

“Yet Once More (Again)” – Hebrews 12:25-29

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 12...

I want to circle back to the passage at the end of Hebrews 12 again. There are two more points we need to see in these verses that not only conclude the chapter but also the main argument that has been running through the entire epistle. We will cover one of them this morning as we make our way to the Lord's table to share the ordinance together. And then, to begin the next decade (2020!), we will consider the final one, which has to do with acceptable worship. So let's have a look at the text. I'll begin reading in verse 25 and invite you to follow along. This is God's Word...

“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. ²⁶ 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.’ ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:25-29)

So what have we seen in this passage so far? A couple weeks ago I tried to show you that these verses remind us of a series of consequences that should emerge in our lives when we rightly consider and respond to the realities the author has been stressing earlier in the chapter by way of his contrast between two peaks—Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. The former, representing the Old Covenant, reminds us of the holiness of God and the inability of sinners to draw near. The latter, representing the New Covenant, reminds us of the work of Christ and the new realities He has brought us into and ensured will be our experience in the life to come. I don't need to re-preach on those verses (you can find them on our church website), but this new paragraph is helping us understand what a God-honoring response to these realities looks like. What is the result in the life of the believer who realizes these things are true of him or her? Well, we've seen two results so far. First, we will have an...

Uncanny Perseverance in Our Weariness

I say “uncanny” because it is unusual in the eyes of the world. It is beyond what is natural to sinners in the flesh. It is, therefore, evidence of the Spirit's operation in our lives. We would not persevere in faith through the adversities in life were it not for the grace of God at work in us. He is the author and perfecter of our faith (12:2). So our perseverance, like every other evidence of saving faith, is something that God alone gets the glory for.

But, second, we saw that we respond to these new covenant realities with...

Uncanny Priorities in Our World

Which is to say that knowing the future outcome of things—that Christ is coming back and will initiate a “shaking” of things made so that everything will pass away except that which is part of his “unshakable kingdom”—changes what the believer prioritizes here and now. We don't live for the same things that world

does, at least not when we are rightly thinking on what God has revealed about the end. We prioritize the things above. We seek first His kingdom and righteousness. We hold loosely to the things of this world because our hope is not in them. It is in Christ. We have something unshakable. Something this world and the pains of this world cannot shake us from. And indeed, as we have seen, Christians are the only people in this world who truly possess anything. The point being that our priorities should be dramatically different when we know what God has revealed about the direction of history.

Now today I would like to add a third truth. The first truth—about the need for perseverance—is explicit in the text. The second—about our priorities—is implicit, a natural consequence of what the verses reveal. This third truth is also implicit. Trusting that God will bring these things to pass should result in...

Uncanny Poise in Our Woe

The Christian's poise in turbulent times is a consequence of their faith. We trust the Lord to make things right in the end and we trust the Lord to fulfill His promises. So when people and circumstances seem to threaten our lot in this world, we can find contentment and be free from panic because we know the future that God has in store. The world should see a stark difference in how Christians face uncertainty and disappointments and how unbelievers cope with such things. They should see a poise in us when those without Christ know only panic. And this surprises the world. It doesn't make a lot of sense. It forces them to consider why we are different. And this introduces questions that have only Gospel answers. It is part of our Christian witness.

Furthermore, we have a different perspective on why and how God uses the bitter providences of this life to shape His people for the glorious life to come. Remember the discussion on discipline earlier in chapter 12? "*Endure hardship as discipline*", says the author, "*God is treating you as his children*" (12:7; NIV). Remember the word "discipline" just means instruction. It doesn't have to be punitive. And from a loving Father it is designed to foster healthy and needed development in children. So he reminded us that God "*disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness*" and that in "*the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*" (12:10-11).

