

## XXXIII. An Unshakeable Kingdom

April 23/24/25, 2019

Hebrews 12:18-29

**Aim:** To appreciate the difference that grace makes over law, and in doing so, to give God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe in the congregation of God's people.

### A. Mount Sinai vs. Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:18-24)

*Bruce:* Our author reverts to the contrast already pointed in 2:2-4 between the giving of the law and the reception of the gospel. Awesome as were the circumstances of the giving of the law in Moses' day, more awesome by far are the privileges associated with the gospel. Those who wholeheartedly believe the gospel and gladly embrace its privileges need have no fear; they are urged to enter the heavenly sanctuary with full confidence through the blood of Jesus (10:19-22). The stern note of warning is for those who, having begun to make an approach, fall back. They are reminded that the consequences of despising the gospel are even more dreadful than were the consequences of despising the law.

*Phillips:* 'Let My people go,' Moses cries to Pharaoh, 'that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness' (Ex. 5:1). This is an excellent reminder that the purpose of our deliverance, the purpose of the church, is to worship and serve-God—not to please the world, not to market goods and services to the secular culture, but to please God through our living worship. But it is not to Mount Sinai in the desert that Christians are told that they have come. Mount Sinai is brought into the picture, but only to present a contrast by which the mount of our salvation may be seen more clearly. It is a contrast between Sinai and Zion, between Moses and Christ, between the law and the gospel.

#### 1. The Mountain of Law (12:18-21)

<sup>18</sup>For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest, <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup>For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." <sup>21</sup>Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

*Schreiner:* The readers are urged to stay on the right road, pursue holiness, and live differently from Esau because they have come to a mountain that is far superior to Sinai. So in verses 18-21 the author tells the read what they have *not* come to. They have not come to Sinai but to Zion. The author never mentions 'Sinai,' but is it clearly in his mind.

*Phillips:* The author of Hebrews is writing for effect, piling description upon description to make clear the situation of Judaism, the situation to which Moses brought the twelve tribes and to which the writer warns the Hebrew Christians not to return. This is the old covenant situation, and it does not come across as a very attractive one.

##### a) A Physical Mountain

*Schreiner:* The word 'come to' (προσεληλυθατε, *proselēluthate*) is one of the author's favorites (cp. 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22). Those who 'come to' God must believe He exists and rewards those

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

who pursue Him (11:6). Mount Sinai is an earthly and visible mountain. It can be ‘touched’ and handled, but anyone who touched it when the Lord was present would be slain (Ex. 19:12).

*Hughes:* Essential to understanding the contrast between Mounts Sinai and Zion, we must see that the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai was an awesome *physical* display, as depicted in Exodus 19:16-19, 20:18-19, and Deuteronomy 4:11-12. The prelude to the divine fireworks at Sinai involved the people’s consecration as directed by God (cp. Ex. 19:10-15). They washed their clothing (Ex. 19:10, 11, 14) and abstained from sexual relations, so as to be ceremonially clean (Ex. 19:15). They also observed God’s orders that no man or beast touch the mountain on pain of death by stoning or arrows (Ex. 19:12-13). The stage remained set for three days. Then on the morning of the third day, the people saw a thick cloud cover the top of Sinai illumined by gold veins of lightning with accompanying thunder rolling down the slopes, plus a deafening trumpet blast that reduced everyone to trembling (Ex. 19:16).

*Phillips:* The description in Hebrews 12:18-21 comes from the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, the writer says, ‘For you have not come to what may be touched.’ This recalls Exodus 19:12. When man came to God at the mountain of the law, there was a separation between man and God, a separation made necessary by our sin and His holiness.

### b) *An Awesome Presence*

*Schreiner:* When the Lord descended to speak with Moses and Israel, it was ‘blazing with fire’ and ‘darkness, gloom, and storm’ (cp. Ex. 19:16; 20:21; Dt. 4:11; 5:22). The storm and gloom represented the might and power of God, terrifying the people observing it. Smoke billowed up from the mountain, and the mountain was shaking as in an earthquake (Ex. 19:18). In verse 19, the author continues to convey the terror and dread that cascaded down upon those near Mount Sinai. The sound echoing down the mountain was like a trumpet blasting, and the words were such that the people entreated Moses that they be spared from hearing them (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18-19; Dt. 5:24-27). What they feared was imminent death upon hearing the words of the Lord. Israel was required to cleanse themselves (Ex. 19:10), to abstain from sexual relations (Ex. 19:15); and they could not touch the mountain (Ex. 19:12) or try to break through to see the Lord, or they would face certain death (Ex. 19:21, 24).

*Bruce:* The description of the terrors of Sinai is based on the account in Ex. 19:16-19; 20:18-21, with Moses’ recollection of the scene forty years later in Dt. 4:11ff. The mountain was so charged with the holiness of the God who manifested Himself there that for man or beast to touch it meant certain death.

*Hughes:* Imagine what it must have been like to be there: the ground is unsteady under your feet due to perpetual seismic tremors—the sky is black in deep darkness except for the radiating forks of lightning in the gloom and the fire blazing from the top of Sinai ‘to the heart of heaven’ (Dt. 4:11)—celestial shofars blare more and more loudly in primal moans—Moses speaks, and God answers him with a voice like thunder. The only thing that matches this incredible display you are witnessing is the seismic trauma in your heart! The people were visibly, physically assaulted with the holiness and majesty of God. This palpable divine display on Sinai communicated far more than any speech or written word ever could—and all Israel, young and old, could understand.

*Hughes:* In addition to providing a glimpse of God’s holiness, the blazing fire atop Sinai emphasized that His holiness rendered Him as judge—‘a consuming fire’ (cp. Dt. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). The effect of these physical signs was to display in no uncertain terms the absolute

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

unapproachableness of God. The mountain was so charged with the holiness of God that for a man to touch it meant certain death. Even if an innocent animal wandered to the mountain, it would contract so much holiness that it became deadly to the touch and had to be killed from a distance by stone or arrow.

*Phillips:* Second, the mountain was ‘a blazing fire.’ This was not the painted fire of a decorative fireplace. This was a fire that could be felt, which menaced the people with its hot, destructive power. Its message was the same one delivered by the flaming sword of the angel at the gate to the Garden of Eden. It was a barrier to access, and a deadly one. Third, there was ‘darkness,’ the mountain of the shadow of death. It was draped with ‘gloom and a tempest,’ we are told. This is what it means to come to God under the administration of the law, under the old covenant. There were a trumpet blast and a voice of thunder that terrified the people. They could not bear the voice of God, so they sent Moses up to mediate for them.

### c) *A Terrifying Experience*

*Schreiner:* We are not astonished to learn that the Israelites near Sinai begged the Lord to stop speaking, for they couldn’t endure the command that even an animal that touched the mountain would be stoned (Ex. 19:12-13). Exodus 19:13 actually says that neither human beings nor animals should live if they touched the mountain that both would be stoned for transgressing the boundaries. The author of Hebrews picks up on the command to execute animals to underscore the strictness of the requirements and the terror that the people felt. Even animals, which could not comprehend what was going on, were not spared from punishment if they wandered to the place God prohibited.

*Bruce:* If even a beast accidentally touched or trespassed on the hill of God, it contracted so much holiness from it that it too became highly dangerous to touch; it must be killed from a safe distance—stoned.

*Phillips:* To get the full effect, we have to rattle these items off one after another, the way the writer of Hebrews does: the mountain is roped off; it is blazing, dark, gloomy, and storm-ridden; from it blast a trumpet and a voice that makes the people beg it to stop, lest they die. Even their spiritual leader Moses, a true giant of the faith, a man set apart by God and for God, cried out, ‘I tremble with fear.’ This is the mountain to which Israel has been brought, having been delivered from the bondage of Egypt.

