and to be with Christ... is far better"
(Phil. 1:23).

And where is Christ? He is at the right hand of the Father in heaven. There also are the spirits of the dead in Christ, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies; and they are in conscious bliss, "present with the Lord." Moreover, Christ's own account of the rich man and Lazarus, recorded in the sixteenth chapter of Luke, tells us plainly that the dead could not communicate with the living even if they wanted to do so. The rich man "in torments" could not even pass over the "great gulf fixed" between him and Lazarus, let alone return to earth. The only explanation of spiritism is that demons impersonate the dead in satanic seances. Saul suffered the judgment of our holy God because he went to the witch of En-dor, knowing that his act was contrary to God's command. Spiritism is a cult to be feared; for it is of Satan. But our loved ones who have died believing in the Lord Jesus are forever with Him, in conscious peace and joy before His presence. Nor are they "witnesses" all around us as spiritualism falsely states. They are "present with the Lord... which is far better."

The great "cloud of witnesses" of Old Testament times, Paul says here, have borne faithful testimony to the power of faith as they walked with God on earth. Their example affords encouragement to our own faltering hearts when trouble or sorrow are our portion. Their testimony tells us how we may run the race as Christians. What they did by faith we can do. The temptations they withstood we can withstand for Christ's sake. Their faith, which pleased God, we also may appropriate and be well-pleasing unto Him. Theirs was faith in the promised Saviour; ours is faith in Him who has already come!

Taking courage from their faithful witness to the power of the Lord in their lives, Paul ran the Christian race with God-given courage and faith and hope. That is why, at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, he could write to Timothy, saying,

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Tim. 4:7, 8).

Paul did not say to Timothy, "I have travelled over much of Europe and Asia; I have established scores of churches; I have raised thousands of dollars for the Lord's work." He simply said, "I have kept the faith." That is how he ran the Christian race, preaching Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ ascended, interceding, and coming again in glory to reign. He did not spend his time preaching against social evils or liquor or war, seeking through human organization to rid the world of these fruits of iniquity. He simply preached the Gospel of the grace of God; that is how he "kept the faith, looking unto Jesus" for strength and courage for the task. He ran the race with patience.

If we would follow the example of Paul and the Old Testament saints, we must "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us." The athlete in the Olympic games of old surely did not enter the race wearing heavy boots and carrying a heavy load that could only hinder him from winning the crown. The runner today does not wear his overcoat and shoes to retard his speed. The football player does not make a touchdown with a heavy burden in his arms. He lays aside every weight, and runs unhindered toward his goal. Likewise, the Christian race is won victoriously by the child of God who, by faith through His grace, lays aside the hindering weights and influences and sins that, like a wild beast, pursue him and beset his path. His eyes are upon the goal, even the Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal home in heaven with Him. "Looking unto Jesus," the believer in Him runs by faith.

And when the final victory is won, the rewards will be given by the Lord Himself to those who have "fought a good fight," who "have kept the faith," in spite of troubles and burdens and persecutions and trials here on earth. That is what Paul meant when, under the guidance of the Holy
Spirit, he wrote to the persecuted Hebrew Christians, saying, "Let us"—he was one with them, suffering as few have suffered for Christ's sake—"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus..."

2. In View of the Supreme Example of Faith—The Lord Jesus Christ, 12:2, 3.

The Holy Spirit's exhortation to patient endurance under trial bears added weight as, through the inspired apostle, He reminds the suffering Hebrew Christians of the supreme Example of faithfulness through suffering, even the Lord Jesus Himself.

"... let us run with patience 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

The Revised Version translates it like this, "... Jesus the author (or 'captain') and perfecter of faith. The word "our" is in italics, therefore not in the original Greek. The thought of the passage, then, is that our Lord Himself is the Captain and Perfecter of faith. Indeed, the whole Bible tells us that He is the only perfect Example of faith.

It is the "Man Christ Jesus" who is described here; for as a Man He "suffered being tempted." His earthly name "Jesus" is used here, for the Holy Spirit had a purpose in every word of the sacred text. It was as a Man that our Lord, during His earthly ministry, prayed to His Father in heaven. As the God-Man He was tempted, "yet without sin." As a Man He wept over Jerusalem and shed tears of compassion for His suffering saints. As a Man He set before us the perfect example of faith.

