



A Kingdom that Cannot Be Shaken

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 12:18-29

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

Today, beloved, we are going to finish out the 12th chapter of Hebrews. When you look at chapters 11 and 12 in the letter to the Hebrews, you see the heart of a pastor, the heart of a man who wants those to whom he has preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, those who he has taught the Word of God, those whom he loves – how he wants them to remain faithful to Jesus – not to fall away or drift away or give up or be discouraged – but to persevere to the end and be saved.

He in this incredible chapter, the writer of Hebrews calls on us to follow the example of those saints of old that he described in chapter 11, and he challenges and exhorts us to run the race of faith, to run the course that God has set before us, casting off whatever gets in the way, laying aside the entanglement of sin. We have a race to run, fashioned by God, so do it! That's his message. He tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, to look to Him and find in Him the strength and the power to persevere in our calling just as He did in His. He calls us on us to make the most of the formative and corrective discipline of God, designed by the Father to mature us, to strengthen us, and to make us like Christ. He told us to toughen up, to get with God's program of peace and holiness, to look out for one another and what pitfalls to avoid along the way. So far in chapter 11 and 12, the pastor has called us to run the race of faith; he has told us why we must and told us how to do it and now this morning, he is going to give to us the motivation for running the race to the end. We all need motivation, we need a reason when things get hard, when we are tempted to ask ourselves if it is worth it, to keep going, to keep running the race of faith and to persevere in faithfulness to Christ to the end. And so the pastor gives us the motivation to keep going here. I'll just summarize that motivation in three statements. We must run because of what we have been given in Jesus Christ. We must run and finish because of what is at stake in the future. And we must run because of who God is. So let's look at this, ok? The first thing the pastor wants us to see is

We Must Run Because of What We Have Been Given in Christ (18-24) In seeking to give the Hebrew Christians fuel for running the race, he tells them: ***“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”*** (Hebrews 12:18–24, ESV)

This is some of the most picturesque language in the entire NT. It is the final contrast that the pastor is going to make in this sermon between the old covenant of the law and sacrifices and the new covenant in Christ’s blood. He does it by way of speaking of two mountains that describe the differences between the old covenant and the new – the description of Mt. Sinai, although it goes unnamed, and Mt. Zion. It is an awesome picture.

Now to understand the purpose of this contrast, we have to remember what was going on in the lives of the original recipients of this letter. These brothers and sisters in the Hebrew church in Rome were being tempted, because of the persecution and hardships that they were facing from the Roman society and their friends and family, to abandon the race and to abandon Christ and to go back to the Jewish faith, to go back to the old covenant – to trade eternal blessing for temporal ease. That was exactly what couldn’t happen and so the pastor shows them the huge contrast between what the old covenant could deliver minus Christ and what they had in the new covenant in Christ.

He speaks of the old covenant, characterizing what took place after the Exodus when Moses led the nation of Israel to Mt Sinai to worship God and to enter into covenant with Him as His people. And the description that he gives is terrifying. Look at this again: ***For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”***

The giving of the Law at Mt Sinai was a terrifying, awesome physical display of God's glory, His majesty and His holiness. If you are familiar with Exodus 19 and 20, you know the story. The nation of Israel was brought to Sinai to worship God. They had to take three days to consecrate themselves in order to be ceremonially clean before God, and then on the morning of the third day, while gathered at a safe distance at the foot of the mountain, the people saw a thick cloud descend on the top of the mountain, thick veins of lightning flashing forth, loud peals of thunder rolling down the slopes, and a deafening angelic trumpet blast causing everyone in the camp to tremble. Then God, in the form of a raging fire, a picture of His burning holiness, His perfect purity, His unrivalled glory, and His person as the Judge of all of creation, appeared on the summit and the entire mountain was covered in smoke. The ground began to heave under their feet as the mountain began to quake with God's presence. And as the angelic trumpet blasts grew louder and louder, Moses spoke to God and God answered Him in thunder. The mountain was so charged with the holiness and glory of God that if an unthinking animal touched it, it was to be stoned. For a man, to draw near to that mountain, to touch it, meant certain death.