*Schreiner:* Nor was the terror confined to ordinary Israelites. Even Moses as the leader and deliverer of Israel was filled with dread and fear. The Lord’s holiness is so awesome that every person in the world is filled with trembling and fear upon entering His presence. The terror of gazing at the storm breaking out on the mountain and of hearing the thunder and feeling the mountain shaking was palpable. Moses confessed that he was seized with terror and trembling. The OT actually emphasizes the people shuddering in terror rather than Moses (Ex. 19:16; 20:18; Dt. 5:5). A reference to Moses’ fear is found in the account of the golden calf (Dt. 9:19). Perhaps Moses’ terror is implied in Ex. 19:19 where Moses speaks and God responds with thunder. Such a thunderous reply could doubtless be interpreted to provoke fear in Moses. But it is more likely that the author merges Sinai with the golden calf incident intentionally. Thereby he evokes Sinai’s full implication for Israel. Those who trifle with the Lord and flout His covenant stipulations will be destroyed.

*Bruce:* And not only were the people terrified; even Moses, privilege as he was to press up into the thick darkness where God was, was filled with numinous awe. His words, ‘I am filled with

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

fear and trembling,’ are not recorded in the Pentateuchal description of the Sinai theophany; the closest Old Testament parallel is in Dt. 9:19, where he reminds the people of his supplication for them after the incident of the golden calf: ‘For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure, which Yahweh bore against you, so that He was ready to destroy you.’

### d) *A Theological Symbol*

*Schreiner*: The main point is that believers couldn’t draw near to God through Sinai, though some did draw near and see God or at least His feet (Ex. 24:9-11). The old dispensation was entirely inadequate.

*Hughes*: The salutary effect upon those at the foot of Sinai was substantial—it instilled a proper fear of God (cp. Ex. 20:20). It was patently remedial. To understand that God is holy and that one is a sinner is to stand at the threshold of grace. Moreover, the giving of the Ten Commandments, in this awesome context—and Israel’s failure to keep them—served to emphasize the people’s impotence and doom, which is a further grace, however negative the experience may be. But this said, the great problem with the trip to Sinai was that while men and women could come to see God’s holiness and their sinfulness, the Law provided no power to overcome sin. Understanding this, the writer’s explanation that they have come to a better mountain than Sinai makes sense: ‘For you have not come to what may be touched.’ Zion, to which they had come, is a spiritual mountain, whereas Sinai was a physical mountain that could be touched only at pain of death.

*MacArthur*: The Old Covenant was associated with Mount Sinai because that is where God spoke to Moses when that covenant was instituted. It was a covenant of law, and it was also a covenant of judgment and of fear. It said, ‘Do this, or do not do that, or you will be judged.’ In some cases it said, ‘Do not do this, or you will die.’ That is not the place to which the New Covenant brings us. To that mountain ‘you have not come.’ As God was preparing to establish the covenant, the people were forbidden so much as to set foot on the mountain, under penalty of death. ‘May be touched’ does not refer to permission but possibility. That is, Sinai was a physical mountain, and therefore was able to be touched, seen, and walked on. The earthly mountain symbolized the earthliness of that covenant, as contrast with ‘the heavenly Jerusalem’ (v. 22).

*MacArthur*: To stand at the foot of Sinai, even without touching it, is to stand under judgment and doom. It demands and it punishes. Since no man in himself can fulfill its demands, no man in himself can escape its punishment. At Sinai, sinful and unforgiven man stands before an infinitely holy and perfectly just God. Guilty, vile, and undeserving of forgiveness, he has nothing to expect from Sinai but God’s condemnation. The symbols of Sinai are darkness, fire, trembling, and trumpets of judgment. There is good reason to fear at the foot of Sinai.

### e) *A Modern Application*

*MacArthur*: The law is God’s great mirror. When we look into it, we see ourselves as we really are—immeasurably short of God’s standard of righteousness. There is not a single commandment that we have kept perfectly or can keep perfectly, in either act or attitude. The law makes no exceptions and no allowance for less than perfect obedience. The law overwhelms us, slays us. No sinner can endure Sinai. Every sinner who stands at the foot of Sinai is paralyzed with fear. ‘So terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”’ Even Moses, to whom God had spoken through the fiery bush and through whom He had challenged Pharaoh, could not stand at Sinai fearless.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

*Hughes:* Today, few Christians, especially Gentiles, are in danger of turning back to Sinai per se and embracing the Levitical corpus of the Old Testament. Sinai, with its fiery mountain and its code, is simply too daunting. Instead, we fabricate our own mini-Sinai with a series of mini-laws that reflect nothing of the fiery presence and that are, we think, well within the reach of our unaided powers. If one is an evangelical, one's little legalisms reflect something of Biblical ethics, however faintly. If one is liberal, the little legalisms will simply reflect cultural consensus about popular causes. But whether evangelical or liberal, our legalisms—our mini Sinais—are always *reductionist*, shrinking spirituality to a series of wooden laws that say, 'If you will do those six or sixty or six hundred things, you will be godly.' And, of course, legalism is always *judgmental*. How easily our hearts imagine that our lists elevate us, while at the same time providing us with a convenient rack on which to stretch others in merciless judgment.

*Phillips:* You in the church were likewise brought to the presence of God Himself. You were brought to a mountain—but not to *that* mountain! There is a positive comparison here. The church, like Israel, has been delivered out of bondage, brought to the presence of God for the purpose of consecration to Him. But there the comparison stops and the contrast begins. 'You have not come to *that* mountain,' the writer says, 'but instead to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.' We are reminded here of a comparison Paul made in Galatians 4. There the old covenant is Mount Sinai, and her children, Paul says, comparing her to Abraham's illegitimate mate Hagar, are slaves. This is Judaism, this is the old covenant. But we are 'the Jerusalem above' that is free (see Gal. 4:21-26). This freedom, this access to God in Christ, is visually presented here in Hebrews 12:22-24, as the writer turns to the situation of the new covenant believer.

### 2. The Mountain of Grace (12:22-24)

*Schreiner:* The contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion is stunning. Hebrews helps us to imagine the difference between the two, for the author paints in striking colors the difference between paralyzing fear and extraordinary joy.

*Bruce:* The events of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, as we have seen before, are treated in the apostolic age as parables of Christian experience. But Christians have come to no sacred mountain which can be touched physically but to the heavenly dwelling-place of God, the true and eternal Mount Zion.

*MacArthur:* The mountain of the New Covenant is Mount Zion, representing the 'heavenly Jerusalem.' The opposite of Sinai, it is not touchable, but it is approachable. Sinai symbolizes law and Zion symbolizes grace. No man can be saved by the law, but any man can be saved by grace. The law confronts us with commandments, judgment, and condemnation. Grace presents us with forgiveness, atonement, and salvation.

*Hughes:* From Mount Sinai we now switch to Mount Zion and the sublimest description anywhere of what we come to under grace. It is lyrical and has the feel of an early confession regarding the church. After the introduction of Mount Zion, there follows seven sublimities.

#### a) *The Mountain (12:22ab)*

##### (1) Mount Zion (12:22a)

<sup>22</sup>*But you have come to Mount Zion...*

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

### (a) Come

*Schreiner*: Instead of coming to Mount Sinai, where there is fear and foreboding, the readers have joyfully ‘come’ (*προσεληλυθατε, proselēluthate*), which is the same term used in 12:18, to Mount Zion. There is an already-but-not yet dimension to the promise here, for they have come to Zion, and yet the fullness of Zion is not yet theirs.

*Bruce*: ‘You have come’ may denote their conversion to Christianity; the Greek verb is that from which ‘proselyte’ is derived (*προσεληλυθατε, proselēluthate*).

*Hughes*: We are in Zion for good. ‘But you have come to Mount Zion’ is in the perfect tense, emphasizing our permanent, continuing state.

*Phillips*: What are we to understand about the Christian life? The key to this is found in verse 22, which says, ‘You *have come*.’ The writer of Hebrews does not say, ‘You are coming’ or ‘You will someday come.’ He says, ‘You have come.’ This is the dark glass taken away, so that we may have God’s perspective on our own present existence as His people in the world. This is not merely a picture of your future reality—this is now your reality if you are a Christian. You have come to this mountain, where the threatening flames burn no more. You have come to this city, in which the worship of angels surrounds the people of God. You have come to this church, vindicated by God, proclaimed righteous and made perfect in Christ. Why? This is where our passage leads us—all of these things are true because of this one and essential thing, because ‘you have come ... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,’ to his better-speaking blood. You have come to Jesus and all of this is found in Him.

