

## **An Unshakable Kingdom** **Hebrews 12:25-29**

If you've yet to lay eyes on the big lake near my hometown, I'd be glad to give you a more comprehensive list of reasons why you should. On that list I'd note to you that timing makes a big difference in how one experiences it. The blooming lily pads, white with joy, are incredibly proud of themselves in the late spring and early summer. The sun colorfully dances on the water's surface, with dawn and dusk both competing for the title of most stunning. Frozen cypress stumps peeking up out of the water in January eventually thaw and stretch upwards as docking stations for snakes and turtles seeking the sun's warmth.

However, that area, just a rock's throw east of the Mississippi River, was not always covered in water. Before 1812 it was a lowland that sported a large forest and a small tributary of said Mississippi. But on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1812 what happened there was reportedly felt in Boston, Detroit, and New Orleans. On that day the New Madrid Fault stirred from its slumber, the ground yawned violently, and the mighty Mississippi filled in the tormented terrain to form what is known today as Reelfoot Lake.<sup>1</sup>

In mere seconds, many were rocked with devastation and death, and hundreds of thousands of acres of land were transformed. The equivalent of 2 billion tons of dynamite erupted underground that day—that would be roughly 63 Hiroshimas. At the sight of it all, echoing the palmist's reverence would have been fitting, *"The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!"*

There were probably a few natural warning signs for the residents of the area on that fateful day. Bulging sections of earth, various gas emissions from the ground, smaller foreshocks, changes in animal behavior—some would have noticed these red flags. But seismologists today possess newer technologies. These new devices have created better lead times for fault line dwellers around the world to seek refuge. It's not a stretch to say that the residents of my homeland back in 1812 had less to go on than many do today who live near such places. Of course, earthquakes don't always announce their arrivals. Yet, when signs are seen and heeded, lives can be spared.

The pastor of Hebrews, with pen and passion, has just declared two essential truths flowing from the significance of two mountains. First, with Mount Sinai in mind, he conveys that placing one's hope in law-works and not believing God's promise to save by grace places one in the crosshairs of His dreadful justice. What else do we make of the terror of Israel and Moses? God is a danger to the proud, self-trusting. And a second truth, God will get all the glory and we will gain all that is eternally good when we come to Jesus, the way to Mount Zion. He is the only true Mediator between God and man, whose blood covenant is enacted on promises better than those in the old covenant. His cross proved clearest that He is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, but the same cross revealed that He is far from safe to any who are positioned against Him in their sin.

Unlike the natives and early settlers of Lake County in 1812, the recipients of this letter found themselves being warned. If they were seeing correctly, they would have recalled the red flags dotted in the sacred scriptures. In some ways, with a heavy emphasis on human sin, Hebrews is a map that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Madrid-earthquakes-of-1811-1812>

directs us to the way of escape from peril and the pathway to celebration.<sup>2</sup> In other words, some recipients were being wooed away from the heart of it all. They were attempting or were tempted to leave the place prepared for them, the heavenly community enrolled to share in the glory of the New Jerusalem, and the Mediator who carved the path to glory by the power of an indestructible life. The recipient's hands were being extended towards Sinai, and this loving pastor desired to show them that their inheritance and their standing were hands down better than anything the Old Covenant could offer. You want to leave the place of majestic splendor, forfeit the prize of eternal life, and turn your back on the precious Person who mediated your release from condemnation? Notice, this last leg of the longer argument on Christ being better than all, worthy of enduring faith. He warns these new converts away from such foolish abandonments.

## I. Regard Him who speaks

<sup>25</sup> ***See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.*** The words ***see to it*** are the same as “*take care*” in chapter 3—“*take care, brothers, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart...*” Proceed with caution. Pay attention. As we approach VBS, one week from this coming Wednesday, many of us leading will relay the same message to your children. Pay attention to this undefeated God. Take care to listen carefully.

