

HEBREWS 12:18 – 13:25

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6. The blessings of the new covenant (12:18-24)

6.1. The old covenant mountain (12:18-21)

¹⁸For you have not come to a thing that can be touched, and to a blazing fire, and to darkness, and to gloom, and to a storm, ¹⁹and to [the] noise of a trumpet and to a sound of words which those who heard begged that a word not be added to them, ²⁰for they could not bear the thing commanded: "If even an animal should touch the mountain it shall be stoned." ²¹Indeed, what appeared was so frightening Moses said "I am terrified and trembling."

6.1.1. Turning from God always is inexcusable and tragic, but it is even more so in light of the glory of the new covenant. Christians have not come to a covenant like the Mosaic covenant that, as was symbolized in the events at Sinai, so emphasized God's distance, his fearsomeness, and the sternness of his commands. That emphasis served a teaching function for the people of Israel until the time of the new covenant that Jesus introduced.

6.1.2. The imagery is drawn from the covenant assembly recorded in Exodus 19 – 20 and Deuteronomy 4 – 5. Moses is not reported to have said "I am terrified and trembling," but Ex. 19:16 states that "all the people in the camp trembled." The Hebrew writer, under inspiration of God, makes clear that this included Moses. Deuteronomy 9:19 (see Exodus 32) registers Moses' fear at Sinai of God's wrath against sin in relation to the incident involving the golden calf. Some think the writer may have had this in mind, as it confirms the fearsomeness of God in the same general setting.

6.2. The new covenant mountain (12:22-24)

²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to [the] city of [the] living God, to [the] heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels in a joyful gathering, ²³and to [the] church of the firstborn ones who are enrolled in [the] heavens, and to [the] judge, the God of all, and to [the] spirits of [the] righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, [the] mediator of a new covenant, and to [the] blood of sprinkling that speaks a better [word] than the [blood] of Abel.

6.2.1. The surpassing glory of the new covenant is expressed in its contrast with the Sinaitic symbolism of the old. The distance and trepidation of the old

covenant, the frightening scene of Mount Sinai, has given way to the nearness, warmth, openness, and celebration of the new. Lane comments (p. 464-465):

Every aspect of the vision provides encouragement for coming boldly into the presence of God (cf. 4:16). The atmosphere at Mount Zion is festive. The frightening visual imagery of blazing fire, darkness, and gloom fades before the reality of the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem. The cacophony of whirlwind, trumpet blast, and a sound of words is muted and replaced by the joyful praise of angels in a festal gathering. The trembling congregation of Israel, gathered solemnly at the base of the mountain, is superseded by the assembly of those whose names are permanently inscribed in the heavenly archives. An overwhelming impression of the unapproachability of God is eclipsed in the experience of full access to the presence of God and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

6.2.2. Those in the new covenant have been linked with the heavenly reality, God's true dwelling place, and with its countless angels in joyful worship.

6.2.3. They have been made part of, and thus brought into relationship with, the church of the firstborn ones. The firstborn ones are those who share the inheritance of the Son, *the* firstborn (Heb. 1:6), and whose names are written in heaven.

6.2.4. They have come to the judge, the God of all who will vindicate them on that Day, and have entered into fellowship with the godly men and women who already died, those who in the intermediate state between death and resurrection are in God's immediate presence because of Christ. He not only is the basis for their reconciliation with God; he also, I am convinced, brought to heaven the spirits of those who formerly were in the blessed portion of Hades (Paradise).

6.2.5. And, of course, those in the new covenant have come to Jesus, the mediator of that covenant. His blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel in the sense that Abel's blood cried out to God for judgment (Gen. 4:10) bearing witness to Cain's guilt. Christ's blood has won our forgiveness; it cries out that we are guilty no more.

7. FIFTH WARNING: Do not reject God's word (12:25-29)

²⁵See to it that you do not refuse the one who is speaking, for if those who refused the one who warned [them] on earth did not escape, how much less [will] we who turn away from the one [who warns] from [the] heavens, ²⁶whose voice then shook the earth, but now he has promised saying "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." ²⁷Now the [phrase] "Yet once more" makes clear the removal of the things that are shaken, as of things that have

been made, so that the things that are not shaken may remain.

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, let us have gratitude, with which let us worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe, ²⁹for indeed our God [is] a consuming fire.

