

An Unshakeable Kingdom

Hebrews 12:18-29

11/4/2018

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Good morning. Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 12. And as the children who are leaving to go be together for an age appropriate Bible lesson for our children's worship – we have that every week except the fifth Sunday of a month. And if you're new and visiting, please go with your child and meet the volunteers out in the lobby to go downstairs, that's ages 4 to first grade. I enjoyed teaching. We have other volunteers that love that time to teach our young people the glory of the Lord and what is acceptable worship. In many ways, it's what we're going to be talking about today as well.

As we are looking today at this passage, we're doing a couple of things. One, we're finishing up the section that Randy started last week. And we're also beginning to finish the whole letter. You'll remember that the letter of Hebrews is more of a sermon. And where he began and where he is ending is culminating in the sense of the sufficiency of God's Word and for the call, the encouragement for us, to listen, to pay attention, to respond to the Word of God as He's communicating to us, as He's revealing to us who He is. And the author of Hebrews discusses again and again the radiance of Christ, how He is better than the old covenant. And this pattern of exhortation, explanation, and exhortation again has happened again and again, unfolded on itself throughout the whole book. And we see that in the passage today as well.

Last week, Randy talked about having a firm resolve. It's an encouragement to be strengthened in your faith as you persevere. Engage in wholehearted unity in one another while guarding your heart from an unwilling spirit. And so, today's passage continues that, gives an encouragement for action while also providing a motivating reason. So, let's read Hebrews 12:18-29.

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further message be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given,

“Even if a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.”

So terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised,

“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.”

This phrase, “yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Lord God, we are confronted with the whole story of seeing your interaction in front of your people in physical ways, ways that are in bold relief to how we no longer experience what it means to be mediated, to be communicated to by you. But you give us your Word, and we ask that we would hear it and understand it and respond to it in ways, being encouraged that, Lord, your ways and your means are sufficient. Your ways and your means are provisions of your grace that we experience your full glory now through your Son Jesus. Help me, the teacher. Help us by your Spirit to be moved to worship of you. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Well, it's that time of year again: commercials, radio songs, Hallmark movies, the perennial fight, can you sing Christmas songs before Thanksgiving? Or must you wait until Thanksgiving has come and gone? We can have that debate later. I'm sure we have passionate reasons for both. But commercials, as we think about that time, are stories. They are selling something. They're persuading us. They have this wonderful ability to expose what we think we need, and they seek to persuade us for a product or a service or an experience that we just must have.

And this time of gift giving and altruism and good cheer, all these things are wonderful. But they're also very poignant times that it exposes something about who we are as people. You see, people have an uncanny ability to pursue anything or to pursue anyone that we think will improve our lives, keep us safe, give us what we want. We are driven towards self-protection. We are motivated by a sense of security. We seek the pleasure of what feels good even if we actually know and experience that it's not for our good, and that ultimately it does not satisfy.

Christianity is based on gospel. What is gospel? It's good news, right? The good news that is certainly crescendos in the life of Jesus – His teachings, His claims, His actions, certainly His death, and the witness of His resurrection. That is good news. But the good news can also make us uncomfortable. For some, the Gospel is laughable. Others, it's terrifying. It can make some angry, and others feel unconvinced. So, we have various levels and layers of discomfort with this good news, this message of salvation in Jesus.

Why? Why is that? I think in some ways, it gets at the crux of something Jesus said. He asks, "What prophet is it if a man gains the whole world but loses him or herself?" Jesus, He's telling the world one of the simplest truths and yet one of the deepest profound mysteries when He says, "For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it." Jesus is calling us to a life of self-denial as we follow Him. Jesus invites us to rest securely in Him. Jesus provides us the desires of our hearts. But He only asks us to walk a different path to get there.

So, this message, this gospel, it challenges our pursuits. It messes with our definitions. It exposes our motivations. And this gospel, this good news, is only good news if it's true. And because it's true it's better, and it's better because it's unshakeable.

