

FAILING THE GRACE OF GOD

HEBREWS 12:15

by

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The verse that is being dealt with in this paper contains a warning that every Christian should heed. There are many such warnings that are given in the Bible and they vary in force and severity according to the danger that is foreseen by the writer. This particular danger concerns "failing the grace of God." As is true of all other portions of Scripture, the context and grammar is of utmost importance in arriving at the true meaning of this passage. There has been a considerable variety of interpretations of this verse and these will be dealt with also. The variety of opinion regarding the meaning of this verse is also demonstrated by the various ways it has been translated by the English versions. Among the various issues that must be discussed in relation to this verse is the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to deal specifically with this doctrine, it cannot be ignored. A correct interpretation of Scripture should be the goal of every Christian no matter what that involves.

ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΘΑΡΙΣΤΙΚΗΣ
ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΤΡΙΝΙΤΕΤΟΣ
ΕΝ ΤΗ ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΡΘΑΓΙΝΗΣ
ΕΝ ΤΗ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΤΡΙΝΙΤΕΤΟΣ
ΕΝ ΤΗ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΤΡΙΝΙΤΕΤΟΣ

GREEK TEXT

GREEK TEXT

The Greek New Testament,

British and Foreign Bible Society, 1958

ἐπισκοποῦντες μὴ τις ὕστερῶν ἀπὸ
τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ, μὴ τις ῥίζα πικρίας
ἄνω φύουσα ἐνοχλῇ καὶ διὰ ταύτης μιαν-
θῶσιν οἱ πολλοί

TEXTUAL VARIATIONS

There are two minor textual variants in this text. One variant concerns the pronoun *ταύτης*. Some manuscripts have *αὐτῆς* instead of *ταύτης*. The main support for *αὐτῆς*, which is printed in the United Bible Societies text of 1966, comes from p. 46. Better evidence exists for *ταύτης* and it is supported by the uncial manuscripts Sinaiticus and Bezae. It is also supported by the majority of manuscripts from all families as well as by the Byzantine texts, according to the British and Foreign Bible Society text.

The other variant concerns the presence of the article *οἱ* with *πολλοί*. It is omitted by p. 46 and codex Bezae, P, and the Byzantine manuscripts include the article.

Neither of these variants have a major effect on the interpretation of this text. The significance of these variants will be brought out later in the text of this paper where these words are discussed.

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ENGLISH VERSIONS

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King James Version (1611)

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.

American Standard Version (1901)

Looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled.

Moffatt's New Testament (1922)

See to it that no one misses the grace of God, that no root of bitterness grows up to be a trouble by contaminating all the rest of you;

Goodspeed's New Testament (1931)

Be careful that no one fails to gain God's favor, or some poisonous root may come up to trouble and contaminate you all.

Phillip's Translation (1947)

Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace which God gives, for if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit which is not only bad in itself but can also poison the lives of many others.

Revised Standard Version (1952)

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled.

New American Standard Bible (1960)

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by it many be defiled.

Today's English Version (1966)

Be careful that no one turns back from the grace of God. Be careful that no one becomes like a bitter plant that grows up and troubles many with its poison.

The Jerusalem Bible (1966)

Be careful that no one is deprived of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness should begin to grow and make trouble; this can poison a whole community.

The New American Bible (1970)

See to it that no man falls away from the grace of God; that no bitter root springs up through which many may become defiled.

New English Bible (1970)

Look to it that there is no one among you who forfeits the grace of God, no bitter, noxious weed growing up to poison the whole.

King James II (1971)

Look carefully for fear that there should be anyone lacking of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness should spring up and trouble you (by this many are made unclean).

Living Bible (1971)

Look after each other so that not one of you will fail to find God's best blessings. Watch out that no bitterness takes root among you, for as it springs up it causes deep trouble, hurting many in their spiritual lives.

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Essential Background

The book of Hebrews is a unique book. It is the only book in the New Testament whose author is uncertain. It is thoroughly a Jewish book in the sense that it was clearly written to Christian Jews.¹ It does not deal with Gentile problems or problems in general, but with distinctly Jewish problems. The particular problem dealt with is that of the possible defection of some of the Christian Jews. There was a movement underway among these new Christians to go back to their former way of life under Judaism. This was occasioned by certain Judaizers who were exerting great pressure on them by teaching that it was necessary for them to observe the Old Testament ceremonial laws, including circumcision. There is good evidence that they were experiencing persecution in many forms and the temptation to comply with their persecutors was undoubtedly very strong. Therefore, the purpose of the book was to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism and to encourage these Jewish believers to endure discipline and not forsake their new way of life. Thus the book is replete with warnings and admonishments to continue in the faith.