Moreover, His suffering was such as no other could possibly endure. His sinless soul bore the curse and penalty of the sins of the world. Surely we, by His grace, with God-given faith, can press on to the goal! Our suffering can never compare with what He endured; and He is seated at the "right hand of the throne of God" to intercede for us, to strengthen us, to encourage us in our race toward the goal. Not only so, but the very thought that it was the "joy" of sharing with us and all His redeemed His riches in glory that led Him to the shameful cross inspires us to even more patient and faithful endurance as He leads us on to glory.

In our study of the Person and work of Christ, our Great High Priest, as set forth in Heb. 1:1—10:18, we have seen how much is devoted to proving the real humanity of our Lord. We have observed that the priestly work of the eternal God began at His cross, when He offered Himself as the one sufficient Sacrifice for sin; that His priestly work has been continued ever since He arose from the dead and ascended into heaven and sat down on the right hand of the Father, were He "ever liveth to make intercession" for His blood-bought children. Therefore, this reference to His real humanity in Heb 12:2, 3 is in keeping with the purpose of the epistle. Remembering His suffering for us and His power exercised on our behalf, we are urged to "consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself," lest we "be wearied and faint" in our minds. Pilate and Herod and the "sinners" at the cross of Jesus led Him to Calvary, bearing false witness to His matchless grace. They mocked Him and spat upon Him and covered Him with shame. Those He came to redeem "plucked off his beard," drove the nails into His hands and feet, and pierced His side. No such "contradiction of sinners" could possibly touch us, not in the most extreme of human suffering. And as we keep "looking unto Jesus," remembering His love for us and His power, then we can and should "run with patience the race that is set before us," with our eyes fixed upon Him who is our Goal.

3. In View of the Limited Extent of the Suffering of the Hebrew Christians, 12:4. Paul reminded the Hebrew Christians further that, although their sufferings for Jesus' sake had been severe, yet they had not yet "resisted unto blood, striving against sin." In other words, they had not become martyrs for Christ. Many Old Testament saints had
laid down their lives for the Lord; many Hebrew Christians had been slain for their testimony, as were Stephen and James, the brother of John. Surely their example and the supreme Example of the crucified Lord offered encouragement to those still living, however bitter their persecution might be. And as long as we today live in the flesh, we shall still have suffered less than those who have become Christian martyrs. So, again, we take courage and press on.

4. In View of the Proof That Their Suffering was a Token of the Father's Chastening Prompted by Love, 12:5-13. As we bear in mind the fact that the word "chastening" here is literally translated "child-training," the whole passage before us in verses 5-13 takes on a beautiful and reassuring significance. It is not difficult for us to imagine that the Jewish leaders who still clung to Judaism were telling the suffering Hebrew Christians that God was punishing them for having forsaken the temple worship. We can well imagine that they were putting every discouragement in the way of believers in Jesus, saying that they were not really children of God, that He did not love them any more because they had followed the lowly Nazarene. Thus their very suffering for Christ had become a stumbling-block to these Jewish believers in Christ. That is why the Holy Spirit comforted them, explaining that, because God did love them, He was "child-training" them for service then on earth and for service and joy throughout eternity in the glory. In this connection two truths are emphasized:

(1) Chastening—An Evidence of Sonship, 12:5-9. Let us read these verses carefully. Quoting from the Hebrews' own Old Testament, the Holy Spirit said:

"And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children (or 'sons'), My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (verses 5, 6; cf. Prov. 3:11, 12).

Thus the Holy Spirit assured the Jewish Christians that, because they were sons of God, because He did love them, He allowed them to go through the purifying experiences of "child-training." Instead of His punishing them by persecutions and trials, He was permitting suffering as a proof of His love. In the light of this truth, their suffering took on a new meaning; for "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth."

The conclusion of this quotation from Proverbs is drawn in the verses which follow, rendered especially clear by the Revised Version:

"It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not? But if ye are without chastening, whereof all have been made partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons" (verses 7, 8).

Do you sometimes wonder, my Christian friend, why you are called to endure bitter sorrow or physical pain, whereas your godless friends seem to prosper and enjoy temporal blessings? In these verses from God's Word lies your answer. For reasons known to our all-wise, loving Lord, He permits the trials because He is training us for eternity. A mother who lets her baby play with fire does not really have the child's physical development at heart. And our God of love permits the fires of suffering, in order that His children may be made into His glorious image, most ready to serve His all-wise purpose for time and for eternity.

