

October 6, 2019

A FINAL WARNING AND A CALL TO GRATEFUL WORSHIP

Hebrews 12:25-29

*(27 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)*

I've noted before that 2 Samuel 6 contains what feels like the most abrupt change of emotions in Scripture. The text tells us they were celebrating "with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals (2 Sam 6:5)" And a few minutes later, after Uzzah reached up to touch and steady the ark of God, a man was lying dead on the ground. No doubt the celebration came to an immediate stop. The next emotion we see in the text is anger, as we're told that David was angry with the Lord. One minute—celebration. The next—shock, sadness, confusion, and anger. But it may be that when you look at our text this morning, you feel that same sort of abruptness in change of emotions.

Last week, as we looked at Hebrews 12:18-24, we saw a text of celebration. The author reminded his readers that they've not come to a setting where God is telling them to keep their distance because he is unapproachable, like we saw at Mount Sinai. Rather, because of the high priestly work of Jesus Christ, they live their lives in the presence of God as their Father, credited with Christ's righteousness, with angels rejoicing, as God's adopted children. The glory of this joyful note just builds and builds as we move from verse 22 to verse 24. And then, right at the moment, when our emotions are raised in joyful celebration, we come to a warning text: "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" (v. 25).

It can feel shocking after the joyous note of vv. 22-24, but it's a reminder that the aim of this book is to keep a people from walking away from Jesus and going back to their former life of worship under the old covenant. The purpose of this letter is to encourage perseverance in faith in Christ and warn against the judgment that comes when people don't persevere in faith. Therefore, it shouldn't be surprising that the last note of the book, before the epilogue that we see in chapter 13, is another warning—our final warning in this letter to the Hebrews.

Now, since this is our final warning, some of you may not have been with us through this study, and may be thinking, "Wait a second, if verses 18-24 were celebrating the believer's standing in Christ, why would there be a severe warning to these same hearers about final judgment?" let me briefly cover four axioms that you can hold to when coming to a warning text like we've seen throughout the letter to the Hebrews. I won't expound on them in as much detail as I did when I first noted them, but you can go listen to/read that sermon if you desire to do so.<sup>1</sup> But here they are:

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<sup>1</sup><https://cccjackson.org/sermons/hebrews-10-26-39-a-warning-of-fearful-judgment>.

1. Everyone who is ever justified will be glorified.

This is simply my affirmation that all belong to the Lord will be preserved in faith by him, and I'm specifically using the language of Romans 8:29-30 where Paul notes that all who are justified will be glorified.

2. Christians, by definition, persevere in the faith.

We see this in places like 1 John 2:19 where believers are not only defined as those who repent of sin and believe in the crucified and risen Lord but as those who continue and persevere in repenting and believing.

3. Many professing believers will go to hell.

Jesus says, "Many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not . . . do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me'" (Matt 7:22-23). Also, the parable of the seeds affirms many people who profess to believe and even give evidence of knowing Jesus for a season of time who will ultimately show themselves never to have known him. They'll ultimately refuse to turn from a specific sin or deny Jesus altogether. They will not persevere in repentance and faith. They will go out from us because they were never of us, to borrow a phrase from the apostle John (1 John 2:19).

4. The Bible gives severe warnings to Christians concerning hell.

To the one who fits axiom three, this makes sense. But for all his children, God uses warning texts about hell as a means of turning his children away from sin and back toward a path of obedient faith. Therefore, if we downplay or sidestep warning texts for believers, we may well be intentionally avoiding the very means God intends to use to preserve his children.

Therefore, we come to our final warning this morning, but we not only have a warning but also a call to grateful, worshipful, obedience to our glorious God. So, let me first start with the warning. I'll say it this way:

**Don't refuse what God says, for terrible judgment is coming.**

If you remember all the way back when we started our study through the book of Hebrews, this book started on the note that God is a speaking God. Under the old covenant, God spoke by the prophets by all kinds of diverse means—through visions, direct speech, etc.—to his people. But then, in God's clearest self-expression, he spoke to us by his Son. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and when he spoke we heard the very words of God. Then, Jesus told his apostles that the Spirit would "take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14), and that's what he did, giving the New Testament writers the very words of Christ so that we have the revealed truth of God as the Scriptures. Our God is a speaking God, and we are grateful for it.

However, this privilege of reading the very words of God (or hearing them read) comes with great responsibility. We must obey them. That's where the author begins, "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" (v. 25).

What is he talking about? Well, if you remember from the text last week, we had this scene of God descending on Mount Sinai to speak to his people, and when he spoke, his words were like thunder, shaking even the mountain itself. It was a terrifying scene. And when God gave the people his words through Moses, he demanded that they obey or that they suffer judgment. But, sadly, they didn't obey, and they did suffer judgment. The bodies of an entire generation of Israelites littered the wilderness as a sign that God is not to be mocked. He demands obedience.