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 14.

Grammatical Construction

The first matter that must be considered is the grammatical construction of this verse. Since there is no main verb in this verse, it is necessary to look back to verse 14 for the main verb: "Follow peace with all men." The participle **ἐπισκοποῦντες** modifies the verb **διώκετε** ("follow") and denotes simultaneous action to it. Its meaning is illustrated by its use in I Peter 5:2: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight."¹ Here it is used to denote the discharge of the office of the elders of the local church in their care and oversight over the flock of God. However, in the passage in question it does not carry this official emphasis, but rather refers to the duty and responsibility of all believers to watch over one another.

The prefixed preposition **ἐπι** carries a perfective sense and intensifies the meaning of the simple verb **σκοπέω** ("to look"). Hence, it refers to a diligent and persistent look. It is a thorough, scrutinizing look as in the case of watching over a sick person. More specifically, it refers to a mental attitude of watching over oneself and one another. The idea here seems to be that of preventing spiritual decay as well as promoting spiritual good.² Since this participle is dependent on an imperative verb, it is likely to give it a mandatory force.³ Therefore,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the King James Version will be used for all Scripture references in this paper.

² John Owen, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews IV (London: J. Haddon, 1840), 603.

³ George Junkin, Epistle To The Hebrews (Philadelphia: Smith, English, and Co., 1873), p. 467.

it may be taken as a warning to prevent a defection.¹

The participle ἐπισκοποῦντες governs three subordinate subjunctive clauses which are each introduced by μή τις . The clauses are parallel in thought and each one deals with a particular danger. The first clause deals with the danger of losing God's grace for oneself. The second clause deals with the danger of defiling others. The third clause deals with the danger of not being able to recover what was lost.² Some thereby see a gradual degeneration of apostasy.

A grammatical problem is presented by the absence of a finite verb in the first clause. Some have suggested that the verb ἐνοχλῆ should be supplied in the first clause from its presence in the second clause. However, it is probably better not to make both clauses dependent on the same verb and simply supply the present subjunctive form of εἰμί for the first clause.³

¹Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in The Expositor's Greek Testament IV, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), 370.

²Lenski, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 444.

³William Lindsay, Lectures on the Epistle To The Hebrews II (Philadelphia: Smith, English, and Co., 1867), 280.

MAJOR PROBLEM:

THE MEANING OF FAILING THE GRACE OF GOD

CHAPTER II

MAJOR PROBLEM:

THE MEANING OF FAILING THE GRACE OF GOD

Loss Of Salvation View

Description

Among the various views that have been offered in explanation of this passage is the view that this is a warning addressed to believers against losing their salvation. According to this view, to fail the grace of God means to be separated from the saving grace of God after it has been once obtained.¹ This view clearly denies the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer and is primarily advanced by Lenski.²

Evaluation

The view that failing the grace of God is a warning against losing one's salvation seems unsupportable to this writer. Falling from grace is possible, but it does not mean the loss of a person's salvation. Paul charged certain ones in Galatia with having fallen from grace: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). However, this refers to their desire to be justified by the law instead of by grace. It does not refer

¹ Lenski, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 444.

² Ibid., pp. 443-46.

to salvation, but to the Christian rule of life by grace. They were mixing the observance of the law of Moses with salvation by grace. They had been taught by the Judaizers that keeping the law of Moses was also necessary for salvation. Therefore, to fall from grace meant to assume that the merit system of the law gained them favor with God. Paul was telling them that the merit system does not provide the rule of life for those who have been saved by the grace of God.¹ To make it so is to make the work of Christ of no effect. Although this passage in Galatians is within a different context than the passage being considered here, it does provide us with a similar expression that does not necessarily teach the opposite of what is being presented here.

Grammatically, this view does not have very much support. Its main strong point is the presence of the preposition ἀπὸ, which implies the loss of a previous attainment. However, to apply this loss to the loss of salvation does not take into consideration the proper meaning of the verb ὑστερῶν. It does not mean "to fall from" (πίπτω), nor "to cease from" (παύω), but "to be deficient in something." The use of this particular verb strongly suggests as Barnes so aptly puts it that "this passage should not be used in the discussion of the question about falling from grace."² On the other hand, Lenski takes it as refer-

¹Lewis S. Chafer, Systematic Theology III (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 311.