When I was a pastor in Iowa, as I was walking along the street one day, I saw a group of boys throwing stones. A window crashed; a door opened; and a man took one of the boys, punished him, and sent him on his way. I wondered if that one boy was to bear the chastisement for all the group. But that boy was the son of the man who had punished him for his wrong. It looked as if the other boys would go free of chastisement. But a little later a police car drove up and led the other culprits to jail. In some such manner our heavenly Father deals with His own sons now; but the day will come when He will mete out judgment upon the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting world. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth."
Some years ago the now famous Cullinan Diamond was dug from the mines of South Africa and presented to King Edward VII of England. It weighed one and one-third pounds, and appeared clear and water-white in its brilliance. But in the heart of that great stone was a flaw. It was sent to Amsterdam to be divided by a skilled artisan. For months the workman studied it under the microscope. And then one day, with a silver hammer, he struck it a skilful blow. The casual onlooker might have thought him reckless or foolish; but behind that blow of the hammer were months of exacting study and care. As a result of his art, nine large stones and a number of small brilliants—all flawless—were given back to their owner, two of which are the largest brilliants in existence.

It is something like this that our Lord is doing for us now, as He permits suffering on the part of His sons and daughters. He is making us ready to rule and reign with Him in glory, when we shall “shine as the brightness of the firmament . . . and . . . as the stars for ever and ever” (Dan. 12:3). May He give us grace to learn well the lessons He is seeking to teach us through trials and heartaches.

Perhaps He wants us to be able to “comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (II Cor. 1:4). Perhaps He wants us to prove the sufficiency of His grace. (See II Cor. 12:9.) Perhaps He is teaching us patience as it can be learned only in the school of experience. (See Rom. 5:3; James 1:2, 3.) Perhaps this is His way of bringing us to know Him, to cast our cares upon Him who “doeth all things well.” (See Phil. 3:10; I Peter 5:7.) And having learned His lessons in His way, we shall then “be conformed to the image of his Son,” even our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And He is “altogether lovely.” (See Rom. 8:29; Song of Sol. 5:16.)

One of God’s most beautiful creatures is the emperor moth. It is almost as large as a butterfly, and has wings of exquisite coloring. One day a woman had a cocoon of one of these, and was watching it emerge. As the moth struggled, she thought she would help it; so she took a pair of scissors and clipped the cocoon. The moth came out easily enough, but it was powerless to fly; its wings were drab and colorless. The woman did not know that the struggling was needed to force certain juices into those wings, to give them color and beauty.

Shall we not let the emperor moth teach us a lesson? Perhaps even now, as we are struggling against difficulties and sorrow and pain, God is shaping our lives into something more “to the praise of his glory” than we dream, making us “conformed to the image of his Son.” Then let us keep on “looking unto Jesus,” listening to His voice, expressed in the familiar words of the old hymn,

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply; The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.”

Therefore, let us reiterate the words of the inspired apostle,

“Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of our spirits (R.V.), and live?” (Heb. 12:9).

(2) The Fruit of Chastening, 12:10-13. All the conclusions which we have drawn concerning God’s purpose in chastening His children might be summarized in His own Word, as recorded in Heb. 12:10-13. Our earthly fathers “for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure”; that is, “as seemed good to them.” But our earthly fathers are human and fallible. Our heavenly Father is infallible and all-wise, as well as the God of love. He chastens us “for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness” (verse 10). Sometimes human fathers punish their children when angry; sometimes their punishment is unjust and unmerciful. But our heavenly Father never makes a mistake! His child-training is always “for our profit.” And in the text before us He is careful to explain:

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are ex-
ercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed” (12:11-13).

Some time ago I heard a Christian say that, when all his earthly possessions were swept away, he could not understand God’s dealings with him. But “afterward” he learned through that experience to pray; and then he understood. Job knew nothing of Satan’s accusations while he was enduring bitter sorrow and physical pain; yet “afterward” he became an object lesson in patience and faith. And because of his faith through trial, he could say of the Lord.

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ... When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 13:15; 23:10).

These words of Job remind us of another passage of Scripture, recorded in Mal. 3:3,

“He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.”

