

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 23

Hebrews 12:14-29

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Our preacher is in the midst of another of his sections of application and exhortation. He has been telling them to run the race as generations of the faithful have before them, and to take their difficulties for what they are, the discipline of their heavenly father, by which their faith is strengthened and their hearts purified. That exhortation now continues and is made still more solemn: Do not turn away from God, he will tell them now, or else!

- v.15 Each Christian must seriously seek after holiness and help other believers to do the same. And one important way of doing that is to nip sin in the bud, before it has a chance to bud and blossom in a community. If sanctification, holiness of life is absolutely necessary, then, obviously, that which works against it must be resisted and rooted out.
- v.17 Esau is an example of the person these Jewish Christians are now being tempted to be: that is, someone who exchanges the unseen and future inheritance of the saints for the sensible and immediate pleasures of the world. We are reminded again of his point in chapter 6 about apostasy being permanent and irreversible. Esau's tears showed remorse for the consequences of his actions, but not a godly sorrow that leads to true repentance. This is the impression we get in the Genesis narrative as well. There is a question as to why sexual immorality is named here, as that is not explicitly part of Esau's profile in Genesis. But there was a tradition in Judaism that Esau was a sexually immoral man. In any case, the emphasis falls on what we actually know, that is, how Esau sold his birthright for a meal.
- v.18 As I am going to argue momentarily, vv. 18-24 are really a repeat of the statement, made several times already in the letter, that our preacher regards these Jewish Christians as genuine believers who will take his warnings to heart and renew their obedience to Christ. He is confident of their salvation.
- v.23 "church of the firstborn" refers to the privileged station of the saints as set apart to God and as heirs of all things, the very privileges that Esau squandered.
- v.25 He may have confidence in the genuineness of their faith, but that does not mean he has no need to warn them of the consequences of apostasy. We have had his confidence and another warning together several times already in this letter (6:9-12; 10:32-39). He is sure that their situation is different from Israel's in the same way that it is different from Esau's.
- v.27 The author never strays far from his eschatological perspective, that is, he is always thinking about the end of time and the salvation that comes in its fullness and visibly only when Christ returns. From the beginning to the end of his sermon it is, as he says in 2:5, "the world to come about which" he is speaking. Here he quotes from Haggai 2:6 to make the point that the second coming of Christ will be, in Tolkien's recondite manner of

speaking, a *eucaastrophe*, a “good catastrophe,” that is, vindication and salvation for the saints while doom for the unbelieving.

- v.29 Once again, confidence in their spiritual state mixed together with warning against a lagging faith. “We are receiving...” he says, including them; but, “let us be careful...” for our God is a consuming fire.

Now, as has been the case before in our studies, I need to devote our time this evening to demonstrating what the passage *does not* mean. What it means, in the context of the sermon as a whole, is not that difficult to state, for the several points have been made before: if you are real believers, as I think you are, it is high time for you to take warning and to recommit yourselves to Christ, lest you expose yourself to God’s wrath. He said much this same thing in chapter 10 and in chapter 6 and, really, has said the same thing all through the sermon. “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation,” was his first way of putting it way back at the beginning of chapter 2.

But, under a longstanding and deep-seated prejudice toward the Old Testament, or what we call the Old Testament, this passage, along with several others in Hebrews, has been taken as setting forth a contrast between the religion of the ancient epoch, the religion of Moses, and the religion of Christ and his apostles. The old revelation and the old dispensation is earthly, menacing, and morbid in its concentration on law and judgment while the new is spiritual, heavenly, and full of freedom and joy.

One commentator puts it this way:

“In a passage of considerable power the writer draws a contrast between Israel’s frightened cowering at the base of Sinai when the law as given and the happy, confident approach to Mount Zion, even the heavenly Jerusalem, which believers of the new dispensation have made.” [E.F. Harrison, 339]

We have found before, however, that interpretations of this type usually run afoul of the actual words our preacher wrote, and this common interpretation is no exception.

First, at no point in this sermon has Israel been viewed as a representative of the *true and genuine* religion of Moses. Far from it. Israel’s problem, as we read in chapter 4, was that she had had the gospel preached to her, but she didn’t believe it and so failed to obtain the eternal rest. She failed to obtain that rest in just the same way that people who do not believe and continue to believe will fail to obtain it today. No one doubts that Israel’s unbelief is mentioned and emphasized in this passage also. As we read in v. 25:

“If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven.”