Minus the warning aspect, this is precisely how the author begins the letter. God's track record has never been silence, but communication with His image-bearers. He spoke in many ways to many people, Hebrews 1:1, but “*in these last day has spoken to us in His Son.*” We see this contextually as well. Coming off the heels of verse 24 from last week, the messaging from the Mediator's work is intended to clearly come through—the death of Christ speaks better than Abel's. Abel's death was a crime of passion and vengeance, and it cried out for God's justice. But Christ's blood cried out for God to be gracious and forgiving. His blood is *superior* because through it God's justice is answered in full, while at the same time, Christ's death justifies wrongdoers by taking their punishment upon Himself.<sup>3</sup> And the author, after he communicates the celebratory markers of their destinies in Jesus, he sets out to do again what any loving person might do to others who are gravitating away from what is better and towards what is destructive—he warns them, and here for the last time, and he begins the warning, “***See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.***”

Again, this wasn't the first warning in Hebrews. Verse 25 is an equivalent expression to those who “*drift away*” mentioned in chapter 2, and those continuing in unbelief “*willfully after receiving the knowledge of truth*” from chapter 10. The author wants the reader to understand the drift and unbelief are not merely rejections of God's covenant promises, but the betrayal of God's final revelation. He desires to convey the ***Him*** here. He wants all who scan these words to regard Christ and all that is bound up in His life and purpose for coming and becoming a ransom for many.

This present tense verb, ***is speaking***, expresses to the reader that God continues to speak through His Son. When His Word is conveyed through whatever medium He chooses, God is unveiling His Son's worth, His glory, His majesty, and His goodness. For the Jews who professed Christ or for any of us who have done the same, we must keep Jesus in our line of sight while we run the race set before us. To navigate away from the polestar accomplishment of Jesus becoming the lone substitute for sinners is tantamount to the stiff-necked rebel ascending Mount Sinai with misplaced confidence. Christ is

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<sup>2</sup> One seasoned friend recently described verses 22-24 as a “seven-point celebration.” He summed it up this way: “You have not come to the Dark and Fearful Sounds of the Old Covenant, but you have come to the Light and Festive Sights of the New Covenant...enter into your MASTER'S JOY!”

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:26

the object of all true, saving faith, and He is the source of our certainty for eternity. Regarding Him who speaks is believing that God's Son is the LORD of all and the only acceptable offering for our sin. The warning continues.

## II. Disregarding Him who speaks...

### A. From earth and from heaven

This pastor of Hebrews reasons back into those accounts from Exodus 19, again in verse 25, ***For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.*** We understand that the nation of Israel, while at the base of Mount Sinai, begged that no further word be spoken to them. It was a momentary fear that turned into a way of life. In time, they would fail to develop the spiritual constitution to stomach God's will or ways. The curses of disobedience listed in Deuteronomy 28 are extensive and severe. God warned them, but they refused to listen, and they did not ***escape***. We find the most extreme expressions of His temporal judgments over time were death, the departure of divine glory, and eventually exile. Yet, the author wants these new believers to know here that this last warning is superior to all that have been issued before.

He writes, arguing from the lesser to the greater, ***if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.*** These Jewish converts were on the verge of misplacing their faith and hope in Law of Moses and its customs. And his reasoning would have arrested many ears as he wrote of what happened at Sinai. From infancy, they were familiar with documented stories of God's majesty on full display. God spoke to Moses face to face and privileged His people with various sights of His glory and awesomeness. He also granted them His Word with scores of warnings due to their scores of sins, and He did so primarily through prophets. In these ways God warned His people ***on earth***.

But how was the majesty of God, which radiated danger Israel found themselves in by their unbelief, lesser than this warning ***from heaven***? Because of the One sitting at the Father's right hand. Hebrews has answered the question, "Where is Jesus right now?" His nail-scarred, glorified body is on heaven's throne! This is how Yahweh-God warns from heaven: He has crowned His Son as LORD of creation and done so through His suffering in human weakness for sin. That's God's final Word to us! Through faith in Him we find the only protection from the just deserts of our filth. If Israel didn't escape the promised punishments made on earth, how then will any escape the promised punishment of God who speaks with finality through His Son, and does so from the inner chamber of heaven itself?<sup>4</sup>

The false idea or sentiment can exist in many minds that the gospel age of the New Testament is the milder regime compared to the Old Testament era. That God somehow mellowed out between Malachi and Matthew.<sup>5</sup> But that's not what today's text says. If we take the leap, if we turn away from hearing what God has declared clearest in the crucified and risen Christ, then we need to heed the ***much less will we escape*** here in verse 25. In legal vernacular, *mens rea* is a Latin term that refers to the intention or knowledge of the wrongdoing of the person who has committed a crime. The one who walks past a "Do Not Enter" sign at a government facility is likely to be in more hot water than the one who trespasses without proper, clear signage. If we turn away from Christ and the gospel, the

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<sup>4</sup> Sigurd Grindheim, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 655-66.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Hebrews: Christ and His Rivals*, 152.

clearest, final Word from God, then we've committed the greater crime deserving of the greater punishment.

