

Hebrews 12:25-29

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Date: 20 September 2020

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[0 : 0 0] have your Bibles open at Hebrews chapter 12. It is a challenging passage and it will be helpful to have it open or switched on if you prefer in front of you. And whilst you head there, let me tell you a story, a story about an architect in Japan. About 14 years ago, this man was arrested in Tokyo. He was arrested for building badly designed architecture and his buildings weren't especially ugly. They didn't block a neighbor's view of the sea. They weren't even particularly damaging for the environment. No, he was arrested because he was building buildings that would not withstand an earthquake. In Tokyo, a city where you really need to know that when an earthquake strikes, you're going to be safe. This man had built almost 200 buildings, which would not stand up to the vigorous shaking of earthquakes that are so frequent in Japan. And this evening's passage forces us to ask, will our lives stand up to the vigorous shaking that its verses describe?

And so as we come to the end of our series in this letter to the Hebrews, it's a letter where the writer encourages a group of first century Jewish Christians to run the race of faith. A letter where we too have been encouraged to run that race. So as we come to the end of that letter, today's passage urges us to avoid being like that Japanese man as we run. See, the end of Hebrews chapter 12 warns of a great shaking, and it urges us to run instead with an unshakable kingdom in mind, to, unlike that Japanese architect, build our lives on something utterly unshakable. And it does that in today's passage by offering us a warning and a beautiful gift. A warning of a great shaking and the beautiful gift of an unshakable kingdom. But before we get stuck into our passage, I want to ask a question. It's been on my mind for a while. I wonder if you've ever even noticed it. Here's the question. Why do churches have red doors? Have you ever noticed that? You will notice it now. Ours doesn't, but lots of churches have red doors. I think ours is brown, but I promise you, you will notice it. Lots of churches have red doors.

And I've been wondering for ages why this is. I looked it up. I think it's brilliant. So I'm going to tell you. See, it's a beautiful symbol. It's because we enter into the church through Christ's blood.

We live in a very real world, don't we? A world where we never really measure up, never measure up to our own standards, let alone the standards of God. A world where something seems to be missing, where we never really feel at home. And as we walk through the red doors of the church, it reminds us that there is a better kingdom or a better mountain that we enter through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Last week, Neil helped us see exactly that in verses 12 to 24, that there is a better mountain, Mount Zion, and that we enter it through Christ's spilt blood. He reminded us that because of what Christ did for us on the cross, we have access to a far better mountain and that we can approach it with a great sense of awe and joy. And it is that same blood spilled for us on the cross through which we enter the unshakable kingdom in today's passage. It's what makes a difference for us as Christians.

[3 : 4 2] And as we step through the red door of the church, through Christ's blood, we enter into that promise of an unshakable kingdom. And so with all that in mind, let's get stuck into God's word for us this evening. Let's start by hearing the warning of a great shaking. Have a look at verse 25 with me.

It's the beginning of our passage. It says this, see that you do not refuse him who is speaking. Why not? Well, it continues, if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven. Right. What on earth is going on here?

You might want to read it again. I've had to read and reread that so many times. And I want you to see this with me. Quite simply, there's someone speaking, someone who were not to refuse. He's warned some people before and they did not escape. And now he's warning us from heaven. And right, I've got some questions. Who didn't escape? Who warned them on earth? And who's warning us from heaven?

I've got to do a bit of digging to wrap our heads around this. Firstly, we have to think about the generation of Israelites, those who encountered God at Mount Sinai. They've just been rescued out of slavery in Egypt. And they were a generation who were warned on earth by God, by his words at Mount Sinai as the earth shook. They were a generation who rejected that warning and walked in persistent disobedience to him. A generation who did not escape God's righteous judgment. I think that answers our first two questions. It's the Sinai generation who didn't escape. And it was God who warned them through Moses on earth. And then have a look back at verse 24 because it helps us understand who warns from heaven. Jesus, the mediator, which is basically just someone who breaks up a fight, of a new covenant, which really just means an agreement, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Abel was killed by his brother Cain way back in Genesis, as we heard last week. So from that verse, verse 24, we see quite simply that it was Jesus who was speaking and that he is speaking by his blood and that he does so from heaven. Again, last week,

Neil helped us see how much better Christ's blood is, offering us grace and forgiveness, unlike Abel's blood, which can only offer vengeance. And so the writer to the Hebrews said that we should be especially careful not to reject Jesus. And not only because of who it is that does the speaking, not even how he does it or where he is, but also because of what he is warning us about.

