

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

## Lesson # 47 February 5, 2023

### The Unshakeable Kingdom

#### Hebrews 12:25-29

Welcome back to what I anticipate will be the final 6 month ( or less ) segment of our journey through the Book of Hebrews – a journey we began on September 13, 2015 – 7 ½ years ago @ a pace of 6 months at a time. If we finish Hebrews before the 6 months is up, I do have a lesson or two planned to finish up the full segment of teaching.

## Introduction

These 5 verses that end the 5<sup>th</sup> exhortation to believers ( the 5<sup>th</sup> warning passage ) since the start of the book, express a concern that has been the underlying theme of the letter – that those who have professed to be believers must not deny their faith in Christ under persecution or for any reason because to do so would be to go backwards to something far inferior to Christ by any measure or comparison the reader might consider.

This final warning ends the exhortation section of Hebrews which goes from Heb. 10:19-29 before the book concludes in 13:25 – the epilogue. Falling back or away is unthinkable, since they have come to Mt. Zion rather than Mt. Sinai; to the throne of grace where sins are cleansed and forgiven rather than judged and punished.

The A.H. warns them one last time that they must not refuse the One speaking, because if Israel, under the old covenant , did not escape when warned on earth, then believers in Christ won't escape the One who warns now from heaven.

## Don't Reject God's Word

### v. 25

“See that” ( or “See to it”, or “make sure” ) – IOW, beware of refusing “Him who is speaking.” If the Israelites did not escape the very severe punishment when they hardened their hearts towards God at and after Sinai, how much greater judgment is due to those in the NT era who won't heed the gospel? And that message is from heaven – note Heb. 2:2-3.

If you are at all familiar with the first 5 books of the Bible ( the Pentateuch ), then you know that Israel mistakenly and arrogantly asserted that they could keep the law in Ex. 19:8. But God knew they could not, and would not – note Deut. 28:15-68 ( read vv. 15-45 ); Deut. 29:24-28 & Lev. 26:14-35. These are just a few examples.

But keep in mind that all these curses promised to Israel as a result of their disobedience, rebellion and idolatry, were temporal and earthly curses. But, being warned to obey, too many of them ( leaving only a remnant of obedient people ) did not

escape the judgment that they could have, had they heeded the many warnings. Those in the NT & church era, who have been warned, as we are here in v. 25 and elsewhere, who then reject the Word / the Gospel – are in a much more dangerous position, because Apostates will not inherit the kingdom!

Richard Phillips, citing, in part, George Guthrie, points out;

“There is no middle ground in the things of God. George H. Guthrie rightly says, “The Word must be received or rejected...For those who reject the Word, there exists no escape from God’s judgment. At the end a person either resides as a citizen of God’s unshakable kingdom or perishes with the rest of the universe.

Many people draw a mistaken conclusion about the NT and Christianity. They conclude that since Jesus speaks of grace and peace, God must no longer be as serious about obedience as he was in the OT. People compare Moses and Jesus, and think that Jesus is a nicer fellow who will be more tolerant of their sin and rebellious unbelief. But they are badly mistaken. According to the NT, the same Jesus who tenderly ministers to his own flock will return in vengeance to judge the world that crucified him in unbelief. The apostle Paul puts this in starkest terms, writing of Christ’s return, “from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” ( 2 Thess. 1:7-8 )” – cf [ Jude 14-16 ].<sup>1</sup>

Many of today’s leaders, national & international, draw similar conclusions about who Jesus is and what His real authority involves. Consider the interchange between Jesus and Pilate on Jesus’ crucifixion morning, in John 18:33-36. Can we really afford to ignore Jesus’ spiritual authority because His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, so the irreligious are OK to be complacent about it?

James Montgomery Boice comments;

“If Jesus’ rule is merely spiritual, does that mean it has nothing to do with people who do not choose to be religious?”

“Nothing is farther from the truth, for when we say that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world [ JN 18:33-36 ] what we are really saying is that Christ’s kingdom is of heaven and therefore has an even greater claim over us than do the earthly kingdoms we know so well...Over these is Christ, and we flout his kingship not merely at the peril of our fortune and lives but at the peril of our eternal souls.”<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be a disconnect when it comes to the Gospel. Perhaps because so many well-meaning evangelists have called it “the offer of the gospel”, as if it were one choice among many alternate and equivalent choices, many people do not see it as the ultimatum and command that it is!