So when things don't pan out the way we hope, as Christians, we trust that God has something He is accomplishing that is good and that the circumstances can produce in us something that is needed. We trust that God is working in our lives the way that we would ask Him to work in our lives if we knew all that He knows. And so instead of panic, there is poise and a perspective that encourages us to look and listen for what God might be trying to teach us. I like the way Tony Evans has put it: "When your world is shaking, then, it's because God is talking." What if the reason things are shaking is because "God is trying to eliminate a hindrance in your life" or "loosen your grip on created physical things so that you'll grasp more tightly onto eternal things instead"? Then perhaps "instead of clutching earthly things that are trembling and wobbling" we can trust the Lord knows what He is doing and let our natural panic be replaced with the poise of faith.¹ Faith that trusts that God's intentions are good and He can be trusted with our present circumstances and their future outcomes. The illustration Dr. Evans gives is instructive.

"Tomorrow you may press a hot iron to wrinkled clothes. But your intent isn't to ruin them. Your goal will be to remove the wrinkles to make your garment fit to wear. Guess what. God wants to wear you and look good in you. So he will apply a consuming fire to you for your good. Even though there will be steam and heat, you're going to look good when he's through."²

And this is not just abstract and aspirational. It's practical and observable in the lives of many believers. I read recently of a Dutch theologian who lived during World War II by the name of G. H. Kersten. His hometown was Rotterdam and on May 14, 1940, they were bombed by Nazi aircraft. Can you imagine the terror of that

day? The sheer and utter panic and chaos? That's certainly what we all would expect and none of us would blame anyone for reacting that way. But this is what Kersten wrote about that day:

“When the streets in the vicinity of our home were set aflame, even hospitals were destroyed, and our home shook on its foundations and the floor heaved under our feet, I was privileged to bow under God’s justice and to worship His majesty in the midst of judgment. I do not write this to exalt myself. By nature we are all rebels against God; however, God’s grace humbles, and that humility gave me peace and helped me calm my family. This has compelled me to admonish the people in both writing and preaching to bow before God and acknowledge that He has not dealt with us according to our sins.”³

How is that possible in a man’s life in the midst of such turbulent circumstances (literally)? It was made possible by God’s grace, through faith in what God has assured. It’s grounded in the conviction that, yes, the world may cave in around me as they have in buildings throughout the city, but, even still, God’s going to take care of me. I may lose this life, but I am found in Him. This life is not my best life. What happens today will not determine my fate. Christ has. To live is Christ. To die would be absolute gain. That looks strange to the lost world. But is the fruit of a faith that takes God at His Word. As Jeremiah Burroughs explains,

“True fear and trembling at the Word is that which will settle the heart and strengthen the heart against all other fears....The more fear there is of God’s Word, the less fear there will be of any creature in the world. It is the only way to free you from all fears whatsoever.”⁴

Unfortunately, I fear that Christians in our day and setting are not marked by much of this faith. The world doesn’t see in us poise, when it expects to see panic. It sees panic when it expects panic. It sees more worldliness, in other words. And that is not a good witness to the world of the power of biblical faith, is it? Of course not.

One of the most glaring examples of this, it seems to me, is every time we find ourselves in a political season. I am amazed at just how much Christians talk about politics in such worldly ways. It’s like we believe that if our candidate doesn’t get elected that God’s Church is going to collapse in on itself and the world is going to go up in flames. What an ungodly attitude. Yes, we should be good citizens and we should seek to be salt and light—agents of positive change and influence—in all arenas in life, including the political arena. But when things don’t go our way, God is no less sovereign. When pressure mounts against the people of God in society, it is not comfortable and not desirable to be sure, but God is no less at work in accomplishing His purposes in our life. But you watch, because the world will be watching, just how Christians (or people who identify as Christians) conduct themselves when the next election cycle rolls around. Do you see a difference in them? Will you see the influence of their faith? Or will you just see what you expect from the world? Will we sound like prophets or like political pundits? Will we be marked by poise or panic? Perhaps that will show where we really place our hope.