²Albert Barnes, Epistle To The Hebrews (New York: Harper and Bros., 1870), p. 310.

ring to dropping away from the grace of God or losing the grace of God.¹ Such an assumption has no support from the true meaning of this verb.

Not only does this view present a serious grammatical problem, but it also presents a serious theological problem. It actually contradicts many passages that claim the eternal security of the believer (Rom. 8:29-30; Jn. 10:28-29). It is well recognized that without grace Christianity would be meaningless. The Bible clearly states that we are saved by grace: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Not only have we been saved by grace, but it is also true that we are kept saved by grace. With regard to salvation, grace signifies God's gracious favor and acceptance in Christ for salvation.² But grace does not leave off with our initial salvation. The grace of God is able to sustain and enable the believer to persevere in the Christian life: "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). Works can no more keep a person saved now than they could save a person when he was lost. Since no one merits to be saved or be kept saved, no one can fail the grace of God by not meriting salvation through works. A person cannot claim salvation by grace and at the same time depend on his own efforts and works to keep himself saved. Grace sets a person on the

¹Lenski, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 444.

²Owen, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, IV, 603.

³Kenneth S. Wuest, Hebrews in the Greek New Testament, IX (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 223-24.

pathway of faith and also enables that person to continue and complete that path.¹ We may frequently fail the grace of God, but the grace of God never fails us.

Short Of Salvation View

Description

Another view of this passage is that this described the situation of an unsaved Jew who has allowed himself to be led along by the Holy Spirit in His pre-salvation work of convicting the sinner and bringing him to the place of repentance.² This view is based on the passage in Hebrews 6:1-12 concerning those who had fallen away, which is taken to refer to unbelievers in the same condition. They, like Nicodemus, had believed the facts, but had not yet been truly born again. According to this view this is a warning against the failure of becoming complete partakers in salvation.

Evaluation

Actually this view is merely an attempt to preserve the doctrine of eternal security. However, it does so on a faulty basis. The context of this verse gives no support to this view. Those who hold this view do not recognize that the general context reveals that this particular passage was primarily addressed to those who at least claimed to be true believers. The author has been dealing with various aspects of divine dis-

¹F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 365.

²Kenneth S. Wuest, Hebrews in the Greek New Testament, IX (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947), 223-24.

cipline in the Christian's life. The essence of the passage is that God only disciplines His children (Heb. 12:5-8). There is no evidence that the author now begins to address the unsaved person. It seems very difficult to this writer to read such an interpretation into this passage. Furthermore, this interpretation is based on an improper understanding of Hebrews 6:1-9. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to deal with this particular passage, this interpretation of it does not have very much support. The language appears to be much too strong to refer to merely those who may have been under conviction. The analogy, therefore, would be incongruent and not based on facts. Moreover, to make such an explicit distinction between an unsaved person who is under conviction and a true believer would certainly require some special insight.

False Profession View

Description

Another view, which is very closely related to the previous one, is that it refers only to professors of faith. This view is that there were those in the assembly who professed to know the truth but because of sloth and unbelief were in danger of not attaining unto the grace and favor of God. They were, therefore, not true believers.¹ Likewise, according to this view, the warning is against the possible failure of not entering into a true experiential belief of the gospel. This view is pro-

¹Owen, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, IV, 603-04.

posed by Owen,¹ Lindsay,² and Barnes.³

Evaluation

This view differs from the previous view in that it holds that those who are being addressed may have at one time claimed to have experienced salvation, but were actually only professing to be saved. Certainly it would be impossible to say that every single person to whom this letter was addressed was truly saved. It is readily admitted that there were some who were only professing to be Christians and therefore not truly saved. The same thing is true in almost every assembly of Christians. However, this fact does not prove that these false professors were being addressed here. As was stated in connection with the previous view, the context of this passage bears out the fact that true believers were being addressed here.

Writer's View

Description

This fourth view takes this passage as referring to a failure in some aspect of Christian living. Evidence will be presented from the context in favor of the proposition that this warning was being addressed to true believers. Further evidence will be drawn from a grammatical analysis of the passage for the purpose of demonstrating that this passage is referring to a practical application of Christian principles to a Chris-

¹ Ibid., pp. 602-07.

² Lindsay, Lectures on the Epistle To The Hebrews, II, 279-81.

