

Receiving the Heavenly Kingdom

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[0 : 01] How about I pray for us before we look at God's word together. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you speak to us through your word, the Bible.

And what you have to say to us is still very much relevant for us today. So please give us minds to understand and hearts that would seek to live in light of the things you say to us this morning. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Well, often in life, there are a number of things that help us to keep going, isn't there? And one of those things is the end goal.

I'm sure you've all heard the phrase, the light at the end of the tunnel. So I remember a week before Christmas, our son Tim asked for a toy for Christmas.

Now, it wasn't too expensive, so we said, OK. But you have to be good for the rest of this week. And he was, actually. He was pretty good. Two days before Christmas, however, he said to us with some excitement, only two more days of being good.

[1 : 10] Not sure he got the point. But our point is that the light at the end of the tunnel does help you to persevere, doesn't it? It does help you to keep going.

Well, today, the writer of the Hebrews peels back the curtain, as it were, to show us a glimpse of our end goal. To highlight how bright the light at the end of the tunnel is for us and for his readers, so that they might be encouraged to keep going.

Do you remember the readers were facing persecution? They were tempted to give up on Jesus and go back to Judaism. And so after the past few weeks, we've seen the writer remind them of certain truths, which are meant to encourage them to persevere.

And so, two slides on. Next one. The writer has said so far in chapter 10, here's one truth. We have a great high priest.

And so, in light of that truth, let us draw near to God instead of shrinking back from God. In chapter 11, he reminded us of all the great witnesses to the life of faith.

[2 : 29] That great cloud. And therefore, because of that truth, let us run with perseverance. In chapter 12, verse 3, he says, consider Christ.

That truth who endured. And may that truth encourage you to persevere. In chapter 12, verse 7, he says, endure hardship as a way of being trained, disciplined.

And so, strengthen your weak knees and pursue peace and holiness. And today, he continues to encourage them by reminding them of the truth, that their future, the light at the end of their tunnel is truly bright.

Now, unfortunately, it is hard to see how this passage connects with the ones before it. Because in our English versions, it's missing a key word in verse 18.

You see, in verse 18, literally starts with the word, because. Because. And so, the idea is, keep enduring hardship, keep persevering in holiness, because, verse 18, you have not come to the gloomy Mount Sinai.

[3 : 37] But instead, verse 22, you have come to the glorious Mount Zion. That's the big picture. And to highlight just how bright their future is, he contrasts it firstly with their past.

So, we're at point 1 in verse 18. He says, you have not come, as Israel did, to a mountain that can be touched, and that is burning with fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, and to a trumpet blast, or to such a voice speaking words, that those who heard it begged, no further word be spoken to them.

Because they could not bear what was commanded. If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that even Moses said, I am trembling.

With fear. Now, these verses describe what we saw in our first reading, don't they? They describe Israel's past, where they left Egypt and met God at Mount Sinai.

On the next slide is a picture of what most people think is Mount Sinai. We're not sure exactly, but they suspect this is it. And the writer is saying in verse 18 that Christians, like these readers, have not come to a physical mountain that can be touched like that.

[4 : 57] In fact, in verse 20, even Israel was not allowed to even touch it. If they did touch it, they would be killed. Such was God's holiness and their unworthiness.

And so they were kept at a distance from God. There was limits put around the mountain. He was unapproachable. They could not draw near. What's more, this mountain was burning with fire. But instead of giving off light, there was darkness. It was covered in smoke, you see, such that there was only darkness and gloom and storm. There was an ominous trumpet blast that made the people tremble.

And out of the storm, God spoke with such a voice. We heard him in Exodus 19 that the people were petrified. And here it says, begged, no further word be spoken.

Moses, you go and talk to God and we'll listen to you. We can't cope with this. But even Moses was trembling with fear. It's an overwhelming sensory experience.

[6 : 04] Of course, it all simply highlights how awesome God is. And not awesome in the way that some children speak of their toys, like totally awesome. But awesome in the sense of full of awe, overwhelming, even fearful.

It's kind of the feeling I got when I saw a new roller coaster ride in the US. So on the next slide, here it is. Are you feeling that in your stomach right now? And if you're not, look at where you get to on the next slide.

Now that feeling you've got right now, multiply that a hundredfold. And that's a glimpse of what Israel felt before the awesome God.

You see, God is powerful. He is majestic. And he is so overwhelming that it is a bit scary. So awesome that we might feel a bit sick.

And certainly tremble with fear. And so Israel came to a physical mountain that they weren't allowed to touch. Kept at a distance from God. So overwhelmed. They felt sick with terror.

[7 : 08] And even their mediator, Moses, was scared. But, says the writer, you Christians, you have not come to that. Rather, you have come to, point to verse 22, You have come to Mount Zion.