The book of Hebrews began by giving us this main idea that the preacher, the author of the book of Hebrews, really just unpacks and unrolls and cycles back and unrolls more. It begins at the beginning, where he says,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the nature of the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

From the beginning, the author of Hebrews is preparing this menu for fine dining. He's bringing out course after course and each course is better than the previous one. He's showing us how Jesus is

better than the angels, how He's better than Moses, He's a better priest, He's a better sacrifice for sins, He's a better mediator of the covenant, of a better covenant.

What shines and what glimmers alerts our eye, does it not? But what radiates, emits light, it emits heat. Costume jewelry shines, but a bride's smile radiates. Hebrews is about this radiance of Christ, that Jesus is the better prophet. Jesus is the better priest. And Jesus is the better king. And all the more, then, do we need and require – everything about us is longing for, and the Lord provides. But we need this encouragement to endure whatever comes our way. And we can endure with joy because Jesus's kingdom is unshakeable.

And so, we're going to look at this passage in three points. The first is a caution. And the second two points are encouragements. So, first, this caution of do not refuse. It says in verse 25, "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking." This specific caution occurs three times in the book of Hebrews, first, in 3:12 where it says, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God." Then in 10:25 regarding the "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day drawing near." And then the third instance is here. It's a caution that starts with a phrase that uses our sight as one of our senses to pay attention, to watch, to be mindful. It's a road sign telling you to slow down as the curve approaches. It's a parent telling their little one to stop running around the pool because the deck is wet. Pay attention.

So, what does it mean to refuse him here? Well, the word takes on a sense of averting or to decline a request. So, for example, the same word here is also used in verse 19 of our passage where it talks about "the hearers begged that no further message be spoken to them" through Moses. They requested something, but that request was an averting. It was a declining: we don't want it any more. This unmediated disembodied voice, these sounds, the gloom, the fire, the darkness, the tempest, these things are overwhelming, please stop.

Also, another example is Luke 14:18 where Jesus is telling a story of a man who gives a banquet. And upon saying that everything is ready, and the invitation is, come and celebrate. And his guests begin making excuses why they can't come to the party anymore. I have to go attend my field; my father died. These excuses of: I know you've invited me, but I am declining the invitation. It's a refusal which takes that intensive in our verse to another level. Because the context is not just a polite declining of a party. It's a refusal. It is a rejection to obey, to obey the one who is speaking.

Now, to do this, the author of Hebrews starting in verse 18, he's painting two pictures in contrast. He puts them in bold relief of each other. On one hand, he's talking about Mount Sinai, and on the other hand, he's talking about Mount Zion. And so first he describes seven words, seven phrases, to describe Mount Sinai. He talks about it being a mountain that can be touched, even though the command as we read earlier was to not touch. But it's tangible, it's physical. There was a blazing fire, there's darkness, there's gloom, there's a tempest storm, sounds like trumpet blasts, and words I don't understand by hearing words from not a person. It's a disembodied voice.

And we see that here is a refusal to hear. Now that's part of the story, and they go on to refuse and disobey in much more drastic ways. But that overwhelming nature of Mount Sinai, whereas in contrast to Mount Zion – which when the Bible talks about Mount Zion, it's referring to a couple things. But usually at some level, it's referring to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, the capital where the temple is. Sometimes Mount Zion is referring to the specific part of Jerusalem, the temple mount. And then, likewise, the Bible also talks about Mount Zion in a more figurative way of that dwelling place of the Lord with His people. And so, this is how the author of Hebrews is bringing it up.

Now, he's using seven words and phrases to talk about Mount Zion in contrast to Mount Sinai. He talks about Mount Zion being the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, where there are multitudes of angels in joyful gathering, kind of like the Olympics, kind of like a sports competition where there is excitement that the competition has come to an end and the victors are screaming and cheering. This joy filled experience together that includes part of God's creation, and that's truly mysterious, but

the multitudes of angels. And then, likewise, we see the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in Heaven. This is picking up a little bit from the beginning of chapter 12, the cloud of witnesses. Again, those gathered corporately in this gathering, this assembly of praise and joy and excitement and celebration.