[6 : 26] Have a look at verse 26. At this time, his voice shook the earth. You just heard in the Exodus story, Mount Sinai shook at his voice. But now he has promised, once more, I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens. The warning here is that this time around, the earth and the heavens will be shaken.

This isn't talking about heaven as in some random spiritual place where I guess the world thinks that God is, but rather the sky, the universe, everything physical that exists, including the earth.

What the writer is saying is that this time around, everything is going to be shaken. So let's take a second to pause and ask ourselves a really important question.

What's taking up most of our headspace? I found this passage really challenging personally this week because there are so many things that I hold on to too tightly. Things that I spend too much of my time dwelling on. Things that ultimately will be shaken. Sometimes really stupid little things like a new pair of trousers that I'd love to buy. Or even slightly bigger things like a new car or a new house.

Sometimes even things that are not even created, or not material, sorry, but nevertheless created. Dwelling on things like where I've succeeded in life or where I think I have failed.

[7 : 57] Accomplishments and insecurities. My head is full of all these things that ultimately will be shaken when that time comes. So what are your favorite things in life?

What's your most treasured possession? What's your greatest achievement even? What is your least favorite thing? Your greatest insecurity? The most anxiety-inducing thing in your life?

Whatever it is, hear this loud and clear. Good or bad, it will not last forever. When you die, you cannot take it with you, much less can it survive the great final shaking described in these verses. Whatever it is that is taking up most of your headspace, that fills you with exultant pride or crushing anxiety.

The writer here urges us to hold it lightly and recognize that it will not last forever. And he's not just talking about some random ending of the world, a sort of natural end of things.

It's not simply that the created world has run its course. There's a purpose here, and we see why in verse 27. Have a look. The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken, that is, created things.

[9 : 20] In other words, hear this warning. There is coming a time when the whole created order will be shaken beyond recognition, and everything in it will no longer remain.

This is the warning, that this world will be judged, it will be found wanting, and it will be removed and regenerated. And I'm aware that that sort of judgment and warning can be hard to take, can't it?

I'm aware that it can sound desperately unloving. I think we've got to ask ourselves the question, how can a loving God possibly carry out such a thorough judgment?

And I think it works a little bit like this. See, when I was a child, I used to get incredibly car sick. Virtually every journey that we went on that was more than an hour long, I would actually genuinely be physically sick.

The worst thing that I could do was fail to tell my parents how I was feeling, wasn't it? But the most loving thing I could do was to warn them of the imminent danger of continuing. If I warned them that I was about to be sick, it would give them an opportunity to pull over, to escape an otherwise extremely unpleasant experience.

[10 : 36] And I think this warning in Hebrews is sort of similar to that. Because if God is perfectly just, then he simply has to do something about a creation that does not give him the glory that he deserves.

When he sees almost 4,000 people homeless in this city today, he has to respond. I mean, how bad would God be if he saw that sort of injustice and was simply indifferent to it?

He simply has to do something about a world that has been tainted by self-serving evil. A world where 4,000 people can be homeless in a wealthy city like ours, and yet every day I walk on by.

Which means he has to do something about me. It means he has to do something about you. Something like the way I couldn't help but be sick on a long car journey.

He just has to do something. But he is also completely loving. And so he has to warn us that he's going to do something about it. Though we don't deserve it, he is so completely loving and kind that he has warned us.

[11 : 46] And he has to give us an opportunity to respond to that warning. And that's what the writer is saying here. Respond. Do you see that warning?

See that you do not refuse him. Hear this warning of a great shaking. And then receive the gift of an unshakable kingdom with thanksgiving.

Because as the rest of verse 27 tells us, have a look at it, this great shaking will take place so that what cannot be shaken may remain. The purpose of this great final shaking is to make way for the perfect and eternal future kingdom.