Al Mohler, in his short but exceptional commentary on Hebrews, tells us how we should consider the Gospel;

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips / George Guthrie, Hebrews p 576-577

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Boice, cited by Phillips, p. 577

“The verb “reject” is important to note. Our modern cultural context as well as general lack of attentiveness to the text often causes us to present the terms of the gospel in terms of consideration rather than command. This verse, though, helps us see that the gospel is never presented solely as an offer to be considered. It is presented as an ultimatum, as something to be either received or rejected. Presenting the gospel always produces a response. One either hears the gospel and believes it unto salvation or hears the gospel and rejects it unto eternal judgment.”<sup>3</sup> [ cf. Isaiah 55:8-11 ]

And William Barclay points out something that goes along with what Dr. Mohler says; “The gospel presents the highest obligation to obedience, bringing a greater punishment for disobedience than even Moses’ law. William Barclay says: “if a man merits condemnation for neglecting the imperfect message of the law, how much more does he merit it for neglecting the perfect message of the gospel? Because the gospel is the full revelation of God, there is laid on the man who hears it a double and a terrible responsibility; and his condemnation must be all the more if he neglects it.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul, in 2 Thess. 1:8 also points out in frightening context, that the gospel is a command to be obeyed, not just some religious suggestion to be given our consideration. So, you refuse at your eternal peril to heed the warning of the gospel, because it comes with a warning attached, that most people do not think very deeply about; i.e., what does Jesus save us from? Again, Al Mohler is very helpful here; “Again, the author’s choice of words is significant. Why does he choose the word “escape? Escape what? God’s wrath against those who reject his Son. The Bible is straightforward about the certainty of God’s wrath against sinners. Those who reject the word God has spoken through Jesus Christ will not escape his wrath. This is an essential part of the gospel, a part Christians should not be embarrassed to proclaim. Our rebellion against God merits his wrath. Praise God that he has placed that wrath on his Son for all those who repent and believe – for those who do not reject his word and do not turn away from his warning. If we reject Jesus, we will not escape wrath.”<sup>5</sup>

## Shaken & Unshakeable

## vv. 26-27

This certainly has as its closest antecedent vv. 18-21. And the unstable and fearful scenes at Mt. Sinai from Exodus 19. But there are other references to OT shakings by God – one is Psalm 68:8. God shook the earth with His voice at Sinai, and also in Judges 5:5 as Jericho was flattened.

The author next cites in v. 27, Haggai 2:6. The context of this verse in Haggai is that Israel is trying to complete the new temple and God’s Spirit is among them – note vv. 5 & 6 – in this context means that God would judge the other nations, and v. 7, their treasures would fill God’s temple, bringing more glory into the new temple than was

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Christ in Hebrews*, B & H 2017, p. 215

<sup>4</sup> Wm. Barclay – cited by Richard Phillips, *Hebrews*, p. 577

<sup>5</sup> Al Mohler, p. 215

in the old one. Haggai 2:21-23 concludes the book with God pledging to “shake the heavens and the earth”, to dethrone pagan kings and destroy their military power, then rule through Zerubbabel. It is possible that the A.H. is picking up on the entire section here of Haggai, ultimately interpreting them as eschatological – the coming of the kingdom at Jesus’ second advent, which appears to be the point of these verses in Hebrews. The shaking to come will be more profound than at Sinai, and will include all of creation.

By saying “Yet once more,” the author is pointing to the temporal nature of the initial shaking, because, eschatologically, the removal of the present world and the heavens is coming. Demolition and complete re-creation is what is expected from this text and others – cf. Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 21:1-22:5, but especially note Revelation 20:11. Some theologians, of late, mostly Covenant Theologians, do not expect a complete destruction of the earth from these texts, but instead postulate a renewal only – a renovation instead of a complete re-creation. At this point, in my own studies, I disagree with this argument.

The upshot of this is that we must not place our hopes in this present world – either its order or in fact, its very existence. There is a great disruption coming as prophesied, and it will be much worse for unbelievers than anything so far in history.

The things of this world are not the things that ultimately matter. Oh, they matter to us in our temporal lives, because God has ordained that food, clothing, shelter, family and housing and all these things we consider as necessities should be important aspects of all our lives, but our commitment to Christ must be primary, not secondary – cf. Matt. 6:30-34. The day is coming when everything in this world will pass away (Matt. 24:35; Matt. 5:18), except God’s Word, His truth and those whose security is attached to these things will find themselves in complete despair and ruin!