Do you know, my friend, how silver is refined? It is done by the intense heat of a furnace. The refiner stands by the fire, increasing the heat very slowly. When the metal is brought to a stated heat, all the dross comes to the top and forms a layer of foreign matter so that the silver can not be seen at all. The heat is increased until at length, in a cloud of smoke, all the dross is taken away; and the refiner beholds the reflection of his own face in the silver that has been purified. Something like that is what God is doing for His suffering saints during their earthly pilgrimage. Not only does He want to see His own image reflected in them; but He also wants the testimony of His redeemed to bring glory to His Name. He wants the “hands which hang down” in discouragement to be lifted up; the “feeble knees” to be strengthened; “the lame” to be “healed,” not “turned out of the way” by a life that professes to be Christian, yet brings no honor to His name.

Not long ago I conducted the funeral service of a Christian young man about twenty-two years of age, who was killed in a plane crash while in training for military duty. When he was a little boy, I took him with me to Australia; and he was a lovable lad. His mother is a godly woman; and although she could not understand the providence of the Lord, yet she asked me before the funeral service not to let any note of sadness creep into the message. “The Lord permitted this,” she said; “I do not understand why; but I know that He doeth all things well.” As I gave her testimony to the waiting friends, their faith was strengthened; and into their hearts came a longing to know the Lord like that. I think this is what God means when He says that suffering borne for His glory yields “the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

**Exhortation to Diligent Watchfulness**

Heb. 12:14-17

The paragraph recorded in verses 14-17 of this chapter urges the true believers in Christ to “follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord” (verse 14, R. V.). Then it warns against the danger of the hypocrite in the midst of God’s people, described here as one who has not accepted the grace of God, a “fornicator, or profane person, as Esau ...” Such a person can work havoc among true believers, bringing reproach upon the name of Christ. Let us read the entire paragraph in the Revised Version, which makes the meaning very plain:

“Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord: looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God (or ‘whether any man falleth back from the grace of God’; i.e., an apostate); lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one mess of meat sold his own birthright. For ye know that even when he afterward desired the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place for a change of mind in his father, though he sought it diligently with tears.”
Two Old Testament passages are referred to here, with both of which the Hebrew Christians were familiar: one is the story of Esau; the other, a verse found in the very heart of the Palestinian Covenant, spoken by Moses, and recorded in Deut. 29:18:

"... lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that heareth gall and wormwood."

The message is plain: to serve other gods is to be lost; to turn one's back upon the grace of God as revealed in Christ Jesus is to be eternally unsaved, forever a lost soul.

In the Corinthian Church there was a "fornicator" who brought reproach upon the name of Christ. (See I Cor. 5:1-13.) And Esau is an example of a "profane person" who despised his birthright. Neither this Scripture nor the Genesis story states that Esau's soul could not be saved. It could have been if he had put his faith in the promised Redeemer. We are not told whether he did or not. All of his actions would indicate that he did not believe in the promised Messiah, that he turned his back upon spiritual things. But what the Scripture here does say is that he could not receive the blessing he had lightly sold, for it had been given to Jacob. That blessing involved the spiritual inheritance of the family through whom the Redeemer should come. That is what Esau sold for a dish of pottage; and that is what his father, Isaac, could not give back to him, though he afterwards "sought it diligently with tears." It had been given to his brother.

Now Jacob is not to be commended for the unscrupulous way in which he obtained the blessing; but the fact remains that Jacob had his heart upon the future, upon the promise God had made to Abraham concerning the promised Seed, even Christ, and the promised land. God had to deal severely with Jacob before he was converted; and still further before he was consecrated; but Jacob did have a desire for spiritual blessings. And through the Apostle Paul God was warning the Hebrew Christians to be careful not to allow such unbelievers, "as Esau," lacking in faith and unholy in their lives, to have fellowship with them in the church. Likewise the Holy Spirit wrote in II Cor. 6:14-18, saying:

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? ... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

Now let us digress just a moment to try to make clear what the Holy Spirit does not say in verse 14 about "holiness." I once had the joy of leading a young couple to Christ, later to discover that they had associated themselves with a body of people who believe in the atoning work of the Lord for salvation, yet hold that they have attained sinless perfection in this life. This couple insisted that I go with them to their church, which I did, hoping to find an opportunity to teach them the true meaning of "sanctification" or "holiness." When we arrived at the church, I saw a banner over the pulpit bearing these words, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). But what those people believed to be the meaning of that text is not what the Bible means by it. Indeed, the banner over that pulpit was not even an accurate quotation. What the Scripture does say is, "Follow after ... sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord." Without following after a holy life, "no man shall see the Lord." An unsaved man does not "follow after" holiness; he goes on and on in sin, an unbeliever in the only Saviour. But the true Christian wants to please his Lord; he "follows after holiness," even though he does not always realize it in this life.