But then the author reminded us that we have something better than Mount Sinai. Christ has come, and we can live our lives in the very presence of God, knowing that he delights in us. However, this superior blessing also brings responsibility. That is the author's point in the second half of verse 25. If God didn't tolerate a people refusing to believe and obey his words when he came to them at Mount Sinai, how much less do you think we can escape judgment if we—who live on this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—reject his Son? To use the language of 10:29, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" In other words, don't think that sin is something to be trifled with in our lives. It is nothing less than disobedience to God. We, as believers, must see it as a cancer, always needing to be removed from our lives. If we feel the pull to say, "I know what God has said in his word, but ..." we need to stop and re-read verse 25. Do you think you can refuse his words and escape judgment when even those under the old covenant didn't escape judgment when they refused a less clear word from God?

And not only is the weight of responsibility heightened but the judgment to come is more severe than what we saw in the wilderness. The author writes, "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'" (v. 26). This is a quote from Haggai 2:6 and 21, which foretells of the Lord bringing a universal judgment one day that will include all of creation. After the flood, we see judgments of the Lord here and there in the OT, some against Israel and some against the other nations, but one day there is a judgment coming that will encompass all of creation, that no man will escape outside of persevering faith in Jesus. Therefore, today, do not see sin as acceptable in your life. Repent. Turn away from it. Pluck out your eye or cut off your hand, if necessary (meaning simply, be willing to take radical measures). But do not refuse to obey in faith the God who has spoken. That is the warning of verse 25.

But warnings aren't the only means the Lord uses to preserve his children in faith. He also holds out the promise of blessing, and that's where our text goes next, as we're reminded to remember in gratefulness that we have eternity coming.

## Remember with gratefulness that we have an eternal home.

After noting the judgment to come by saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens,” the author adds, “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. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (vv. 27-28a). What does he mean by removal of things shaken and things that cannot be shaken?

Here’s what I think he means. I think it is referring to the coming new creation and perhaps the Lord’s people as well. Let’s start with God’s people, although I think the main focus is the new creation. When God judges the earth, he is going to remove in judgment all who are against him. Everyone who is defiled in sin, not clothed with the righteousness of Christ, will be thrown into the lake of fire so that only those who belong to the Lord in faith—and have endured—will dwell with him forever. That may well be the reference here, and not a few commentators think so. And this reality is why we preach the gospel to people, for hearing and believing the gospel is a person’s only hope of being saved.

But I think the main emphasis is on the coming new creation. Here’s what I mean. When Adam sinned in the garden, Romans 8:20 says that God subjected the creation to futility. That is, the created order itself fell under the curse; it was put in bondage to decay. However, the Lord did this not as a permanent feature. Rather, Paul notes that God “subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). In other words, you and I are longing for the day when Christ will return and we’ll be given our resurrected bodies. Everything that is corrupt and mortal about this body will be transformed in an instant to an imperishable body. Gone will be aches and pains, disabilities and disease, and sin and death. But the return of Christ will not only affect us as we all obtain the freedom and glory to come. The return of Christ will also affect the created order itself.

Just as Adam sinned and all of creation was cursed, so when God’s children are raised will creation be freed from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom that we’ll know as his people on that day. The Lord will come and shake the creation itself in judgment, and all that is corrupt and defiled will pass away, or to use the language of the text, it will be removed.<sup>2</sup> And what is revealed—or remains—after this shaking will be a new creation, a creation unlike anything we’ve known. It won’t be subject to futility. It will be free from its bondage to decay. And we, as God’s resurrected and glorified children, will dwell in this new heavens and new earth with our Lord forever.

And the author of Hebrews says that we should be grateful to know we’re getting that glorious inheritance of the new creation to come. He says, “Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom

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<sup>2</sup>Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 406.

that cannot be shaken" (v. 28). As believers, how can we not live our lives in constant gratefulness knowing that we have an eternal, glorious home?

But I know this can be hard to feel, so let me try to paint an image that might help us see this more clearly. Imagine that you're friends with the son of a multi-billionaire. And his father loves him, but he has not given him any of the inheritance yet, and the son is working a \$40,000 job. However, one day his father comes to him and says to him that sometime before the end of the year, he's going to give him a billion dollars. He doesn't know precisely when, but it'll be before the end of the year. Meanwhile, your friend calls you one day and says, "Man, I just got some terrible news. I'm crushed." And you say, "What is it? Were you given a fatal diagnosis or something?" And he says, "No. The mechanic says that my car probably isn't going to last too many more years, and the bank rejected my attempt to borrow more money when I really wanted to buy a larger house, and looking at my HVAC unit, I'm not sure it'll last as long as I wish it would. Man, I'm just really discouraged and bitter about these circumstances and just needed someone to complain to about all of it."

