

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ Above all Things
A World Rocked
12:25-29

Text:

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.” ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Introduction:

There is a colloquial saying we use from time to time: “It will rock your world.” That is a precise contemporary understanding of the main point of this paragraph. With Christ, the world was rocked. Here is what I mean...

We are in the process of comparing and contrasting two mountains. The one mountain, our author names Mt. Zion. The other mountain is nameless; but it is described with such detail that he leaves no doubt as to its identity. He describes the mountain with seven terms:

1. They came to the place of God’s location – a mountain that could not be touched.
2. blazing fire
3. darkness
4. gloom
5. tempestuous winds
6. the blast of trumpets
7. and a thundering voice that struck panic into the heart’s of its hearers.

He is speaking, of course, of Mt. Sinai and the Israelite experience at the time of the giving of the Law to Moses recorded in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4 and 5.

If you remember the story, as Israel was encamped around the base of the mountain, the command had been issued that no one was to touch the mountain, not even an animal. If an animal touched the mountain, it was to be stoned to death. As the people camped there, they could not see God they could only hear his voice. They were extremely frightened. In fact, in response to the thundering voice of God and to his commands, the people begged Moses to tell God to stop talking to them.

Everything about the encounter was frightful and foreboding.

The contrast, then, is with Mt. Zion – the very mountain to which the readers of Hebrews had come. This mountain is festive. In a similar fashion, the author describes Mt. Zion with seven terms:

1. You have come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem
2. filled with innumerable angels in festal gathering

3. to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven's registry
4. to God, the judge of all
5. to the spirits of the righteous now made perfect
6. to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant
7. and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Heaven, the New Jerusalem, is the ultimate fulfillment of all things.

Now, it becomes clear that we are not simply contrasting two mountains, but two covenants – the Old versus the New. And building off of this comparison with the two mountains, our author seeks to issue a warning in vv.25f. “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” What is this warning based on?

If you go back to v. 19, our author describes the original encounter like this:

Hebrews 12:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ and [they heard] the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.”

The author of Hebrews views this begging of God to stop talking and this inability to endure the command given as a refusal of God himself. It was indicative of the unbelieving heart that caused them, as a nation, to so quickly turn aside from the covenant (cf. Exod. 32:19-35).

So, now, the author writes to a group of professing Jews, who were contemplating their return to Judaism, to say to them: “If you turn back, you will be refusing God. Only this time, you are not simply refusing him who spoke on earth but him who is speaking from heaven. So if your forefathers did not escape when they refused God's word, how much more do you think you shall escape?” He is forming a rather tight argument from the lesser to the greater.

In other words, this paragraph is a strong plea in sermonic form to encourage the readers to persevere in faith and not to cave-in beneath the pressure that threatens them physically. It is very true. The Jewish Christians in the 1st Century were threatened physically. They were arrested, tortured, beaten and eventually martyred. But such threats to mere physical realms are inconsequential when one contemplates the mountain to which they have come when they have come to Christ.

Let's follow his argument.

You will do well to notice that he takes the comparison by way of contrast to new heights in this paragraph. He is not going to compare the mountains: one frightful and one festive; but he is going to compare two kingdoms: one unstable the other unshakable. The two covenants result in two kingdoms. The OC produced an earthly kingdom built around a physical nation. It was unstable. You need merely to read the OT narratives to see that fact born out. The NC, on the other hand produces a heavenly kingdom built around a spiritual people and it will prove to be unshakable. With this paragraph, the author brings to a close all his argumentation as to the many ways that Jesus is, in fact, superior to all things.

The flow of thought proceeds along three arguments:

First, the voice from heaven is to be preferred to the voice from earth (v.25).

Second, the shaking from heaven compared to the shaking of earth (v.26).

Third, the establishment of heavenly things with the removal of earthly things (v.27).

Following this argumentation, he calls for an appropriate response in vv.28-29.