### (b) Zion

*Phillips*: Christians, through faith in Christ, have come into the presence of God Himself, the place where God exercises sovereignty and from which He sends deliverance. This Zion is His acropolis, the seat of His throne.

*Schreiner*: Zion, historically, is part of Jerusalem and was captured by David (2 Sam. 5:7; cp. 1 Kgs. 8:1), and is henceforth identified with Jerusalem. Zion in the OT is God’s ‘holy mountain’ (Ps. 2:6; 9:12; 20:2; 74:2; 76:2; 132:13; Mic. 4:2; Joel 3:17, 21; Is. 8:18), where He specially dwells. Here in Hebrews, Mount Zion is linked with the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city. We are prepared for this in the OT, for Mount Zion is identified as ‘the city of the great King’ (Ps. 48:2; cp. Is. 60:14). The promise to rebuild Zion (Ps. 102:16) is fulfilled ultimately in the heavenly Zion, for we find in Ps. 110:2 (the favorite psalm of the author) that the Lord and His Messiah reign from Zion. Zion will not be shaken or destroyed but will endure forever (Ps. 125:1; cp. Is. 24:23).

*Bruce*: Mount Zion was the site of the Jebusite stronghold, which David captured and made his royal residence in the seventh year of his reign (2 Sam. 5:6-9). He made it the religious center of his kingdom by installing there the ark of God (2 Sam. 6:2). Thus Zion became the earthly dwelling-place of God (1 Kgs. 14:21; Ps. 78:68-69). When later Solomon built his temple on the hill to the north of Zion, and installed the sacred ark there, the name of Zion was extended to include this further area, and became in practice synonymous with Jerusalem (Ps. 122:3-4). As the earthly Zion was the meeting point for the tribes of the old Israel, so the heavenly Zion is the meeting point for the new Israel (cp. Rev. 14:1).

*MacArthur*: Ever since David had conquered the Jebusites and had placed the ark on Mount Zion, this mountain had been considered the special earthly dwelling place of God (cp. Ps.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

132:13-14). Whereas Sinai was forbidding and terrifying Zion is inviting and gracious. Sinai is closed to all, because no one is able to please God on Sinai's terms—perfect fulfillment of the law. Zion is open to all, because Jesus Christ has met those terms and will stand in the place of anyone who will come to God through Him. Zion symbolizes the approachable God. Sinai was covered by clouds and darkness; Zion is the city of light (cp. Ps. 50:2). Sinai stands for judgment and death; Zion for forgiveness and life (cp. Ps. 133:3).

*Hughes:* Mount Zion was the location of the Jebusite stronghold that David captured and made the religious center of his kingdom by bringing to it the golden ark of God—God's presence with His people. When Solomon built the temple and installed the ark, Zion/Jerusalem became synonymous with the earthly dwelling-place of God.

### (2) The City of God (12:22b)

*...and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...*

*Hughes:* First, we come to the *city of God*. In Christ, we have come to the physical Mount Zion's *heavenly counterpart*, the spiritual Jerusalem from above. In one sense, this is still to come (cp. 13:14, 'but we seek the city that is to come'), but we have also already arrived there in spirit. Christians are *now* citizens of the heavenly city and enjoy its privileges (cp. Phil. 3:20). We are in Zion by virtue of our incorporation in Christ (cp. Eph. 2:6). Sure, the fiery presence is there, but we have the requisite holiness and access of Christ.

*Phillips:* What we see in these verses is a mountain-city; indeed, it is the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (11:10), solid in its foundations as a great mountain arising from the earth. We are led to this new mountain, remembering the former one that was covered with darkness and fire and gloom. Now, all of that has been pierced, blown aside by the wind of the gospel, torn open like the veil in the temple before the holy of holies, and what we see is a shining city, the city of the living God. Sinai prohibited the entrance of sinful man. No man, woman, or child could even set foot on that mountain. But here on the mountain of grace is a city in the clouds, where God's people dwell. To approach the former mountain was to tremble with fear—even Moses felt it. To draw near to this mountain is to find hope renewed with every lightened step. This is the difference made by the coming of Jesus Christ, who has removed all that stood opposed to us with God, who has taken away the darkness and fire and gloom, who transforms the mountain of fear into the mountain of grace. What a magnificent portrayal of the difference it makes that Christ has come to take away our sin.

*Schreiner:* The city of God can't fail, for the living God dwells there, and no one can triumph over Him. Ps. 48:8 affirms that 'God will establish' the city of God 'forever,' and it will never end, according to Hebrews, because it is a heavenly city. The city is heavenly, for it is also described as 'the heavenly Jerusalem.' We see both the vertical and temporal eschatology of the writer. The earthly Jerusalem points upward to the heavenly Jerusalem, and at the same time it points forward in time to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the consummation of God's purposes, for it is described as the city 'to come' (13:14) to which believers are 'looking forward' (11:10). In Paul, the Jerusalem 'above' is the mother of believers (Gal. 4:26), and he shares the same vertical imagery, while also reflecting a similar eschatological viewpoint. Revelation emphasizes that Jerusalem is the holy city of God that comes from heaven (Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 10). On the one hand the city is something believers anticipate, but at the same time they have already come to that city and are already its citizens.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

*Bruce:* In Rev. 21:2ff., ‘the holy city, new Jerusalem,’ which has existed eternally in heaven, is seen coming down to earth, so that henceforth ‘the dwelling of God is with men, and He will dwell with them’ as their covenant God. This is not our author’s perspective: the new Jerusalem has not yet come down to mankind, but in the spiritual realm they already have access to it. They have become fellow-citizens with Abraham of that well-founded city for which he looked; it is the city or commonwealth which comprises the whole family of faith, God’s true dwelling-place. Even now this city has not been manifested in its fullness; it is still in one sense ‘the city which is to come’ (13:14), but the privileges of its citizenship are already enjoyed by faith.

*MacArthur:* ‘The city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,’ is heaven itself. Coming to Christ is coming to heaven, the only way to come to heaven. When we come to Mount Zion, we come by grace to the city Abraham looked for, ‘the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God’ (11:10). From the moment of salvation, heaven is our spiritual home—where our heavenly Father and our Savior are, and where the rest of our spiritual family is. That is where our treasure is, our inheritance is, our hope is. Everything we have of any value is there and all that we should want is there.

### b) *Its Inhabitants (12:22c-23)*

#### (1) Angelic Hosts (12:22c)

*...and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...*

*Hughes:* Second, as the church we meet *angels*. Moses tells us that ‘ten thousands of holy ones’ attended the giving of the Law (Dt. 33:2), and from Daniel we hear that ‘A thousand thousands served Him [the Ancient of Days], and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him’ (Dan. 7:10). David said, ‘The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands’ (Ps. 68:17). In the church we come to these dizzying thousands of angels. They are everywhere—mighty flaming spirits, ‘ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation’ (1:14). But the grand emphasis of our passage is not so much the angels’ care of us, but rather our joining them in festal assembly. They word translated ‘festal gathering’ was used in ancient culture to describe the great national assemblies and sacred games of the Greeks. Whereas at Mount Sinai the angels blew celestial trumpets that terrified God’s people, we are to see ourselves on Mount Zion as dressed in festal attire and worshiping in awe side by side with these shining beings!

*Phillips:* The writer of Hebrews then proceeds to describe the inhabitants of the city. In chapter 2 we noted that the old covenant was given through angels; they were the ones blaring the trumpets and stoking the fires on Mount Sinai. The angels were the ones clothed in darkness and gloom, working their ministry of despair before any who might draw near. But now, the author says, upon this mountain to which we have come in Christ, multitudes of angels are to be seen, all in festal array. They are now a welcoming party, inviting us to join their glad worship of the Lord.

