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Introduction

Imagine Detroit, New York, and Boston as cities of worship. But you say, "There is no such city on earth that genuinely and truly worships Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." Well, in one sense that is the case, but the truth is that there is a city characterized by worship and the writer to the Hebrews tells you that you have come to that city and you are part of it. For he says, you have not come, as the old Israel, to Mount Sinai but as the new Israel, you have come to Mount Zion. In summary of 12.22-24, you have come to the church for worship by the gospel.

Moreover, the worship is joyous: you have come to **innumerable angels in festal gathering** (12.22)

Angels are exalted spiritual beings that serve God by serving His saints (Heb. 1.14).

Notably, they worship the Lord Jesus (Heb. 1.6-7). In **festal gathering** they adore Him singing the new song they confess (Rev. 5.9). In Revelation 5.11, John says, **"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 [in song per. 5.9] 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!'"** Remarkably, Jesus says, **in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise** (Heb. 2.12); He sings in our midst when we sing. Thus, the book of Hebrews stirs up this question: how can we be anything other than a singing church when we gather for worship as an assembly of the firstborn?

Now, in 12.25-29, the writer of this challenging book continues the theme of worship. It is interesting that he continues this lofty theme from the springboard of a final warning about apostasy. The important word in 12.25a is "refuse." You have to think about how you may profess faith in Christ but refuse Him by refusing to hear His speaking when you come to the church for worship by the gospel. You can refuse and resist the Lord. You cannot thwart His purposes or defeat Him in any way, but you can back away in refusal and rejection of Him in how you approach the assembly of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. Coming to this local gathering, you have come to God and to Jesus for the privilege of fellowship with one another and with the Father and the Son. You have this privilege right here and now. You have come to the church for worship, but for what kind of worship? In 12.25-29, our Lord through this writer describes the kind of worship that pleases Him. In a word, it is to be grateful, grateful worship, and surprisingly, this exhortation to grateful worship arises from a warning.

Therefore, there are two things to stress in our meditation today: 1) the warning that encourages grateful worship, and 2) the grateful worship that this warning encourages.

1A. The warning that encourages grateful worship

Read Hebrews 12.25-27 with me again: 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. 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.

In tight flow of context, the one who speaks (v. 25a) is Jesus the mediator to whom you have come: **to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel** (12.24). He does not call out for our condemnation but for our justification speaking a better word than Abel. Earlier in the book, we are told that our salvation was **preached first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard** (2.3). Now our mediator has **passed through the heavens**

(Heb. 4.14) and He continues to speak by the Spirit through the word of His apostles (those who heard in the beginning). Of course, His speech is the speech of God who speaks to us in these last days (the whole time between) by His Son (Heb. 1.2). To refuse the gospel message of the apostles that we now have in the NT is to rebel against the living God (3.12) by treating the Son with contempt (6.6) and by trampling on His blood (10.29). Hughes summarizes with these insightful words: "The admonition here is in effect a repetition of that already issued at 2.2f., where, in the light of the retribution which overtook those who defiantly dishonored the Sinaitic covenant, the question is asked how we can expect to escape if we despise a salvation so incomparably great and wonderful as is ours in Christ... The warning against apostasy under the old covenant of law was terrible enough; more terrible still is the warning of the consequences which will overwhelm those who defect from the new covenant of grace" (*Hebrews* 557).

But the word that shook the earth is surely the word of God at Mount Sinai is it not? We have a blending of the word of God through Moses at Sinai and the word of God through Jesus. God spoke on earth and He will yet speak from heaven for according to Haggai, which our author cites here in Hebrews 12.26-27, God will shake the earth again: ⁶ **For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts** (Hag. 2.6-7). How does our writer interpret this OT text? He points to the shaking of the heavens and stresses the phrase "**Yet once more**" (Hag. 2.6; Heb. 12.27). It turns out that the forceful warning has a word of promise buried in the middle of it: **but now he has promised** (Heb.12.26). A day is coming when God will shake the entire creation, indicated here by the "heavens" in connection with the earth. What is coming is comprehensive and will affect the heaven and earth, the sea and dry land. God will shake the universe in judgment, but the clouds of judgment hide the smiling face of redemption and glory. The vision of redemption that Haggai anticipates has a universality that includes not only the entire physical universe but it also includes the whole world (Jn. 3.16; 1 Jn. 2.2). In other words, the saving of the children of the eternal covenant (Heb. 2.11-13) is how God saves the corrupt, fallen, sinful human family. Heaven's glory includes the salvation of the human race in the saving of people from all families of the earth. These biblical writers give us the encouraging word of Christ regarding the coming glory **And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts** (Hag. 2.7).

