

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

A Consuming Fire

Hebrews 12:25-29

25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. 26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." 27 This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

Lord, give us the meaning and spirit of Your Word while it lies open before us;
Apply Your Word with power to our souls, threatening or promise, doctrine or precept,
whatever it may be; lead us with trembling and with joy into the soul and marrow of Your Word.
(adapted from C.H. Spurgeon)

In our text this morning we come to the closing comments of Hebrews 12. Remember that Hebrews 11-12 have focused us on the topic of faith, giving us the explanation of what faith is – **“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...”**; giving us examples of ordinary people, who because of the exercise of faith became extraordinary people; and finally giving us the exhortations to run the race of faith to the glory of God.

In Hebrews 12:25-29, we have this final exhortation, calling those who profess Christ to diligently exercise faith alone in Christ; to not be tempted to fall back into some former way of thinking or living for God contrary to what has been said. Remember that many of the first Jewish readers were tempted to forsake following Christ because it was hard; it was hard to endure the ridicule and persecution from family and friends; it was hard to not live for self; it was hard not to think that something one did would not contribute to finding favor with God for salvation.

Things have not changed some 2000 years later. There are still fierce temptations for those who profess Christ to give up or give in – to not be so bold in living for Christ. There are still those who having seen something of faith, yet never truly take hold of faith and so, as time goes on, they shrink back and steadily fall away from the Lord. And beloved, please know that one may shrink back from the Lord while faithfully attending church and while saying and doing all the right things. So, the question becomes this, “How can we know if we are living by faith?” How can a person know if his or her faith is real, that it is active and that it is leading toward salvation?

I see in our text two answers to such a question – two final exhortations given to us as readers by which we may evaluate our own walk of faith. These two exhortations are as follows:

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1. The life of faith is characterized by obedience to God and His Word;
2. The life of faith is characterized by the worship of God in gratitude, reverence and awe.

I submit to you this morning that if we see our lives diligently pursuing faithful obedience to the Word of God and faithful worship in joyful trembling, then we can have assurance that faith is alive and well in our hearts. So then, using these two points, let us examine the text.

I. The Life of Faith is Characterized by Obedience to God and His Word (12:25-27)

A. Our Responsibility (12:25a)

Our text begins with words we have already seen and discussed back in 12:15; “**see to it**” – this is a present imperative – calling each one who hears these words to “take diligent care – to take heed – to examine carefully.” This is our responsibility. Also, it is a plural verb making it not only a personal exhortation, but also a corporate one. Each one is to individually watch out for themselves, but then also to be watching out for others.

Just what is to be watched for? Our text goes on to say, “**see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.**” The word “**refuse**” here means to purposely, intentionally and actively disregard. It means to know something and yet to count it as nothing. It is not a polite rejecting of a second portion of food that you do not need anyway, but rather an insulting rejection of that which is good and reasonable. According to our text, we are to make sure that not one of us so refuses, disregards, or rejects **Him** – that is Jesus (He was the subject of verse 24) **who is speaking**. Notice our text tells us that Jesus is still speaking. He speaks to us by means of His Word, through faithful study and preaching. Remember that Hebrews 1:1-2 said to us that

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...”

We are not to refuse what Jesus has and continues to say concerning God, man, sin and salvation. We are not to count as little or nothing the good news of the gospel. The one who lives by faith does not reject the Word of Christ, but rather receives it, assimilates it and then practices it. He is not unwilling to hear the Word but longs for it. The life of faith wants to know and obey the Word. One preacher has said, “*The only visible evidence you will ever have of your salvation is a life lived in the direction of obedience; it is the proof that you genuinely have bowed to the lordship of Jesus Christ and have been transformed by His grace into a servant of His righteousness.*”¹ Obedience to the Word is our responsibility.

B. Our Reason (12:25b)

But why? What is the reason or motivation for this obedience to what Jesus has said? I suggest to you that we have two such motives. First, we are to know that the Word of Christ is effectual – that is, what God’s Word says always comes to pass and always accomplishes God’s purposes.

¹ MacArthur, John – “Hard to Believe” p. 112-113

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Notice the logic offered in our text as the author says, **“For if those did not escape [the judgment of God] when they refused him [God] who warned them on the earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.”** This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. The lesser case was when Israel **“refused”** to hear any more from God. Look back at 12:19. There we read that Israel “begged” for no further word to be spoken to them. That word begged is the same Greek word translated refused here in 12:25. It was not that Israel simply pleaded for God to stop; rather they refused to hear no more. And this stubbornness of heart would eventually lead Israel down a path of total rejection and abandonment of God where in the words of prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, God’s people were more wicked than even the pagan nations around them. And so, from a time period from about 739 BC on until 586 BC and Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, God applied the rod of correction and, in accordance with His own Word, poured out His wrath on them. All of this because Israel refused to hear God on the Mountain of Sinai. Some might say, “But the revelation of God on Sinai was wrathful, terrifying and full of judgment.” Yes, it was. And so God, in great grace, mercy and love, revealed Himself in Jesus Christ – the King of kings who will rightly rule from Jerusalem and graciously reign from Mount Zion. And the point is this, if people who refused God’s earthly message of Sinai received such a heavy penalty for disobedience, how much greater will the penalty be for those who refuse God’s heavenly message of grace as revealed in Jesus? This has been a repeated theme of Hebrews – not to forsake so great a salvation (2:3); to take care that none have a evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God (3:12); that none would be dull of hearing (5:11); to see to it that none willfully sin after hearing the truth of Jesus (10:26); and now here in our text, that we would not refuse, but rather obey the gracious words that come from heaven (12:25). This is our responsibility and the reason given is that disobedience leads to great condemnation.

