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GREAT PRIVILEGES, GREAT GOD, GREAT RESPONSIBILITIES

Hebrews 12:25-29

By

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Hebrews Lesson 50

Great Privileges, Great God, Great Responsibilities Hebrews 12:25-29

Thanks to the profusion of frivolous lawsuits, we now may enjoy the lunacy of ridiculous warnings on various products. A hair dryer warning label wisely advised, "Do not use while sleeping." A portable stroller warned, "Caution: Remove infant before folding for storage." A package of fireplace logs intoned, "Caution: Risk of fire!" A dessert box pointed out, "Product will be particularly hot after heating." A snow sled label stated, "Beware: Sled may develop high speed under certain snow conditions." We used to have a fold-up windshield screen to block the sun while our van was parked. It wisely advised, "Do not drive with screen in windshield."

We can thank the litigation-happy lawyers for injecting these bits of humor into our daily lives! But the downside of such ludicrous warnings is, they may make us ignore legitimate warnings. And there are some warnings that we ignore to our peril!

God's warning of eternal judgment for those who reject the gospel is the most perilous warning in the world. The author of Hebrews was concerned that some of his readers, who had professed faith in Christ, were in danger of abandoning Christ under threat of persecution for the more comfortable old Jewish rituals. And so he issues a repeated, final warning to urge them to persevere in their professed faith in Christ. His message is really a repeat of what he said in Hebrews 2:1-3:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

He argued in a similar manner in 10:28-29:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as un-

clean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

These are arguments from the lesser to the greater, and that is the force of our text. If those under the old, inferior covenant incurred God's judgment for their disobedience, how much more will we be judged if we neglect God's provision in Christ? If the signs of God's presence were frightening when He shook Mount Sinai, how much more frightening will it be when He shakes the entire creation? But "since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken," and since "our God is a consuming fire," the only proper response is to persevere in faithful, reverent service to Him.

In light of our great privileges and our great God, we must serve Him with obedient, grateful, and reverent hearts.

We have great privileges; we have a great God; and therefore, we have great responsibilities.

1. God has given us great privileges.

Throughout this epistle, the author has repeatedly shown the superiority of Christ and the new covenant over Moses and the old covenant. If you possess something of superior quality, why would you want to give it up and go back to something of inferior quality? We can sum up our privileges here under two headings:

A. God has spoken to us from heaven through Jesus' blood.

"See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven" (12:25). First, to clarify an interpretive matter, some argue that there are two speakers here: Moses, who warned Israel on earth; and, God, who warns us now from heaven. But since verse 26 indicates that the same voice that shook the earth then is the voice that speaks now, probably God is the only speaker in both instances. So the contrast is not between Moses' voice and God's voice, but rather between God speaking *on earth* at Mount Sinai then and His speaking *from heaven* now.

The author begins the Book of Hebrews, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (1:1-

2). God's Son is His supreme and final way of speaking to us. But, in particular, God has spoken to us through the blood of His Son, "which speaks better than the blood of Abel" (12:24).

When the Jews heard God's voice thunder at Sinai, they were so terrified that they "begged that no further word be spoken to them" (12:19). The same Greek word used in that verse ("begged") is used in verse 25 ("refuse"). The author sees the Jews' request at Sinai as a parable of their hardness of heart toward God that led to their ingratitude and disobedience in the wilderness (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 556). They begged not to hear any more of God's voice, and look what happened to them. But now, God has spoken in a greater way, through His Son, and even more through the blood of His Son. "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking" now!

The word translated "refuse" is used in Luke 14:18, 19, in the parable of the slighted dinner invitation. The man made great preparation and sent out invitations to come to his dinner party, but he received lame excuses in response: "I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused." "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused."

God's invitation in the gospel, to forgive all your sins and to give you eternal life, if you will respond, is the greatest invitation in the world! What more could He do than to send His own Son and shed His innocent blood as the penalty for every sinner who will believe in Him? Since the gospel is the greatest privilege imaginable, to refuse it is the greatest sin imaginable! We who have received God's gift in the gospel should count it as our greatest possession, far above anything this world has to offer!

B. God gives us a kingdom which cannot be shaken.

The idea of God's kingdom is not a major theme in Hebrews. The author mentioned it in 1:8, citing Psalm 45:6, "But of the Son He says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom.'" But while the word "kingdom" is not used, the concept is certainly behind his references to "Mount Zion," "the city of the living God," and "the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22).