³ Barnes, Epistle To The Hebrews, pp. 304-05.

tian's life. Some of the adherents of this view include Calvin,¹ Bruce,² Westcott,³ and Barclay.⁴ This view is also implied by several versions and paraphrases of the New Testament, such as Goodspeed's New Testament, The Twentieth Century New Testament, Letters To Young Churches, and The Living Bible.

Contextual Argument

A brief summary of the context of this passage will help to understand its true meaning. Beginning in the eleventh chapter the author of Hebrews lists several Old Testament figures who had "obtained a good report" (Heb. 11:2). They were praised not for the fact that they had obtained salvation, but because they were counted worthy of a special reward. In the twelfth chapter the author admonishes his readers to run the race that is set before them (Heb. 12:1). This refers to certain obstacles that must be overcome if a Christian is to have victory in his life. Christ is used as an example of this very thing (Heb. 12:2-3). The presence of divine discipline is viewed as the mark of a true Christian: "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). The author further points out the fact that this discipline may be grievous, but it has a purpose: "Now no chastening for

¹ John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul The Apostle to The Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), pp. 324-26.

² Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, pp. 365-66.

³ B. F. Westcott, The Epistle To The Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), pp. 406-07.

⁴ William Barclay, The Letter to The Hebrews (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 107-08.

the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11).

Beginning with verse 12 the author encourages and admonishes his readers to endure this discipline unto the end. These verses contain nothing that could not be applied to believers. Verses 12 and 13 refer to those who were spiritually weak and possibly in danger of spiritual collapse.¹ Likewise, verse 14, which admonishes the readers to "follow peace with all men, and holiness" could only be addressed to true believers since only they had the capacity to fulfill it. In the author's conclusion on this subject, he says: "Wherefore . . . let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). Within this context is the warning not to "fail the grace of God." Since this implies a warning against not reaching an intended goal, according to the context this goal must be endurance through discipline. Therefore, the evidence seems abundantly in favor of the view that failing the grace of God must refer to some aspect of Christian living. This can be illustrated by imagining that the writer was addressing a traveling group who were on a journey and instructing them to take care that none of them should be left behind or fail to reach the end of the journey.² The end of the journey is not final salvation, but the reward for faithfully serving God and not rejecting His discipline.

¹ Homer A. Kent Jr., The Epistle to the Hebrews (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1972), p. 265.

² Dods, The Expositor's Greek Testament, IV, 370.

Grammatical Argument

This argument will be presented by analyzing the basic grammatical elements of this passage.

Analysis of ὑστερῶν ἀπὸ

The translation of this verb has varied widely. It is used in several different places in Scripture. A brief survey of these passages will help to demonstrate its basic and most prominent meaning. It means to be deficient in something or lack something in the following passages: "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" (Mt. 19:20); "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want" (Lk. 15:14); "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing?" (Lk. 22:35); "And when they wanted wine" (Jn. 2:3); "so that you are not lacking in any gift" (1 Cor. 1:7). The verb can also mean to come behind or be inferior: "For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5). It also means to fall short of something: "Let us therefore fear, lest . . . any of you should seem to come short of it" (Heb. 4:1); "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

The most common meaning in Classical Greek seems to be the idea of coming late or behind as in an athletic contest. This meaning is also supported by the verb's relation to the adverb ὕστερος ("later, after"). Since most scholars agree that a form of the verb "to be" should be supplied here, it is a reasonable assumption that this is an example of a periphrastic present, which denotes a durative action. Furthermore, the

present tense of the participle implies a continuous state and not a single act.¹

The root meaning of the preposition ἀπὸ is "off" or "away from." It is very common and usually denotes separation from something.² Wuest notes that it indicates the loss of a previous attainment and that the present tense of the participle denotes that this may be a progressive loss.³ Westcott concurs with Wuest on this point and further describes this separation as a moral separation of not keeping pace with the movement of divine grace which stirs the progress of the Christian.⁴

At least two things may be implied by this construction. One is the idea of deficiency and the other is the idea of defection or separation. These two ideas will be discussed in greater detail later.

Analysis of τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ

The determination of the meaning and use of this phrase has a great effect on the interpretation of this passage. The word "grace" is used in several different ways in the Bible and one cannot apply one particular meaning to it in every case. It frequently refers to goodwill, pleasure, mercy, loving-kindness, or favor. Grace is used as a synonym for the gospel and salvation in many various passages (Acts 13:43; 14:3; 20:24,32). However, it has many other meanings and concepts besides the

¹Westcott, The Epistle To The Hebrews, p. 406.