As believers in Christ, our standing before God, our position in Christ, is one of holiness. God is our Father, and He is infinitely holy. We are His children, identified with Christ by faith in His atoning work on Calvary. Accordingly, our position, or our standing, before God is one of holiness—not
because of any merit of our own, but because our lives are hid with God in Christ. But in Heb. 12:14 the Holy Spirit is speaking of our state in the flesh, urging us to “follow after holiness” in our daily walk, that we may manifest to the godless world that we are “partakers of his holiness” in our standing before God. (See Heb. 12:10.) Our eternal position in Christ is all of His grace; whereas our testimony before the world is evidenced by our words and deeds. The apostle referred to our standing in Christ when he addressed these same Hebrew Christians as “holy brethren” in Heb. 3:1; but constantly, throughout the epistle, he also warned them to maintain their testimony before the unbelieving world.

No, my friend; holiness is not sinless perfection in this life. Thank God! When we get to heaven, we shall then be free from every trace of sin. But in this life we still have the old Adamic nature that would drag us down but for the grace of God and our new nature in Christ Jesus. He can and will give us a life of victory over sin, but He does not promise sinless perfection here below. The word “sanctification,” often misused in this connection, simply means separation from the things that defile, separation unto God and a life for Him. And when men profess sinless perfection on earth, as one man did to me on a boat going to Australia, in that very moment the awful sin of pride is dominant in that life. God wants His redeemed children to “follow after peace” toward all men and to “follow after holiness” toward God.

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion
Heb. 12:18-24

In verses 18-24 we find one of the many striking contrasts of this epistle, a contrast between the old covenant represented by Mount Sinai and the new covenant represented by Mount Zion. It is a contrast between the Law of Moses and the grace of God, the legalism of Judaism and the grace of Christianity. No honest, open-minded Hebrew Christian in the days of Paul could withstand the argument; no honest, open-minded Christian today can still maintain that our salvation is partly of faith and partly of works. The proof of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism is overwhelming, as set forth in these few verses before us.

In order to grasp the full significance of the picture drawn by the inspired writer, let us turn back to Exodus 19:9-25 and Deut. 5:22-27 to read the story of the giving of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. Then let us read Heb. 12:18-21 for the New Testament commentary on that scene. The Holy Spirit was saying to those early Hebrew Christians that they had not come unto Mount Sinai, where the old covenant was given—

“... the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (for they could not endure that which was commanded, and if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake.)"

Why were the Israelites not to touch Mount Sinai? Why was not even a beast to touch it and live? Why was there fear in the hearts of God’s people, accompanied by blackness and darkness and tempest and the sound of a trumpet? Why did even Moses exceedingly fear and quake at the sight? The answer to all this is that sin had separated man from a holy God; sin had not yet been atoned for in His sight; the barrier of sin had to be removed before man could approach God; and He gave these physical phenomena to impress upon His people the magnitude of sin, the awful reality of sin, the need of a sinless Saviour to take it away, in order that the repentant sinner might approach Him unafraid. Israel had presumptuously asked for the law, saying, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8). But Israel did not realize her weakness, her utter inability to keep the ten commandments and all the law which they epitomized. Even before Moses came down from the mount, the nation had broken that holy law by dancing naked around a golden calf!

While Moses was still on Mount Sinai, God gave him the pattern for the tabernacle, showing that the veil separated
even the priests from the Shekinah Glory. Israel's holy God was unapproachable, except on the basis of the shed blood, by faith in the promised Redeemer. Even the high priest could enter that Holy of Holies only once a year, not without blood. He sprinkled that blood before and upon the mercy seat, which hid from sight the broken law; for beneath the mercy seat, in the golden-covered ark of the covenant, were the ten commandments. Not until Christ died on Calvary was the veil of the temple rent in twain, by God Himself, from top to bottom. Not until then could sinful man approach a holy God—by grace through faith in the sinless Substitute for the sinner's guilt.