There are several things to note about this kingdom. First, we have already received it, and yet it is still to come in its fullness. "Receive" is a present participle, implying that we are in the process of receiving this kingdom. We have already come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem, and yet in another sense, we have not come to this city in its final form. That awaits the second coming of the King. The word "receive" means that we do not work to merit this kingdom. It is a gift that God freely bestows on all that believe.

In 12:28 he says that it is "a kingdom which cannot be shaken." This means that it will outlast all earthly kingdoms. Because it is *God's* kingdom, it will remain "forever and ever" (1:8). Every earthly kingdom that has been established has eventually fallen to other, more powerful, kingdoms. The history of the world is that of the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms. Men such as Alexander the Great have devoted their lives to establishing these kingdoms, only to die and have their kingdoms broken up. The only kingdom that will endure is the kingdom of God. We are privileged to be members of this kingdom by His grace. Even if we are persecuted to death, God's eternal kingdom cannot be shaken, and we are heirs of it through faith in Christ.

So, God has given us great privileges. As we saw in our last study, we should not forget these great privileges that we inherit in Christ, so that we do not let them go for the world's bowl of stew, as Esau did. But there is a second major theme in our text:

2. God is a great God.

The God who speaks to us through the gospel is the same God who spoke to Israel at Mount Sinai. Two themes bring out God's greatness in our text:

A. God is great because His voice will shake both the earth and heaven.

When God spoke at Mount Sinai, the earth shook violently (Exod. 19:18). The author of Hebrews refers to that event (12:26), but then alludes to a prophecy from Haggai 2:6, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." Some argue that this refers exclusively to the spiritual events during the first coming of Christ, in which the Jewish rituals and outward religion were

shaken and the spiritual kingdom of the church was established. While there may be an initial fulfillment of the prophecy in Christ's first coming, I agree with those who understand the final fulfillment of this prophecy to relate to Christ's second coming, when all of the kingdoms of this world will be shaken into oblivion. After reporting his vision of a great earthquake (Rev. 11:13), John goes on to say, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

God's shaking of the earth and heaven is a frequent image in the Bible to refer to the final judgment in the day of the Lord. In Isaiah 13:13, the Lord says, "Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the Lord of hosts in the day of His burning anger." Isaiah 24:18-21 prophesies,

Then it will be that he who flees the report of disaster will fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit will be caught in the snare; for the windows above are opened, and the foundations of the earth shake. The earth is broken asunder, the earth is split through, the earth is shaken violently. The earth reels to and fro like a drunkard and it totters like a shack, for its transgression is heavy upon it, and it will fall, never to rise again. So it will happen in that day, that the Lord will punish the host of heaven on high, and the kings of the earth on earth.

Revelation 6:12-17 reports,

I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath

of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

Revelation 16:17-19 reports a final terrible earthquake:

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, "It is done." And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath.

In Matthew 24:7-8, Jesus predicted of the times just before His coming, "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."

So when a huge earthquake off the coast of Sumatra causes a tsunami that kills 150,000 people all around southern Asia, we who were spared should view it as a birth pang of coming events. When a woman goes into labor, it tells her that the culmination of her pregnancy is near. Get ready, the baby is coming soon! In a similar manner, the birth pangs of devastating earthquakes tell the inhabitants of this world, "Get ready, the big event is about to happen! Some day soon, God will speak and the earth and all heaven will shake as they have never shaken before." All that will remain is the kingdom of God and of His Christ. Make sure that you are in submission to the King of the universe before He speaks that terrible word of judgment!

B. God is great because He is a consuming fire.

Verse 29 refers to Deuteronomy 4:24. Moses warned Israel in verse 23 to watch themselves, so that they would not forget God's covenant and fall into idolatry. Then he added, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." Like the earthquake, the image of fire is a frequent picture of God's powerful judgment. I can only mention a few. In Isaiah 33:14, the prophet writes, "Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless. Who

among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?" He also says of those who have transgressed against God, "For their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched" (Isa. 66:24). Jesus cited that verse as a description of hell (Mark 9:48).

