

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 12, Verses 18-29
Notes From Class on May 11, 2010
Last Revised on (May 17, 2010)

Survey Concerning the Future of this Class

As you know, we are nearing the end of our study of the New Testament book of Hebrews.

Tonight we will finish Chapter 12.

That leaves only the relatively brief concluding chapter.

I expect we will finish Hebrews around the end of May.

Several weeks ago I handed out a preliminary questionnaire, in an effort to understand whether people wanted to continue this class and, if so, what they wanted to study next, and some other things.

From that first questionnaire, it became fairly clear that most people **do** wish to continue the class and, somewhat to my surprise, there is a strong general preference for studying either **Revelation** or **Romans**.

I therefore went ahead and ordered several commentaries and wrote a follow-up survey, to help decide which of these two books to study on Tuesday evening and to adjust the class to your preferences in other ways.

I have received some of the follow-up surveys back so far, but I hope that the rest of you, who have not yet done so, will fill those out this evening.

Do you have any questions regarding the survey or the future of this group, before we get started?

Songs

Please pick some songs to sing. (while they are picking say the following)

Based on the survey data I have seen so far, and my conversations with many of you. it appears that almost everyone would prefer to sing at least a little bit **less** than what we have been doing.

From now on, then, I think we should try to sing only about three (3) hymns, perhaps one more or less than that depending on whether the hymns selected are relatively short or long ones.

Also I will continue to work on adding more contemporary songs into our collection, for those of you who are getting tired of the more traditional hymns, and sometimes wish to choose something more modern.

I wonder if any of you might wish to be in charge of leading worship in this group. If so please talk to me separately.

I feel I should start to delegate more things, rather than trying to do everything myself.

OK let's sing.

Opening Prayer

Dear God.

We thank you for this group, and for each one here.

We pray that the time we spend here, is building us up, and building up your church.

As we come to the end of our study of Hebrews, Lord, please help us to come to a good and lasting understanding of it.

Please, then, guide us into our next study, in the weeks ahead.

Please let us make the right choices and have the right heart about how we approach your word.

Please be here among us, leading us into every truth, and protecting us from evil and error.

In Jesus Name we pray.

Amen

Concerning Prayer in the Future

In addition to those of you who may be interested in leading worship, if any of you would like to be involved in opening and closing our meetings in prayer, please talk to me about that also.

I think it might be better for me to share these responsibilities, rather than doing everything myself.

OK then, please get your coffee and your tea and your handouts and other stuff you need now, and after you are settled, we will get started.

Review

Another thing that comes through the survey data we are now collecting, is that some folks feel that I have been spending too much time, each week at the start of class, reviewing prior weeks's lessons.

And I think you are probably right, but I also think that it is very easy to misunderstand scripture when it is read out of context, so a significant amount of review is unavoidable.

So I will try to spend a less **time** reviewing, and I will try to think of some more efficient **ways** of reviewing, but I will not completely back away from the challenge of reviewing prior weeks' material. lest we begin to start reading small bits of the bible out of their larger context.

Tonight rather than reviewing everything again from the beginning of Hebrews, I will simply hand out to you, on paper, my one-page summary of the first 11 chapters.

Q. Does everybody have one now?!

Please take just a minute and read through it.

The **overall** summary and conclusion of these first 11 chapters, it seems to me, is that Christians should hold fast to their faith in Christ until the end, despite all of the troubles which they encounter in this world.

That thought, then, is carried on into Chapter 12, which I will now review a bit more closely.

Please direct your attention to the beginning verses of Chapter 12 and follow along with me as I review.

Inspired by the great heroes of faith described in Chapter 11, which he describes as a great **cloud** of witnesses, the preacher now urges Christians to set aside their **sin** and other **unnecessary** baggage and to run the race set before them with **endurance**. (12:1)

He encourages the church also, and especially, to consider **Jesus**, who is the origin, and object, and only perfect example of faith, he who endured the shame and suffering of the **cross** because of the joy set before him. We are invited to do **likewise!** (12: 2-3)

The preacher reminds those to whom he is speaking that they, like most of us, have not really suffered so much. We have not even resisted, yet, to point of shedding our blood. (12:4)

Furthermore all the suffering that we Christians **have** endured, had been for our **benefit**.