*Schreiner:* Believers have also come to ‘myriads of angels in festive gathering (*μυριαδιν αγγελων πανηγυρει*, *myriadin angelōn panēgurei*). ‘In festive gathering’ is appositional to ‘myriads of angels,’ just as the heavenly Jerusalem stands in apposition to the city of the living God. The heavenly city is inhabited by countless angels, and the notion that there are thousands with God in the heavenly realms is rooted in the OT (cp. Dt. 33:2; Dan. 7:10; so also Jude 14; Rev. 5:11). The word ‘festive gathering’ (*πανηγυρει*, *panēgurei*) is used in the OT for festivals where Israel

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

worshiped the Lord (Hos. 2:13; 9:5; Amos 5:21; Ez. 46:11), but we have a picture here of angels enthusiastically gathering to worship.

*Bruce:* The myriads of angels remind us of the ‘ten thousands of holy ones’ who attended God at the giving of the law on Sinai (Dt. 33:2), or of the ‘thousand thousands’ whom Daniel saw serving God, and ‘ten thousand times ten thousand’ who stood before Him (Dan. 7:10). Our author knows that the attendant angels are sent to minister to the heirs of salvation; how exalted the status of the heirs of salvation is may be gauged from the fact that the Son of God passed by angels in order to partake of flesh and blood with mankind (2:16). When, therefore, believers come to the myriads of angels it is not to worship *them*, but to worship the God whose servants they are (cp. Rev. 19:10; 22:9).

*MacArthur:* I believe ‘the general assembly’ (*paneguris*, ‘a gathering for a public festival’) refers to the ‘myriads of angels.’ The translation could be, ‘But you have come to ... an innumerable company of angels in festal gathering. When we come in Jesus Christ to Mount Zion, we come to a great gathering of celebrating angels, whom we join in praising God. Innumerable angels were also present at Sinai, as mediators of the Mosaic covenant (Gal. 3:19), the covenant of law and judgment. But men could not join them there. Like the God they served, at Sinai they were unapproachable. The angels were not celebrating at Sinai; they were blowing the trumpets of judgment. In heaven we will not worship angels, but will worship *with* angels. We will join them in eternal celebration and praise of God.

### (2) Assembly of the Firstborn (12:23a)

...<sup>23</sup> *and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...*

*Hughes:* Third, we come to *fellow-believers*. Jesus is the firstborn par excellence, and by virtue of our union with Him *we* are firstborn. All the rights of inheritance go to the firstborn—to us who are ‘fellow heirs with Christ’ (Rom. 8:17). There are no second or third or fourth sons and daughters in the church. We all get the big inheritance! And there is more. As firstborn, our names are written in Heaven along with the firstborn who are already there. In other words, there is an amazing solidarity between the Church Triumphant in heaven and the Church Militant here on earth. We are all the Body of Christ!

*Phillips:* Furthermore, what we find in the city—and what a welcome sight!—is something to which we ourselves belong: ‘the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.’ The term ‘firstborn’ tells us the character and composition of this church. ‘Firstborn’ has several connotations, all of them wonderful. The firstborn received a double portion of an inheritance, and here we have a whole city of such heirs. Heirs receive their portion by birth, not by achievement. So, too, these firstborn come into their rights by the new birth in Christ. This status is realized solely by faith. Furthermore, the firstborn are those especially beloved of the Father. This is what God said of Israel in His demand to Pharaoh: ‘Israel is My firstborn son... Let My son go that he might serve Me’ (Ex. 4:22-23). These citizens are those beloved of God, defended and delivered by His might for fellowship with Him and to worship Him forever. We think back to Egypt and the exodus, and we remember, too, that the firstborn sons were redeemed by the blood of the lamb. Surely this is on the writer’s mind as he compares Sinai to Zion. Just as Israel’s firstborn sons later had to be redeemed from God (see Ex. 13:13), so these to belong to Him, are set apart for Him, for His glory and service. Finally, we remember that our Lord Jesus is the ‘head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead’ (Col. 1:18). He is, as Paul writes in Romans 8:29, ‘the firstborn among many brothers.’ The

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

writer of Hebrews goes on to say that the firstborn ‘are enrolled’ in heaven.’ When Moses brought the children of Israel out to Sinai in the exodus, he was to enroll their names in the annals of the nation (Num. 3:40-43). This was an enrollment on earth; but the firstborn are recorded in heaven, a source of great rejoicing and praise.

*Schreiner:* Believers have come to a heavenly assembly, to the place where the names of those who belong to God are inscribed in heaven. Being enrolled in heaven is characteristic of human beings (Lk. 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 21:27), indicating that human beings rather than angels are described. In the phrase ‘church of the firstborn,’ the word ‘firstborn’ (*πρωτοτοκων, prōtotokōn*) indicates that believers are beloved of God. Just as Ephraim was God’s ‘firstborn’ (Jer. 31:9) and Israel was the Lord’s ‘firstborn’ (Ex. 4:22), so believers are God’s children.

*Bruce:* How are we to understand the ‘assembly of firstborn ones who are enrolled in heaven’? One interpretation is that this is another way of designating the elect angels, called ‘firstborn’ because they were created before human beings. But against this interpretation is the description these ‘firstborn’ ones as ‘enrolled in heaven.’ The idea of enrollment in the heavenly book is regularly associated with human beings (Lk. 10:20; Rev. 21:27; cp. Acts 13:48). If, then, believers in Christ are said to have come to ‘the assembly of firstborn ones’ in this sense, the reference may be to those men and women who lived and ‘died in faith’ before Christ came, but who ‘apart from us’ could not attain perfection. If so, the phrase is synonymous with ‘the spirits of the righteous’ at the end of this verse. But more probably the reference is to the whole communion of saints, including those who, while ‘militant here on earth,’ are enrolled as citizens of heaven. To this community believers have come—not merely into its presence (as they have come into the presence of angels innumerable), but into its membership. All the people of Christ are the ‘firstborn’ children of God, through their union with Him who is the Firstborn *par excellence*; their birthright is not to be bartered away, as was Esau’s.

*MacArthur:* The ‘church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven’ is the Body of Christ. The first-born are those who receive the inheritance. As believers, we are ‘heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,’ who is ‘the first-born among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:17, 29). Our names ‘are enrolled in heaven’ in ‘the Lamb’s book of life’ (Rev. 21:27).

### (3) God the Judge (12:23b)

*...and to God, the judge of all...*

*Hughes:* Fourth, we come to *God*. Although the scene in Zion to which we come is a joyous festival, it is not a casual thing. We come to Zion to meet the God of Sinai, who is Judge of all. We understand regarding Him that ‘no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account’ (4:13). We also know that He said, “‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay.’” And again, “‘The Lord will judge His people.’” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (10:30-31). Knowing this, we come before Him in awe because He is the Judge. But we do not come in craven dread, because His Son has borne the judgment for us. This is our *highest delight*—to gather before God! It is a miracle of grace.

*Phillips:* Of course, if this is the City of God, then God Himself must be there. And to Him the writer draws our attention: ‘You have come ... to God, the judge of all.’ This was also something the Israelites found on Mount Sinai: a judging God, a law-giving God, a God who gave the Ten Commandments upon the mount. For sinners, this is a sight that chills even the warmest welcome. Yet this is clearly not the meaning here. Indeed, the point is quite the

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

opposite of condemnation. For here we see God as judge, yet the fire and smoke and dark and gloom, the threatening blare of trumpets, all the trappings of condemnation—are gone!

*Schreiner*: Believers haven't just come to the heavenly city, to countless angels, and to the heavenly assembly. They have come to God Himself, the one who judges all and determines one's final destiny. The point of the entire letter is that believers now have access to God through the high priestly atoning work of Jesus Christ. The word 'judge' precedes God, stressing God's awesome holiness. Why does the author refer to God in a paragraph that stresses the joy of coming into God's presence? The hearers are reminded that they will be vindicated on the last day. This joyful fellowship is not to be taken lightly. God has not relented in His holiness. They come boldly to God's throne where He bestows grace because of Jesus (4:16), and they draw near full of assurance (10:22), knowing they will escape judgment because their bodies have been washed and cleansed.