The author moves away from the *we* pronouns for two verses and turns in a more comprehensive and cosmic direction.

### *B. To shake earth and heaven*

With the imagery of Sinai still in mind, we read,<sup>26</sup> ***And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN."*** Just before God spoke the ten commandments to Moses, the conditions of Sinai are spelled out. Upon the mountain "*were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud...the LORD descended upon it in fire...and the whole mountain quaked violently.*"<sup>6</sup>

Last week, Matt spoke of the permanence and stability of mountains, making the point that a human span of life pales in comparison to their longevity and endurance.<sup>7</sup> But as God set out to reveal Himself and give Israel His Word, the immovable trembled under divine power. And verse 26 tells us that Sinai then became a kind of forerunner-warning to something that will take place at another juncture in history. It was a sign and symbol of a weightier reality to come. He shook Sinai, ***but now [God] has promised*** another quake-event—a final, creation-altering shake—***YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.***<sup>27</sup> The quotation here is from Haggai 2:6. He then offers an interpretation, ***This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things...***

The near fulfillment of this text from Haggai is addressing how God will restore His exiled people back to their homeland. He would do that by dethroning pagan kings and restoring a place for His people to once again worship Him, namely the temple.<sup>8</sup> But the ultimate fulfillment to Haggai's sermon was that through the Man Christ Jesus, God would not only do what He did at Sinai, but everything in creation, both the physical and spiritual, will be overturned and devastated under His judgment.<sup>9</sup> Those tempting the new converts back in Judaism, slandering the perfect name of the Messiah with no repentance or faith in sight, they will be justly judged. The created, invisible powers stirring opposition, with Satan himself leading the charge, will be shaken into outer darkness, rendered powerless before God's terrible omnipotence. The last Day will be all-inclusive. Not only earth, but also ***HEAVEN***. No earthly power and no invisible being at odds with Him will escape His just judgement. The kingdoms of this world can't build enough or plan sufficiently for the incoming upbraiding. No person will be exempt from divine accountability. The glory of God will either enthrall with unending wonder or engulf in everlasting agony. The message of Hebrews has yielded the same truth already: It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.<sup>10</sup>

In one sense, the faithful find a word of comfort and rest in this truth. A prayer that should never be far from our hearts is that the stated enemies of the cross come into the light of God's mercy. We would join the angels in joy for their repentance. But, there are times and situations where our anger towards the unjust, the divisive, and the persecutor, is justified. The promise of final judgement in

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:16-18

<sup>7</sup> From Matt's sermon last week called "Two Mountains" based on Hebrews 12:18-24.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *EBTC: Hebrews*, 404.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 17:30-31, "*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*"

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 10:31

scripture aids us to not take matters into our own hands, but it also confirms our desire to see God and His people be absolutely rid of all darkness throughout creation. Speaking into the specific situation of these Jewish tempted, one commentator posits the communication from the author to his audience this way, “Can you not see that the vestments and the animal sacrifices and the glorious temple and the pageantry and the priesthood—can you not see that the whole lot of it put together, though it attracts you so much now, is destined to pass away?”<sup>11</sup> God will wash it all away and rock the whole created order so that every knee will bow to the supremacy of Christ.

Speaking of rocks, I was drawn to the image Paul paints for the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 10 he captures what grounded Israel in the wilderness and what will ground us when God shakes creation in judgment, “*For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea...[3] all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. [5] Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.*” Everyone who does not rest on this Rock will be destroyed. Everyone who rests on the Rock of Christ will be secure, among, end of verse 26, ***those things which cannot be shaken.***

Have you believed on Jesus as your Rock of refuge? Are you attending to His Word, with eagerness to love and obey Him. Are you drifting from believing that life is all about Him—loving Him and pleasing Him? Hearing of the grave danger of refusing God’s way in Christ is meant to turn any and all back from temptations to do so.<sup>12</sup> God is not to be trifled with.