That which cannot be shaken. This is our prize. This is the motivation for which we run. Just as it was, Jesus is. Have a look back at verse 2 with me.

Because it was for the joy that was set before Jesus that he endured the cross. It was because of the kingdom that awaited him. And it is the joy that is set before us now as we endure and run the race of life as a follower of him.

[12 : 56] To be clear, what we're talking about here is a complete regeneration of the world that we live in. A physical place that is both like the world we live in now and yet completely different. I think C.S. Lewis puts this best in his Narnia story.

See, just as the children in those stories are entering into this new creation, they look around and they are amazed. Because it's just like Narnia. Just like the world that they've come from.

But better in an indescribable way. Those hills, said Lucy, the nice woody ones and the blue ones behind, aren't they very like the southern border of Narnia? Like, cried Edmund after a moment's silence.

Why, they're exactly like. Look, there's Mount Pyre with his forked head. And there's the pass into Arkenland and everything. And yet they're not like, said Lucy.

They're different. They have more colours in them. And they look further away than I remembered. And they look more, more, I don't know. More like the real thing, said the Lord Diggory softly.

[13 : 59] This is what we have to look forward to. A perfect, indescribable version of this world. But more than that. Because this is not simply a future physical reality.

Because in a sense, this is all already happening in the life of the believer. We are being shaken. And we are laying hold of the unshakable today.

At least it is my prayer that the Holy Spirit would be at work convicting us of our attachment to the shakable things of this life. And instead, to take hold of the unshakable today.

When we accept Jesus and are born again by the Holy Spirit, our lives are greatly shaken. Are they not? And we are receiving this unshakable kingdom today both in promise and in power.

We receive it in promise because a perfect promise, like we see here, is as good as the thing itself. And we receive it in power as we see the life-changing power of Jesus at work, even in this very room today.

[15 : 07] Just take a moment to think about the difference that that makes. About the difference Jesus has made and is continuing to make in our lives today. Setting us free from our slave-like attachment to the shakable things in our lives.

Setting us free from our materialism, our pride and our insecurity. And offering us peace in both power and in promise. This is the unshakable kingdom today.

And it is just a pale shadow of the future perfect promise of a regenerated reality. And our passage urges us to be thankful for it.

It urges us to not underappreciate the value of this kingdom. Have a look at verse 28 with me. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

The shakable things of this world do everything they can to distract us from this. When things are going well, they seem like the very thing that we should be thankful for.

[16 : 13] And when they're going badly, it feels like there's nothing to be thankful for. But this is the beauty of the unshakable kingdom. It is a gift of promise and power that exceeds our current circumstances.

I think this is a great opportunity for us to be distinctive. When the world around us is instinctively and perhaps rightly negative about our current circumstances.

We have a brilliant opportunity in this moment to offer hope in apparently otherwise hopeless times. We have a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And we can always be thankful for it. Antiques Roadshow is a brilliant TV program. You might disagree with me on that, but I love Antiques Roadshow.

And I think when we watch Antiques Roadshow, we're all waiting for that same story. You know the story that I'm talking about. We're all waiting for it. It's the story where Bill has inherited this awful looking lamp from Aunt Betty.

[17 : 17] And it's been gathering dust in his attic for about 20 years. And to be honest with you, he's thinking about throwing it on the skip. But when the Antiques Roadshow comes to his local big house or wherever they film it, he's brought it along.

He's brought this lamp along just on the off chance that it might be worth something. And of course it is. It's worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. And we all think that Bill is a bit of a mug.

All those years this lamp has been sat collecting dust in his attic. All those years Bill has failed to appreciate the value of this incredible gift.

What a mug. But we so often do the same thing, don't we? Again, I've found this a real challenge in preparing for this evening. Because the extent to which I can take the gift of the kingdom for granted can be staggering.

The ease with which my mind is distracted when I pray. Or my eyes are distracted as I read God's word. Or my ears as I listen to it. The ease with which I disregard Christ's death on the cross and live as though the unshakable kingdom were not a reality.