The firstborn are the recipients of the covenant, the blessings, the birthright in comparison to what Randy talked about with Esau who literally was the firstborn but sold his birthright. And those who are not firstborn are made firstborn enrolled in the book of life, referring to those believers in Christ who are experiencing the benefits and the joy of this salvation. The spirits of the righteous made perfect, again, those clouds of witnesses, the believers from the Old Testament and the believers from the New Testament together all under the mediation of the new and better covenant, which is mentioned as we come to God the judge of all and to Jesus the mediator of this covenant.

And the final reference, “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” And the writer of Hebrews has spent many chapters talking about sacrifice and the work of the priests and the blood in the temple. And he’s making this reference to Abel, he’s done it once before in chapter 11. But what cries out from Abel’s blood? In His own death, God speaks about his blood crying out from the ground, crying out for vengeance for this murder, vengeance and justice for what has happened. And how in that same voice of vengeance and justice, we see it speaking a better word because that has been met and accomplished in the atonement of Christ. A better word, His blood that cleanses and forgives and makes things right between us and God.

These verses describe the presence of the living God upon Mount Sinai and the presence of the living God amongst His people even today. God’s holiness is indeed set apart, and anything unholy cannot approach. There are things to hear on Mount Sinai. There are things to see. The people, including Moses, were rightfully terrified. It says he was trembling with fear.

This is glory, gravitas. What do you do? This power, this might is saying come to me but don’t touch. Do not defile my sanctuary but be holy as I am holy. It’s no wonder the author of Hebrews is using this contrast to talk about what they couldn’t endure, and what we are invited to experience with full access in Christ. We are very much like them. We long for the visual, right? Show me and I will believe, we say. But friends, they saw and disbelieved. What makes us think that we will believe if we see? That’s the argument that the author of Hebrews is making here, an argument from lesser to greater.

Likewise, people have an uncanny ability to make vows with God in the shaking of our lives, right? When the trembling of our fears is gripping us, we cry out, do we not? Whether that is to the living God or whether that’s to some impersonal force. We just want our lives to go better. We want our circumstance that we are experiencing to stop. But a soon as the skies clear, what do we do? When the pressures fade, we go about our merry way.

So, the verse here, this caution “do not refuse him who is speaking” is reminding us of God’s nature. Indeed, in His glory, He is a consuming fire. He is the same, yesterday, and tomorrow. But here in verse 26 we see a quote, and the author of Hebrews does this a lot. It’s a great picture of how to truly get the depth and the nuances of the New Testament is to be students of the Old Testament. It’s to hitch ourselves to the Old Testament and to know how God is communicating and how He has communicated, but as the author of Hebrews has said, how He now communicates through His Son.

But he quotes Haggai 2:6 which says, “For thus says the Lord of hosts, yet once more in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea and the dry land.” This is a picture of judgement to the nations. But it’s a picture of a cosmic reality of God being judge. God shaking that which He has created. It’s apocalyptic in some ways, this sense of what is He doing to bring about the final restoration of all things, undoing what has been undone so that it has been made done again. That can be confusing, right? He’s undoing that which is undone. That what has been brought about in the brokenness and the rebellion of our hearts is being pushed back. It’s being undone. That’s what I mean by the confusing words.

He undoes what has been undone and He makes it right. This shaking that He does is not for destruction, it is for refinement. It involves His righteous judgement, but it is for His glorious purposes. His shaking removes all that doesn't last so that what does remain lasts.

And so, the author is giving us this caution. If they didn't escape, how can we think we can? It is a word of caution that we should take seriously even though we can hold two realities in tension, that this kindness, this accessibility, this approachability that we now have to God in Christ is both the same way we approach God there in Exodus 19, but it's unique in that it is perfectly done and accomplished as we are experiencing that mediation through Jesus.