Once again, it does not seem that Israel’s problem was that something was wrong with God’s covenant or with their religious situation in the days before the incarnation. The problem was their refusal to believe, just as it was in chapter 4. “Don’t be like them” is this author’s warning

“or the same fate will overtake you.” Were the common view of these verses correct – that they represented a contrast between the religious worlds of the OT and the NT – we would expect the author to say in v. 25, that these Christians of the new epoch should believe because they are in a better position than the ancient saints were, but instead he says what he has always said, that if they repeat Israel’s unbelief, they will repeat Israel’s fate.

And, as a matter of fact, Israel’s unbelief as being the key point here and not some imagined defect in the Mosaic revelation or the covenant God made with his people in the ancient epoch, is emphasized more than might at first appear. In v. 19 we read that Israel, terrified before the manifestation of God’s glory, “begged that no further word be spoken to them.” What you cannot tell, by the translation of the NIV, is that the word “begged” in v. 19 is the same word “refuse” in v. 25. The begging that was done in v. 19 by Israel this author regards as an act of unbelief, a refusal to hear God’s Word. Israel, when she was begging that no further word be spoken to her, was not giving expression to the religious world that the saints of that epoch had to endure, dark and gloomy and threatening as it was, she was giving expression to her own unbelief and her fear of God *as an unbelieving people* who found themselves face to face with the majesty and holiness of God, always a frightening thing to those who do not have the righteousness of Christ and do not know God as their heavenly Father.

Now, the Bible does not say explicitly that the Israelites’ request that no further word be spoken to them was, in itself, sinful. But in the larger context of that history, many commentators admit that our preacher read it the right way. They weren’t making that request out of reverence for God but out of the craven fear that comes from unbelief and that their request was an ominous prelude to Israel’s later rebellion. After all, it was only a month or so later that we find them worshipping a golden calf at the very foot of Mount Sinai.

All this is confirmed by the fact that the incident reported in v. 21, where Moses said, “I am trembling with fear,” does not come from the Exodus account of Israel’s encounter before Sinai at the time of the giving of the law. The words are taken from Deuteronomy 9:19 in which Moses remembers his fear for the people after their sin with the golden calf. Moses wasn’t trembling with fear because of the manifestations of God’s holiness and majesty in the cloud, the thunder, and the lightning at Sinai. He had, by this time, already walked up into that fire and gloom and spent 40 days and 40 nights there (Ex. 24:18). And the seventy elders also had been brought near to God and had actually seen the glory of God. It was not the manifestation of the divine glory that was the source of this fear, but the people’s estrangement from this glorious God on account of their unbelief and disobedience. What Moses feared was what would happen to Israel on account of her rebellion against God.

As one commentator puts it:

“...the command to put to death any beast that might haply touch the mountain revealed to the people that God was dealing with them as sinners. Moses himself ...feared exceedingly. But his fear came upon him when he looked and beheld that the people had sinned against the Lord their God and made them a molten calf. His fear was not the prostration of nervous terror. Remembering, when he had descended, the awful sights and sounds witnessed on the mountain, he

was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure of the Lord against the people, who had done wickedly in the sight of the Lord. Almost every word the [author] has written here bears closely upon the moral relation between a guilty people and the angry God.” [T.C. Edwards, 300]

And, of course, that makes perfect sense in the context of Hebrews. That is what this preacher is afraid of too. What will happen to his readers if they do not repent and renew their faith in Christ.

Second, the notion that God was terrifying and distant in the ancient epoch but is more kind, loving and accessible to his people in the new not only runs afoul of a thousand actual statements in the Old Testament, but of this author’s own statements here. Here we find him warning his readers of the wrath of God, of his promise to shake the world, and he finishes the section by quoting Deuteronomy 4:24 to remind them not that God *once was* but is now a consuming fire. There is nothing here or in chapter 10 where similarly terrifying things are said about the wrath of God to suggest that this preacher thought that in the matter of the divine wrath there is any difference between then and now. This point is so obvious that it shouldn’t have to be mentioned, but so deep is the prejudice against the Old Testament that many people simply cannot see the obvious here in these verses. You cannot find anywhere in the Bible evidence for the notion that God is more loving in the NT or less fearsome. Some of the greatest statements of his kindness and mercy come from the OT and some of the most terrifying accounts of his wrath come from the NT.