[18 : 28] When I rely on my own efforts to bring the kingdom and to make sure that I'm there. And so this passage forces us to ask, are we thankful for the unshakable kingdom that we are receiving?

And are we willing to relinquish our grip on the shakable things of this world? And finally then, just as we finish, have a look at the ultimate response to this unshakable kingdom.

It's back in the second half of verse 28. It says, worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire. Our God is a consuming fire.

Now, you might have a footnote in your Bible telling you that that's a reference to Deuteronomy chapter 4. And in that passage in Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the Israelites, that disobedient generation that we've been hearing about, of the warning that God gave them at Mount Sinai.

He describes God there as a consuming fire and reminds them that he alone is worthy of their praise. God is a bit like the sun, really, because he's described as a consuming fire, like that great ball of fire in the sky.

[19 : 43] And apparently, if we were any closer to the sun, it would utterly consume us. And yet, if we were any further away, we would freeze. And in a similar sort of way, God is a consuming fire, both life-giving and yet with the deadly potential to destroy.

We see that in our passage today, don't we, with the gift and the warning. God is perfectly just and therefore has to do something about suffering and evil and sin in this world.

He has to cause this great shaking. But he is also perfectly loving. And so he has to warn his people and provide a way for them to enter into the gift of the unshakable kingdom.

Two things that are both taken care of perfectly on the cross. That's why churches have red doors. It's where God's righteous judgment is poured out on Jesus.

And it's in this act that his love for his people is best expressed. And for the Christian, that can result in acceptable worship, as verse 28 describes it.

[20 : 51] But I think we have to ask ourselves the question, what is acceptable worship? What does it mean for the Christian to relate to God with reverence and awe?

I think chapter 13 really answers that question. And I won't read it, but do go away and read it yourselves. I think you'll find that edifying. But let me just list some of the specific examples that the writer to the Hebrews gives in the next chapter.

Love one another. Show hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison. Remember those you have treated badly. Honor God's blueprint for sex and marriage.

Do not love money, but be content with what you have. Remember your leaders. Have confidence in them and submit to their authority.

Now, these are all things that were clearly particularly timely for the original Jewish Christian readers of this letter for lots of reasons. But they also apply to us today, don't they?

[21 : 56] I think they force us to ask ourselves some questions. How well do we love one another as a church? How often do we show hospitality to strangers?

To people we've never met before? To people who don't look like us? Who don't sound like us? How welcoming are we of those who have ended up here because they have nowhere else to go?

How is God's blueprint for sex and marriage treated by the society around us? Are we prepared to be different? Are we prepared to speak up about it? How much do we love money?

How content are we with what we have? How do we respond to our church leaders and their authority over us? Notice that all of these things have everything to do with how we relate to the world around us and the people in it.

And there's something really profound in that, I think. Because in other words, what this forces us to ask is, are we living in reverence and awe of God? Remembering what he has done for us as we relate to the world around us and the people in it.

[23 : 10] I think that's Hebrews' challenge to us. Hear the warning of the great shaking. Receive the gift of the unshakable kingdom with thanks.

And respond with this acceptable worship. Just a couple of weeks ago, there was an earthquake down in Bedfordshire, down in the south of England. And the people there were utterly unprepared for it.

The Bedfordshire Police Department tweeted saying that their control room was overwhelmed with a large number of calls. Now, let's be honest, that was a very minor earthquake. One person actually described it as like having a convoy of heavy goods vehicles driving down the street outside their house.

It was hardly a great shaking. But in Japan, earthquakes really can wreak havoc. Cities can be torn down in a matter of minutes.

Particularly when the buildings aren't properly designed. It's no wonder then that the man we met at the beginning was arrested for poorly designed buildings. Selling people homes that would simply crumble in an earthquake.

[24 : 19] And this is the challenge from God's word today. It's what Hebrews is asking us. Are we building our lives on created things that will crumble at a great shaking?

Or are we building our lives on the great unshakable kingdom that we have received as we walk through the red doors of Christ's spilt blood for us?

As we walk through this verse 8th to 12 h kiedy-edit is what we see on the other Earth.

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