God is treating us as his **sons** (and daughters) and preparing us for eternity (12:5-8)

How **dare** we despise God

Our **earthly** fathers discipline us and we respect **them**. We should be infinitely more ready to give respect and gratitude to **God** for the discipline we receive from him, which is all perfectly good for us, even though it is unpleasant as we are going through it. The reward comes later...in eternity. (12:9-11)

Knowing what we know, there is no good reason for Christians to be angry with God or discouraged, so we should stop staggering around and run with renewed **vigor**. (12:12)

But we should run **carefully**, watching where we are going **(12:13)**,

cultivating **peace** with others, especially other Christians, and avoiding personal **sins** **(12:14)**

and we are to have an eye not just to **ourselves**, but to **others**, and to the **church** as a whole **(12:15)**

It would be tragic if anyone were to turn **away** from his eternal inheritance in pursuit of earthly pleasure or reward. **(12:16)**

Because as was seen in the tragic tale of **Esau**, sometimes when we reject our inheritance, it is impossible to get it back again. **(12:17)**

This (I think) speaks of the person who has been born into a Christian community, or wandered into one, and who has heard the word of God spoken to him but has refused to accept it and be transformed by it.

Thus we have completed our review of previous lessons.

Discussion

Another thing that is coming through the survey data that I have been collecting is that some of you feel that I should lecture a little bit less and allow a little more time for class discussion.

On the contrary, however, there are several of you who would prefer that there be no discussion AT ALL, because you find it difficult to follow.

So here is the compromise I will try to accomplish between those two groups.

I will allow and even encourage a little bit more discussion in class, on two conditions.

First, please make your remarks as clear and as understandable as possible, and especially please ask your questions in a way that lets translation (into Japanese or English as the case may be) happen effectively.

The second condition is that your questions and comments need to focus on understanding or applying the word of God now sitting before us, and for the benefit of all who are here studying the word together.

We are not here to share our opinions or our feelings in general but, rather, to share our understanding and our need for help in understanding and applying the Word of God.

In summary and in short, I am going to encourage clear and constructive discussion, and I am going to discourage discussion which seems not to be clear and constructive. OK? Please help me with that.

Now then, before we read on, please take a moment and consider whether you have any questions or comments regarding the text we have covered so far, that would be beneficial to the study of the group.

If you have such comments or questions, please do share them with us now.

OK, then, before we proceed let's pray again.

Prayer

Dear God

Please bless the reading of your holy word, which we are now about to do.

Please open these words to our understanding.

Please protect us against misunderstanding, misapplication, miscommunication, and every other thing that might snatch your truth from us.

In Jesus Name we pray.

Amen

Hebrews, Chapter 12, Verses 18-24

OK, then, would somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 12, Verses 18-24, in Japanese.

Now would someone please read that in English (ESV).

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest

19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."

21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

22 But 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.

Thank you.

Notice that a **comparison** is being made in these seven verses.

Verse 18 begins, "for you have **not** come to what may be touched " and so forth.

Verse 22 begins, "**but** you **have** come to Mount Zion ..." and so forth.

This means verses 18, 19, 20 and 21 are describing **one** thing.

And verses 22, 23, and 24 are describing something **else**.

And these two things are being **compared**, and contrasted, one to the other.

The **second** thing, described in verses 22-24, is being described sort of clearly, isn't it?

Q. We'll talk about this more later, but roughly what is being described there?

A. Mt. Zion, the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the angels are, and God is and where Jesus is....etc.

A. In short, to **heaven** or, some might prefer to say, to the **new** heaven and earth which are to come.

A. Anyway we kind of get the point of verses 22-24. This where Christians are **going** and, in some sense, have already come, and it is a very **good** place.

Q. So what is it that is being described in verses **18-21** and compared to and contrasted with heaven?

A. **Moses and his people** were there and they were **afraid**

Q. **What** (who) were they afraid of?

A. **God!**

A. What is being described here is **Mt. Sainai** when God descended to speak with Moses.

It would be a **fearful** thing for God to come directly into our presence in this way, and the appearance of God to Moses on the peak of Mount Sinai is one of the **few** times this ever happened, so far as we know.

But the preachers says that we have somehow come up even higher than Sinai, into the very abode of God and his angels and his only begotten Son and the place is made not fearsome but festive.

OK then, I think we see basically what is going on in the passage we just read, let's go back through it now, verse by verse.

(Verse 18)

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest

The preacher says to the church, "you" (i.e. you who profess to be Christians)

You have not come to what may be touched, etc.

Q. So what is it that may be touched?

A. Mt. Sinai, as we have already seen.

Mt. Sinai was on Earth and God came down to it.

At most times Mt. Sinai certainly could be touched, like any earthly mountain can be.