So that is where we are going. Let's get there.

First, then, the voice from heaven is to be preferred to the voice from earth (v. 25)

Hebrews 12:25 (ESV)

²⁵ 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.

The flow of argument at this point really centers on the word “refuse.” It very literally means “to beg off.” It is used in verse 19 referring to the people of Israel who begged God to stop talking. In fact, the word is used with this meaning throughout the NT. Look with me at a few other places the word shows up. (There are no more references to this word in Hebrews. Cf. Mark 15:6 where it is used positively as “to beg”; Acts 25:11)

- **Luke 14:18-19** But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’
- **1 Timothy 4:7** Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;
- **1 Timothy 5:11** But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry
- **2 Timothy 2:23** Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.
- **Titus 3:10** As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,

So, in Hebrews 12:19, when the Israelites begged God to stop speaking to them because they could not endure the command, they were choosing to have nothing to do with God. They were, in fact, refusing him. Here is the point: If you refuse God's word, you refuse God himself because apart from God's revelation, you can have no interaction or relationship with God. To refuse his word is to refuse his person.

The warning for 1st century Jews is the same. If you refuse Christ, the means through which God speaks from heaven, you too refuse God.

Do you remember the opening words of the book back in 1:1-2?

Hebrews 1:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,...

So far, we have only looked at the facts. Now here is his argument (v.25): “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.”

If those who disobeyed God as he spoke on earth regarding an earthly, physical and temporary kingdom did not escape punishment, how much more will those be punished who disobey God as speaks from heaven concerning a heavenly, spiritual and eternal kingdom?

The argument is a means to perseverance. The author is not attempting to establish a theology of assurance or loss of salvation; he is not trying to speak to loss of rewards or anything else. He is

simply attempting to motivate believers to persevere in their obedience. Do not refuse God. We know this because it is not the threat that receives his emphasis but the promise. Let's advance in his argument to the second part.

Secondly, the author compares the shaking of earth with the shaking of heaven and earth (v.26).

Again, we have a comparison by way of contrast; it is seen with the words, "at that time" compared with the words, "but now." The comparison is contrasting a time when God's voice shook only the earth – Mt. Sinai – compared with a time when his voice will shake heaven *and* earth, as opposed to shaking the earth *only*. What does he mean?

To put it very plainly, whenever God makes a change in program, there is a shaking of the earth. Shaking the earth is symbolic of change. Shaking the earth *only* is symbolic of earthly, physical change, while shaking the heaven and earth is symbolic of spiritual and physical change. There are many passages which attest to this reality ().

When God delivered the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he stamped the change with a literal, physical earthquake. The shaking of the earth testified to the establishment of a new nation, a physical nation of Israel – a physical, national and temporal kingdom. High and important changes were conferred on them, but as great and glorious as this change was, it did not extend to heaven.

"At that time his voice shook the earth, but now..." What time is he referring to? There are two ways to read this phrase, "but now he has promised." The first is to reference the word "now" to the time in which he made the promise; the second is to reference the word "now" to the time for which the promise refers. In the first case, the author would be saying, "At that time God's voice shook the earth, but today he has promised to someday shake heaven and earth." Understood in this way, the promise is made in the 1st century era with a fulfillment to come sometime in the future. This reading does not work because the author already assumes that his readers have received the kingdom (cf. v.28, "Therefore, let us be grateful for having received a kingdom that cannot be shaken). So, the promise cannot be entirely future.

If we read the "now" language according to our second option, the author would be saying, "At that time God's voice shook the earth *only* producing an unstable temporal kingdom; but the promise is *now*, opposed to *then*, that there will be an unshakable eternal kingdom." In speaking from heaven with the revelation of God in Christ, the voice of God has shaken heaven and earth in bringing about a change in both physical and spiritual arenas.

We know this is the right interpretation because of the quote from Haggai 2:6-7:

Haggai 2:6-7 (ESV)

⁶For 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. ⁷And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts.