So, just a few questions because I can't speak to everybody's situation. But as you think about this caution in your life, how do you respond to God's Word? Where are you being tempted to refuse Him? Where can your heart be sluggish and apathetic to His Word? Yes, salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus, but don't let that encourage you to gloss over the Lord's own warning. Hear and listen to His Word. Do not refuse Him and come to Him.

That is the beauty of this passage which we're going to get to in the encouragements in one moment. We long for what's real, right? We want experiences that give us life or make us feel alive. But what the author of Hebrews is saying here and what he's been unpacking the whole time is what is happening in Christ? Though we don't go to a mountain, though we don't experience sacrifices of animals, this is the full glory of God. His presence is dwelling with His people. He has sent His Spirit, and in the new covenant of Christ our union with Him is as good as it gets. It's as good as it's going to get. We experience that now and all the more when it's finally restored. Now, our experiences are limited, yes. But how much more in Christ?

That's the caution to hear His words and it certainly is the encouragement. And we see two of them. The first one is verse 28, "Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." I'm going to go through these two quickly because they're important. So, be grateful, and let us offer worship, these two encouragements.

There is an encouragement for gratefulness, for gratitude. Now, gratitude is in proportion to the gift, is it not? We might tell our loved one – and we should mean it, and I encourage you to mean it – but if you are given socks at Christmas, yes, you're thankful, right? I happen to be very thankful. My mother in law gives me a pair of smart wool socks every year. I love them. But you know joke about socks, right? We say thank you, but eh. Ho hum. But the gratefulness that we're encouraged here is in the reality of our relationship to the Lord redeemed in Christ. And why is it? For receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. His kingdom cannot be moved. It cannot be altered by the power of kings, the might of armies, or the wisdom of men. So, to have the gratefulness that's encouraged here is to respond with generosity. It is a condition of our heart. It's an attitude. It's a disposition that we have. The very core of who we are is receiving something from God by grace. And we are full of gratitude. It's receiving it, it's accepting it, it's knowing His kindness. It's saying thank you to Him. It's putting into practice the benefits of that gift, right?

Yes, I get socks. I wear them. But my brother in law – I think I've shared this once before with you – he bought me a bag that I can't afford, like a literal leather bag. I can't afford it. It was a big gift. I don't put that in the dresser and wear it every once in a while. That is something that is valuable to me as the gift that it was. My gratitude is in proportion to the gift.

So, how do you experience, how do you demonstrate your gratefulness to the Lord for receiving such an unshakeable kingdom? Do you have joy? That's a great question. And I don't mean happiness or euphoria all the time. But is there a well spring of joy in your heart embracing the gift? Yes. But it is loving the giver, having a grateful spirit. It's understanding more about what we are being grateful for, it's part of our discipleship. It's learned more about this gift, what it cost, what it entails. What are the benefits of salvation? How am I going from faith that converts me from death to life in Christ, how do I experience His justification as if I never sinned and how do I grow in that grace as I am to be holy as He is holy?

It's understanding, it's learning. It's also, likewise, orienting our lives to live in accordance with His kingdom. That we have no other allegiance ahead of Him or above Him, no greater purpose, no greater love, no greater intentionality in how you go about your life except living in the righteous and sovereign rule of Jesus in His kingdom that is unshakeable.

There is one of those Pinterest quotes. You know what they are. "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." And so, the encouragement from being grateful to offering worship go hand in hand. Verse 28, also, "Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe." This offering worship includes what we do here. It is a corporate reality of praising God, ascribing glory to His name, declaring what is true about Him in His character, in His redemptive work as we pray and trust and ask and confess and embrace the reality of who we are in Christ. All of these things happen, yes, on a Sunday. But they happen in your homes. They happen around the dinner table. They happen in your living rooms. They happen at bed time. It's all of life, this offering of worship.

