

The God whose Voice Shakes Heaven and Earth

Hebrews 12:25-29

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was a deist but he loved the teachings of Jesus. He didn't believe that Jesus was God in the flesh or that the miracles described in the Bible actually happened. And so he decided to create a book about the life and teachings of Jesus without all the parts that didn't make sense to him. So he took a razor blade and literally cut the teachings of Jesus out of his King James Bible and pasted them into a book. He called the resulting book *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*; most people call his book *The Jefferson Bible*.

If you're like me, you have a pretty extreme response to the idea of literally cutting out the parts of the Bible that you don't like. "How arrogant to cut and paste the Word of God so that it's now compatible with your thinking and your wisdom and your worldview!" And yet in **practice** I'm not so sure we're that different sometimes. There are certain parts of Scripture that we avoid because they make us so uncomfortable or there are certain commands that we avoid because we can't imagine changing the way we actually live. In practice we are sometimes guilty of doing what Jefferson did with his Bible: we only hear what we want to hear.

Mark Batterson's comment is that when we do that, we end up with "a god who is about our size and who looks an awful lot like us" (*Wild Goose Chase*, p. 71). In other words, if we end up creating a "god" in our own image.

The book of Hebrews warns against this tendency. One of the core challenges of the book of Hebrews is to listen to God's voice - even when He is saying things that are hard to hear. We are responsible to pay attention to the voice of God and hear everything He is saying to us. Today's passage, Hebrews 12:25-29, once again challenges us to listen when God speaks. He roots this challenge in the character of God, emphasizing that God's voice is so fierce and powerful that it can shake heaven and earth. This passage suggests that we ask ourselves a couple of simple questions:

Am I actively listening to the voice of God? And am I responding with gratitude and service/worship? (Hebrews 12:25-29) The core command in this passage is given in verse 25:

25 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.

"See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking." A theme throughout the book of Hebrews is that God has spoken and is speaking to us. In the opening verses of chapter 1, the author writes, "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. . . ." The idea is that God has spoken most decisively and most clearly in His Son. In chapters 3 and 4 the author quotes the same verse (Psalm 95:7) three times. For example in 3:15 we read:

15 . . . “Today if you hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.”

Verses like this suggest that ***today is the most important day of your life***. Since yesterday is gone and you may or may not be around tomorrow, today is the most important day of your life (spiritually speaking). That’s why the author of Hebrews keeps writing, “***Today*** if you hear His voice, don’t harden your hearts. . . .” You may or may not hear God’s voice tomorrow - not because He won’t be speaking (He WILL be) but because you may not be listening. Therefore, we shouldn’t squander the opportunity to hear God’s voice today.

In Hebrews 12:25 the author echoes this warning when he writes “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking”; do not reject what God is saying in Jesus and in the new covenant. We are responsible to listen to the voice of God. We’ve seen throughout Hebrews that we are to be intentional and engaged when it comes to our spiritual growth (instead of being lethargic and passive).

In the second half of the verse he uses an argument that should be familiar to us by now from Hebrews: Since the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, there are more severe consequences of disregarding the salvation it provides (see 2:1-4). Specifically, he writes:

25 . . . 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.

Hebrews repeatedly draws a contrast between God’s revelation at Mt. Sinai (the old covenant) and God’s revelation in Jesus (the new covenant). In the old covenant God warned the children of Israel “on earth” (at Mt. Sinai - see 12:18-21). In the new covenant God warns “from heaven”; we saw last week that we have come to “the heavenly Jerusalem” from which God speaks (see 12:22-24).

The argument here is the same as we saw in chapter 2: The consequences of rejecting something are ***proportional to its greatness***. If they didn’t escape when they rejected God’s warnings in the old covenant, how much less will ***we*** escape if we turn away from His warning in the new covenant?!?! The greatness/superiority of the new covenant demands that we pay much closer attention to what God is saying to us in Christ.

This turns upside down a lot of our thinking about the difference between the old and new covenants. The stereotype is that God was mean and serious under the old covenant, whereas now He is more lenient and laid back and chill when it comes to sin and disobedience and paying attention to Him. In reality both the blessings and the punishments of the new covenant are greater than those of the old covenant. The blessings and punishments of the old covenant were largely physical and immediate whereas the blessings and punishments of the new covenant are heavenly and eternal.

