



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

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Issachar Comments Papers

Expounding biblical concepts on the world scene today

Unpacking Hebrews 12.14-29

A Prophetic Scripture with relevance for our times

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Hebrews 12.14-29 is a passage which is highly significant for understanding God's purposes. The major theme of the book of Hebrews is that of presenting a contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant which God has established through Jesus who, although he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice thereby enabling all who put their trust in him to enter the presence of God by "*a new and living way*" (Hebrews 10.20). The whole company of believers is urged to "*hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess for he who is promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds*" (Hebrews 10.23 - 25).

Holiness v 14 "*Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*"

The passage begins with an exhortation to make every effort to live at peace with all people. The people of God should not be those who are stirring up dissension but be those who are presenting the new and living way as witnesses of the Lord Jesus. Their lives should be holy. Holiness means separation from the world and being consecrated to God. In order to do this our lives have to demonstrate a clear distinction between the values of the world and the values of the kingdom. Those who are disciples of Jesus must learn to be in the world but not of it. They must live according to kingdom values of love, truth, integrity, justice and servanthood.

Dangers v 15 "*See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*"

Christians should be warned that it is possible to be shut out from the presence of God like Esau who lost his inheritance because of his commitment to worldly values. He sold his inheritance rights for a single meal. This should act as a strong warning. The kind of things that could cause us to miss the grace of God are bitterness, sexual immorality and clinging to worldly values. We all suffer disappointments and injustice at the hands of others or through circumstances outside our control. These experiences can create roots of bitterness which must not be allowed to develop or they will destroy our relationship with God in the same way as sexual immorality which destroys right relationships with other people and acts as a blockage to the grace of God.

Esau vv 16-17 "*See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.*"

Esau's gourmet passion revealed his lustful appetite and addiction to the things of the flesh. He was unable to change the situation even though he wept bitterly and sought the blessing which should have been his but which he had renounced. He sought the blessing with tears but these were not tears of repentance but tears of

regret at what he had lost. Repentance, *metanoia*, means turning; renouncing the past and embracing a new and living way. This is a strong warning because it means that we can reach a situation that is beyond redemption; a situation which it is impossible to reverse - a situation in which we will be swept along by a tide of destruction like a tsunami sweeping across the land and destroying all in its path. This can happen both to individuals and nations.

National Life An example of this in the history of Israel is where Jeremiah had been warning the nation for 40 years to turn away from the cocktail of sins which he recounted in his "Temple sermon" (Jeremiah 7.1 - 11); they were - false religion, injustice, oppression, violence, idolatry and immorality. Jeremiah saw that there were inevitable and unstoppable consequences if the nation continued upon this path with no repentance. When the warnings went unheeded the nation reached the point where God instructed Jeremiah three times to cease praying for the nation. *"So do not pray for this people nor offer any pleas or petitions for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you"* (Jeremiah 7.16; repeated in 11.14 and 14.11). It was no longer possible to redeem the situation: judgement had to follow.

It is worth noting that although Jeremiah ceased pleading with God for his mercy, he continued to call for repentance in the nation right up until the time when the Babylonians were building siege-ramps up against the walls of Jerusalem in preparation for the final assault upon the city. The reason for Jeremiah's persistence was that he knew that, if there were true tears of repentance and turning to the Lord, God could have wiped out the Babylonian army at a single stroke as he had done to Israel's enemies in the time of King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20) and in the time of King Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32).

Individual Lives In our own individual lives it is also possible to reach a situation which is irredeemable, from which we cannot turn back. It is possible to become so entangled in a web of lies, deceit and corruption that the consequences become inevitable. This can be in business, in public life, or in our personal and private lives, or in marriage and family. We may bitterly regret what we have done and try to change things or to carry out damage limitation but we may reach a situation which is beyond repair. This is because there are several degrees of sinfulness.

There is the first degree which is often unintentional such as giving way to temptation or allowing ourselves to be persuaded by friends to do things which put us in the way of harm. The second degree of sinfulness is that of indulging in things which we know are wrong; we find them pleasurable so we defy our conscience and continue. The third degree of sinfulness is that of iniquitous behaviour whereby we deliberately flout the word of the Lord and reverse his teaching on right and wrong.

These three levels of sin are expounded by Paul in Romans 1.18-32. In introducing each of these three degrees of sin Paul uses the phrase *"God gave them over"* (Romans 1.24; 1.26; and 1.28). In the final degree of sin God gives them over *"to a depraved mind"* and they *"become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity"*. They even *"invent ways of doing evil... Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them"* (Romans 1.32).

Mount Sinai vv 18-21 *"You have not come to a mountain that can(not) be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm, to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded. If even an animal touches the mountain it must be stoned. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear'."*

Attention now returns to the scene of comparing the old and new covenants. The first covenant was enforced by the law, given at Mount Sinai. It was a mountain surrounded by *"darkness, gloom and storm"*. It could not be touched and if an animal so much as touched the mountain it had to be stoned. The mountain struck fear into

the hearts of everyone. The people were so afraid that only Moses climbed the mountain to enter the presence of God and he confessed to have been *"trembling with fear"*. When God spoke the whole mountain was shaken and the people would not go near. So the Decalogue which sealed the first covenant became a restrictive code that controlled and defined the relationship between God and his people: it was a relationship that kept the people at a distance from God who demanded absolute loyalty and absolute obedience.