## Acceptable Worship

v. 28

“The kingdom that cannot be shaken” is God’s Kingdom, the very one we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come...”. This is what history is really all about and so, if we are wise, we will place full value on our participation in Christ’s spiritual kingdom, the one He told Pilate in JN 18:36, “*was not of this world*,” far above any earthly calling. Nothing can prevent God’s Kingdom from coming at the time He has determined it will come and will triumph (Note Daniel 2:35,44-45).

V. 28a starts with, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken...”. Note how Tom Schreiner and Philip Hughes respond to this point: “Through such gratefulness believers serve God in a way that pleases him. God is honored when those who belong to him give him thanks and praise for his mercy. Such gratefulness is mingled with “reverence and awe.” It is a humble gratefulness, a gratefulness mixed with a holy fear, with

the realization that the kingdom is an undeserved and precious gift. Hence there is no arrogance or overconfidence in such thankfulness but a joy that is sweetened by a sense of awe.”<sup>6</sup>

“As ingratitude lies at the very root of all sin and rebellion against God ( Rom. 1:21 ), so gratitude is the pulsating heartbeat of every positive response to the gospel, gratitude which spontaneously bursts forth in the apostle’s exclamation, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” ( 2 Cor. 9:15 ). Whatever his circumstances, whatever he does or suffers, “always and for everything” the Christian should be “giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” ( Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17; 1 Thess. 5:18 ). His whole life should be one constant expression of gratitude.”<sup>7</sup>

We, of all people who have ever lived, who have lived and died with no thought of Christ in many cases, outright by rejecting Him, the presentation of the Gospel notwithstanding, are most blessed because He has chosen us for salvation before the foundation of the world, and worked our lives out to be in a position to hear the gospel, to accept it, obey and persevere in the faith. Along with that, Romans 8:16-17 promises us we will be co-heirs with Christ, God’s children and His kingdom will thus be our dwelling place and our citizenship is from there already – cf. Eph. 1:11,18-20; 2:6, 18-22 & Phil. 3:20.

Verse 28b – “*and thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.*” This verse is reminiscent of Paul’s summary analysis of 11 ½ chapters of doctrine in Romans 12:1-2. “*Acceptable worship*” – just this very clause implies that such a thing as unacceptable worship exists.

Christ pointed out to a Samaritan woman in John 4:23-24 that acceptable worship to God is done in “*spirit and truth.*” We also know from Hebrews 11:6 that “*without faith it is impossible to please Him.*” To please Him is tantamount to being acceptable. Thus, acceptable worship must be the direct result of a heart changed by God, and also the result of a heart of gratitude and a love of God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

The fact that this “acceptable worship” is to be done with reverence and awe help define “acceptable.” We must come in full allegiance to God, not just by rote or to obey the letter of the law ( this is what was taking place in the book of Malachi – cf. 1:6-14; 2:1-19. )

Richard Phillips points out for us that allegiance to God is no light matter; “Never think that allegiance to God is a light matter, for he is jealous of the affections of his people. He is a consuming fire, who purifies all with whom he comes into contact. God being the kind of God he is, the two essential ingredients to true spirituality are those found in verse 28, namely gratitude and awe.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 407

<sup>7</sup> Philip Hughes, Hebrews pp 559-560

<sup>8</sup> Richard Phillips, p. 583

God is not one to be trifled with, as v. 29 will make very clear for us. Those who heed His warnings and obey His commands will enjoy His kingdom forever. Those who reject and forsake Him will face the fire of His wrath.

## God is Not a Tame God!

### v. 29

“These two attitudes [ reverence and awe ] are given in the Bible as the yardsticks by which we may assess all our worship, all our works, all our lives as they are offered up to him. “Let us be grateful,” not wishing for the world and stirring his jealous anger; “let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,” not forgetting that this is the holy God of heaven, “a consuming fire.”<sup>9</sup>

Reverence and awe are 2 essential ingredients to true spirituality. We must, as creatures before such a magnificent Creator, tremble in fear, even as believers ( cf. Phil. 2:12-13 ), and must reckon with His holiness and power, with an awe that produces reverence as we live out our relationship with Him. We must never forget that we are sinners saved by His grace, unmerited, and wholly undeserved and so, as a result, we must also be thankful ( v. 28 – “grateful” ) for His love and mercy.