Palmer Robertson offers us some wise commentary along these lines in a book called, *God’s People in the Wilderness...*

“Hebrews speaks directly against harmful self-understandings of the people of God today. The church is not an established institution that draws its strength by connection with political, social, financial, cultural, or educational establishments. Instead, God’s people of the wilderness transcend all these temporal organizations as a community that is in the world but not of the world. Whenever and wherever these other institutions crumble, their fall will never function as a harbinger of the fate of the church.”⁵

Think about it, brothers and sisters, from the perspective of the original readers of the epistle to the Hebrews. Was there any power more impressive than that of Rome? They ruled the known world. They seemed like an unrivaled and stable powerhouse that could never be shaken. And what about the Christian community scattered

across the Roman empire? Did it look powerful and stable and like it had any hope of outlasting Rome? Clearly not. Do you think anyone in the unbelieving world would have bet on the church outliving and outgrowing the mighty Romans empire? You would have been laughed at to even put them in the same conversation.

But what has become of Rome? Historically, they would exert their influence and strength against the Gospel and those who professed faith in Christ. They would put them to the sword, cast them to the beasts, and set them ablaze with fire. “But in the end it was Rome that capitulated.”⁶ In came the Barbarians and the might of Rome came crashing to the ground.

“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. The prophet Isaiah put it well: ‘All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever’ (Isa. 40:6–8). 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.”⁷

Brothers and Sisters, Christ will build His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Rome is instructive. Never has there been a more powerful Empire over the world. And on the other side of the Christmas celebration we should recall the humble origins of the man Christ Jesus and the people He would establish. But here we are. And where is Rome? Is it any more revealing commentary that today people name their children Paul, after Christianity’s most famous Apostle, and their dogs Nero, after the Roman emperor most commonly associated with persecuting Christians?⁸ Jesus meant what He said—“*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*” (Matt. 24:35). And so, writes Raymond Brown,

“Where everyone around them was being shaken, these believers were not to be afraid, but to rejoice in the secure, immovable kingdom to which they most certainly belonged...the order of things that *cannot be shaken*. These things, like the Christ who controls them, *remain* (cf. 1:11-12).”⁹

We are called to the same conviction. And that conviction should lead to uncanny poise in times of woe. Let the world panic. If we have Christ, we have nothing to fear. You have nothing to fear, for...

“...*you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ 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, ²⁴ 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)

You have come to “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28). So we should pray, as Jesus taught us, “*Your kingdom come*” (Matt. 6:10), which is essentially praying that God’s rule would “extend further and deeper into our lives and into this world.” And that, friends, “is what history is all about, and if we are wise, we will value our participation in Christ’s spiritual kingdom far above any worldly calling.”¹⁰ So if the world shakes, don’t panic. You have something greater reserved for you. Remember this and you will find the kind of profound poise we see in the Lord Jesus, “*the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame*” (Heb. 12:2).

And it is His poise—His eternal perspective—that we remember when we come to the Lord’s table and partake of the ordinance. No greater example of poise under pressure could be cited in the history of the world than that displayed in Christ when He laid down His life for us on the cross. Was it pleasant? Not at all. His body was broken. His blood spilled. But it was necessary for our saving. Jesus kept His eye on the goal and that settled poise has meant for us eternal salvation through faith. He died in our place, so that we might live in His place—

Mt. Zion. He took our sins upon Himself and nailed them to a tree, so that we could be forgiven of sin and by His grace set free. So let's remember His work. Let's trust in His sufficiency. Let's give thanks for His poise for our sake. And let's reflect on what that means for us today.

Pray with me...

[Lord's Supper...]

¹ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1332.

² Ibid.

³ M. Golverdingen, *Rev. G. H. Kersten: Facets of His Life and Work*, translator Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids: Netherlands Reformed Publishing, 2008), 202. Also quoted in David B. McWilliams, *Hebrews* (LCECS; Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege Press, 2015), 382-383.

⁴ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Fear* (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991), 36. Drawn from McWilliams, 383.

⁵ Also drawn from McWilliams (383), who cites O. Palmer Robertson, *God's People in the Wilderness* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 145-146.

⁶ Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 579-580.

⁷ Ibid., 580.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 245-246.

¹⁰ Phillips, 581.