In a similar way, the prophet Zephaniah writes (1:18), "Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord's wrath; and all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth." In Zephaniah 3:8, the Lord says that He will assemble the kingdoms, "To pour out on them My indignation, all My burning anger; for all the earth will be devoured by the fire of My zeal." John the Baptist said of Jesus (Luke 3:17), "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Some try to dodge the implication of these verses by saying that the God of the Old Testament was a God of judgment, but the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy. But He is one and the same God! The author of Hebrews calls the God who is a consuming fire, "*our* God." The God of Sinai is the same as the God of Zion. Peter tells us (2 Pet. 3:9) that God "is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." But keep reading! In the next verse (3:10) he continues, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up." These things are a merciful *warning* for unbelievers (Heb. 12:25), but for we who believe, they are a *promise* (Heb. 12:26), because they usher in the "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13).

Thus God has given us great privileges. Our God is a great God, whose voice shakes earth and heaven, whose fire will consume every adversary. It follows, then...

3. We have great responsibilities: to be careful to serve Him with obedient, grateful, and reverent hearts.

There are four responsibilities here:

A. We must be careful not to refuse Him who is speaking.

“See to it,” means, “Watch out! Be careful!” The author used the same command in 3:12, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” It means, “Pay attention, because if you don’t, you could fall into the same sins that engulfed Israel in the wilderness.”

Do you take care about your spiritual life? Are you on guard about spiritual dangers that could dilute your devotion to God? Do you live in light of the coming judgment? Jesus used this same Greek word when He warned (Mark 13:33), “*Take heed*, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time [of judgment] will come.” He goes on to warn that perhaps He may come suddenly and find us asleep. Then He concludes, “What I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’” (Mark 13:37).

B. We must serve God with obedient hearts.

“Do not refuse Him who is speaking.” He is alluding to Israel’s disobedience in the wilderness. They faced some hardships, but rather than thanking God for delivering them from slavery in Egypt, they grumbled and threatened to go back to Egypt. They should have joyfully endured any trials, trusting that the God who had delivered them would now sustain them. The Hebrews were facing persecution. Would they entrust themselves to the faithful God who had delivered them from bondage to sin, or would they grumble and turn back to Judaism?

How is your attitude when God sends trials into your life? Do you grumble and turn back to the world? Or, do you obediently persevere in serving Him, knowing that He cares for you?

C. We must serve God with grateful hearts.

“Let us show gratitude.” The KJV translates the phrase literally, “Let us have grace.” It may mean that, in the sense of not abandoning God’s grace in Christ for the legalistic old covenant. But the phrase is an idiom that means, “be thankful” (Luke 17:9; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3). There is a connection between the two concepts. If we have experienced God’s grace, we should be thankful. Our service to God is never an attempt to “pay Him back” for His grace, which is impossible. Rather, it is the overflow of a heart that gives thanks “for His indescribable gift” (2 Cor. 9:15).

D. We must serve God with reverent hearts.

"We offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe." F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 385) comments, "Reverence and awe before His holiness are not incompatible with grateful trust and love in response to His mercy." God is our loving Father to whom we are invited to draw near (Heb. 4:16), but He is also "a consuming fire" (12:29). Probably most Christians in our day err on the side of being too chummy and casual with God, not on the side of reverence and awe. We should hold these truths in balance.

The word translated *service* means *worshipful service*. It always refers to that which is done for God. Paul uses the noun in Romans 12:1, when he exhorts us, "by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual *service of worship*." The idea is to offer to God, out of reverence for who He is, every aspect of our lives. Does reverence for God motivate all that you do for Him? It should!

Conclusion

Everything hinges on knowing who God is and what He has done for us by His grace in Christ. He has given us *great privileges*, by speaking to us from heaven through Jesus' blood, and by giving us a kingdom that cannot be shaken. He is the *great God*, whose voice will shake both earth and heaven. He is a consuming fire. So we have *great responsibilities*: we should take heed to serve Him with obedient, grateful, and reverent hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. When we're so bombarded by the world, how can we keep our focus properly on God and His kingdom?
2. How can we know if we have the proper balance between God's kindness and His severity?
3. To what extent should we emphasize God's judgment (as against His love) when we witness?
4. Since believers do not fear final judgment, is the fear of God a legitimate motive to avoid sin? How does Matt. 5:27-30 apply?

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