It shook the nation to its core. They were terrified and rightly so. The people of God were literally assaulted with the holiness and the majesty of God. After hearing God speak, they begged that they not hear the voice of God any more, that they would rather have Moses speak to them, but not God. Exodus 20:18-19 records, ***“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.””*** (Exodus 20:18–19, ESV) Even Moses, God's chosen mediator, His spokesman, who had met Him at the burning bush and performed God's miracles, was full of fear and trembling. Why did God reveal Himself in such a terrifying manner? Because this is who God is! He is a consuming fire. Glorious in His majesty, magnificent in His glory, exacting and awesome in His holiness.

There is no casual approach to God. In fact, everything about this encounter said “Stay away.” God is holy and man is a sinner. The great problem of Sinai is that while men and women were forced to behold the glory and holiness of God from far off, and they could see their own sinfulness, the Law could give no power to overcome sin. God is terribly holy and sinners cannot approach Him. The sacrifices that were offered, the worship that was given

to God – it was all from far, far off. That’s all the old covenant could offer – worship from a distance. Sacrifices that were inadequate to deal with sin and that pointed to the need for a Savior, for a Redeemer, for a sacrifice that would take away sins once and for all. The fear and trembling, the terror of Mt Sinai shows clearly the great gulf between sinful man and holy God, that all of our best efforts to make ourselves acceptable to this God fall miserably short and that it’s only by grace we draw near to God at all. And the pastor’s point in all of this, as the Hebrew Christians were tempted to abandon Christ as God’s Messiah, to abandon Christ as God’s High Priest, as the One who is the only Savior and True Mediator between Holy God and sinful man is this: Do you really want to go back to Mt Sinai? Is that what you want? Do you want to go back to this mountain of God’s holiness and man’s guilt, but this time with no hope at all? Because if you go back to that mountain, if you reject Jesus Christ as the One who fulfilled the Law, paid for your sin, fulfilled all the sacrifices and who brought the grace of forgiveness, you are abandoning all hope. The Law will still find you guilty and you will find you guilty and you will be forever guilty apart from Christ. There is no other Savior, no other Mediator. If you go back to the Jewish religion and leave Jesus behind, you leave all hope of forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God and eternal life behind too!

Like the Apostle John wrote in the gospel that bears his name, **“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17, ESV)** Or as Jesus Himself said, **“Unless you believe that I am he (God’s Son, the Messiah, the only sacrifice for sins) you will die in your sins.”**” (John 8:24, ESV) The old covenant was not an end in itself – it couldn’t be. It only served to point to Jesus Christ, to point to a better covenant, to point to a better mountain, to the presence of God – not revealed in terror on a physical mountain, but to an eternal, spiritual mountain, to Mt. Zion, the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. By the sacrifice of Christ, by the new covenant in His blood – this is the mountain to which you have been brought.

The pastor is telling these Hebrew Christians and telling us, who may be tempted to fall away from following Christ in truth and in faithfulness, “You have not been bought to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion. Don’t trade that for anything!” Listen to the way he describes the incredible blessing that we have been given in Christ. The contrast is so incredible. He says, **“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made**

perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (Hebrews 12:22–24, ESV)

This is the kingdom of which you are a part, this is the covenant that you enjoy by faith, and this is where you belong. Right now, though you cannot at this moment see it with your eyes, though it has not yet been revealed as it will be when Christ returns in all of his glory, already you are a citizen of this kingdom by faith, the kingdom that will one day be revealed in all of its splendor. The contrast with Mt. Sinai is breathtaking. It is one long, incredible sentence. In describing the incredible spiritual blessings that belong to the Hebrews and to us if we hold fast to our faith, what is true of us if we are united to Christ by faith, he says:

You have come to ***Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*** Mt Zion was the Jebusite hill that David captured about 7 years into his reign as the King of Israel, where he built his palace and nearby was later built the Temple. Zion was the religious center of all of Israel and was known as the earthly dwelling place of God. But here, the writer of Hebrews is using Mount Zion to refer to the heavenly city of God, to the spiritual Jerusalem that comes down from above, where God makes His eternal presence with His people. He is speaking of what we read in Hebrews 13:14 where he says, ***“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Hebrews 13:14, ESV)*** He is saying to them and to us, through faith in Christ, already like Paul says in Phil 3:20, “Your citizenship is in heaven.” You are not of this earth, but a citizen of the Kingdom of God, right now seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Right now, what is true of you spiritually trumps everything that you can see, hear, touch and taste.