7.1. In light of all of this, the writer warns them not to turn from the Christian faith, the truth of Christ. As Guthrie expresses the point (p. 422), "If those of the old covenant did not escape the wrath of God when they turned from his Word, the judgment on those who reject the message of salvation received in the new covenant era is even more certain (2:1-3)."

7.2. The one whose voice shook the earth at Sinai has promised in the future to remove or "shake out" from all of creation whatever is not destined for eternity, whatever is inconsistent with that perfect eternal state. This is the Hebrew writer's way of describing the redemption or "heavenization" of creation that will occur at the end. He is speaking about the making of the new heavens and new earth referred to in Isa. 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13, and Rev. 21:1 (see especially Rev. 21:1-4).

7.2.1. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes puts it this way in *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988) 557-558:

Then, at Mount Sinai, the voice of God shook the earth in such a way "that the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Ex. 19:18; cf. Judg. 5:5; Ps. 68:7f.). This awesome moment when God communicated his law before which our fallen and disobedient world stood condemned, portended the much greater terror of the last judgment when, in the words borrowed from Haggai 2:6, God will shake not only the earth but also the heaven, that is to say, the whole created order (as in Gen. 1:1, where "heaven and earth" stand for the totality of creation; . . .). But, terrifying though such a prospect is, it is also good news for those who are God's faithful people, for the final shaking, which is the completion of judgment, is also the completion of salvation. . . .

Our author adds the explanation that the expression "*Yet once more*" points clearly to *the removal of what is shaken*, and therefore of what is shakable and as such unreliable and impermanent, by which the created order in its fallenness is intended (*as of what has been made*). This accords well with the passage from Psalm 102 cited earlier in the epistle (1:10-12), which declares that earth and heaven, the work of God's hands, will perish, that is, as they are presently known to us, and will be changed, whereas God remains eternally the same (cf. Heb. 13:8). The purpose of this ultimate shaking is *in order that what cannot be shaken may remain*. For the people of God, who belong to the order of things which are unshakeable, the removal of all that is insecure and imperfect, is something to be eagerly anticipated; for this final shaking of both heaven and earth is necessary for the purging and eradication from the universe of

all that is hostile to God and his will, for the establishment of all that, being in harmony with the divine mind, is permanent, and for the inauguration of the new heaven and the new earth, that is, the renewed or "changed" creation, in which all God's purposes in creation are brought to everlasting fulfillment at the consummation of the redemption procured in and by Christ (Rev. 21:1ff.; 2 Pet. 3:10-13); and this will take place with the return of Christ in glory and majesty (Rev. 19:11ff.). Thus Gregory of Nazianzus [Bishop of Constantinople 379-381] explains that "this last shaking is none other than the second coming of Christ, when the universe will be transformed and changed to a condition of stability which cannot be shaken."

See also, Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 862; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 459-461; and George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 620-621.

7.2.2. Not only will our bodies be transformed to be suitable for eternity with God, but all of creation will be transformed. That's what Paul says in Rom. 8:18-23. Douglas Moo says of Rom. 8:18-23 in "Nature in the New Creation," *JETS* 49 (3, '06) 460-463:

. . . [C]reation has been "frustrated" and is in "bondage to decay." . . .

. . . What can be affirmed on the basis of Romans 8 is that the natural world itself has been affected in some way by the human fall into sin and is therefore no longer in its pristine created state. . . . Human sin has affected the state of nature itself and will continue to do so until the end of this age. . . .

. . . If creation has suffered the consequences of human sin, it will also enjoy the fruits of human deliverance. When believers are glorified, creation's "bondage to decay" will be ended, and it will participate in the "freedom that belongs to the glory" for which Christians are destined. Nature, Paul affirms, has a future within the plan of God. It is destined not simply for destruction but for transformation. . . . The reversal of the conditions of the Fall includes the created world along with the world of human beings. Indeed, the glory that humans will experience, involving as it does the resurrection of the body (8:9-11, 23), necessarily requires an appropriate environment for that embodiment. . . .

. . . The hope for the liberation of creation that Paul expresses in Romans 8 clearly implies that the destiny of the natural world is not destruction but transformation.