Mount Zion vv 22-24 *"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*

Popular Hebraic folk religion, during the period of the Second Temple, revered Mount Zion which represented the city of Jerusalem, which was thought to be an earthly shadow of the heavenly Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. It was the heavenly Jerusalem, the *"city of the living God"* that is here referred to as Mount Zion - a place where a vast number of angels surround the throne of God. Also, there were many believers in the Lord Jesus, who were part of his church.

Hebrews was one of the last books to be written in the New Testament and there would already have been many who had died for their faith during the successive waves of Roman persecution before the end of the first century. In coming to Mount Zion, believers were joining a great company who were rejoicing in the presence of God. They had been enabled to come into his presence through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant. Mount Zion is thus seen to be a place of light and joy in contrast to the gloom and fear that surrounded Mount Sinai.

Warnings v 25 *"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"*

If Hebrews was written during the final decade of the first century, this was least 20 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. That had taken place in A.D. 70 following the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66. It took the Romans four years of brutal warfare to suppress the revolt during which time some half 1 million Jews in Judaea were slaughtered. The Christians had received divine forewarning and had left the region before A.D. 66 and settled in the Decapolis, particularly in the city of Pella.

The writer of Hebrews assumes that all who read this scroll would know what had happened to Jerusalem. He reminds his readers that Jesus, during his earthly ministry, clearly warned the people of Judaea and the residents of Jerusalem what would happen to their city if they refused to accept their Messiah who had been sent by God.

As he approached Jerusalem during the last week of his Ministry Jesus wept over the city. He then prophesied, "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God is coming to you" (Luke 19.43 - 44). Surely if people suffered because they did not heed the warnings given during Jesus' earthly ministry, the consequences of refusing to listen to the warnings now being given by the Risen Jesus from heaven will be even more severe.

Once More vv 26-27 *"At that time his voice shook the Earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens'.* The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken - that is, created things - so that what cannot be shaken may remain."

When God gave the law at Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he was promising once more to shake

not only the earth but also the heavens. In Hebraic usage 'the heavens' (Heb: *shamayim*) is the dwelling place of God from where he looks down upon human beings. *"The Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them"* (Psalm 11.4). It is not an unseen spiritual realm encompassing the spirits of the departed. It signifies the outer parts of the physical universe which includes the sun, the moon and the stars; all of which were thought to have their foundations based upon the earth. There is a reference to this in David's Song of Praise, *"The earth trembled and quaked, the foundations of the heavens shook"* (2 Samuel 22.8).

The great shaking envisaged in these verses, whenever it occurs, will shake the whole realm of natural creation and also everything on earth which can be shaken; that is, all the great empires of mankind including the social, political and commercial institutions as well as the material structures created by human beings. Everything will be shaken which is not founded upon kingdom principles of love, truth, integrity, justice and servanthood.

The Kingdom vv 28-29 *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."*

The great shaking will coincide with a move of God which will be a major paradigm shift in the history of the world in pursuance of God's intention to establish his kingdom upon the earth. It is a kingdom which cannot be shaken and those who are part of the great company of believers will worship God with thanksgiving and with reverence and awe as they see God's refining fire consuming the dross and purifying the land from corruption. The long awaiting 'Day of the Lord' will have dawned. It is the day referred to by John the Baptist when he foresaw Jesus with his winnowing fork in his hand. *"He will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire"* (Matthew 3.12).

The teaching of the Apostles was that the 'Day of the Lord' when God will judge the nations would be preceded by times of persecution of Christians. Peter says, *"If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."* He continues *"For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God"* (1 Peter 4.16 - 17). This is a strong warning to Christians today as there is more persecution of Christians in the 21st-century in many parts of the world that there has ever been. In addition, Christians are suffering in the Western world where Christianity has flourished for centuries but is now being replaced by a secular culture which is hostile to Christianity

Peter speaks of the day of the Lord coming suddenly. He foresees a time of tremendous destruction which will even affect the heavens; that is, the natural environment surrounding the earth. This is similar to the destruction envisaged in Isaiah 24.1f *"See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants,"* which may describe an exchange of nuclear weapons, leaving a nuclear waste. Peter says, *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare"* (2 Peter 3.10). What Peter is foreseeing is that God will use this time of tremendous destruction to carry out a renewal of the whole natural creation which he says is what God has promised to do. Peter says *"But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness"* (2 Peter 3.13).

The great shaking is foreseen in the prophetic Scriptures of both the Old Testament and the New Testament as being the prelude to the 'Day of the Lord'. There are many references throughout the Bible to the 'Day of the Lord'. In view of the shaking of the nations that we are seeing in our lifetime, maybe it is time to examine these Scriptures to give us greater understanding of the way God is working out his purposes today.

This paper comes to you as part of the Issachar Ministries (C&M Ministries) Discerning the Purposes of God Initiative. Responses are invited to shaking@issacharministries.co.uk.

Other papers including "Exploring the Purposes of God" are available on request by e-mail and further ones are being prepared

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ISSACHAR
MINISTRIES UK

(C and M Ministries Trust)
registered charity no 1029797

Moggerhanger Park, Park Road, Moggerhanger, Bedford, MK44 3RW

Telephone: 01767 641006 ext 221 Fax: 01767 641515 Website: www.candmministries.org.uk