## I. Receiving from Him who speaks

Like we’ve noted from earlier warning passages, the new believers turning their backs on Christ and His gospel is not a done deal. In fact, the warning text of Hebrews 6:9 shows an optimism concerning the recipients of this sermon. Here’s what this pastor writes after expressing how a life that bears thorns and thistles is worthy of destruction, “*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.*” He concluded this because he heard of their sacrificial service towards the saints. So where does he land his lengthy argument? In that same place of hopefulness towards the recipients. <sup>28</sup> ***Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.***

I’m struck by the subtlety with which the words are couched, ***since we receive a kingdom.*** The sentence structure here does place stress on how we respond to such a secure position and such a gracious gift, but for what do we ***show gratitude? A kingdom!*** Among those things which cannot be shaken is the inheritance of a kingdom for all who endure by faith to the end. After instructing his disciples to trust in God for all they would need going forward, Jesus declares the very same thing, “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*”<sup>13</sup> What is this ***kingdom?*** Is it not the gift of a perfect King, who could not be rattled in His mission to save us? Is it not the rest we have through Him, the dwelling place with God secured through Him, access to the Father through Him, a family of those made perfect by Him, a city with foundations prepared and made new by Him? Is it not that time and place where God’s rule is all and in all?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> David Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom: Hebrews for Today*, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, 546.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 12:32

<sup>14</sup> Gareth Cockerill, *NIC: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 670.

**Kingdom** encapsulates all we have been granted in the Lord Jesus Christ and all that we will be granted because of His grace. The present tense participle here is meant to bring the reader to his/her present responsibility to keep enduring.<sup>15</sup> Your life in the kingdom has begun by grace through faith, but you have yet to receive the fullness of God's kingdom. If you keep going, the gift of receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken remains. If you withdraw in unbelief, the trepidation of Sinai will be multiplied at the final judgment.

The warnings of verses 25-27 and the truth that God gives His enduring people a kingdom in verse 28 serve together to produce a proper response in these hearers. It's one thing to hear that we're not getting what we surely deserve in our sin, but to further hear that we're being given what we could never deserve or earn—a place with the King in His kingdom—together those incredible truths should only intensify what is called for here, **gratitude**.

I recently heard a panel discussion on the kingdom of God. One person said, "You're not building the kingdom. You're not achieving the kingdom. You're not voting the kingdom in. God gives His children a kingdom as an inheritance...and what is an inheritance but wealth you didn't work for."<sup>16</sup>

This **kingdom** is a wealth of grace we can't measure, but it's a grace for which we can live with consistent thanksgiving, a thanksgiving which should fill the whole community of faith. The gratitude in one **by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe**. This is how kingdom citizens live. We serve God from reverent hearts, awestruck by His greatness. Grace has turned our reverence from servile dread to a distinguished honor. With God being our Father, Christ being our Elder Brother-Savior, and the Spirit being our Comforter, the hostility has been put away for good. But since God remains, verse 29, **a consuming fire**, repentance for drifting away from His revelation in Christ should be the reasonable conclusion.

## Conclusion

Warning systems serve to save human lives. On Saturdays when you hear the tornado siren in your neighborhood, I assume most of you aren't annoyed, unless it's just above your back yard. I would assume that you would appreciate what it can do in those moments that precede the 180 mph winds. Giving opportunity for refuge feels more like love than inconvenience.

Today, you have not heard the voice of a mere man. In these scriptures, you have heard **Him who warns from heaven**. Hebrews has been a book that has told us that Jesus died for sin, that Jesus has defeated the grave and every dark power in us and outside us, and He's done so for people like me and you. Faith in Him is the way of escape. It's the loving refuge He offers. Let the one who has ears, hear.

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<sup>15</sup> Peter O'Brien, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 498.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Horton, as heard in a panel discussion found at <https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/shows/a-kingdom-for-the-poor-in-spirit/>