We all face a choice – obey or rebel & reject God’s call – Richard Phillips talks about the choice we all face;

“Everyone is faced with a great choice in this life, a choice that is tested and refined later on. Into the cacophony of this world, into our busy lives, into the ever-present hum of trivial human endeavors, God is speaking. God calls to this world; he calls to each of us. At Mount Sinai he spoke from the earth, but in the gospel today he speaks from heaven. Our choice is a simple one: will we heed his voice? It is not easy to heed the call of God in a world like ours, to live for a world that is yet to come, that is invisible to our sight and evident only to our faith. But God does not intend for it to be easy, for it is the costly devotion of our hearts that he seeks. It is always that way: we must lose our lives in order to save them, we must give up the world to gain the kingdom of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Phillips then adds;

“The gospel invites us to draw near to God, to live upon his mountain in the city he has prepared. Yet it is also true that God’s holiness places an eternal distinction between the Creator and the creature. Verse 29 reminds us of Exodus 3, where Moses saw the fire burning within the bush. God called Moses to come near, but then. Said to him, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” ( Ex. 3:5 ). The imagery of God as a raging fire speaks of his holiness and the reverent fear with which we must always treat him. God can never be taken lightly. Even when the threat of his wrath has been removed by the cross of Christ, he himself is not a tame God; he is always dangerous.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Phillips, p. 583

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, p. 584

<sup>11</sup> IBID, p. 582

I could not resist adding this next quotation from C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia novels, as narrated at first by Phillips; because it is quite pertinent to this verse and shows us that God is not a tame God;

"This truth is famously depicted by CS Lewis in his Narnia series of children's fantasies. Lewis uses the figure of Aslan, the giant and majestic lion to depict the Lord. At one point, one of his heroines, the adventurous girl, Jill, comes upon a stream of water. She has been lost and is dying of thirst. But as she comes forward, she spies the lion sitting calmly before the water. Terrified, she stops in her tracks. The lion invites her, "If you are thirsty, come and drink." Dying of thirst, and drawn by the rippling gurgle of the stream, the girl steps a bit forward. "Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" she meekly asks. "I make no promise," said the lion. Drawn closer by the refreshing sounds of water, she wonders aloud, "Do you eat girls?" I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," he replies. Jill recoils at this, concluding, "I daren't come and drink." "Then you will die of thirst," said the lion. "Oh dear!" cries Jill, drawn yet a step closer by her need of refreshment, "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then." But the lion responds, "There is no other stream."

If you are going to have the thirst of your soul filled by the waters of eternal life, then you are going to have to deal with this kind of God. He will not move out of the way for you. He will not become more palatable, a chummier kind of God. He will never be safe. But he is the Savior, the God of majesty and grace, the God who shakes the heavens and earth but gives to his own a kingdom that cannot be shaken."<sup>12</sup>

On this subject, I cite an additional ( and likely more famous quote ) from CS Lewis from the Chronicles of Narnia, this time from the book, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" where Aslan is again depicted as the Christ figure in the book;

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr. Beaver. "Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. But the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, who will save Mr. Tumnus."

"She won't turn him into stone too?" said Edmond.

"Lord love you son of Adam, what a simple thing to say!" answered Mr. Beaver with a great laugh.

"Turn him into stone? If she can stand on her two feet and look him in the face it'll be the most she can do and more than I expect of her. No, no. He'll put all to rights as it says in an old rhyme in these parts:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,  
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,  
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,  
And when he shakes his man, we shall have spring again.

You'll understand when you see him."

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr. Beaver.

"Is he a man?" asked Lucy.

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<sup>12</sup> Cited and analyzed by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 582-583 "Chronicles of Narnia;" - "The Silver Chair"

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the Wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – *the* lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver: “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King I tell you.”<sup>13</sup>

The final words for this lesson go to Al Mohler;

“The gospel isn’t merely fire insurance. The gospel is Christ’s abundant mercy saving us from the holy wrath we rightly deserve. Remembering that God is a consuming fire stokes our reverence and awe of him and reminds us of the severe and eternal consequences of failing to turn to him in faith and repentance. We must not fail as the Israelites did. We must persevere until the end.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> CS Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, p. 146, Harper-Collins, 2001

<sup>14</sup> Al Mohler, *Hebrews*, p. 217