*Bruce*: Further, the readers have come to 'God the judge of all'—or, as the phrase is more precisely rendered in the RSV, to 'a judge who is God of all.' The designation of God as 'the Judge of all the earth' goes back to early biblical times (Gen. 18:25). The mention of God as judge in this context is calculated to emphasize the solemnity of the Christian's responsibility; it echoes an earlier reference to the one 'to whom our account must be rendered,' before whom our inmost being lies open to view (4:13), and the warning of 10:30ff. that, since the judgment of His people is God's prerogative, it is 'a fearful thing' to fall into His hands.'

*MacArthur*: On Mount Zion we can come into God's own presence, an incomprehensible concept to a Jew who knew only the God of Sinai. But at Jesus' crucifixion, 'the veil of the temple was torn in two' (Lk. 23:45), and the way into God's presence forever made open for those who trust in the atoning work of that crucifixion. To come into God's presence at Sinai was to die; to come into His presence at Zion is to live (cp. Ps. 73:25; Rev. 21:3).

### (4) Righteous Spirits (12:23c)

*...and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...*

*Hughes*: Fifth, we come to the *Church Triumphant*. Though they are in heaven, we share a solidarity with those who have gone before. The same spiritual life courses through us as through them. We share the same secrets as Abraham and Moses and David and Paul. Here is an amazing thing—they died millennia before us, but God planned, according to 11:40, 'that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' They waited for centuries for the perfection we received when we trusted Christ, because that came only with Christ's death—'by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified' (10:14). Because of Christ's work we are not one whit inferior to the patriarchs, for through Christ we are all equal in righteousness!

*Phillips*: Indeed, what we see with this judging God is not hell but heaven, not those arrested and punished, but 'the spirits of the righteous made perfect.' The host around this God and Judge have been acquitted in His court; they are judged righteous and are made perfect. This is the host to which we belong, if we have come through faith in Christ. For this host God stands as a judge, not to condemn, but to vindicate. Indeed, the very fact that He is the Judge increases our comfort all the more, for He will be righteous in accepting us in Christ, who already paid the entire debt of our sin.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

*Schreiner:* They have also come ‘to the spirits of righteous people made perfect.’ The use of the word ‘spirits’ indicates that those described here are no longer in their mortal bodies. Here the author uses ‘perfect’ to mean they lack nothing in their relationship to God. They have been cleansed from sin and thus brought into the presence of God through the work of Christ. The writer speaks here of all believers throughout the ages. The perfection described doesn’t mean believers already enjoy all God has done for them. It means the perfecting work accomplished for them guarantees their entrance into the heavenly city. The readers are described as God’s people, as the gather assembly whose names are inscribed in heaven.

*Bruce:* As for ‘the spirits of the righteous who have attained perfection,’ they are most probably believers of pre-Christian days, like those mentioned in 11:40, who could not attain perfection until Christ came in the fullness of time. If it was the divine plan that ‘apart from us they could not attain their perfection,’ it is equally true that apart from them we could not be made perfect; by coming to God we have also come to those who in earlier times came to Him believing ‘that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him out’ (11:6). They fulfilled the promise of 10:38, ‘my righteous one will live by faith.’ Our author’s lack of reference of the coming resurrection does not mean that if found no place in his creed (cp. 11:35); but it is plain that, for him, the souls of believers do not need to wait until the resurrection to be perfected. They are perfected already in the sense that they are with God in the heavenly Jerusalem.

*MacArthur:* ‘The spirits of righteous men made perfect’ are Old Testament saints, those who could only look forward to forgiveness, peace, and deliverance. When we come to heaven we will join Abel, Abraham, Moses, David, and all the others in one great household of God (cp. Mt. 8:11). They had to wait a long time for the perfection that we received the instant we trusted in Christ. In fact, they had to wait for us (11:40), in the sense that they had to wait for Christ’s death and resurrection before they could be glorified. IN heaven we will be one with them in Jesus Christ. We will not be inferior to Abraham or Moses or Elijah, because we will all be equal in righteousness, because our only righteousness will be our Savior’s righteousness.

### c) *Its Access (12:24)*

#### (1) Jesus the Mediator (12:24a)

...<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...

*Hughes:* Sixth, we come to *Jesus*. Significantly, Christ’s human name, redolent in the Incarnation, is used here because we have come to the man ‘*like us*, and the man *for us*.’ Moses was the mediator of the old covenant, but as great as he was, he trembled fearfully at Mount Sinai (cp. v. 21). But through Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, we draw near with confidence. The promises of the new covenant are sure, for they are in Jesus. He is the source and dispenser of all for which we hope. He is *in us*, and we are *in Him*.

*Phillips:* Finally, the writer of Hebrews tells us that as Christians we ‘have come to ... Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.’ This is placed last for emphasis, as the climax of all we have already seen. Moses was the mediator who stepped toward the other mountain in fear and trembling. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant in His blood, one who takes away our fear, strips away the clouds of fury and opens wide the gate to Paradise for all who come in faith. We remember the point of the Letter to the Hebrews, and we see what this passage is teaching. What folly it would be to go from this mediator, Jesus, to the old mediator, Moses, from this mountain of grace to the mountain of fear and darkness that was Sinai!

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

*Schreiner:* The author's list climaxes with the reference to Jesus. The joyful access to God described in the previous verses has been opened through the work of Jesus. The readers must not forsake Jesus and His priestly work, for they have come to Mount Zion instead of to Mount Sinai. They have come to Jesus, who is 'the mediator of a new covenant.' He is not simply the mediator of a new covenant (cp. also 9:15). He is also 'the mediator of a better covenant' (8:6; cp. 7:22). The old covenant arrangement between God and His people has been displaced. The readers must not forsake Jesus since they have come to one who has instituted and ratified a new and better covenant, one which guarantees an 'eternal inheritance' (9:15), for it secures complete and final forgiveness of sins (10:15-18).

*Bruce:* Their ancestors in Moses' day had been borne on eagles' wings and brought to God Himself (cp. Ex. 19:4) in terms of the old covenant; that old covenant, as we have already learned, has now been antiquated by the new one, of which Jesus is the mediator. Since Jesus' sacrifice of Himself, those who come to God must 'approach God through Him' (7:25).

*MacArthur:* Supremely, we come 'to Jesus,' in the fullness of His beauty and glory as 'the mediator of a new covenant.' When we come to Mount Zion, we come to our Savior, our Redeemer, our one and only Mediator with the Father.

### (2) The Sprinkled Blood of Forgiveness (12:24b)

*...and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

*Hughes:* Seventh, we come to forgiveness because of *sprinkled blood*. Abel's warm blood cried from the ground for vengeance and judgment, but Christ's blood shouts that we are forgiven and have peace with God. *Hallelujah!* Oh, the eloquence of Jesus' blood! It says that what was impossible for us has happened. It says that you and I are forgiven! As fellow-pilgrims in the great marathon, we must not veer off course toward Sinai, because Jesus has met Sinai's great demands for holiness and perfection at Calvary atop Mount Zion.

*Phillips:* Moses sprinkled the blood of sacrifices on the people when the old covenant community was being formed, and Jesus now is seen doing the same for the new covenant community. Jesus' blood, we are told, speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Again, we have an Old Testament reference, one that has the blood not just sprinkled but actually speaking. In Genesis 4 we read of Cain, the first child of Adam and Eve, murdering his brother Abel, who received God's favor through faith. God tracked Cain down and exclaimed to him, 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground' (Gen. 4:10). God therefore cursed Cain, and the blood of Abel spoke a word of vengeance. In the heart of Cain, the voice of Abel's blood resounded with despair all the long years of his cursed life. In great contrast, the blood of Christ pleads with God for forgiveness and speaks peace to men.