Even when God came down, the mountain could be touched, but not carelessly.

The mountain provided a degree of separation between God and his people, for their safety.

Only Moses could go all the way up and, then, his communication with God was shrouded in clouds.

Others had to stand back, away from the mountain, and listen from a distance to God's voice.

But even that was too frightening to bear.

(Verse 19)

and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

When God descended on the mountain, the holiness was too great and too frightening for the people

(Verse 20)

For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."

but of course that in itself proves the mountain **could** be touched, even by animals. It was still on earth, even when God descended on it.

It was just really, really scary when God came down to earth.

(Verse 21)

Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

Q. So has everyone understood the reference to Sinai? (i.e. the picture that verses 18-21 are supposed to evoke in your mind)

Q. Do you have any questions or comments about those four verses?

O.K. So the preacher has summoned up this picture of God descending to meet with Moses on Mt. Sinai and he has said this is **NOT** what the Christians he is talking to have come to.

They have **not** come to Sinai. God has **not** descended and manifested himself to them in that way.

Q. So, once again, what **have** they come to?

A. Verse 22 tells us

(Verse 22)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

Christians have come **not** to Mount Sinai, but to Mount **Zion**.

Historically Zion was the name of the **hill** in Jerusalem on which David built his house.

Later, when David's son, Solomon built a temple nearby, the term was expanded to include the **temple**,

When the the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the temple, was understood, in some sense, to be the dwelling place on earth of the living God.

At some point it became common to refer to the whole earthly city of **Jerusalem** as Zion

And that is still heard today.

But the preacher does **not** mean to look to that earthly city.

He clearly is **not** contrasting the earthly Sinai (which can be touched) with the **earthly** Zion (which also quite clearly **can** be touched).

No, he is contrasting the **earthly** Sinai with the "**heavenly** Jerusalem"

This is a common mode of thinking for both Jews and Christians of all time.

The Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem, and the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, have always been understood as earthly **shadows** of a heavenly **reality**.

The Earth and **everything** in it is utterly temporary.

It is the **heavenly** reality that the preacher has in view here.

To make this doubly clear, he notes that, in the heavenly Jerusalem he is talking about, there are innumerable **angels** in a **festal** gathering.

The angels are not being scary or standoffish in their holiness, they are having a **celebration!**

Q. And who **else** has been invited to this party?

A. Verse 23 tells us that, in addition to the angel, we have come

(Verse 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,

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which is here translated "**assembly**" is the word which is also translated "**church**" elsewhere in the Bible and has the sense of a gathering of those who have been called or chosen out of the world.

In this case, the called out ones are described as those "who are **enrolled in heaven**"

In the Bible this usually refers to those men and women whose **names** have been **written** in the Book of Life.

They are here also referred to as "**firstborn**" which is, I think, **not** a chronological reference but, rather, a different way of describing those whose names are written, those whose **birthright** is eternal life with Jesus.

In other words, "**all** of the people who belong to **Christ** are "firstborn" children of God."
(Bruce)

Interestingly the Greek word translated as "**birthright**" in Verse 16 (in connection with Esau) is literally "right of the **firstborn**"

So in other words, heaven is the **birthright** of all who belong to Christ.

So the **place** in view here, is a place where there are innumerable **angels**, and **humans** whose names are enrolled in heaven, and **God**, of course, who is the judge of all.

This leaves the question of who and what are "**the spirits of the righteous made perfect**"

Q. What do you think?

A. Such a description **could** apply to **all** humans enrolled in heaven who have already died physically

We understand that with the death of the **body**, the spirit of a **believer** is perfected and dwells in the presence of the Lord awaiting the resurrection.

A. It is **also** possible that the preacher is here reassuring them of the happy state of believers from the **pre-Christian** era, such as those listed in Chapter 11

We understand that, somewhere somehow, **their** spirits awaited the coming of Christ to be perfected and brought into his presence.

In any case, **Christ** is at the center of this whole heavenly party to which Christians have come, as we read in Verse 24

(Verse 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.

We are again reminded that **Jesus** is the mediator of a **new** covenant,

The new covenant it is the one that actually **can** and finally **does** save.

It is by the blood (death) of **Jesus** that all who **are** saved are saved.

The meaning is that his death, and only his death, was sufficient to atone for the sins of any man.

This is here **contrasted** to the blood of **Abel**.