You have come to ***innumerable angels in festal gathering.*** Unlike Sinai, where the angels were wrapped in darkness and their trumpets terrified the Israelites, we have come to angels in festal gathering, into the midst of an innumerable gathering of holy angels, joyfully worshipping God the Father and Jesus Christ for their glorious work of redeeming you and me. Revelation describes the scene, ***“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”” (Revelation 5:11–13, ESV)*** Though you cannot see it, this

is the company you are in right now as we gather for worship, a tiny foretaste of the fullness of heaven that is yet to come.

You have come to **the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven**. This is who we are, literally the “church of the firstborn.” This is incredible. He is speaking of all who have been saved. We are all the firstborn, our names written in heaven, enrolled in the people of God in the Lamb’s book of life. This word “firstborn” is so very rich. I want you to get a sense of it. Long ago in the ANE, far more than in our own day, the title of firstborn was of huge significance. The firstborn was especially blessed by virtue of their birth. They received a double portion of the inheritance, a place of honor in the family, and were oftentimes the special object of the father’s love. So this word, applied to us spiritually speaks of incredible blessing. We are, each one of us, a firstborn of God – especially blessed by virtue of the “new birth” we have received from Christ. John says that **“to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,” (John 1:12, ESV)** We have received an inheritance that is undefiled and imperishable, one that we receive as –get this now – “co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). We are a church of the firstborn.

You have come to **God, the judge of all**. God has not changed. He is still the great God of glory, the God of eternal majesty and power, the God of burning holiness, the God who is the rightful judge of all. He is the one, of whom the pastor earlier wrote, **“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:13, ESV)** Appearing before this God at Sinai filled the Israelites with abject fear, so how can it be that we come before Him, with these angels, in joyful celebration? The only way that this can be true is if we are no longer under condemnation for our sins and that is exactly what Paul describes in Romans 8:31-34, when he says, **“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” (Romans 8:31–34, ESV)**

You have come to **the spirits of the righteous made perfect**. Who are these spirits of the righteous with whom we worship? None other than the saints who have died before us throughout the ages – Moses, David, Enoch, Abel, Isaiah, Paul, Peter, Thomas, John. They have now been made perfect in the eternal presence of God; there is no barrier to their

fellowship with God, no imperfections. Though they are in heaven yet awaiting the day when Christ will be revealed in all of His glory, we share a solidarity with them in Christ and the same spiritual life that flows through them flows through us. Because of Christ we are all made righteous. That's the heart of it all.

You have come to **Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**. Here, the pastor has saved the best for last. Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, approached God with fear and trembling, but Jesus is the mediator who takes away all of our fears, whom makes all these blessings possible, who bids us to enter into the very presence of God. It is He who was **“made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”** (Hebrews 2:17, ESV) He is **“the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”** (Hebrews 9:15, ESV) He is the one who has made all of this possible. How could the Hebrew Christians, how could we, be unfaithful to this Savior? Without Him, the new covenant falls apart and the blessings of God are forever out of reach. And it is all because of His willing sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant in his blood, who takes away our fear of judgment, dispels the clouds of separation, and opens wide the gates of heaven to all who come in faith. The pastor makes that clear when he says:

You have come to **the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**. He personifies the blood of Christ as opposed to the blood of Abel and the contrast is shocking. After Cain slew his brother Abel in cold blood, the Scriptures tell us that the voice of his blood cried out to God from the ground for vengeance and God cursed Cain for his sin. But the blood of Christ calls out to God, not for vengeance, but for forgiveness, for mercy, for grace and it speaks peace to us.