This is an uplifting vision of the future. He warns about turning away on one hand, but He encourages perseverance on the other hand. Consider where you have come and where you are going in order to make your paths straight for the race of your life through the struggles here to the glories hereafter. Moreover, and this is to the main point, this promise-laden warning is an encouragement to grateful worship. To that part of this text we now turn.

2A. The grateful worship that this warning encourages

As I read the text (12.28-29), consider how gratefulness and worship interface here: 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.**

He has just told us that the entire universe will be shaken: just as the heavens and the earth were created by the word of God, likewise, the entire fallen world will be shaken to its foundations and radically renovated by the redemptive and restorative word of God. There is promise, gospel promise, in the fact of the coming judgment. God as universal Sabbath king has a kingdom; it is the world of space, time, and people. Thus, the kingdom you have received, to which you have come, and of which you are a part is **a kingdom that cannot be shaken**. So, the warning that houses a marvelous promise leads to a pointed exhortation, an exhortation to gratitude: **Therefore let us be grateful** (12.28a). Similarly, Paul tells us to give thanks in everything and to do so because of God's unspeakable gift of His Son (1 Thess. 5.18; 2 Cor. 9.15). It is surely appropriate to begin the thanksgiving now that will continue throughout eternity.

By contrast, what words can we find to describe an ingrate? Ingratitude is a universally recognized wrong. It is a root sin that yields obstinacy and rebellion (Rom. 1.21). Anyone in their right mind can see how deplorable it is when someone receives what he does not deserve, even the very opposite of what he deserves, from a gracious benefactor with no genuine appreciation or thankfulness. Who is not moved by the story of *ten lepers* who receive the healing of Christ and *only one* praised God with thanksgiving? They all stood at a distance as required by their illness. There they all cried out for mercy. All of them were healed by Jesus. But only one was grateful: ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?" ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (Lk. 17.15-18). If you have been cleansed of leprosy of the soul, if you know what it means to be brought near to God from a frightening distance, and if you know that you have come to the assembly of the firstborn, to God, to Jesus, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the better word of new covenant gospel preaching, then can you assemble and refuse to praise God with a *loud* voice? Can you gather with the saints in this holy gathering and refuse to fall on your face at the feet of Jesus, give Him thanks, and confess His glory with your mouth?

Clearly, true gratitude to God for His blessings (for kingdom righteousness and kingdom blessings) leads to worship at the feet of Jesus. So, to what kind of worship does the final warning of the book of Hebrews lead us? The writer says, **let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,** ²⁹ **for our God is a consuming fire** (12.28-29). In a word, this is an exhortation to the right kind of worship, the kind that is acceptable to God. Acceptable worship will be riveted throughout with joyful gratitude. That is the first order of things; that is basic. Having this perspective, you will not want to be like the nine who went away without appreciation. But there is more here; there is depth here. Acceptable worship is characterized by reverence and awe in light of the fact that our God is a consuming fire.

The call to the right kind of worship is the middle of a sandwich: one slice of bread is the call to not refuse the Lord Jesus because God through Him will shake the universe. The other slice of bread is the bold fact that our God is a consuming fire. But part of the sandwich at its center is the gospel promise of redemption and restoration when all that is shakable and defiled is excluded and every member of the coming city knows the Lord (Heb.8.11). That kingdom is not yet, but as we know, it is also now. You *have come* (Heb. 12.22) to the city-family-church gathering in the presence of God and the angels.

What then will you do when you know that *this gathering*, here and now in new temple worship, is *a taste of worship in the heavenly sanctuary*? The first thing you will do is to enter God's presence with grateful worship; that will be first and foremost on your mind when you gather with the people of God on the Lord's Day. How could you name His name and do anything else?