7.2.3. This same concept is expressed in Revelation 21-22. N. T. Wright expresses it this way in *Surprised By Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) 104-105:

We thus arrive at [Revelation 21-22,] the last and perhaps greatest image of new creation, of cosmic renewal, in the whole Bible. . . . This time the image is that of marriage. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

We notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian scenarios in which the end of the story is the Christian going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned, to meet its maker in fear and trembling. As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven, it is heaven that comes to earth; . . . This is the ultimate rejection of all types of Gnosticism, of every worldview that sees the final goal as the separation of the world from God, of the physical from the spiritual, of earth from heaven. It is the final answer to the Lord's Prayer, that God's kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. . . . [I]t is the final accomplishment of God's great design, to defeat and abolish death forever – which can only mean the rescue of creation from its present plight of decay.

7.3. Since they (and we) are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, an eternal dwelling of a heavenized creation, they are to be grateful, and with that heart of gratitude they are to worship God in an acceptable way, meaning with reverence and awe. Those who turn from him in ingratitude, who like Esau spurn their inheritance, need to know that our God is a consuming fire.

8. Practical exhortations (13:1-19)

8.1. General guidelines for Christian living (13:1-6)

Let brotherly love continue. ²Do not neglect hospitality, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember the prisoners as having been imprisoned with them [and] the ones being mistreated as being yourselves also in the body. ⁴Marriage [is to be] held in honor by all, and the [marriage] bed [is to be] undefiled, for God will judge [the] sexually immoral and adulterers. ⁵The way of life [is to be] free from love of money, being content with the things you have, for he himself has said, "I will in no way leave you; neither will I in any way forsake you." ⁶So being confident we say, "[The] Lord [is] my helper, I will not be afraid; what will man do to me?"

8.1.1. The writer urges them to continue loving fellow Christians and then commands two specific expressions of that love: not to neglect hospitality and to remember the prisoners.

8.1.1.1. The command not to neglect hospitality probably is focused on traveling Christian workers (see 3 Jn. 5-8). There is a tendency to shrink from hosting Christian workers when the society is hostile to Christianity because hosting them raises one's public identification with the faith. The temptation is to want to keep one's head down and not attract attention. The statement that by showing hospitality some have entertained angels probably is a reference to O.T. examples of people who entertained angels unwittingly, e.g., Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-22), Lot (Gen. 19:1-4); Gideon (Judg. 6:11-22).

8.1.1.2. As there is a tendency to shrink from hosting Christians when the society is hostile to Christianity, so there is a tendency to forget about fellow believers who are in prison. The writer tells them that they are to remember those in prison as if they were right there with them, having them always before their eyes, and he says they are to remember those being beaten as if their own bodies were receiving the blows.

8.1.2. He says in v. 4 that *marriage* is to be honored by all. It is a God-given institution that is to be considered precious and valuable by the Christian. If without being married you relate to another person in a way that is reserved for marriage, if you're sexually involved without being married, you are dishonoring marriage. By creating your own immoral arrangement you are saying, in essence, that marriage is misconceived, that it is a burden rather than a blessing and that you have designed a superior structure for male-female relationships.

8.1.3. He also says in v. 4 that the *marriage bed*, which is a euphemism for the sexual relationship, is to be undefiled, which as the next clause makes clear, means there is to be no sexual involvement of any kind with anyone other than your husband or wife. Though you may conceal your betrayal from your spouse and your family and friends, God is fully aware of what you're doing, and he will judge you for it. As Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 6:9-11 (ESV):

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

8.1.4. The writer may have included this admonition about sexual sins simply as a general reminder, but it possibly is tied more closely to the situation of his hearers. Koester remarks (p. 565):

[T]hose who show hospitality bring strangers into their homes (13:2), making it important to observe rigorous standards of propriety.

Imprisonment of a spouse left the other spouse without marital companionship for an indefinite period (13:3). Economic difficulties (13:5; cf. 10:34) sometimes led to the exchange of sexual favors in return for benefits.

8.1.5. He tells them in vv. 5-6 that the proper way to live is to be free from the love of money, being content with one's present possessions.

8.1.5.1. A Jew who was being ostracized by the Jewish community for his faith in Christ would be tempted to turn away from Christ to expand his economic possibilities. When that temptation strikes, they need to hold firm to the Lord, remembering his faithfulness as exemplified in his statement to Joshua in Josh 1:5 that he would not leave or forsake him.

8.1.5.2. Being confident that God is with them, Christians can say with the Psalmist in Ps. 118:6 (LXX) "[The] Lord [is] my helper, I will not be afraid; what will man do to me?" The point is that with confidence of the Lord's supporting presence, Christians can face any situation. Even if they are called to surrender their lives (12:4), God is big enough to bless them through it, big enough to trump even that evil.

