

5. The Hebrews writer's overall approach in his epistle was to *instruct* his readers and then draw out the implications of that instruction in the form of *exhortations* and *warnings*. His letter reminds them of the truth of what God has accomplished in Jesus the Messiah, what the truth requires of them, and the consequences of neglecting the truth. So in the present context, he reminded his Jewish readers of their heritage of faith, going all the way back to Abel and culminating with Jesus Himself. He then exhorted them to run their own race of faith with discernment and perseverance, understanding what had come in Jesus, their participation in His accomplishment, and the destiny it granted them.

They had become disciples of the prophet Jesus with the conviction that He is indeed Israel's Messiah – Yahweh's triumphal Servant who has accomplished His pledge to purge, renew and regather His creation to Himself. In solidarity with His Father, Jesus conquered the curse and its fruits, condemning and crucifying in Himself all that deviates from the truth ("sin"), then inaugurating renewed life and immortality by His resurrection from the dead. *This* is the Messiah that these Hebrews had embraced, and this embrace brought with it great glory and privilege, but also immense responsibility and obligation. They needed to own in practice and discipline the truth of their new life in Jesus, and failure to do so would bring dire consequences. Thus the writer concluded this section of instruction and exhortation with a sober admonition (12:25-29).

- a. The substance of his plea was that his readers be vigilant to not turn away from the one speaking from heaven; refusing Him (or even ignoring Him) wouldn't enable them to *escape* Him. The writer notably used a grammatical construction that indicated his confidence in their faithfulness to that point, but he was clearly concerned for them going forward (cf. 2:1-4, 3:12-14, 4:1-11, 6:1-9, 10:19-23, 35-39). He knew they were struggling in their hardship and the opposition of their Jewish kinsmen, and he feared that they might buckle under the pressure.

But who is this One speaking to them from heaven? Some have understood two referents in verse 25: *Yahweh* (or Moses), who spoke to Israel on earth, and *Christ* who now speaks from heaven. Others believe Yahweh is the sole referent. In fact, it seems that both are true in the sense that Yahweh, who spoke to Israel at Sinai, now speaks to men in His Son. When God speaks to men from heaven, he does so through the enthroned Messiah, the Image-Son at His right hand. This is certainly the perspective of the Hebrews writer (ref. 1:1-2), and his preceding statement about Jesus' blood "speaking" suggests that he also had Him in mind here.

Tying verses 24-25 together helps explain *how* Jesus speaks from heaven, and why turning away from His words is such a serious offense. The writer obviously wasn't suggesting that Christians (note his pronoun *we*) hear a voice out of heaven, akin to Yahweh's audible communication at Sinai. Rather, just as Jesus' shed blood speaks truth, so does His resurrection and exaltation to the "right hand of the Majesty on high" as King of kings and Lord of lords. The triumph of His life, death, resurrection and enthronement is God's climactic word to men – a powerful, inescapable and compelling message that sounds throughout the world and obligates all hearers to embrace its truth (cf. Acts 14:16-17 with 17:24-31).

The writer underscored the gravity of this obligation by arguing from the lesser to the greater (a fortiori), which was common Jewish rhetorical practice: *If those who heard God speak on the earth didn't escape His words and their compulsion, how will those escape who hear Him speak from heaven?* He was pointing his readers back to their Israelite forefathers who heard Yahweh speak to them from Mount Sinai, and yet turned away from Him and His words. (In Hebrew, the Decalogue is designated the *ten words*, and these “words” formed the substance of the covenant – Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:10-13.) The Israelites at Sinai turned away from Yahweh’s words, even as He was speaking them. And though they did so out of fear, rather than disregard or disdain, their fear underscored the fundamental *alienation* between them and their covenant God. This alienation insured the covenant children’s waywardness; throughout their generations, they persisted in turning away from the God who continued to speak to them through His covenant, His prophets, and His actions. *And these Hebrew Christians were painfully aware that Israel’s refusal to hear hadn’t ended with the incarnate Word. Indeed, for many Jews, refusal became outright rejection and opposition.*

But Yahweh wasn’t oblivious or indifferent to all of this; from the time the Israelites departed Egypt He showed them over and over again that there was no escape for those who turned away from Him. His word and works are truth, and all who depart from the truth will meet the fate that denial and contradiction bring; nothing that violates truth will endure. That was the case for the people of Israel, to whom Yahweh spoke “*in portions and various ways*” (i.e., incrementally through His prophets, and through structures, symbols and actions). How much more, then, is that the case for those who have “heard” the *fullness* of truth by witnessing Jesus the Messiah – the Son who is God’s full disclosure of Himself, His purpose, will and work (1:1-3; cf. John 1:14-18, 14:1-11, 18:33-37).

And so the writer wasn’t contrasting *heavenly* and *earthly* speech, as if divine words out of heaven have more weight and consequence. The contrast is between God’s communication to men in the time of preparation, versus His full and consummate speech now in the living and enthroned “word” (cf. John 15:22-25 with 5:17-19, 33:47, 14:1-11). This is the sense, then, in which God’s earthly and heavenly speaking correspond to Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (ref. 12:26).

- b. God’s voice “speaking on earth” from Mount Sinai “shook the earth” (ref. Exodus 19:17-18; cf. also Deuteronomy 5:1-5; Psalm 68:8), and the writer noted that God has promised another future shaking – one that will be *cosmic* and not merely local (12:26). Readers and commentators have long wrestled with what “promise” he was referring to. For the prophets often used this sort of language to depict cataclysmic events in Israel’s history and future, particularly in relation to the theme of the Day of Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 13; Joel 2:1-11, 3:9-16; Zephaniah 1:14-18; etc.). Haggai also spoke in this way, but in describing God’s mighty work in perfecting His end-time sanctuary (2:1-9, 20-23). In fact, Haggai’s words come closest to the Hebrews writer’s statement, but the “Day of Yahweh” contexts also relate to it, in that they speak of the same end-times judgment and renewal.