To the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly. To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all. To the spirits of the righteous made perfect. And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Here we have not come to a physical mountain, but a heavenly city. Zion, of course, is another name for the city of Jerusalem. It was God's chosen city.

It's where the temple was, and therefore where God was. And this city is not filled with gloom, but joy. And it is the place of God's church.

[8 : 18] The church who are all his firstborn sons. Whose names are written in heaven. Who will inherit as the firstborn son inherited. And at the center is God.

Who, do you notice, is still called the judge of all. It's worth noticing that, because some people think the God of the Old Testament and Mount Sinai is different to the God of the New Testament and Mount Zion.

But no, it's the same God. He's still awesome. He's still the judge. But there is a difference. And the difference is Jesus.

And so the writer adds that we have also come to the spirits. That is, Christians who have died in the faith. Who have been made perfect or holy in God's sight. Such that they can stand before God the judge.

The implication is that we too will be able to stand before God. Why? Because of Jesus. Because we have come to the better mediator. Whose blood speaks a better word.

[9 : 23] Than the blood of Abel. I grew up with two brothers. And we occasionally fought. Probably more than our parents wanted us to.

But we never actually killed each other. You'll be glad to hear. We got close sometimes. But in Genesis, Cain actually killed his brother Abel out of jealousy.

You might remember. And you might remember that Abel's blood cried out from the ground. It cried out for justice and judgment on his brother Cain who killed him.

But here the blood of Jesus speaks a better word. A word of forgiveness. A word of mercy. Because his blood has taken our judgment.

His death has paid for our sins. And so the writer, as he said back in chapter 10, 14, we've been made perfect in God's sight. Not physically.

[10:21] I mean, you still sin just as I still sin. But rather we are counted perfect in God's sight by the blood of Christ. Which speaks this much better word.

And so, even though God is still the same God, the judge of all. Even though we need to fear him with reverence. We don't need to fear him with terror. We can stand before him.

Having been made perfect. Counted perfect by the blood of Christ. But do you see the complete contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion?

Do you see the contrast? Between the old covenant and the new. The writer is trying to show us just how bright the light at the end of our tunnel is.

I mean, which mountain would you prefer to come to? But guess what? You've already come to it. Do you see verse 22?

[11:19] You have come to Mount Zion. Do you see that? It does not say we will come to Mount Zion. It says we have.

Or you have already. You see, there's a sense in which we who are Christians have already come to this city. We have already part of this joyous celebration.

We're already part of this church in heaven. We've already come and drawn near to the God, the judge. Because we have already come to Jesus. And his blood, which has counted us perfect in God's sight.

When and how did all this happen? Well, when we became Christians. For then we are raised spiritually, you see. Let me show you from the Bible, from Ephesians chapter 2 on the next slide. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.

Even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. And God knows this. God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.

[12:26] In Christ Jesus. You see, although we are physically here on earth, we have been spiritually raised to new life and seated with Christ in heaven. And so spiritually, we have already come to Mount Zion, this joyful city.

We are already part of it. Our names are already written there. In other words, the writer is not only showing us how bright our future is.

But he is also encouraging us with the truth that we are halfway home. Of course, he knows we are not physically there yet. He will say in chapter 13, verse 14, that we are still looking forward to the city to come.

But he is trying to encourage his readers to keep going by reminding them that they have already got a foot in the door. They are already halfway home to heaven. We just have to keep going.

One of the most memorable moments of the Sydney Olympic Games was Eric the Eel. I don't know if you remember him. He entered the 100 metre freestyle race.

[13:30] Before coming to Sydney, he had never seen in real life a 50 metre pool. In fact, he'd only ever swum in lakes in Ecuador. And the only time he swum in a pool was his 12 metre swimming pool at the hotel he stayed at before he flew to Sydney.

Here's a video clip of the race. In lane five, representing Equatorial Guinea, Eric Musafania. With a name like Eric, if he'd been an athlete, he could have been an elephant.

As it was, two false starts in the men's heats in the 100 metres freestyle in Sydney, left in the most famous eel in the pool. And heat one of his men's 100 metres freestyle.

And here we have Eric Musambani of Equatorial Guinea. And Adrian, I've never seen anything like this at the Olympic Games before. This guy doesn't look as if he's going to make it.

Now I am convinced this guy is going to have to get hold of the lane rope in a minute. Adrian, I'm not sure he's going to make it, is he?

[14:38] No, he is. This is the Olympics. He's got 17,000 people shouting for him. Eric Musambani of Equatorial Guinea wins heat one of the men's 100 metres freestyle.

A great moment in sporting history. Now what motivated him to keep going? You saw him struggling at the end, didn't you? What motivated him to keep going, to persevere to the end of the race?

It was a few things actually. At first, he said that he was representing his country. He wanted to do them proud. Secondly, it was the cheers of the crowd. And thirdly, it was the fact that he had

already won the race.