That is what the Holy Spirit was telling those Hebrew Christians in the days of Paul; that is what He is telling us today. And yet there are literally thousands in our churches today who limit the grace of God and seek to lead men back to Mount Sinai. They say that faith and works will save the soul. They are still living under the Law of Moses, which no one ever kept but the Lord Jesus. They are just as sincere as were the Israelites in the time of Moses; but they are not true to the Word of God.

What does the keeping of the ten commandments promise concerning heaven and the Father's presence? After we do our best to keep them, we are still at Mount Sinai, with its blackness and darkness and judgment upon sin. Moreover, James tells us that "whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). He has broken God's holy standard of righteousness. No, my friend; "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (Rom. 3:20).

God let Israel have the ten commandments to show her and the world "the exceeding sinfulness of sin," the need of a sinless Saviour who would come to take away the penalty of sin for all who would believe Him—by faith alone. Not only did the Hebrews in the days of Paul, who were in danger of letting persecution drive them back to Judaism, need this searching warning; but legalizing teachers today need to remember that no keeping of Sabbaths, no legalism, can save the soul. No mere man can keep the Sabbath perfectly anyway; God's Word abundantly proves that!

By way of contrast, the Holy Spirit turns our eyes to Mount Zion and all the eternal blessings that heaven holds. Let us take these wonderful phrases of Heb. 12:22-24 separately, to see something of what awaits the true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the sinner who trusts Him utterly, by faith, for salvation. God tells us here that we "are come unto"—

1. "Mount Zion."
2. "... and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."
3. "... and to an innumerable company of angels."
4. "... to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven."
5. "... and to God the Judge of all."
6. "... and to the spirits of just men made perfect"; i. e., Old Testament believers.
7. "... and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant."
8. "... and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

What an array of eternal blessings! Our finite minds can not fully comprehend their significance! But when we get to heaven, every one of these we shall behold—for all eternity. And it is all of grace! No blackness, no darkness, no fear and trembling; only joy and peace and bliss in the presence of God, in the "many mansions"—these are the blessings that we receive at Mount Zion. No sorrow, no tears, no suffering, no pain can enter there. What a contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, between law and grace, between Judaism and Christianity, between the old covenant sealed with the blood of the animal sacrifice and the new covenant sealed with the precious blood of Jesus!

There is an earthly city called in the Scriptures Mount Zion; it is Jerusalem, which will yet be the metropolis of the world when the Lord Jesus returns to reign on earth. And there is the heavenly city called Mount Zion, "the city of the
living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” It is the eternal home of the redeemed of all ages. Its streets are paved with gold; its gates are of pearl. Nothing that defiles can enter there. To that “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God,” the Holy Spirit is bidding us go, in the words of the text before us; indeed, in all the Word of God.

There is “an innumerable company of angels” in that beautiful city. John tells us that they number “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands” (Rev. 5:11). “The church of the firstborn,” whose names are written there, will be in that heavenly host. God, the Father, is there. The Old Testament saints, saved by faith in the promised Saviour, now “made perfect” since a full atonement has been made for sin—these “spirits of just men made perfect” are there. Jesus, the Lord, is there, the Mediator of the new covenant. We shall see His face that shines like the sun. We shall behold the pierced hands and feet. We shall behold and share His glory! And throughout eternity we shall remember Calvary, and “the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than Abel.”

The words “that of” in reference to Abel are in italics; and are therefore not in the original Greek. What the text says is that the blood of Jesus “speaketh better things than Abel.” By His faith Abel, “being dead yet speaketh” (Heb. 11:4), because he brought a “better sacrifice” than Cain, a blood sacrifice by faith in the Christ of the Cross. But Abel’s sacrifice was that of a lamb; the blood of Jesus is infinitely more precious! Abel’s faith speaks to us of the only way of salvation; Jesus’ blood tells us that the Saviour is the only Way to heaven and eternal life.