Beloved, this is the spiritual mountain of blessing to which we have been called, Mount Zion, the city of God. When we realize what we have in Christ, how could we ever give him up, how could we ever fall away, how could we ever shrink back? That's the point that the pastor is making. We must run the race of faith because of what we have been given, but he adds even more incentive by reminding us what is at stake. Look what he says, next

We Must Run Because of What is At Stake (25-27) He says, starting in verse 25, ***“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.”*** (Hebrews 12:25–27, ESV)

This is the last warning section in the book, the last warning against apostasy, against failing to persevere in faith until the end. This command to “not refuse Him who is speaking” is in the present tense. In other words, the pastor is telling you and me to keep on listening, to keep on heeding the words, of God the Father who has spoken to us in these last days in His Son, Jesus Christ. Hearing Christ’s voice, His call to salvation is not a one-time deal. He is calling us to keep on listening to Jesus Christ as He speaks to us in His word. Those who continue to hear and respond to the words of Christ by faith, who continue to heed the Word of God, will persevere to the end and prove themselves to be children of God. But those who refuse to hear God, who refuse to respond to Christ’s Word, who turn a deaf ear to the truth, will prove themselves to be false converts, false professors or just simply unmoved altogether and will not escape.

You can see the progression here, can’t you? Those who refused to hear God when He spoke from Sinai, those who the writer of Hebrews described in chapter 3 when he wrote: ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”*** (Hebrews 3:7–12, ESV) Those unbelieving Israelites fell in the wilderness and never entered the Promised Land.

He uses them as an example to say in essence, “God is no more tolerant of sin, no more tolerant of unbelief now than he was then. If God judged those who failed to heed His warnings when He spoke through Moses, how much more judgment do they deserve who refuse to hear God speaking through His own Son, Jesus Christ.” It is a foolish and damning notion to think that God is less serious about sin, less serious about obedience, less serious

about judgment simply because we live in the “age of grace” when the gospel has been preached and Christ has been offered as the bearer of our sins. God is just as serious now as He was then. The only difference is that God has given the ultimate refuge from His wrath against sin in Jesus Christ, but we must abide in Him by faith if we are to be saved. We cannot treat the gospel with contempt, with disrespect, or neglect and get away with it. God’s invitation in the gospel, to forgive all your sins and to give you eternal life, to bring you to Zion, if you will respond, is the greatest invitation in the world. What more could He do than to send His own Son who shed His innocent blood to pay the penalty for every sinner who will ever believe in Him? Since the gospel is the greatest gift imaginable, to refuse it is the greatest sin imaginable. God does not look the other way when people refuse His gospel. To know the joys of Zion calls for an unequivocal commitment to Jesus Christ as Mediator, Savior, and Redeemer. George Guthrie puts it very succinctly when he says, “The Word must be received or rejected... For those who reject the Word, there exists no escape from God’s judgment. At the end, a person either resides as a citizen of God’s unshakable kingdom or perishes with the rest of the universe.”

And that’s important, because there is a shaking that is coming, a shaking that will encompass the entire created universe. God’s holy presence shook an entire mountain at Sinai, but that is nothing compared to the shaking that is coming on the day of God’s judgment. Heaven and earth, and everything in it, will be shaken. Everything of this earth will crumble to dust, will cave in upon itself, will be destroyed, and the only thing left standing will be what belongs to the unshakable kingdom of God. Look, you see it coming. History tells you it’s true. Every kingdom that has been established has eventually fallen to other, more powerful kingdoms and if it is true of the kingdoms of this earth, then you know it is true of the Kingdom of God. In Revelation 11, after describing his vision of a great earthquake, John says these words, **“There were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.””** (Revelation 11:15, ESV)

Yet once more, God will shake not only the earth, but the heavens and only those who are in Christ, only those who have made their home in the kingdom of God through faith in Christ, who have not refused Him who is speaking, will escape the destruction of God’s judgment. Those who have their hopes and dreams, their security and their hope of salvation rooted in this world will find themselves brought to utter ruin. “Run the race of faith,” the pastor says, “because of what is at stake.” And last, he tells us to run the race, because of who God is.

We Must Run the Race of Faith Because of Who God Is (28-29) He tells us in verses 28-29, ***“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”*** (Hebrews 12:28–29, ESV) Let us be grateful... what a divine understatement. We deserve destruction, we deserve wrath poured out without mercy, we deserve cosmic judgment, but we have been given in Christ a gift we could never repay. Our God is a consuming fire, blazing in His holiness, glorious in His burning purity and we, who are sinners by nature, through Christ’s blood have been given a place in His kingdom, only by His grace, only by His loving kindness, only because of Jesus.