As we've seen throughout the book of Hebrews, the author is warning against full-blown apostasy (rejecting Jesus). A warning against the final state of apostasy is also a warning against the very things that **lead** to apostasy: (as we saw in chapter 3) the deceitfulness of sin which can lead to hardening which can lead to unbelief. This warning against apostasy is a warning against "drifting" (2:1), against spiritual laziness (5:11-14), and against forgetting God's discipline (12:4-11).

Verse 26 makes a reference to the earth shaking when God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, confirming that he's making a contrast between God speaking **then** in the old covenant and **now** in the new covenant.

26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven."

Every culture and nation has a collective memory of events that define who they are as a people. Here in the U.S. our collective memory includes events like the Civil War and the assassination of JFK and 911. Israel's collective memory included God speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai; specifically, they remembered that when God spoke to Moses the **earth shook**. Exodus 18:19 tells us that ". . . Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently." The fact that God's voice caused an earthquake when He gave the old covenant was supposed to remind them that they would be foolish to take that revelation lightly.

Our author says that "His voice shook the earth then" (i.e. at Mount Sinai). "But now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.'" This statement is a reference to Haggai 2:6 which looks forward to the day when God will vindicate His people and judge His enemies. If you thought the earthquake at Sinai was terrifying, God's voice on that day will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." This shaking/judgment will happen in the **future**, but it has been promised **now**; it will flow out of everything God has done in Christ in the new covenant.

Just as Israel was mindful that God's voice shook the earth when He gave the old covenant, we who know God through the new covenant need to be mindful that God's voice will one day shake heaven and earth (i.e., the entire created order). In verse 27 the author clarifies what he means by God's voice shaking heaven and earth. He picks up on the phrase "yet once more" from Haggai 2:6.

27 This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

The prophecy is that "once more" (i.e., **one, final decisive time**) God is going to shake heaven and earth. When that happens, some things will be proven to be solid and permanent whereas other things will be exposed as frail and temporary. The "things which **can** be shaken" are those things which are opposed to God and His kingdom. Those things will not withstand His voice on that day. By contrast, those things which

“cannot be shaken” will remain intact. In verse 28 our author will mention the “kingdom” of God as something which “cannot be shaken.”

You may have wondered why the Bible speaks so frequently about these events at “the end of the age.” If you read the entire New Testament, for example, from Matthew to Revelation, you will find dozens of references to the return of Christ. Over and over we’re told that God’s enemies will be punished and His people will enter into eternal joy. Some people get really annoyed at all this talk about the return of Christ and basically ignore this whole area of doctrine. And so it’s valid to ask, “Why does the New Testament talk about this future reality so frequently and intensely?”

Verses 28 and 29 give one answer to that question. These verses tell us that we should live our lives here and now in light of that final reality.

28 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; 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

The author wants us to realize that in Jesus Christ “we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” ***Through Jesus we are entering into the safest, most secure place in the universe.*** We are entering into the kingdom where God (the One whose voice will shake the heavens and the earth) reigns. [Notice that the “kingdom” is something that “we receive” (or “we are receiving”): it is a gift God gives to everyone who believes in Jesus.]

The fact that we are entering into God’s unshakable kingdom should ***not*** make us yawn; we should not be bored or disinterested in this reality. The fact that we are entering into the safest place in the universe should prompt us to ***live thankful lives***: “Therefore . . . let us show gratitude.” Let us continually be thankful for what we are receiving. This future reality is supposed to bleed back into the here and now and cause us to live thankful lives. We are supposed to have gratitude for things God has promised in the future. This is what Hebrews 11 described as faith: being confident and certain about things we don’t yet see and haven’t yet received.

This thankfulness is the foundation of our service (or worship) to God. “Let us show gratitude, by which we may ***offer to God an acceptable service*** with reverence and awe. . . .” Back in 9:14 we were told that the blood of Jesus cleanses our consciences so that we can “serve the living God.” Because our consciences have been cleansed we ***can*** serve God. Because we have so much for which to be thankful in the future we ***should*** serve God. Once again this confirms that our understanding of the future should press back onto the present and affect the way we live our lives. Instead of being self-serving or serving lesser gods, we should serve the One whose voice will one day shake heaven and earth.