*Schreiner:* Sins are forgiven in the new covenant because of the blood of Jesus, which explains why His blood is better than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood testified to his faith, to his trust in God in offering his sacrifices (Gen. 4:4; Heb. 11:4). Jesus' blood is superior to Abel's because it sprinkles clean those who trust in Him (cp. 10:22). We come again to one of the favorite words of the author: 'better' (*κρείττον*, *kreitton*). Jesus' blood is better than Abel's because it secures forgiveness, and the heavenly Mount Zion is better than Mount Sinai, for it brings us into God's presence.

*Bruce:* To 'approach God through Him' means 'to have freedom of access into the holy place by Jesus' blood' (10:19); accordingly, believers are further said to have come to 'the blood of

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

sprinkling.’ This may remind us of ‘the sprinkling of the blood’ at the time of the first Passover (11:28); but more probably our author is thinking of the covenant-blood of Christ as the antitype of the blood sprinkled at the inauguration of the old covenant. By the blood of the new covenant, symbolically applied, believers’ hearts are ‘sprinkled clean from an evil conscience’ (10:22). The removal of an evil conscience does away with the barrier between them and God; the sacrifice of Christ thus ‘has better things to tell than the blood of Abel.’ Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground, protesting against his murder and appealing for vindication (cp. 11:4); but the blood of Christ brings a message of cleansing forgiveness, and peace with God to all who place their faith in Him.

*MacArthur:* To come into Christianity is to come ‘to the sprinkled blood,’ the atoning blood, through which we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace’ (Eph. 1:7). The sprinkled blood of Jesus far surpasses the sacrifice of Abel (11:4) and ‘speaks better than the blood of Abel.’ Abel’s sacrifice was acceptable to God because it was offered in faith, but it had no atoning power—not even for Abel, much less for anyone else. Jesus’ blood, however, was sufficient to cleanse the sins of all men for all time, to make peace with God for whoever trusts in that blood sacrifice (Col. 1:20).

*Phillips:* What a contrast there is between Abel’s blood and Christ’s! Both were killed by their brothers: Abel by Cain, and Jesus by His fellow Jews, and no less by the sins of those firstborn brothers who will share eternity with Him. Jesus was killed by us, his brothers. But what a different message Jesus’ blood proclaims! Abel’s blood brought storms upon the earth, while Jesus’ blood cries, ‘Peace, be still!’ Just as those words calmed the winds and waves when Jesus spoke them from the boat, so too does the voice of His blood drive away the mountain storms, the fire and tempest of Mount Sinai, to make Mount Zion a place of peace and calm and joy forevermore.

*Phillips:* Never forget, if you have come to faith in Christ, that you have come ‘to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,’ to the blood that speaks a word of grace and not of condemnation. Jesus is a better Savior than you are a sinner. Therefore He rests enthroned in His city, His saving work secure in your life. He calls us to rest our hearts in Him, and with thanksgiving to offer God the worship of our lives.

### B. Shaken vs. Unshaken (Hebrews 12:25-29)

#### 1. Warning (12:25)

<sup>25</sup>*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.*

*Schreiner:* The sermonic character of Hebrews surfaces with the last warning, which begins with the words, ‘Make sure’ (*Βλεπετε, Bletepe*). The readers should beware that they don’t refuse the God speaking to them. They have the privilege of being addressed with the words of God and must pay heed to them. The author draws the contrast between Israel and the church, between those on earth and those in heaven, just as he has done previously (2:1-4; 3:12-4:11). God warned Israel on earth, particularly in the covenant curses that He threatened to impose on those who refused to observe covenant stipulations (Lev. 26:14-39; Dt. 28:15-68). The curses imposed were earthly curses such as famine, defeat in wars, crops that failed to produce, and disease.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

Most significantly the culmination of the curses was exile. God's word is an effective word. The curses He promised would strike Israel indeed came to pass. They did not 'escape' (*εξέφυγον, exephugon*). The author argues from the lesser to the greater. If those warned on earth did not escape God's judgment, such is even truer for those who 'turn away' from the one who speaks from heaven.

*Bruce:* When our author warns his readers not to 'refuse to hear the one who speaks,' he uses the same verb for refusing as he did in v. 19, where the people 'begged that nothing further be said.' But, whatever was the people's attitude when God spoke at Sinai, the Pentateuchal record makes it plain that time and again throughout their wilderness wanderings they failed to pay heed to the commandments of God, and suffered for their disobedience. This has formed the basis of a solemn warning in the earlier part of the epistle (3:7-15), and the warning is repeated here. The Israelites in the wilderness did not escape judgment when they disregarded the voice of God that thundered from Sinai. But if it was from an earthly hill that God proclaimed the statutes which formed the basis of the old covenant, it is from the heavenly Zion, from His unseen throne, that He speaks in the gospel. The 'how much more' argument of 2:2ff. and 10:29 is pressed home again: to disobey the gospel incurs judgment more certain and terrible even than that incurred by disobedience to the law.

*Hughes:* We ought to obey because God's word is unstoppably *effectual*. Verse 25 is what is called in logic an *a fortiori* argument, an argument that argues that what is true in the lesser case will be even more true in the greater. In the lesser case, God's earthly warning at Sinai first suffered subtle refusal by the Israelites when they 'beg[ged] that no further messages be spoken to them' (12:19; cp. Ex. 20:19)—though their refusal there at Sinai was more from fear than from outright rejection of God. However, in the years that followed, they explicitly refused God's word by repeated disobedience during the four decades of wandering in the wilderness. So grievous was their disobedience that Numbers 14:29 records that God pronounced judgment in that everyone who was twenty and older would die in the desert. Considering the inexorable penalty for disobeying God's earthly message, how much greater will the penalty be in the greater instance of disobeying His heavenly message of grace through His Son (cp. 1:2)? Surely no one will escape! This, of course, has been the writer's message all along. In 2:3a he warned, 'How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' Later in 10:28-29 he said much the same thing, emphasizing greater punishment. The message is so clear: we had better obey God's Word because His threat that no one who disobeys will escape is ineluctably effectual. It is a 'done deal.' No person will escape who refuses the gospel! God is a relentless 'consuming fire.'

*Phillips:* Hebrews 12:25-29 completes the fifth and final exhortation against the danger of apostasy, a concern that has preoccupied our writer throughout this letter. On the basis of what we have seen, the writer of Hebrews intends for us to make some reflections about life and eternity. With this sight in our eyes, and this sound in our ears, he exhorts us, 'See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.' Given the glorious prospect set before us in the gospel, it would be, he says, the gravest folly to gaze upon this, to hear this call, and yet to turn away. 'See to it' is a favorite expression of the writer, denoting watchfulness for a real and grave danger (cp. 3:12). The point he makes in verse 25 is one he has made before. He is arguing from the lesser to the greater, in this case from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion. If the Israelites did not escape the most severe punishment when they had hardened their hearts toward God's revelation from Mount Sinai, how much greater is the punishment for those who do not heed the

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

gospel, which comes to us from the heavenly Mount Zion! This is similar to what he argued in 2:2-3.

*MacArthur:* After giving the contrasts between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, the writer says, in effect, ‘Here is what you must do. You must not ignore ‘Him who is speaking.’ ‘God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son’ (1:1-2). If men were held accountable for heeding God when He ‘warned them on earth,’ from Mount Sinai, how much more will they be held accountable now that He ‘warns from heaven,’ from Mount Zion? The unbelieving Israelites who ignored God at Sinai did not enter the earthly Promised Land, and unbelievers today, Jew or Gentile, who ignore God when He speaks through His Son from Mount Zion will not enter the heavenly promised land. Whether God speaks from Sinai or from Zion, no man who refuses Him will escape judgment.

*Phillips:* Many people draw a mistaken conclusion about the New Testament 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 Old Testament. People compare Moses and Jesus, and they 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 New Testament, the same Jesus who so tenderly ministers to His own flock will return in vengeance to judge the world that crucified Him in unbelief (cp. 2 Th. 1:7-8). 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. That being the case, our writer’s warning to ‘see to it’ is very reasonable. Because they disobeyed God’s earthly revelation, an entire generation of Israelites was forced to wander and die in the wilderness. The penalty for refusing the gospel witness from heaven, as it is preached and read from the Bible, is considerably greater, even eternal condemnation.