Does it create the kind of gratitude in you and me that it should, the kind of gratitude that results in reverent and awe-filled worship? We worship with our lives as living sacrifices, Paul says. We worship with the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name according to Hebrews 13:15. We worship with reverence and awe the God who is a consuming fire. I was thinking why it is that the writer of Hebrews again emphasizes that God is consuming fire as He revealed Himself at Sinai. This is Mount Zion, right? But it makes perfect sense. The degree to which we forget or reduce the fearsome awe, the burning holiness, the consuming majesty of God the Father is the very same degree to which we reduce our former guiltiness and unworthiness, and to which we then reduce the awesome nature of and work of Christ’s redemption and His glory as our Savior and Mediator. A god of little glory, sinners of little guilt, requires a mediator of little glory. But a God whose glory is infinite, and sinners whose guilt is infinite, requires a mediator whose glory is likewise infinite. That kind of God and that kind of Savior provokes real gratitude in the hearts of those who have been saved, and demands reverent and awe-filled worship.

Really grasping these realities... it just changes our lives. It changes the way we think about everything. I don’t deserve to be alive, none of us do. Any good thing we have, anything short of hell and judgment, is all grace and mercy from God. There is no-one like God, no one like Christ. There really isn’t. And the only sensible response is reverence Christ, to hold Him in awe, to want to glorify in our living and to speak well of God in Christ. There is no one and nothing better than Him, who He really is, the way that Scripture describes Him. And there is no one else to whom we can go than Him, no other place of refuge, no other place of salvation, no unshakable hope than Jesus Christ. We either take Him as He is, trust in Who

Scripture says He is, hold fast to Christ as He is, stake our lives on Him as He is... or we are lost. That is what the writer of Hebrews wants us to understand.

Our God is a consuming fire and He has spoken to us in Christ and He is no tame God. This imagery of God as a consuming fire speaks of His holiness and the reverent fear with which we should always treat Him. God can never be taken lightly. Even when the threat of wrath has been removed by the cross of Christ, He is no tame God. In CS Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, He depicts Christ as the great and majestic lion, Aslan. And I hesitate to use this quote because there are a lot of times in hipster Christianity when Aslan is about all anyone knows about Jesus, but be that as it may, this scene brilliantly depicts a great truth. In this scene, a girl named Jill, who has been lost and is dying of thirst comes to a great clear stream. As she moves to the stream to slake her thirst, however, she sees the great lion, Aslan sitting by the water.

The lion invites her, "If you are thirsty, come and drink." Dying of thirst and drawn by the gurgling water, she steps forward and asks, "Will you promise not to do anything to me if I do come?" "I make no promise," said the lion. Drawn closer by the sounds of the water, she wonders aloud, "Do you eat girls?" He answered, "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms." Jill shrinks back at these words, thinking, "I dare not come and drink." The lion knows her thoughts and says, "Then you will die of thirst." "Oh dear," cried Jill as she moved a step closer to the water and the lion, "I suppose I must go and look for another stream." The lion simply responds, "There is no other stream."

And that's how it is, beloved. If we want life, this is the God with whom we have to deal. He is a consuming fire and like the lion, He will not move for you. You will have to deal with Him. He is not safe – following Him is hard but it's good. He will not change for you, but He will change you – from sinner to saint redeemed by mercy, from enemy to friend reconciled by His love and the blood of Jesus Christ, from rebel into children and heir with Christ. He is the Savior, the Lord of all majesty and grace, of holiness and mercy, of judgment and redemption. He is the Lord who shakes heaven and earth but gives to His own a kingdom that cannot be shaken. So hear the voice of Jesus speaking to you through the pastor saying, "Flee to Me. Trust in Me. I will forgive you. I will cleanse you. I will accept you. I will empower you, protect and keep you. I will shake all things, all people, but to you I will give an unshakable kingdom – if you trust in Me. Trust Me."

Hear His voice and do not refuse Him who is speaking...

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