The author adds that we serve Him “with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.” God as “a consuming fire” is a reference to Deuteronomy 4:24. Deuteronomy is Moses’ sermon to the children of Israel before they entered the

Promised Land. He is warning them not to “forget the covenant” God had made with them. (In the Bible we are responsible for what we forget.)

23 “So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. 24 “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

It is fully appropriate to serve God with awe and reverence because He is “a consuming fire, a jealous God.” The children of Israel found this out the hard way when they made the golden calf. God’s judgment against them was fierce. When you are in an exclusive relationship (e.g., marriage), a certain type of jealousy is appropriate. Under the old covenant Israel was bound to God exclusively; when she cheated on God, His jealousy was appropriate and fierce. He was a consuming fire.

By reiterating that “our God is a consuming fire,” the author of Hebrews is stressing that the character of God hasn’t changed. Under the new covenant we have also entered into an exclusive relationship with God. We too should listen to God and serve Him with reverence and awe because He is still “a consuming fire.” I think this is ultimately a reference to the final judgment on the day when God’s voice shakes heaven and earth. The author of Hebrews is encouraging us to live lives compatible with that day. This involves listening to God’s voice (instead of ignoring Him). In response to His voice and in response to our future destiny, we live lives of gratitude and service.

Our passage next week, Hebrews 13:1-6, discusses some of the core ways that we live lives of gratitude and worship. It talks about how we treat people both inside and outside the body of Christ, a perspective on our sexuality, not loving money, being content, etc. You should know ahead of time that next week’s passage is very strong and direct.

But for this morning I’d like to return to the two questions posed earlier. In light of everything we’ve seen in this passage, ask yourself: ***Am I actively listening to the voice of God? And am I responding with gratitude and service/worship?***

You can hear these questions in a couple of different ways. It’s possible to hear these questions and think, “Oh great. . . more things to fit into my busy schedule. I have to take time to listen to God drone on and on about things I probably don’t really care about. And then I have to say ‘thank you’ over and over throughout the day. And then I have to get busy doing things for God.” Of course most of us wouldn’t be that blunt or honest, but that is sometimes our attitude toward God, isn’t it?

I hope you hear how insulting that attitude really is. It’s really arrogant to think that God’s voice is boring and irrelevant. And it’s a fundamental misunderstanding of our identity in Christ to think that gratitude and worship are somehow a distraction from the things that are really important in this life. It’s as insulting as the kid who raises his hand in class and asks, “Is this going to be on the test?”

There is another way to hear these questions. You can also hear these questions in light of everything we know about God (both from this passage and others). Think about it this way:

- The One whose voice will one day shake the entire created order. . . (He is **that** powerful.)
- The One who sent His only-begotten Son to die for your sin. . . (He is **that** compassionate.)
- The One whose thoughts about you are too numerous to count (Psalm 139). . . (He is **that** interested in you.)
- The One who shepherds you through this life. . . (He is **that** attentive to what you're experiencing.)

The one true, living God is speaking to you, specifically to you. He does this through Scripture, through times of prayer, and through other people. He wants to tell you things about Himself, about yourself, about your calling in this world. God (probably) wants to speak things to you that are hard to hear; but even then His words will be life and healing to you, not condemnation.

The Lord's Table is an experience built into the life of the church to do a couple of things. First and foremost we remember the body and blood of Christ. The bread symbolizes the body of Christ which was broken for us. The cup symbolizes the blood of Christ that was shed for us. Second, the Lord's Table provides the opportunity for self-examination. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul encouraged each person in the Corinthian church to "examine himself"; we should ask, "Is my life compatible with the confession I am making at the Lord's Table?" I'd encourage you to examine yourself in light of today's passage. The body and blood of Christ remind us that God is more compassionate than we can fathom, and therefore we should listen when He speaks and respond in gratitude and worship.

Am I actively listening to the voice of God? And am I responding with gratitude and service/worship?