²H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 101.

³Wuest, Hebrews in the Greek New Testament, IX, 223.

⁴Westcott, The Epistle To The Hebrews, p. 406.

gospel. Although salvation is by grace, grace also governs and empowers Christian living.¹ With regard to salvation, grace is "the unmerited favor of God towards fallen man, whereby . . . He has provided for man's redemption."² With regard to living the Christian life, grace is God's gracious dealing with each of our personal lives: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Ti. 2:11-12). Although grace has many shades of meaning, one particular meaning is usually emphasized by the context.³ One has to pay special attention to the specific context in order to determine what aspect of grace is being referred to.

Grace is used in the book of Hebrews in a variety of ways. The words "grace of God" appear only twice and the word "grace" appears five times (Heb. 2:9; 4:16; 10:29; 12:15; 12:28; 13:9; 13:25). Two of these references seem to be related to salvation (Heb. 2:9; 10:29). The reference in 2:9 refers to God's love which was the divine motive and means of Christ's redemptive work. The reference in 10:29 refers to the "Spirit of grace" and infers that the Spirit is the one who applies grace in a person's heart at the time of salvation.⁴ The basic meaning of grace in

¹Charles C. Ryrie, The Grace of God (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 9.

²Merrill C. Tenney, ed., Pictorial Bible Dictionary (Nashville: The Southwestern Co., 1968), 322.

³Ryrie, The Grace of God, p. 12.

⁴Ryrie, The Grace of God, p. 75.

Hebrews is the grace that is necessary for Christians to serve God. This is clear in at least four of these passages (Heb. 4:16; 12:28; 13:9; 13:25). All of these passages show that God's grace is necessary for living the Christian life.

The fact that grace is necessary to endure hardship and discipline is demonstrated by various passages. When Paul had asked for the dismissal of an affliction, the Lord replied: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Furthermore, Paul admonished Timothy to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1). There are many other passages in the Bible that express this great truth, but it is not necessary to the purpose of this paper to survey all of them.

Conclusion and Application

The results of this study show that "failing the grace of God" refers to a deficiency in God's supply of grace for Christian living. This deficiency is not the result of any laxness on God's part, but is the result of the believer's failure to faithfully appropriate God's grace for the trials that lay before him. When the believer separates himself from God's grace he fails to secure God's blessings on his life.

Since the context of this verse centers around the principle of discipline, it is fitting that this should comprise the primary application of this verse. Discipline is an expression of God's love for His children and when they fail to endure it properly they are rejecting God's love for them. We cannot serve Christ without grace for grace sustains us and helps us live productive Christian lives. We can try to please God by

our works, but we are not successful because we do not recognize that pleasing God is by grace.

Many Christians fail the grace of God by not realizing and considering all the blessings that are ours as children of God. These blessings include our election, our calling, our adoption, our justification, our standing before God, our sanctification, and our assurance of eternal life. A realization of these many blessings of our salvation should cause us to endure discipline joyfully no matter what the circumstances are.

Furthermore, many Christians fail the grace of God because they are tolerant of sin in their lives. The fact that we are under grace should cause us to have victory over sin: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14). In fact, to live in sin while under grace is unthinkable to Paul: "What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid" (Rom 6:15). Therefore, to live in sin while under grace is to fail the grace of God.

Obviously this failure could be expressed in a number of different ways, but they all center around the fact that the grace of God is an absolute necessity for living the Christian life. No one can have victory over sin and discouragement unless he avails himself of God's gracious help in his time of need (Heb. 4:16). The Bible states: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). The grace of God is God's means of escape for those who are being tempted. Our part is to avail ourselves of it.

CHAPTER III

THE IDENTITY OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS AND THE EFFECTS OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS

There are two minor problems concerning the second part of this verse. One problem is the identity of the root of bitterness. The other problem is the effects of the root of bitterness. These two problems will be dealt with in detail below.

The Identity of the Root of Bitterness

This part of the verse is a clear reference to Deuteronomy 29:18:

"For there should be among you a bitter root, bearing gall and wormwood."

MINOR PROBLEMS:

THE IDENTITY OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS

AND

THE EFFECTS OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS

Here Moses was warning the people of Israel not to forsake the covenant that God had made with them by turning away from the true God to go and serve idols. Apostasy on their part would bring disastrous results for the nation as a whole. It would result in their being forsaken by God and driven from their land.