Did you notice that? The two people had already been disqualified. He'd won the race. All he had to do was just finish it. And the writer is saying here to us and his readers, you have already come to God's heavenly kingdom.

Jesus has already won the race for you. And so all you need to do is keep going. Finish it. Your prize is secure.

[15:47] You're halfway home. So keep going. And in case they're not sure what keep going involves, he tells them, point three, verse 25.

First, it means listening to God. He says, Here the writer says, Don't refuse God who speaks. And in Hebrews, God speaks to us through his son. In the word of the gospel, we saw that in chapter one. In other words, they are to keep listening to the gospel, the message about Jesus and his death and resurrection for us.

They are to keep clinging to Christ. For if they refuse to listen to God and his gospel, then all that's left is certain judgment. For if Israel did not escape judgment when they refused God back at Mount Sinai, then we certainly won't escape judgment either, he says.

We're to keep listening to God and the gospel. What's more, we are to remember the type of kingdom we are receiving. Verse 26. It says, At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.

[17:13] The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken, that is, created things, so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

He's saying that this heavenly Jerusalem, this kingdom of God, cannot be shaken or removed. Other kingdoms of this world, other religions of this world will be removed.

But this heavenly kingdom cannot be shaken. It cannot be moved. It is permanent. It is eternal. It's the one that's going to last.

And so he says, it's the one worth striving for. It's the one that matters. I remember that my in-laws were building a house some years ago, and as they were building the house, they got a phone call. My mother-in-law got a phone call from the color consultant. That was her title. The color consultant phoned my mother-in-law at work and asked if they could meet that afternoon, discuss the color scheme for the house.

[18:14] But my mother-in-law said, look, I was too busy today and too busy for the rest of the week. And the color technician, a little surprise, said, but isn't building your house the most important thing in your life?

No. In fact, it will be shaken. It will be removed, along with everything else of this world. The only thing that is permanent, the only thing that is unshakable, is the heavenly kingdom.

That is what's most important then. And that's what will make being a Christian worthwhile. This joyful kingdom that will last forever. Therefore, verse 28, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

And so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. Notice verse 28 there. It says, since we are receiving, we're in the process of receiving this kingdom. It doesn't say we will receive, we are receiving it. We've already begun to receive it. As we've seen, we're already spiritually there. God has done the hard part of raising us who were once spiritually dead to new life.

[19:31] We're halfway home. And so let us be thankful for what God has already done for us in the Lord Jesus. And he says, let us keep worshiping God. And the word for worship here simply means serve.

We're to keep worshiping or serving God. And chapter 13 will give us lots of examples of how we can do this. But for now, the writer just adds that we are to do so not with terror like Israel had at Mount Sinai, but still with awe.

For God is still God. He is still awesome, like a consuming fire. And so he ought to be treated with reverence and awe. And so how are we going in the Christian life?

Are we treating God rightly or lightly? Are we continuing to worship and serve him as I know many of you are? Or are we getting sidetracked with worshiping and serving another?

Are we continually thankful for what he has already given us in Jesus? Or are we continually ungrateful for what he has not given us in this world? Are we continuing to listen to him who speaks to us through the Lord Jesus?

[20 : 42] Now, it's not easy to do, is it? It's not always easy to treat God rightly and to keep being thankful day after day. I mean, it feels like winter has gone on for some time.

I can hear the coughs and spluttering of people who are unwell. You know, there's other issues we face, more serious health issues, not just of our own, but loved ones. There's the spouse we miss. There's the work issues, the grandkids and family issues. And there's the tiredness of just trying to persevere. And if we feel like that, then the writer is saying, look at the spiritual reality that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, a heavenly city where there is joy and fellowship with all those loved ones in Christ, where it will all be made worthwhile.

And so keep going. Remember the light at the end of the tunnel is bright and certain for we're halfway home. Indeed, do what Jesus did in chapter 12, for the joy set before him, that is the joy of entering his eternal kingdom, he endured the cross.

He persevered with that joy set before him. He kept the faith. So may we do likewise until our spiritual home becomes a physical reality.

[22 : 08] Let's pray. our heavenly father, we do thank you for the difference the Lord Jesus makes.

We thank you that his blood speaks a better word, a word of forgiveness and mercy. We thank you that because of his blood we can stand before you counted as perfect and holy in your sight.

We thank you that because of Jesus you have raised us to new spiritual life and seated us with him in the heavenly realms. You have brought us into your unshakable kingdom.

therefore help us to please never refuse you who speak to us. Please help us to never take you for granted but serve you with reverence and awe.

Please help us to keep persevering in the faith until our spiritual home becomes a physical reality.

We ask it in the Lord Jesus name.

[23 : 12] Amen.