But, in any case, *this* preacher is most assuredly *not* distinguishing between the two spiritual situations; he is identifying them once again and saying to his readers that if they follow Israel in her unbelief they will follow her also in falling under the wrath of the living God, which is a terrifying thing.

Third, a point we have made a number of times already in our study of Hebrews, the blessings enumerated in vv. 22-24 can hardly be said to be peculiar to the new epoch. There is, no doubt, a contrast between the earthly and the heavenly, between what can be seen and what cannot be seen, but all through Hebrews that contrast is the same as the contrast between faith and unbelief and it has been the same contrast from Abel’s day to our own.

1. They have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. Well, in the sense that faith greets that blessing from afar, Abraham and the other saints of the ancient world had also come to the heavenly Jerusalem, as he made a great point of saying in chapter 11, and we who believe today, have only come to that city in the same way Abraham came to it. We aren’t there yet, as he will say explicitly in 13:14: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”
2. Moses had come to Jesus Christ as we read in chapter 11. And so on. In fact, the word “you have come” in v. 22 is the same word we find in 11:6 where we read that “he *who comes to him* must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him.” Well that is a description of the faith of all those mentioned in chapter 11. They too had *come* by faith to these things. What our preacher believes is that his readers *had come* to the blessings of eternal life, even if they must be welcomed from afar by faith, and that they *had not come*, as

Israel had, to a sight of God that terrified them because they had no living faith in God or knowledge of his love in Christ. In fact that word, “you have come,” is really a synonym for conversion. It refers to a spiritual approach to God by faith. From Abel onwards God’s elect have come to him in that way. There is nothing unique about that in the new epoch. *We have come* as believers have always come to these heavenly things by faith.

3. The saints of the OT also had their names enrolled in the books of heaven. You can read about that in Exodus 32:32 or Daniel 12:1 among other places. *In other words* there is nothing mentioned here of the blessings of salvation that the saints of the ancient epoch did not share in the very same way we share them today, by faith and not by sight.

You may feel that I am going on and on about this common prejudice against the OT, but I don’t apologize for that. You mistake the central and fabulously important burden of the argument of Hebrews if you bring in some contrast between the ancient epoch and the epoch we now live in. You lessen its punch considerably if you are distracted by the idea that Israel in the days of Moses were disadvantaged by the spiritual world in which they lived. No. It was the same as ours. And their unbelief in the sight of God and the experience of his grace can happen and does happen today just as it did then. And when it happens, it will have precisely the same horrific consequences. Faith may be a struggle in many ways in this world, but it is the only way to the world to come. Always has been, always will be.

The fact is, Christians in the Western world today *do not worry* as they should about the wrath of God. The warnings that are addressed to them in OT and NT alike do not register with them as powerfully as they should. And one of the reasons for that is the assumption common to so many Christian hearts that the NT, in comparison with the OT, is a kinder, gentler administration, that wrath and doom were fundamental to the religion of Moses but merely a minor adjunct to the more gracious administration introduced by Christ and his apostles. Nothing in the NT supports this idea, but Hebrews is an extended demonstration that it is not true in any way, shape, or form. The threat of the divine wrath is as real today as ever it was in the days of Moses. Here we are tonight, perhaps 330 or 350 of us. In a group this size it is a moral certainty that we have among us some, I hope a very few, who will – though they were church goers and at least some of their lives called themselves Christians – nevertheless at the end fall under God’s wrath. Look around you. Imagine a face you know, even a person you love, on the Great Day being sent away to doom and endless loss. And that fate will be worse for those who knew the Gospel and once claimed to believe it. The last place to answer for your baptism and your profession of faith in Christ and your Sundays in church is in hell. But there are many who shall. That is how real this warning is, how much we must take it to heart.

So what do these verses mean. Well, v. 18 begins with a “For...” that the NIV has left out. “For you have not come to a mountain...” The idea is connected to the previous verses and is the same as we have already encountered in 6:9ff. Remember how repetitive our preacher is! The author is confident that his readers (or at least the largest part of them) have experienced a genuine spiritual conversion, they are saved. His appeal to them, and his appeal to us, is therefore this: “You are not like Esau and not like Israel that you should throw away your inheritance and face the wrath of God. If you were, I would have no appeal to you, for there is no coming back from apostasy. But you *have come* to the heavenly realities, you are not the

slaves of an earthly religion and an earthly country, and so I call upon you to persevere in your faith in Christ and promise you triumph in the end.