### 2. Shaken (12:26-27)

#### a) *At That Time (12:26a)*

<sup>26</sup>*At that time his voice shook the earth...*

*Hughes:* If this is not a sufficient reason to obey God, there is another, and that is that His word is *final*, as the writer goes on to explain. The initial historical event where God’s voice shook the earth was at Mount Sinai when He verbally spelled out the Ten Commandments with a thunderous voice. Imagine how terrifying it was to have the ground under one’s feet tremble in response to God’s audible word. There were no sleepers in the congregation at Sinai!

*Schreiner:* The heaven-earth contrast continues. First, the author thinks of what happened on Mount Sinai when the old covenant was established (cp. 12:18-21). God shook the earth with His voice, as a mighty earthquake caused tumult on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18; Jdg. 5:5; Ps. 68:8; 114:4, 6).

*Bruce:* When God spoke from Sinai, ‘the whole mountain quaked greatly’ (Ex. 19:18). This earthquake remained deeply rooted in the national memory (cp. Ps. 68:7ff.). In the Old Testament an earthquake is also expected to mark the coming day of the Lord, ‘when He rises to terrify the earth’ (Is. 2:19, 21); and not only an earthquake, but the shaking of heaven too (Is. 13:13).

*Phillips:* Here is another comparison, starting with the violent scene at Mount Sinai. There God shook the earth. As Psalm 68 says, ‘The earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

God, the One of Sinai' (v. 8). That shaking of the earth at Sinai, the writer says, pointed forward to a greater shaking, one that will impact everything.

b) *But Now (12:26b)*

*...but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."*

*Hughes:* But there is an infinitely greater shaking coming, an eschatological cosmic shaking of the whole universe, and it too will be triggered by God's word. Here the writer has quoted God's promise from Haggai 2:6, indicating that every created thing will be shaken to utter disintegration. This is in accord with what the Scriptures teach us about the power in God's word. Genesis says He created everything by His word as He spoke the universe into existence. Therefore, one 'little word' from Him can and will fell creation (cp. Ps. 102:25-26; Is. 13:13; 2 Pe. 3:10).

*Schreiner:* The Lord has promised, however, a greater shaking in the future. The author quotes here Hag. 2:6 where the Lord promises He will shake both the earth and the heavens. The first four words of the citation stem from Hag. 2:6, but the remaining words of the citation are looser, though they still catch Haggai's meaning. Since Haggai picks up the idea of shaking the heavens and earth again (Hag. 2:21), it seems probable that both texts are referred to here. In Haggai 2 Israel is enjoined to work hard at completing the temple since they have the promise that God is with them and His Spirit among them (Hag. 2:5). This is followed up with the promise that the Lord will shake both the heavens and the earth (Hag. 2:6), which means He will judge the nations of the world. When He shakes all nations, the treasures of all nations will fill the temple (Hag. 2:7), and there will be greater glory in the new temple than there was in the old (Hag. 2:9). The book concludes with another oracle where God pledges to shake the heavens and earth (Hag. 2:21). He promises to dethrone pagan kingdoms and destroy their military power (Hag. 2:22). Then the Lord will rule through His chosen one, Zerubbabel (Hag. 2:23). The author of Hebrews understands the words of the prophecy eschatologically, so that it refers ultimately to the coming of the kingdom. In this verse the focus is on the judgment that is impending. The Lord will shake again, but the shaking will be more profound than Sinai and will include all of creation. Hence, Hebrews appropriates these words to refer to the final judgment.

*Bruce:* In similar language the prophet Haggai conveys an oracle of assurance to Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest at the dedication of the Second Temple in 516 BC (Hag. 2:6). In context, these words declare God's purpose, in the day when He rises in vindication of His cause, to put down Gentile dominion, to exalt the throne of David, and to make Jerusalem and its temple the center of worship and allegiance for all nations. Our author interprets them of the end of the present world-order; the picture is similar to that in the Apocalypse, where earth and heaven flee away from the face of the Judge on the great throne, to be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 20:11; 21:1).

*MacArthur:* From Zion, He is also going to shake the very heavens, the entire universe. If unbelievers did not escape when the earth was shaken, how much less will they escape when both heaven and earth are shaken? The writer quotes from what the Lord had predicted through Haggai (Hag. 2:6; cp. Is. 13:13)

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

### c) *Yet Once More (12:27)*

<sup>27</sup>*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.*

*Schreiner:* The temporal character of the prophecy is noted. Hebrews seizes upon the words ‘Yet once more’ from Hag. 2:6. A removal of the present world, the present heavens and earth, is coming. The world will be shaken and changed, and only the unshakeable will remain. This doesn’t necessarily mean the present world will be annihilated, though some have interpreted it that way. It probably means all that is corruptible and defiling in the present creation will be removed, so the new creation, the new heavens and new earth, will shine with intense beauty (cp. Is. 65:17; 66:22; Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Pe. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1-22:5).

*Bruce:* When, in accordance with the divine promise, this cosmic convulsion takes place, the whole material universe will be shaken to pieces, and the only things to survive will be those that are unshakable. To this unshakable order, however, belongs the kingdom which believers in Christ share with Him—a kingdom, because their great high priest is a *royal* priest. Earlier our author has emphasized the transitoriness of the world in order to set in contrast the eternity of the Son of God; now he emphasizes it again in order to set in contrast the eternity of that new order into which the Son of God has brought His people.

*Hughes:* The reason for this is clearly spelled out: ‘in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.’ The people of God, as a part of the order of those things that are unshakable, will survive. But everything else in the universe will be shaken and therefore purged. Everything that is wrong will be eradicated. No sin, no imperfection will remain. Then there will be a blessed reconstruction—‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away’ (Rev. 21:1).

*Phillips:* This is a quotation of Haggai 2:6-7. We are reading a prophetic history lesson, a reminder that one day this present created realm will be shaken by God, leaving only those eternal things that are of Him (cp. 1 Jn. 2:17; 2 Pe. 3:10; 1 Cor. 7:31). This is one point at which the Christian view is sharply at odds with that of the world. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this matter. All through our lives we are taught that the things of substance, those things that are lasting and stable, are the worldly things. Ideas, beliefs, spiritual commitments—these things come and go, we are told. What matters is cold hard cash, giant edifices of stone and steel, achievements in the world of nations and commerce and arts. Believe whatever you like about spiritual matters, we are told, since they are of secondary consideration. But do not let them interfere with the lasting things of the world. Under this view, a practical person would abandon Christianity in the face of opposition, ridicule, and especially persecution. The Hebrew Christians stood in danger of having their property confiscated. But this world is not what ultimately matters. If it did, then our commitment to Christ might well be secondary. But God, who shook the earth when He descended on Mount Sinai, is going to shake the heavens and the earth—all things—when Christ comes again in glory and power. The day will come when everything that is of this world will pass away, and those who have their hopes and dreams, their security and their salvation rooted in this world, will find themselves brought to utter ruin with it.

*MacArthur:* Commenting on the Haggai passage, Hebrews 12:27 explains that everything physical (‘those things which cannot be shaken’) will be destroyed. Only the external things will remain (cp. 2 Pe. 3:10, 12). But some things are unshakable, and these will ‘remain.’ God has prepared ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ which will include ‘the holy city, new Jerusalem,

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Rev. 21:1-2).

*Hughes:* To those who are obedient this is good news. And the writer means it to be a powerful encouragement to the beleaguered little church to which he writes, in which some feel as though their lives are being shaken to pieces by Rome. ‘Stand firm amidst the Roman tremors,’ he seems to be saying, ‘because the ultimate shaking is coming when Rome and indeed the entire present evil order will fall into oblivion. And you, as part of the new order, will survive. Take heart!’ On the other hand, to those who are ignoring God’s word and drifting further away, this was a disquieting revelation and a challenge to obedience.