In the end, it seems that the writer wasn't pointing to a specific text, but rather God's promise, reiterated throughout the salvation history and Israel's scriptures, to banish the curse and cleanse and renew His creation. This promise was fulfilled in Jesus' life and triumph – Jesus' coming was Yahweh's return to Zion, the "Day" when Yahweh arose to judge His enemies, deliver His people and restore the desolate habitations. The Lord shook the earth at Sinai, but He shook both earth and heaven in the cosmic battle and triumph when He renewed the covenant and restored His sanctuary in His Son. This is the "shaking of heaven and earth" that Haggai spoke of, *but there does remain a future, final counterpart, for God's work of creational renewal isn't yet fully realized* (Romans 8).

- c. This is what the Hebrews writer was referring to (12:27). He had in mind the future day when God will complete His creation's transformation; the day when all that is transitory and liable to judgment (that which can be "shaken") is done away with. He will accomplish this separation by shaking the heavens and earth, which calls to mind a couple of images. The first is an *earthquake*, which breaks apart and destroys whatever is unstable, compromised, or poorly constructed. The second image is a *sieve*, which uses a shaking motion to separate out what is of value to the worker, leaving the rest of the material to be discarded. The Lord's shaking, then, will separate out of His creation all that is flawed and worthless, so that He is left with what He intends to *remain* – all that is part of His renewed creation and its perfect flourishing in His everlasting kingdom.
- d. Implicit in the writer's argument is that *human beings* are part of this renewal and "precious value" that God intends to remain – specifically, human beings who share in His own life through union with His Son. Humans are central in God's new creation – "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28) – because the *Messiah*, the consummate Man and New Adam – is at its center. The resurrected Image-Son is the beginning of the new creation and its very essence. God's intent is to make the entire creation His enduring sanctuary, such that He will at last be "*all in all*" (1 Corinthians 15:12-28; Revelation 21-22). Jesus is the chief foundation stone in that sanctuary, and its superstructure consists of human beings who have become living stones in Him (1 Peter 2:4-10). This closely accords with Haggai's prophecy, in which Yahweh promised to shake the heavens and earth to gather in the "precious value of the nations," so that His sanctuary should be completed in all its glory (Haggai 2:1-9). Haggai's contemporary Zechariah spoke of the same purpose and outcome (Zechariah 2-4, 6:9-15).

God's design, revealed in ever brighter light through the progress of the salvation history, is that His creation should find its ultimate destiny – its true meaning, purpose and function – in His glorified Image-Son (Ephesians 1:9-10). Two related implications follow: First, only those things that are bound up in Him will remain after God finishes shaking His creation. Second, anyone who fails to "hear" Him as God's consummate Word of truth, or who turns away from Him, will pass away together with all that is false in the created order. These two implications are at the heart of the Hebrews writer's warning.

- e. By embracing Jesus as the Messiah revealed in Israel's scriptures, these Hebrews were affirming all of the truths unfolded here. For everything that had transpired in connection with Jesus was exactly what the Law, Prophets and Writings had predicted (Matthew 5:17-20; Luke 24:13-27, 44-48; John 5:39). They understood that Messiah's people are the sons of Yahweh's enduring kingdom (the *Holam Ha Ba*) that He pledged to David (2 Samuel 7), and they had embraced the Nazarene prophet Jesus with the belief that *He* is this Messiah, evidenced in His resurrection from the dead. But believing that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Scriptures, they also believed that they were sons of His kingdom and heirs of its consummate fullness. This was the writer's vantage point for his summary exhortation: "*Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire*" (12:28-29).

Given all that he has discussed and so splendidly unfolded, and given that these glorious truths call the Christian to bind his entire self to them, the way the writer summed up his instruction is profoundly significant. He was jealous for his readers to grasp, own, and live into the truths he'd labored to expound. And what that would look like was them becoming truly *grateful* people – grateful, not for the good things God had given them, but for God Himself and His wise and loving purposes fulfilled so gloriously in His triumph in Jesus. This sort of gratitude is obviously limited to those who know God in truth, but it is also a fundamental characteristic of such ones – all those who are children of the Father.

This is why the writer insisted that *gratitude* is the foundation for true worship and acceptable service to God. How can a person rightly acknowledge, worship and serve the God he doesn't truly know – the God who is known through His words and works that all find their verity and meaning in Messiah Jesus, who He is, what He has accomplished, and what awaits God's creation in Him? But then how can a person know this God in Messiah Jesus and not be overwhelmed with gratitude, awe and reverent devotion? (Gratitude for personal benefits doesn't induce reverence and awe.) Thus the author's further exhortation: "*Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name*" (13:15).

True knowledge of God in Christ produces gratitude that expresses itself in sincere devotion. But the author added a further incentive to gratitude: "*Our God is a consuming fire.*" Taken alone, this statement might seem out of place, but it is a fitting capstone to the context (chaps. 11-12). Some interpret it negatively as a sharp warning: God will consume the ungrateful and wayward. The writer was warning his readers against turning away from their Lord, but by spurring them on in solidarity with himself ("*since we... let us...*"). Their struggles should provoke gratitude, not resentment or fear, for they were suffering as sons and citizens of an enduring kingdom. And one day the fire of their Father's zeal will complete that kingdom by consuming all that is false and purifying what is to remain (v. 27). That was His sure word to them, and they must hold it fast with grateful hearts.