C. Our Rule (12:26-27)

But in addition to this responsibility to hear and to heed and this reason given that disobedience brings judgment, we are also given now the rule or authority of God’s Word as a motivation to obedience. In other words, we are to have faith in the word of God as authoritative, as the final rule or standard of our lives. Let us read these verses again:

26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.” 27 This expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

When God first spoke His law to Israel, it was from the frightening mountain of Mount Sinai with great shaking. I cannot imagine how terrifying it would have been to hear a voice so loud that it caused the ground under my feet to shake. It has been said that there were no sleepers in the congregation at Sinai!

But as dramatic an event as the giving of the Law at Sinai was, our text tells us that there is coming an even more intense shaking to come. It will not simply be the shaking of a mountain, but a shaking of both earth and heaven. And like the shaking of Sinai, this shaking

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will be initiated by His voice. Hebrews 12:26 quotes from the Old Testament prophet Haggai 2:6 in reference to a future judgment when not only will Israel be judged, but all the nations; every created thing will be shaken – meaning taken down to utter disintegration. Just one little word from God and it will be done – nothing will stand. God’s word is sure. God’s word is final. This is God’s rule. He shook the earth at Sinai and He will shake both earth and heaven in the end. Just because Jesus has come to in grace from Mount Zion, one should not think that refusing Him will be met with grace – no – it will be met with greater wrath than that displayed on Sinai.

But why – why does God promise this one great and final shaking? Our text tells us, **“so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.”** What are those things that can be shaken and what are those things that cannot be shaken? The idea behind things that can be shaken are those things that are only temporary. For the first readers, the author of Hebrews has revealed that all of the Levitical system, its priests, its sacrifices, its symbols, were all temporary and would be replaced with the better priest, and the better sacrifice of Jesus Christ. For others, all vain worship of human traditions, all religion apart from faith in Christ, all the material things to which we assign so much value to – all of these things will be shaken into nothing. What is it that cannot be shaken? Beloved, in a word, Jesus cannot be shaken. And all those in Jesus will not be shaken, will not be destroyed. That which cannot be shaken then refers to genuine, visible and hearty faith in Jesus Christ. That which cannot be shaken is the good news of the gospel. That which cannot be shaken is , as verse 28 will say, is the kingdom of Christ. God’s word says that everything temporary will be shaken and destroyed. This is God’s rule. So what are you hanging on to? As we come to a new year – what do you want more of – things? Prestige? Money? Prosperity? Or do you want more of the knowledge of Christ? Do you want more intimacy with Christ? Do you desire to be more obedient to the word of Christ? These are the things that cannot be shaken. Your home will fall, your computer will fail, your car will be demolished, your awards and plaques will burn, your gardens will wither, your earthly accomplishments will fade away – the word of God endures for ever. The “word implanted” – so says James, is the only thing that will save your soul (1:21). This is to be the rule of our lives, the word of God; it is our responsibility to obey and a reason to obey is note the severity of judgment against disobedience. The life of faith is characterized by obedience to God and His Word? How have you done this past year? Would you like to do better in 2008? What steps are you taking to ensure greater obedience to God and greater expression of faith?

II. The Life of Faith is Characterized by the Worship to God in Gratitude, Reverence and Awe (12:28-29)

Not only is the life of faith characterized by obedience, but as a natural result of obedience to God and His Word, the life of faith is also one of whole-hearted worship and gratitude. Let us read again verses 28 and 29:

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

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A. Our Resolve (12:28)

Beginning in verse 28 we see the resolve we ought to have as a result of the duty or responsibility of obedience. Those who have faith in Christ have an unshakeable kingdom. Those whose lives are characterized by obedience to Christ and His word have the assurance of eternal life rather than the expectation of eternal judgment. And the only proper response to this is a resolve to **“show gratitude.”**

This is an interesting command **“let us show gratitude...”** In the Greek text, this command is linked to verse 25; **“see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.”** In other words, *you cannot be grateful to God with being obedient to God.* But the words “show gratitude” are a translation of the Greek word “charis” – which is often translated as “grace.” Let us show “grace.” And if you were here last week, we saw this same word in 2 Corinthians 8:9 and there we noted that a proper understanding of grace; in addition to unmerited favor or divine enablement was “lavish liberality or great generosity.”