8.2. Guidelines on church leadership and doctrine (13:7-19)

⁷Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you, [and] considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ [is] the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for [it is] good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, in which those who walk are not benefited. ¹⁰We have an altar from which those who serve in the tabernacle do not have authority to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹²Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the gate that he might sanctify the people by his own blood. ¹³So then let us go out to him outside the camp, bearing his reproach. ¹⁴For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the one that is coming. ¹⁵Through him, then, let us always offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips praising his name. ¹⁶But do not be neglectful of the doing of good and fellowship, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit, for they are keeping watch on behalf of your souls as [ones] giving an account, that they may do this with joy and not groaning, for this [would be] unprofitable for you.

¹⁸Pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a good conscience, wanting in everything to act honorably. ¹⁹And I urge you to do this even more that I may be restored to you quickly.

8.2.1. He calls them to remember the earlier leaders who decades ago preached the gospel in the founding of the church there and, in light of the outcome of their lives (which implies they are deceased), to imitate their faith. They function like the heroic examples from biblical history.

8.2.2. The Jesus whom those leaders preached, in whom they trusted, and through whom and for whom they lived noble lives, has not and will not change, so their example of faithfulness to him has permanent relevance. However circumstances appear, one need not fear that Jesus has changed and is no longer aware of one's situation or serving on one's behalf.

8.2.3. Verses 9-14 are especially thorny. Lane (p. 530) says they "constitute one of the most controversial passages in Hebrews." That's a clue that one must tread lightly here. I'll just offer my understanding without chasing all the rabbits.

8.2.3.1. The author tells them in v. 9 not to be misled by all kinds of strange permutations of Jewish law that attribute a false spiritual significance to dietary regulations. Since grace in Christ is the genuine basis of one's relationship with God, it is good to have one's heart strengthened by grace. That strengthening is beneficial because it is based on and reinforces the truth. On the other hand, since dietary regulations do not provide the spiritual benefit its advocates claim, do not create or sustain one's relationship with God, it is not good to have one's heart strengthened by those things. That strengthening is harmful because it is based on and reinforces the deception about one's standing with God.

8.2.3.2. He says in v. 10-11 that these and other Jews, those who continue to relate to God under the old covenant, described symbolically as those who serve in the tabernacle, have no authority to eat from the altar of the cross, the place of Christ's sacrificial offering, meaning they have no right to share in the Lord's Supper in which Christians symbolically eat the body of the sacrificial Lamb. They have no such authority because the old covenant prohibits them (the priests) from eating the body of a sacrifice made for the sins of the people. Rather than being eaten those sacrifices were taken and burned outside the camp (Lev. 4:13-21, 6:30, 16:15-16, 27).

8.2.3.3. The writer is saying, in other words, that the old and new covenants are mutually exclusive in terms of relating to God so that returning to Judaism is abandoning Christ (see Gal. 5:2-4). This mutual exclusivity is represented by the lack of authority under the Mosaic law to eat the Lord's Supper, which in Paul's words is a participation in the sacrifice, a participation in the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). One can either be a Christian, which means a right to share in the Lord's Supper, or one can be an old-covenant Jew, which means no right to share in the Lord's Supper; one cannot be both.

8.2.3.4. Some reject any allusion here to the Lord's Supper because they think such a reference runs counter to the prior dismissal of claims that "foods" are of spiritual value, but I disagree with that. Denying that dietary regulations are relevant to one's relationship with God is not denying that being a disciple of Christ, which discipleship is expressed and reflected in one's sharing in the Lord's Supper, is relevant to one's relationship with God. DeSilva writes (p. 499-500):

The eucharistic overtones of this verse have been much explored and debated. Commenting on the eating meat from sacrificial offerings, Richard Nelson writes: "Meat derived from violence has been transformed into food eaten in a meal, which establishes community. . . . The blood that had the potential to destroy relationships (Gen. 9:4-6) has become instead the mechanism to promote those same communal ties through atonement (Lev. 17:11)." The eucharist is the ultimate expression of this principle, wherein a violent and bloody execution is transformed into a meal that provides a model for the new community of believers and sustains that community. For hearers accustomed to participating in this ritual, an allusion to it here in 13:10 is unavoidable and has the potential to enrich their understanding of that meal and to safeguard them against an overly materialistic interpretation of its power and significance (as the author has laid ample stress on the once-for-all and unrepeatable quality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross).