Conclusion

To try to nail down some things from this message, from this text, today, let me direct your attention to some practical "how to's" of acceptable worship with three key words: respect, fear, and confession.

1) Respect (reverence)

Like the respect that people give to earthly fathers, how much more ought you to show respect when you gather to worship your loving Father in heaven. Reverence for God ought to grip you from thought to action, from the inside out. This means that you will be attentive and exercise due diligence with regard to all the elements of worship. Do you recall what they are? [Reading of Scripture, prayer, singing, giving, preaching, and the sacraments] If you have respect (i.e. reverence) for God and Jesus, you will be diligent in these things He appointed for worship, you will be diligent in your giving, reflective in prayer, joyful in singing and attentive to the word of God read, enacted in the sacraments, and preached.

2) Fear (awe)

A parallel text regarding “awe” in Paul's writings is helpful on this point: **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure** (Phil. 2.12-13). The notion of fear and trembling is not a servile fear. Instead, it is a gripping sense of awe at the wonder that God is working in your life to will and to do His good pleasure. Per the book of Hebrews, it means being awe struck at the marvel that Jesus is the author and finisher of your faith (12.1-2). Per Paul in Romans, it means having confidence that the Holy Spirit leads you over the pathway of holiness surely and steadily to consummation glory (8.14). No wonder acceptable worship expresses joyful respectful gratitude and a sense of awe. These ordinary means are truly extraordinary, extra-ordinary! If you do not see it, then you have a weak faith and you need to look to God for the strengthening of your faith: “Lord help my unbelief!”

3) Confession

The angels sing what they confess (as Rev. 5.9-11 shows). You will do the same if you enter God's presence with reverence and awe, with a loud voice of joy and gratitude. But you might ask, “Do we not spend most of the time listening to the voice of God through the appointed means of preaching?” Yes, and what does that fact do? It puts a premium on audible one-anothering prayer and it elevates the place of joyful, praise-filled singing as important God-appointed compliments to the primacy of preaching.

Suggestions *for us all* on how we can improve our acceptable worship by singing.

a) Acknowledge that it is your duty to sing. Be careful here: do not refuse His command that permeates the Psalms and is direct in Ephesians 5.19: **addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart**. One of the things that surfaces in the speaking of our Lord (Heb. 12.24) is the duty that you have to sing as a vital part of worship and thus as one of the elements of worship in the assembly of the saints.

b) Recognize the privilege of singing your confession and adoration of Christ. If you do not grow in this grace, you lose out on a marvelous privilege. The Lord commands that you worship Him in song *for your benefit*. What you have to do to grow in worshipful singing may be more difficult for some of you than it is for others, but, you can be sure, it is for your good. Singing is part of how you run the race of the Christian life; it has a God-appointed place to help you move farther down the pathway of holiness. It somehow balances things; without it, something vital is missing, something is out of whack. This is a beneficial privilege.

c) Practice in private for blessing in public

Enter the experience of singing in your private worship at home and lay the foundation for improvement in your public worship in the assembly of the firstborn. Helpfully, you can get the tunes of all the songs of the trinity hymnal online at the OPC website. Ask me or your spouse or someone else to help you “catch” a tune. To be sure, there is some negative inertia to overcome, but is not your Lord worthy of the effort it may take for you to improve? Surely, you can do this for Him to honor and please Him by confessing your faith with joy and praise in the songs of Zion, especially when you know that He is right here with you as your singing Savior.

Thus, in very practical terms, the writer has put a vision before your eyes to lift your hearts for the difficult steps of your pilgrimage. This is a vision that includes this gathering of the saints; it includes the assembly that is concrete in the present, the one we are not to forsake (Heb. 10.25). Surely, then, you have in these words an amazing elevation of gathering together as a little flock. Without question this is a sweet and awesome place with Christ within the doors!

Let us fall down before the majesty of our God with a deep sense of the dignity, celebration, and the astounding privilege of local church worship. May the Holy Spirit give us genuine hearts for worship by singing and listening to preaching; may He teach us how to love and adore our Lord Jesus more and more to the glory of the triune God, amen.