I like this perspective in the context of Hebrews 12:28. Because we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, the rich, full and free kingdom of Jesus, let us show lavish generosity as an act of worship to God. Let us show the world the great liberality of God by offering such generosity to God. We have freely received, let us freely give. Our resolve ought to be this – that we would be a people characterized by lavish generosity to God first and then to others. For has not God been lavishly generous to us? May I remind you of the greatness of salvation in Christ for just a moment? What do we read in Ephesians 1:3-8? (turn there)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us.

How do you feel when someone lavishes you with something extravagant? A bit spoiled? A bit overwhelmed? A bit undeserving? A whole lot of gratitude? Not too long ago Laura and I were treated to a dinner out that was by far the most extravagant and tasty we had ever experienced. We were overwhelmed by the generosity and greatly enjoyed the time of fellowship. It was a night and experience we will never forget (and in case some of you are wondering, no did not order prime rib but rather the best rib-eye steak I have ever had). Now, if I can be so overwhelmed by the lavish generosity of a high-end dining experience; how much more ought I to be overwhelmed by the lavish generosity of so great and complete a salvation in Christ? Remember the words of Titus 3:5-6? (turn there)

5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...

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Beloved, **“let us show gratitude”** – let us be resolved in this coming year to be lavishly generous in our worship and in our service to God. What will you give Him this year? Not in the sense of earning His favor, but in the sense of simply showing gratitude, of manifesting grace to God? This is the life of faith, a life of showing lavish generosity in our service to God? How can we do this? Let us be resolved to give back to Him more of our time, more of our efforts, more of our hearts, more of blessings, more of our resources. Let us resolve to see how much of what we have can be use in the worship and service of Him. Can you read His word a bit more this year? Can you be more determined to serve at church in some different capacity or to some greater extent that last year? Can you be more resolved to share your faith in Christ with others? What are some other ways you might think of by which to show your gratitude to God?

B. Our Respect

Finally then let me direct your attention to both how and why we are to show gratitude to God – our worship is to be done with three specific attitudes that reflect the utmost and highest respect.

In humble submission to God’s will...

First, we are to show gratitude and worship God with reverence. The word **“reverence”** means in effect “humble submission to God and His will” – we might say in context of our passage that we are to worship God with a willingness to obey. (Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – Matthew 26:39)

In heightened awareness of God’s power...

In addition to this reverence, we are to worship or serve God with “awe” – a word that is only used here in all of the New Testament. The word is used to describe an awareness of danger. It is not an all out “fear” but an awareness that what is being experienced could easily overcome you. Asaph captured this in Psalm 76 after recounting the power of God in delivering Israel from Pharaoh and his army he wrote:

You, even You, are to be feared; and who may stand in Your presence when once You are angry? (76:7)

In this sense it could mean to have a healthy respect for the power of God. Is this how you worship God? The life of faith is characterized by those who worship God in humble submission and healthy respect for God.

In view of God’s judgment against sin...

And just what is it that motivates this respect? We see the answer to that in verse 29, **“for our God is a consuming fire.”** The imagery here takes us back to Mount Sinai. It is interesting to me that the life of faith comes to God through the grace of Mount Zion, by the blood of Christ, through obedience to His Word; but the life of faith never, never, never forgets that God has not ceased to be the God of Sinai, the God of judgment and wrath against sin

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and against anyone who seeks to come to God by his own means rather than through Christ. Note the text says that our God “is” – not “was” – but “is” still a consuming fire.

It is God who has established and demanded perfection to His law. His law is a reflection of Him and whoever keeps the law, if he could, would reflect then the perfection of God. Because we have been created in the image of God, each person is obligated to follow God in every respect. In other words, the righteousness that belongs to God ought to be evident in us. But it is not. We have rebelled against this holy God and each of us is guilty of living according to some other set of rules rather than according to God’s rules. This sin against God demands legal retribution and so the Lord speaks and warns and shakes the very foundations reminding us that He is a consuming or destroying fire. He will destroy all that is contrary to Him. God has not changed. The God of Sinai is the God of Zion. The God who demanded obedience to His law provides the only righteous obedience through His Son. The life of faith seeks to be obedient, to hear the word of the Lord, to trust in the provision of the Son to come to God as a welcoming Father. Disobedience, a refusal of living by faith means coming to God as a terrifying righteous Judge. We must either bow down to Him in reverence and awe in proper worship or we will one day discover Him as the consuming, destructive fire.

Everyone will come to God via one of these Mounts – Sinai or Zion. The life of faith recognizes the grace and mercy of Zion and approaches God with obedience, and reverential worship. The life that lacks such faith approaches God via Sinai, thinking there is something good about Him that can turn away the wrath of God. There is only one who has turned away the wrath of God, the Lord Jesus Christ – and the Lord Jesus speaks, calling us to come to Zion, that is to trust in what He has accomplished for the sinner. Will you come? Will you continue to come? Will you continue to hear him who is speaking, Him who is warning, Him who is calling you to worship with reverence and awe?

Soli Deo Gloria

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