What would you say to your friend? Wouldn't you say, "You are getting a billion dollars sometime before the end of the year, right?" I mean, you can express to him that you're sorry his car is having issues or he can't get that nicer house today or that his HVAC unit may well go out any day, but wouldn't you also be reminding him that he has something promised to him that is going to make all of that stuff feel like light, momentary, affliction? Of course you would. You'd say, "Friend, I'm sorry. I really am, but by the end of this year you could buy an entire neighborhood, a whole car lot, and an HVAC company if you wanted. I'd think you should live with a more grateful heart."

This is the author's point here. We've got an inheritance coming that can't be shaken. Everything in this world pales in comparison with it. One day we will dwell with the Lord forever, never feeling the pull of sin, never dealing with disappointment, discouragement, suffering, pain, and death, in a perfect world. We will reign with Christ over that world, forever, enjoying and glorifying our God, loving him and one another perfectly. That's not a pipe dream. That is real. That's coming. And it can't be shaken. It can't be thwarted. It is sure. So no matter what we're going through, we can rest in that. Even our tears and the ache of sadness and disappointment in this world are laced with gratefulness because we know that this world, as it now is, is not our home. And obedience to the Lord that is founded upon a grateful heart is a beautiful thing.

So, we've had our warning and a reminder to be grateful for our unshakable inheritance. But we end with one final, brief exhortation.

### **Never forget that our God is a consuming fire.**

The text ends with one last exhortation as the author writes, "And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (vv. 28b-29). In the new covenant, worship is not pictured as what we do in going down to the temple and offer sacrifices. That was worship under the old covenant. Paul reminds us of what worship looks like

in the new covenant, writing in Romans 12:1, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Do you see? Under the old covenant, worship was performed in offering the sacrifice of a slain animal. Under the new covenant, acceptable worship is presenting our own bodies as a sacrifice, but it is a *living* sacrifice, living all of life unto the Lord, obeying him, honoring him, and bringing glory to his name. This is why it is important to be reminded of what we saw in our text last week—that we’ve come to Mount Zion. Because it is only children of God who realize that our heavenly Father has cleansed us through the work of his Son and poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us who will live a life of persevering, grateful, joyful obedience to God.

But one thing we must never forget is that God is a consuming fire. We must never somehow domesticate God in our minds to the point that we don’t hold reverence and awe for him. Now, this doesn’t mean that you walk around, living your life in fear of divine judgment. That’s forgetting that you’ve not come to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion, to use the imagery from last week’s text. But it means that you always remember that obedience is non-negotiable.

Let me try to paint a picture. Let’s say you’ve got a dad, on the ground, wrestling with his two boys. The boys are jumping on him, and he’s tossing them out of the way, and everybody is having a great time. There’s laughter, affection, and joy. It’s a beautiful scene of a dad and his boys, and in that moment, those boys aren’t questioning one bit whether they’re accepted by their dad or loved by their dad or that their dad delights in them. And then, one of the boys stands up because he’s going to move away and get a good running start so that he can come and jump on his dad, but as he moves away, his dad says, “Hey, don’t go into that room because there’s stuff that doesn’t need to be broken.” But the boy, runs into the room anyway, yells, “Here I come,” and then runs to jump on his dad.

In that moment, if the boy is small enough and the dad is able, he catches that boy in mid-air, with a stern look on his face, and the atmosphere of everything changes in that second. The boys realize that playtime is on pause in that moment, and the dad goes on to say something to the effect of, “There is never a time when I am not your dad, demanding to be obeyed in everything I tell you. If we’re acting like I’m the enemy playing war or a thief and you’re the cops or a wrestling opponent you’re dropping elbows on, I will be obeyed. Do you understand?”

What the dad is communicating is that his boys must never lose a fear of dad in that sense. And so it is with God. He sings over us, invites us to come to his throne in boldness, and even to share our hurts, fears, and frustrations with him as he cares for us. But we must never forget that he is a consuming fire, let fear of him diminish, and somehow come to think that obeying his every command is negotiable. It isn’t.

This book is written to a people to say to them, “Don’t walk away from Christ.” He’s lured them to Christ, showed them Christ’s superiority, and held up the glory of Christ, but one constant theme has also been, “You don’t want to face the furious, terrible, merciless judgment of God.” And I want to say to us this morning that if you’ve found sin acceptable, repent. That sin is trying

to harden your heart and convince you that God can be trifled with. Brothers and sisters, he is a consuming fire. And when we consider that this God has made us his children through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, that is a reason to live a life of grateful, worshipful, obedience before him. Let us then come in gratefulness to the table this morning. Amen.