Paul picks this up in places like Romans 12, for instance. "We no longer make sacrifices in the temple because our lives are sacrifices that are a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Let us offer worship." How, how are we to do that? Well, here he mentions two things. We offer acceptable worship with reverence and with awe.

Now, with reverence, the words kind of mean the same thing. "Reverence and awe" means "awe and awe" in some ways. But the first one, reverence, is this is a holy fear. Although we have access to Christ and can enjoy the presence of God freely and with confidence, we are reminded that He is still a consuming fire. There is a complete otherness and transcendence that this God, the living God of the universe, is. He is not like us. And we are made in His image, but we are not like Him. And so, it is appropriate to have a holy fear.

Now, the beauty of what is being talked about with Jesus being better is that in the trembling of Mount Sinai, I don't know about you, but it creates an ambivalence, right? I recognize your power. I recognize your might. I'm thankful that you brought me out of Egypt. I just don't know if I want to get too close. Thank you, but it's good for me that you don't want me to touch it because I don't know if I want to go touch the mountain. But what the author of Hebrews is talking about is this approachability with confidence, that we can come to the very holy of holies because Christ has entered in on our behalf, paid for our sins, and is interceding for us.

The second part of acceptable worship with awe kind of deals with the emotion of that. That it is breathtaking. It's beautiful. And that what feels terrifying is actually for my good. It's actually safe. There's security there. There's kindness and mercy to be experienced.

Now, we could go on and on about acceptable worship. Presbyterians love to talk about it, right? It's also a reminder that we can conflate our culture with what acceptable worship is. So, if we're approaching God, we have to do it in a sense of right repentance and right heart but recognizing that some people express joy differently than others. Some people reverence and awe differently than others. Some may get silent. Some people might laugh. Some people might dance. These things in the corporate body of Christ is what's acceptable worship because we are responding to His grace and the generosity that He has shown with joy and worship of Him.

As we think about these two mountains, the author of Hebrews is encouraging us to not go back to Mount Sinai, particularly the audience here. If you remember, in the Roman Empire, there was a group of people who were – the Jewish religion was recognized by the state. But this new sect of Christianity, Christ followers, the empire didn't really know what was going on with that. And so, it might have been advantageous to say, I think I'm going to practice these older things.

The author of Hebrews is reminding us we can't go back. You've been brought out of Egypt. You can't go back to Egypt. And now, he's saying you can't go back to Sinai. So, the question for us as we listen to God's Word, how are we trying to get to God by going through Sinai? What are we putting in our lives

as our performance? What are we putting in our lives that seeks to perform or pretend that we are more righteous or more holy than we actually are? Or failing to acknowledge the grace in our lives, and we think we're far worse than we really are.

We try to touch what we are not permitted to touch. One day my wife was downstairs teaching children's worship, there was a foosball table. She was giving the illustration of the Garden of Eden, and she talked about, this is the tree with the knowledge of good and evil; do not eat of it. What's the first thing those kids did? They wanted to touch it. We try to touch what we are not permitted to touch, and we don't touch what we are invited to touch. We long for more proof, yes. We say, just show me. But thanks be to God that in all of His rumbling glory, He is the same. We can both say He is a consuming fire and He is gracious and kind and invites us into His presence, which is purchased by the blood of Jesus. We are to draw near to Him with the means He has provided.

Do you hear His Word? Do you listen? Do you hear His voice? I encourage you to consider the betterness of Jesus. And hear His call and come. Make no more excuses. Come to Jesus. Let's pray.

Our Father in Heaven, we give you thanks and we give you praise for you are just and righteous and loving and kind and merciful. And these two things we don't understand, and we often keep them separate. But you hold them together in your Son Jesus. Would you be honored by our worship? The worship we do on a Sunday morning, but would you be honored by our lives which we seek to respond to your grace as our worship to you? Help us to understand these things. Help us to grow in your mercies. And help us to grow in confidence that we truly have an unshakeable kingdom that we are a part of. Help us to endure. And may these be the motivations of our heart, to pursue your glory and enjoy you forever. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.