8.2.3.5. Since sacrifices for the sins of the people are burned outside the camp (probably referring specifically to the Day of Atonement sacrifice), Jesus suffered outside the gate, outside the city, that he might serve as a sin offering in conformity with that shadow (v. 12).

8.2.3.6. In vv. 13-14 the writer calls his hearers to join Jesus outside the camp, meaning to join him outside of bounds of old-covenant Judaism, and to be willing to share his reproach as an outcast from that community. He is exhorting them to accept that rejection rather than to seek the temporary comfort and security of returning to Judaism. The strength to do so lies in the fact the Christian's eyes are fixed not on this passing world but on the eternal dwelling that is coming (v. 14).

8.2.4. Through whatever hardships their faith may lead them, they are urged to always offer up to God verbal praises through Christ, meaning on the basis of his sacrifice and ongoing intercession. Lane remarks (p. 524, see also p. 551), "The writer draws upon a tradition of a song of praise which the community offers to God."

8.2.5. In addition to verbally praising God, they must not neglect Christian ethics, acts of kindness to those in need and sharing within the community of faith, because these expressions of devotion are pleasing to God. It is tempting to separate praising God from living for him, but that is unbiblical. Praise is only a sweet aroma to God when it arises from a life that is surrendered to him.

8.2.6. The writer commands his hearers to obey their leaders and submit or yield to them. They are to obey the word of the Lord it is assumed the leaders are presenting (as did their former leaders – 13:7), and they are to cooperate or go along with the leaders in their exercise of spiritual oversight. This is especially important when the church is under pressure because stress heightens the need for mature direction and increases the tendency to fragment.

8.2.6.1. They are to do that because the leaders have the God-given responsibility of caring for the flock's spiritual welfare and will give an account to God for their discharge of that responsibility.

8.2.6.2. Given that the leaders are acting under a divine duty to look out for their benefit, they are to be the kind of people who are a pleasure to shepherd, not the kind of people who leave the leaders groaning. Indeed, they are warned that being a grief to the leaders is unprofitable for them.

8.2.7. The writer solicits their prayers on his and his companions' behalf (though the plural may be a formulaic, an "authorial plural" that refers only to the author), noting that they are serving Christ with genuineness and integrity. He asks specifically for their prayers that he may be restored to them, which indicates he had some prior connection with this congregation.

IV. Benediction and Closing (13:20-25)

A. Benediction (13:20-21)

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by [the] blood of [the] eternal covenant, ²¹equip you with every good thing to do his will, working in us the thing pleasing before him through Jesus Christ, to whom [be] the glory forever [and ever], amen.

1. He prays that the God of peace may equip them with every good thing to do his will and through Jesus Christ work in them (and him) what is pleasing in his sight.

2. God is referred to as the one who brought the Lord Jesus back from the dead, and Jesus is called the great shepherd of the sheep. God brought Jesus back from the dead by or through the blood of the eternal covenant in that, as Bruce says (p. 411), "His resurrection is the demonstration that His sacrifice of Himself has been accepted by God and the new covenant established on the basis of that sacrifice."

3. The last clause is a doxology – "to whom [be] the glory forever [and ever], amen" – may refer either to God, the primary actor in vv. 20-21, or to Jesus Christ, the nearest antecedent.

B. Closing (13:22-25)

²²Now I urge you, brothers, bear with the word of exhortation, for indeed I have written to you in few [words]. ²³Know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. ²⁴Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. ²⁵Grace [be] with all of you.

1. The writer closes by urging the hearers to put up with what he's written, meaning not to consider it an imposition because of its length, because it is in fact relatively short in terms of a sermon.

2. Guthrie writes (p. 443):

The "Timothy" of verse 23 is commonly assumed to be Paul's missionary companion. If so, his "release" indicates an incarceration not mentioned in Acts or elsewhere in the New Testament. In any case, Timothy is a companion of the author and is known to this church. The author expects him to arrive soon and anticipates that they will travel together to see the recipients of Hebrews.

3. The author greets the leaders and all the saints and sends to them greetings from those from Italy. As I noted in the introduction to the letter, "those from Italy" probably refers to people from Rome who now are residing elsewhere with the writer of Hebrews and are sending greetings back to those in Rome.

4. The closing blessing is simply "Grace [be] with all of you."