*Phillips:* This epistle was probably written to Jewish Christians living in Rome; the threat to them came from the Roman government with the help of the Jewish synagogue. What could have been more impressive in that day, more stable, or more lasting than the Roman Empire? If one had asked, ‘Which is going to last? The Roman Empire or Christianity?’ people would have laughed! They would have cried, ‘Rome will last forever!’ They would have pointed to its pomp and pageantry as mere symbols of its eternal power and glory. But from our perspective things look quite different. In time, Rome would pit all its strength against the gospel and the followers of Jesus Christ. But in the end it was Rome that capitulated. Before long, the ‘eternal city’ was overrun by barbarians, its statues crashed to the ground, and its buildings were looted and burned and crumbled. But the gospel of Jesus Christ, that voice that comes from heaven, has endured to this day and it shall endure forever. It endures because it is built on truth, not on worldly pretensions—because it *is* truth. It endures because it is the Word of God (Is. 40:6-8).

*Phillips:* Today, Rome’s great power, which the Christian readers of this letter understandably feared, is but a memory. Meanwhile the kingdom of Christ is with us still, its strength unabated. Jesus Himself said, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away’ (Mt. 24:35). Therefore, a Christian’s priorities are opposite from those of the world. It is not that worldly things are of no importance to us. Christians may well be involved in the erection of great buildings and in worldly efforts of one sort or another. But far from putting spiritual things second, it is our allegiance to Christ that we place first. When worldly commitments and agendas, particularly as they involve sin, get in the way of our obedience to Christ, then we must be prepared to let the world go, remembering which kingdom will pass and which will last.

### 3. Unshaken (12:28-29)

#### a) *Acceptable Worship (12:28)*

<sup>28</sup>*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...*

*Phillips:* Verse 28 says we are ‘receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.’ This is what we are taught to pray, ‘Your kingdom come’—that is, that God’s rule should extend further and deeper into our lives and into this world. That is what history is about, and if we are wise, we will value our participation in Christ’s spiritual kingdom far above any worldly calling.

*Schreiner:* What cannot be shaken ultimately is God’s kingdom. Nothing can prevent the kingdom of God from triumphing. As Daniel predicted, it is like a great stone that will shatter all other kingdoms and will fill the world (Dan. 2:35, 44-45). Or, as we saw in Hag. 2:21-23, when God shakes the heavens and the earth, He will overturn human kingdoms and rulers and establish His kingdom forever. Since believers have already received that kingdom and are assured of

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

enjoying it in its fullness if they persevere, they should be filled with gratefulness and thankfulness. The word for ‘thankful’ (*χαρις, charin*) often means grace, but such a meaning is doubtful here. The verb ‘have’ with the noun used here means ‘give thanks’ in other contexts (Lk. 17:9; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3). 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.

*Bruce:* To the grace of God the proper response is a grateful heart, and the words and actions which flow from a grateful heart are the sacrifices in which God takes delight.

*Hughes:* After obedience, the other great ‘to do’ that comes from this passage is worship. When we come to worship, we must keep both mountains in view—the approachable Zion with its consuming love, and the unapproachable Sinai with its consuming fire—and then come in reverent boldness. We members of the unshakable kingdom are meant to worship with thankful hearts. Our pulses should race with thanksgiving.

*Phillips:* 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. As creatures before the Creator, we must tremble with fear, we must reckon on His holiness with a godly awe that produces reverence in all our dealings with Him. But to awe we must add thanksgiving. We are sinners redeemed by the hand of mercy, enemies who are reconciled by love, rebels who are made children and heirs of God’s eternal kingdom. Realizing this must surely draw forth gratitude from our hearts for the gifts we have not deserved. These two attitudes 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.’

*MacArthur:* This is the kingdom that ‘we receive.’ It is ‘a kingdom that cannot be shaken.’ It is eternal, unchangeable, immovable. We will never be taken from it, and it will never be taken from us. For this amazing blessing in Christ, we should ‘show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.’ The right response, then, is a worshipping life offering holy service to our worthy and awesome God.

### b) *Consuming Fire (12:29)*

...<sup>29</sup> *for our God is a consuming fire.*

*Hughes:* Note our text well! It says that ‘our God is [not was!] a consuming fire.’ The God of Zion is the same God as the God of Sinai. God has not changed. Granted, Christians ought to laugh—they ought to have the best sense of humor on the planet. And Christians ought to enjoy life. But they must also know and understand that God remains ‘a consuming fire’ and that acceptable worship takes place when there is authentic ‘reverence and awe.’ This is God’s Word! Everything depends on how we see God. If we see Him scripturally we will experience awe and reverence—and there will be times when we are overwhelmed with the numinous as our souls are engaged by God. Our heart’s desire for ourselves and those around us ought to be that: 1) they be regenerated; 2) they have a radical Biblical vision of God, a sense of His holiness and transcendence; and 3) this will inform all of life—their worship, their sense of mission and

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

evangelism, their stewardship, their affirmation and delight in creation, their relationships—everything!

*Phillips:* While the gospel gives us a better revelation than that received at Mount Sinai, a salvation through God's grace in Jesus Christ, it is not a different God who speaks in this age. God is unchanging. He is now as He always has been, and that means that He is still holy and exalted, awesome in His glory. He is still 'a consuming fire.' 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 (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 [like Aslan]. 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.

*Schreiner:* The reason gratefulness is mixed with reverence and awe is now explained. 'Our God,' the God Christians can wonderfully claim as their own God, 'is a consuming fire.' Here the author picks up on the language of Sinai. Moses explains why he won't be allowed into the promised land and why the people should not fall prey to idolatry (Dt. 4:22-23) by informing them that God is 'a consuming fire, a jealous God' (Dt. 4:24). The covenant with Israel was established in Exodus 24, and the Lord's glory settled on Sinai (Ex. 24:16-17), and His glory 'was like a consuming fire' (Ex. 24:17). The author reminds the readers that God must not be trifled with. Those who heed the heavenly warning will enjoy the kingdom forever, but those who forsake Him will face the fire of His anger.

*Bruce:* At the same time, such sacrificial worship must be offered with a due sense of the majesty and holiness of the God with whom we have to do: not only thankfulness, but humble reverence and awe must mark His people's approach to Him; 'for our God is a consuming fire.' He who descended on Mount Sinai in fire and spoke to His people from the midst of that fire still consumes in the white heat of His purity everything that is unworthy of Himself. It is an aspect of the character of God as revealed in the Bible that plays little part in much present-day thinking about Him; but if we are to be completely 'honest to God,' we dare not ignore it. Reverence and awe before His holiness are not incompatible with grateful trust and love in response to His mercy.

*MacArthur:* The closing verse of chapter 12 is perhaps the severest warning in the book of Hebrews: 'for our God is a consuming fire.' The writer is warning again by saying, 'Some of you have come to the edge of full acceptance in Christ. Don't go back to Judaism now. Only judgment awaits you at Sinai, and even worse judgment in refusing the offer of Zion. Don't be consumed in God's fierce, unrelenting fire of judgment.'

*MacArthur:* To live under Judaism is to come to Sinai and its judgment, wherein all who trust in the works of the law, even God's own law, will be condemned. To go back to Judaism, after hearing the gospel, after seeing Zion, brings even greater damnation. Those Jews who had 'been enlightened' and had 'tasted of the heavenly gift' and even 'been made partakers of the Holy Spirit' (6:4) could not simply revert to Judaism. They could not pick up where they had left off. If they turned back now, they would be subject not only to Sinai's judgment but to Zion's as well.

## Hebrews – Lesson 33

*MacArthur:* For every man the choice is the same. Whether we are Jew or Gentile, to try to approach God by our works is to come to Sinai and to discover that our works fall short and cannot save us. Whether we are Jew or Gentile, to trust in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ is to come to Zion, where our heavenly High Priest will mediate for us and bring us to the Father, and where we find reconciliation, peace, and eternal life. And if you have truly come to Zion and received all its blessings, it is inconceivable that you would want to hold on Sinai in any way.

For next time: Read Hebrews 13:1-6.