Q. What do you think is meant by this comparison?

A. Abel was **murdered** by his brother Cain.

A. The **blood** of Abel was said to "**cry out**" to God

A. And the response of God was (What?) ... **Justice** ... **Law**

A. This spelled our **doom**, because all flesh is lawless and unrighteous.

A. Only the blood of **Christ** could save anyone from the blood of Abel, and from God's righteous wrath directed against it.

In summary, then, the preacher seems to be saying that the people to whom he is speaking have come not to an **earthly** place of holiness where the bare and frightening holiness of God descends, as happened at Sinai.

rather we have come to a **heavenly** place of holiness, where we are welcomed into the **family** of God and made perfect, because of what Jesus has already accomplished for us through his perfect obedience.

Q. But is this preacher and are the people to whom he is speaking actually **in** heaven already?

A. No. Not yet in a **simple** physical sense. These people are still on **Earth**.

A. But for those of them who actually **are** Christian, they are already **enrolled** **in** heaven.

This is a consistent teaching of the whole Bible.

Christians are **already** "citizens of heaven" who are in some sense traveling through this world, on their way to their real and final and eternal destination....their heavenly home. They just haven't moved in yet.

This world is, in some sense, enemy territory. We are not **supposed** to love it! We are not supposed to feel at **home** here!

It is also, in some sense, a **training** ground, or schoolhouse, where our heavenly father **perfects** us.

It all boils down to whether we have **heard** this fatherly voice speaking to us, and to how we **respond** to it.

Back in Verses 16 and 17 we were shown, as in a **parable**, the earthly story of Esau.

Isaac was his father and Esau, as firstborn, stood to inherit much. But he **sold** his birthright to Jacob.

In that **earthly** story, it happened that Esau was never able to repair the damage.

The moral of this story...the **heavenly** meaning of this earthly parable is: (What?) Don't sell your birthright!

Say **yes** to God and live as **his** child for the rest of your time on Earth, getting ready for the **eternal** home that waits for you in heaven.

A different parable, told by Jesus, the parable of the Prodigal Son, suggests that your heavenly Father is **better** than the earthly Isaac. A child of God is **always** welcome to repent and come on home.

But whatever you do, make sure you **are** a child of God!

That is where the preacher goes **next**:

Hebrews, Chapter 12, Verses 25-29

OK, then, would somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 12, Verses **25-29**, in Japanese.

Now would someone please read that in English (ESV).

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.

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.

Thank you.

Here we have the same message that resounds through this **whole** sermon an through the whole **Bible**.

(Verse 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.

Here the experiences of Israel are again being used as a **parable** to teach Christians.

God came **down** to earth to warn Israel, they ignored him, and they suffered all of the consequences.

God later came down to earth as a **man**, and we killed him, yet his blood has atoned for our sins!

Now God speaks to us from **heaven**.

If we refuse him, how ever can we escape the consequences?!

Verse 26 reads:

(Verse 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."

Here, again, I think the **historical** reference is to the theophany on **Sinai**.

When God came down and spoke, the earth **trembled**, and people were **frightened**, and they professed obedience, but they did not obey, and they suffered the earthly consequences of their disobedience.

The current promise refers to **prophecy** of the end times, most probably **Haggai 2:6**

The point the preacher is making here, I think, is that this time the whole **creation** will be remade.

He made the same point way back in Chapter 1, around Verse 11

The heavens and the earth are **created** and will ultimately **wear out**. Christ will finally roll them up like a scroll.

The preacher comments on this prophecy, in Verse 27

(Verse 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.

So we **understand** that all of creation will be **removed**. What remains will be the eternal Kingdom of God, in which we have **already** been enrolled, if we have heard and accepted our Father's voice.

(Verse 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,

To be offered a **place** in the eternal and unshakable kingdom, is the best thing there is, except maybe being offered the chance to be called a child of God.

We Christians can **only** be grateful, only **joyful** in contemplation of what lies in store, and only willing to **suffer** whatever lessons our Father has to teach us here below, in preparation for eternity.

We **must** love him, and obey him, and we most certainly should **fear** him,

(Verse 29)

for our God is a consuming fire.

Any questions or comments?

Closing Prayer

Oh God, thank you for preparing a place for us in your unshakable, eternal kingdom.

We so long to meet you there.

Thank you for all you are doing to prepare us.

Please help us more in every way.

We cannot come to you on our own.

We are filled with sin! Please forgive us!

We are weak and afraid. Please strengthen and comfort us!

We are ignorant and foolish. Please teach us.

We are lost and alone. Please lead us and live in us.

And deliver us from evil.

In Jesus Name

Amen