The heart must be very hard and stubborn that can turn away from such a picture of heaven and eternity with the Lord Himself! When all these blessings are to be had by faith through the grace of God, why will men seek to add to simple faith man’s “filthy rags” of self-righteousness? Only Satan can so deceive fallen humanity. May God help us to trust Him simply, utterly, thanking Him that “Jesus paid it all!” Then, because we love Him, we shall want to please Him more than anything else in the world. Our good works will follow as the fruit of salvation; they can never be the means of salvation. That is the message of this striking contrast between the things of Judaism and the better things of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit’s exhortation to a full acceptance of the new covenant of the grace of God.

A FINAL WARNING AGAINST APOSTASY
Heb. 12:25-29

With the picture of this contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion still in mind, the inspired apostle continues in the closing words of the chapter to utter a final warning against turning away from Mount Zion and returning to Mount Sinai. God spoke to Moses from Mount Sinai; the Lord Jesus speaks from Mount Zion.

“See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth (i.e., God who spoke from Mount Sinai), much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven” (12:25, 26).

Mount Sinai quaked when God gave the ten commandments; but a terrible shaking of everything godless will take place when the Lord returns to purify this wicked world and reign in peace and righteousness. The Holy Spirit explains verse 26 further by adding in verse 27,

“And this word, yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which can not be shaken may remain.”

When the true church has been translated to the New Jerusalem, forever to be with Christ, swift and terrible judgments will sweep the earth. Then, and in the return of Christ in glory to set up His millennial kingdom, everything godless will be “shaken” to its very foundations. We might liken what will take place to a powerful express train, travelling at a terrific rate of speed. It will take a man to his destination; but if that man stands on the track in front of it, that train
will be his destruction. The Lord Jesus “is not willing that any should perish” (II Peter 3:9). He will take with Him to glory all who will believe in His finished work on the cross. But just as surely “the wicked shall be turned into hell.” There is “none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), except by that name which “is above every name,” even the name of our God and Saviour, Christ Jesus.

And what are the “things which cannot be shaken”? They are the things eternal, summed up in verse 28 as “a kingdom which cannot be moved,” or “shaken.”

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28, 29).

Freely translated, in the literal meaning, this might be expressed like this: “Let us ‘hold fast’ grace, not clinging to law.” “Let us . . . serve God acceptably with reverence and reverential trust: for our God is a consuming fire.”

As fire burns up the dross, so “our God is a consuming fire.” He can not tolerate sin because He is absolutely and infinitely holy. He must turn and overturn until He ushers in “a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” His redeemed will then be completely cleansed of every vestige of sin; and the wicked must be cast into hell. There is no other course.

Fire will do wonders for us if we put it to the right use. It will be our servant, warming our houses, cooking our meals, giving us light. But fire will devour us if we are not in a right relation to it. Likewise, God came down in the Person of His Son to be the faithful Servant of Jehovah, ministering life and light and blessing to all who will accept His grace. But to the man who rejects Him, “our God is a consuming fire.” Because He is holy, He must judge sin.

This is a searching warning against apostasy. The enlightened but unregenerated Hebrews in apostolic days were surely without excuse if they continued to turn away from Christ, in the face of such a warning. It is a message we need to sound before the lost souls of men today. But with the warning, we have the glorious Gospel concerning the imperishable kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to offer to fallen humanity. It is all of grace; and it is wonderful! It tells us that our God is no longer unapproachable, that He bids us “draw near” to Him. It is the message of this chapter. It is the message of the entire Epistle to the Hebrews. It is the message of all the New Testament. Now that Christ has come and suffered in our stead, we approach God, not with fear and trembling and quaking. By faith we go boldly before His throne of grace. By faith we behold Him in the glory, surrounded by all the holy angels, by all the saints of both Old and New Testament times. We see Him now by faith; one day “we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2). This is our message to the world today—a message to weak and faltering Christians who are running the Christian race, even as they keep “looking unto Jesus.” It is God’s message for the suffering saint who needs to remember that the heavenly Father is “child-training” His own for the glory. It is the message that the godless world must heed if it is to look to Mount Zion and heaven and eternity with the Lord.

When we begin to think of the bliss of that heavenly home, we can only thank God and take courage, remembering the word of Paul, when he quoted the prophet saying,

“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9; Isa. 64:4).

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved . . . let us run with patience 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:28, 1, 2).

At the right hand of the Father our Lord Jesus “ever liveth to make intercession for us” (Heb. 7:25).