Analysis of *ῥίζα*

The most basic and extensive use of the word is to refer to the root of a plant or tree (Ps. 80:9; Mal. 4:1; Mt. 3:10; Mk. 11:20). Other uses besides the basic meaning of this word include the following: the most essential part of something (Job 19:28); something firmly established

CHAPTER III

THE IDENTITY OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS AND THE EFFECTS OF THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS

There are two minor problems concerning the second part of this verse. One problem is the identity of the root of bitterness. The other problem is the effects of the root of bitterness. These two problems will be dealt with in detail individually.

The Identity Of The Root Of Bitterness

This part of the verse is a clear reference to Deuteronomy 29:18: "lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood."

The similarity is brought out by the Septuagint, which reads: "μητις ἐστὶν ἐν ὑμῖν ῥίζα ἀνω φύουσα ἐν χολῇ καὶ πικρίᾳ."

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(Eph. 3:17; Lk. 8:13); an offspring (Is. 11:10; Rev. 5:5; Rev. 22:16). However, these uses have very little relation to its meaning in Hebrews 12:15. Its use in I Timothy 6:10 seems to be the closest parallel: "For the love of money is the root of all evil." Here it is used metaphorically to denote the cause or source of something.

Analysis Of *πικρίας*

The basic meaning of the word *πικρίας* is simply that of "bitterness." In Acts 8:23 it refers to a state of extreme wickedness: "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." It is used of bitter speech in Romans 3:14: "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." It is also used in Ephesians 4:31 to denote bitter hatred: "Let all bitterness, and wrath . . . be put away from you, with all malice." The meaning of this word finds its background primarily in Old Testament usage. In Deuteronomy 20:18 two Hebrew words are used to express the idea of bitterness. The word *שִׁנְיָ* ("gall") refers to a bitter or poisonous weed (Dt. 32:32; Ps. 69:22; Hos. 10:4). It is also used to refer to the poison of serpents (Dt. 32:33; Job 20:16). The word *חֲרָבָה* ("wormwood") also refers to a bitter type of plant (Prov. 5:4). Both words are used symbolically to denote bitterness or grief (Jer. 9:14; 23:15; Lam. 3:19). Both are also used symbolically to refer to extreme wickedness in contrast to righteousness: "for you have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock" (Amos 6:12).

Analysis Of *ἀνὴρ φύουσα*

The participle *φύουσα* comes from the verb *φύω* which means

"to shoot forth or spring up."¹ Its most common meaning is to refer to the growth of a plant or seed (Lk. 8:6,8). The present tense of the participle indicates simultaneous action to the main verb which is found in verse 14: "pursue peace . . . and holiness." The active voice indicates that the "root of bitterness" is the source and instigator of the action of the verb. The adverb *ἀνω* stresses the upward growth of the root.

Conclusion On Identity

There have been two general interpretations offered concerning the identity of the "root of bitterness." One interpretation is that it refers to a hidden sin which arises in the life of a person which will trouble him and occasion a stumblingblock to others.² A better interpretation is that the "root of bitterness" refers to a sinful person who troubles the group and thereby many are defiled. This interpretation takes the "root" as figurative of a person.³ This is supported by at least two other references. One reference is Deuteronomy 29:18 from which this verse is derived. Here a person is implied by the use of the personal pronoun in verse 19: "when he heareth the words of this curse." Another reference is found in the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees where Antiochus Epiphanes is described as "a root of wickedness" (1 Macc. 1:10). This conclusion can also be supported from the context of Hebrews 12:15.

¹J. H. Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 661.

²Arthur W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963), p. 1008.

³Owen, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews IV, 605.

Since the following verse refers to the person of Esau, it is quite possible that the "root" also refers to a person. The limited use of this term in this sense reveals that it is not a clear reference to a person per se. It is best to take it as a figure of speech that refers to a person.

Although most interpreters agree that the "root of bitterness" refers to a person, there is some disagreement on the essential character of the person who is called this. One view is that it refers to a person who teaches false doctrine and thereby spreads heresy within the church. In this case he would be classified as a heretic. This interpretation gains some support from the passage in Deuteronomy 29:18 which warns Israel against the evils of idolatry. The application in Hebrews would be to those who were preachers of justification by works of the law.¹ Another view is that it describes a person who is immoral or unholy in character.² This interpretation has the support of the context of this passage. The context centers around living a peaceful and holy life (Heb. 12:14). Also the former part of this verse concerning "failing the grace of God" implies this interpretation. Furthermore, the reference to Esau in verse 16 seems to emphasize his ungodly character rather than his perversion of doctrinal truth. The consensus of opinion is that both aspects could be applied here.³ Because of the context, however, the idea of un-

¹John Gill, Dr. Gill's Commentary, II (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1853), 764.

²Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews, p. 1008.

³Barnes, Epistle To The Hebrews, p. 310.

godliness is probably primarily emphasized.

The significance of the participle *φύουσα* may be that it indicates a gradual growth of the "root of bitterness." As a root identifies itself by what it produces when it has budded forth, so the person who is inflicted with some kind of sin in his life may hide it for a time, but gradually it identifies itself in one form or another. The growth of sin often comes in various stages. It may have its beginning in something very small and seemingly harmless; but it will eventually grow into something much bigger if it is not dealt with immediately. It is a Scriptural principle that if sin is tolerated in one person by the rest of the group, eventually many others will be affected.

Although the "root of bitterness" may not be identical with "failing the grace of God," they probably express similar ideas. Moreover, the fact that the first part of the verse applies to Christians probably indicates that this refers to a fellow believer within a local church. Lenski takes the position that the "root of bitterness" is an example of a person who has failed the grace of God and is therefore in an unsaved state.¹

This interpretation rests solely on the assumption that failing the grace of God refers to the loss of a person's salvation. Since this assumption has already been dealt with previously, it need not concern us here. The context which concerns the matter of discipline may help us here. Although the ultimate purpose of divine discipline is steadfastness and loy-

¹ Lenski, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 445.

alty, sometimes bitterness and resentment against the Lord is the result. Bitterness is produced by despising or rejecting God's discipline and this inevitably leads to many forms of outward sin.

The Effects Of The Root Of Bitterness

It Causes Trouble

The verb **ἐνοχλῆ** literally means "to excite a disturbance, trouble, or annoy,"¹ The noun **χολῆ**, which is translated "gall" in Matthew 27:34, is probably related to this verb. The simple verb **ὀχλέω** means to excite a mob or cause an uproar and is associated with the noun **ὄχλος** ("crowd"). The preposition **ἐν** probably indicates an internal disturbance of some kind. It is used in only one other passage in the New Testament where it refers to those who were being vexed by unclean spirits (Lk. 6:18). The word is also used in Classical Greek by medical writers to refer to the effects of sicknesses. The verb is a present subjunctive and denotes potential action in the present. The active voice indicates that the action of the verb is produced by the subject, which is "root of bitterness."

Since there is no object of the verb **ἐνοχλῆ**, a form of the personal pronoun "you" should be supplied. Either the singular form **σέ** or the plural form **ὑμᾶς** is possible. The particular form that is supplied will depend on one's interpretation of the "root of bitterness." If one views this as referring to a sin that grows in the life of a believer,

¹Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 217.

then the singular form would be appropriate. However, the view of this writer is that the "root of bitterness" refers to a sinful person who appears among the group and troubles them. Therefore, this warning would be addressed to the whole group collectively and the plural pronoun would be appropriate.

The meaning of the verb itself does not indicate that others are caused to sin or follow the example of this person. It does indicate that this person may disrupt or cause dissension within the church. The author saw the trouble that even one erring brother might cause to the rest of the group. Just as Achan "troubled" Israel by his one sin, so one person could cause trouble for the whole church here. Although the specific trouble or vexation is not here defined, it must have been something that would threaten to upset the normal order of things.

It Defiles Many

The common meaning of the preposition **διὰ** with the genitive case indicates agency or source and is best rendered as "by means of" or "through" in most cases. Both pronouns **ταύτης** and **αὐτῆς** are feminine singular and agree with "root" in gender and number.

The actual source or cause of this defilement may depend on the pronoun that is used. The use of the personal pronoun **αὐτῆς** would seem to indicate that the "root of bitterness" is the sole source itself and could be rendered "by him," or possibly "by it." The use of the demonstrative pronoun **ταύτης** might indicate that the trouble that the "root of bitterness" causes is the source of many being defiled. The pronoun **ταύτης** could be rendered "by this" or "thereby." In either case,

the ultimate source of many being defiled is the "root of bitterness" itself. Since **ταύτης** has better textual support than **αὐτῆς**, it is preferred here. The case of the pronoun can be best identified as an ablative of means. This is often used when the expression of means is accompanied by an implication of origin or of source.¹

The verb **μιανθῶσιν** comes from the root **μιαίνω** which means "to defile, pollute, or contaminate."² Its basic meaning is to dye or stain. It is used in various passages of Scripture to refer to moral or physical defilement (Jude 8; Ti. 1:15; Jn. 18:28). The noun form is used in 2 Peter 2:20 to refer to the pollutions of this world. The verb is probably best taken as an ingressive aorist which denotes an entrance into a state or condition.³ The subjunctive mood denotes potential action and does not necessarily indicate a statement of fact. The passive voice indicates that the subject, which is **οἱ πολλοί**, is the receiver of the action of the verb.