Even the Jews admit that this was in reference to the days of the Messiah. The shaking of the heaven and earth surrounding the works of Jesus at the cross and the resurrection and the Day of Pentecost are sufficient to know that a spiritual and physical change has taken place. This brings us to third part of the argument.

Third, the establishment of heavenly things is accompanied with the removal of earthly things (v.27).

That is to say, the eternal unshakable kingdom is accompanied with the removal of the temporal unstable earthly kingdom. This statement is nothing more than the logical end of a string of evidences already given throughout the book of Hebrews.

- Hebrews 7:19 (ESV)
¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.
- Hebrews 8:7-8 (ESV)
⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. ⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says...(quoting the promise of the NC)...¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.
- Hebrews 9:9, 14 (ESV)
⁹ ...According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,...¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

And here in chapter 12, the unstable temporal kingdom is removed so that the unshakable eternal kingdom may come in. There can be no overlap! There can be no confusion! A fundamental change has come about in the plan of God. The time of earthly kingdoms is done. The reign of Christ has come.

How does this fit into the warning? If you are a believer like these 1st century Jews who is tempted to cave-in beneath the pressures that threaten, or to sell-out to other pleasures that beckon, then you need to see that refusal of God's Word in Christ is incomparably more severe than the refusal of Israel of old, for there is no other aspect to God's plan. To refuse God's word spoken on earth through Moses brought very real punishment; but those words were not ultimate in god's plan. The Word of God revealed in the Son are the ultimate words in the revelation of God to man. To refuse Christ is to refuse the ultimate!

The ultimate kingdom is at stake. Why would you even think of turning back to a temporary temporal kingdom in Judaism, or American nationalism when you know it's all about a spiritual kingdom – an unshakable spiritual kingdom?

- If all they can take is the temporal, material elements of this life, they still have not threatened the ultimate realities of a spiritual life. Don't sell-out to other pleasures that beckon.
- If all the nations of this earth can threaten is the loss of physical life, they still have not threatened the reality of spiritual life. Don't cave-in beneath the pressures that threaten.

In coming to Christ, you have received an unshakable eternal spiritual kingdom that des not compare to any kingdom this earth has ever seen.

How should we respond (vv.28-29)?

“Therefore...”

We must respond with a heart of grateful worship.

- Grateful worship expressed in our hope.
“Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken...”

Those tossed about in a storm for days delight to have their feet set upon solid, stable ground. When earthly kingdoms rise and fall. The conquering kingdom of Jesus Christ is refreshingly unique. It is indestructible and permanent. Our hope is not in this land or this life. Our hope is in all the benefits purchased for us by the blood of Christ. The NC brings us promise of living in the new heaven and the new earth for all eternity.

- Grateful worship expressed in our **service**.

“Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship...”

The word translated “worship” is translated throughout the NT as “service” as well. It has the idea of submissive labor pleasing to God – willing obedience. Just as the Israelites refused God’s word resulting in disobedience, so receiving the kingdom results in obedience. The blood of Jesus secures for us the NC blessing a new heart. We now live out a loving obedience, not simply a legal one.

- Grateful worship expressed in our **reverence**.

“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.”

The phrase “with reverence and awe” is to be understood as “with a fear of God...because he is a consuming fire.” The fear of God means that we must fear insulting the worth of God when we live in such a way that our allegiances are tied only to this earth – when we sell-out to other pleasures that beckon; or to fear the insult of God’s worth when we live in such a way that our allegiances are tied only to this life – when we cave-in beneath the pressures that threaten. To worship God with holy fear means to worship God with the fear that you may insult his great worth by returning to some other source of worship. The NC has purchased for us by the blood of Christ, the promise fulfilled, “I will be your god and you will be my people!” If we reject God, to whom will we turn? It is unthinkable! Because of Jesus’ shed-blood on the cross, we have the ultimate.

We have received an unshakable kingdom!