There are several other words that are translated "to defile" in Scripture. Only one of these words is an actual synonym of **μιαίνω**. This is the verb **μολύνω** which means "to smear with mud or filth."⁴ These words represent two forms of defilement. The word **μολύνω** is

¹Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 8.

²Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 414.

³Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 196.

⁴Richard C. Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (London: Mac-Millan & C., 1865), p. 106.

used only in a bad sense, unlike *μιαίνω* which only figuratively means defilement.¹ The use of *μολύνω* can be illustrated by two texts. In 1 Corinthians 8:7 it is used to refer to a person's conscience being "defiled" by sin. In Revelation 3:4 it refers to those who were not "defiled" morally or spiritually.

The words *οἱ πολλοί* also affect the meaning of this phrase. Most expositors agree that the article should be present although some manuscripts omit it. If so, it may be an example of the generic use of the article which represents a class as a single whole.² The presence of the article may have reference specifically to the church as a whole, while the absence of the article would lack this emphasis. The article would further emphasize inclusiveness. The regular function of the article is to point out individual identity.

While the former verb *ἐνοχλεῖ* carried the idea of disruption or confusion, this verb carries the idea of actual corruption. The sin of defilement was a highly developed concept in the Old Testament. There were numerous laws regulating various kinds of defilement. Obviously these laws concerning various kinds of defilement were intended to instruct the Israelites about the holiness of God and their need to emulate that holiness. However, in the New Testament the idea of ceremonial or ritual defilement does not exist.³ The New Testament's concept of defilement is primarily moral and spiritual.

¹ Ibid.

² Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 144.

³ Tenney, Pictorial Bible Dictionary, p. 211.

At first glance this verse might seem to be teaching that one person's sin might be the cause of everyone being defiled. An example of this was the sin of Achan whose sin was the cause of the whole nation being judged as guilty and being punished. On this basis, one member's sin could be the cause for the entire church being judged by God. However, the circumstances that accompanied Achan's sin were crucial. It occurred at a time when God was using Israel in a special way. Furthermore, God had directly commanded the people not to do what Achan was guilty of (Josh. 6:17-18). That this was only a temporary method of dealing with sin is seen by a lack of it in the later history of Israel. The meaning of the word "defiled" implies actual participation in the sin. One person's bad example might be the cause of some or all of the others being tempted to follow his example. This was the reason for God's punishment of Achan for his covetousness lest others would later be tempted to do the same thing. Another example of this is Ananias and Sapphira who were stricken by God for their sin of covetousness. Since God does not deal directly with sin in the same way today, this problem has become the responsibility of the local church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

The text does not state that a "root of bitterness" would inevitably lead to the whole group being led into sin. The purpose of the exhortation to "look diligently" was to prevent such an occurrence. The danger of such a person is expressed by the principle that "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). This danger can be easily avoided by another Scriptural admonition: "Now we command you, brethren, in

the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Th. 3:6). Once the "root of bitterness" has been purged from the rest of the group the danger that many will be defiled will be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to analyze this passage and arrive at its true interpretation. The view that this verse is a warning to the Christian against losing his salvation does not satisfy this writer in view of its grammatical and theological difficulties. Likewise, the views that this is a warning against the failure of becoming a complete partaker of salvation are unsatisfactory for they do not fit the context of the verse. The only interpretation that can properly satisfy the grammar and context of this verse is that it is a warning against the failure of being deficient in the grace of God that enables the Christian to live victoriously. One who fails to do this may become a "root of bitterness" and may be the cause of many others falling into the same sin.

EXPANDED PARAPHRASE

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Continually watch over yourself and one another very carefully, lest any one of you should be failing to avail himself of God's grace which He abundantly supplies to every believer; lest any sinful person of extreme wickedness be allowed to grow up in your midst and cause a disruption which will entice the whole group to be led away into sin.

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