

Receiving the Unshakeable Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Now, many of you I'm sure would know that some of the best authors, the fictional ones, have found the Bible to be a rich well from which to draw symbols and imagery.

So think, for example, J.K. Rowling with Harry Potter, the boy who must die in order to save the world, the magical world, but then comes to life again in the last book.

I hope I haven't given it. Anyway, everyone's read the book, right? Just like Jesus. Or C.S. Lewis with the Chronicles of Narnia and Aslan, the Lion King, again modeled after the Bible's own Lion of Judah, Jesus.

And then, of course, we have J.R.R. Tolkien. It's funny, isn't it, how all these famous, they all go by the initials. And I'm thinking maybe one day I might just be known as M.B.S. Chew.

You can start calling me that if you like. Anyway, with Tolkien, I find that tonight's passage reminds me very much of two mountains in the Lord of the Rings.

[1 : 16] So when I read verses 18 to 21, I think of Mount Doom. I've got a picture of it here. It's where Frodo goes to destroy the ring.

Because that's where the ring was forged in the first place by the evil Sauron. So that's verse 18 to 21. But when I then read verses 22 to 25, the mountain that comes to my mind is Minas Tirith.

I think I've had a slide of this in previous sermons before, where if you watch the movie, a great and joyful assembly gathers at the end, if you recall, elves, hobbits, you know, dwarves, humans even, to crown Aragorn as king.

Now, I don't know whether Tolkien based those two places on this passage at all tonight. But as we look at it, I want to say that although they're the same, to me at least, there are actually differences between the mountains here and those of Tolkien's.

We'll get to that in a while. But let's begin with point one of the outline, where we come first to Mount Sinai. It's not mentioned as such in Hebrews, but having heard our Old Testament reading tonight, we can be sure it's none other than Mount Sinai.

[2 : 31] This is where the people of God came after their rescue from Egypt. This, the place where God spoke and gave them the law. And so although this mountain, like Mount Doom, is burning with fire, verse 18, and is full of darkness and gloom and storm, it's unlike Mount Doom in that this is a picture not of evil, but of holiness.

This is a place of meeting, not with the evil Sauron, but with a good and holy God. And notice in our Exodus reading, which I again put up on the slide, how God actually required them to consecrate themselves, to wash their clothes.

And the thing is that even after they've done this, they've gone through this cleansing ritual. See how they respond. Verse 19, it says that such was God's words that those who heard it begged that 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. And so what we have is a picture of what it's like to come to God without the blood of Jesus to cleanse us.

This is a picture of God's holiness. And it's a picture of a holiness which He still has today. For God is an unchanging God. He's still the same God today as He was when He met His people at Sinai all those years ago.

[4 : 04] But it is a picture of coming to this holy God without the blood of Jesus. And this God still abhors sin just as He did then.

So lying, cheating, unfaithfulness, greed, malice, idolatry, jealousy, envy, pride, these things and more, God's anger still burns against.

And so great is God's holiness that it's too much for any human. Even Moses, we read in verse 21, the most upright and faithful of God's leaders in the Old Testament, trembled with fear at the sight

of God at Sinai.

But notice that what the people feared wasn't so much the darkness or the gloom or the storm, scary though that was, what they feared was the voice of God.

For, recall, they say, they begged that no further word be spoken to them, except through Moses. It is God's commands, the writer of Hebrews says, that they couldn't bear.

[5 : 20] And this powerful word of God, we've actually seen in Hebrews already, haven't we? So back in Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 12, I'll put the slide of the verse up again.

It is, this powerful word is called the living and active word of God, which is sharper than a double-edged sword, piercing and dividing, so that every thought and attitude of the heart is laid bare.

And so it was that when God spoke from Sinai, it was too much for them, because it laid bare their sinfulness. And having heard God speak, their natural impulse was to hide, just as Adam and Eve did when they sinned in the Garden of Eden, and just as we all do, because we know that we cannot bear the word of God.

Have you ever had such an experience that as you read the Bible, that there is a sense of trembling at reading those words, a sense of realization that God is actually speaking through them to us?

It's both terrifying and then strangely exhilarating as well, isn't it? I say exhilarating because we find in God's word, actually someone who knows us intimately.

[6 : 46] It's like someone is reading our very minds, our very thoughts, our deepest fears and insecurities. When we read God's word, that's what happens to us. And yet at the same time, it's terrifying because every selfish motive is being exposed.

Every impure thought is being laid bare. as God's word speaks to us. What a bind we find ourselves in.

To be drawn to God because you know he's able to meet your every need, and yet afraid because you see how unworthy you are before him.

And I think that's what it was like for them at the foot of Mount Sinai. They were trembling with fear, not just with God's holiness, but also with the realization of their own unworthiness.

But thankfully, we no longer need to come to God via this mountain. Rather, because of Jesus, we come to God now via Mount Zion or at Zion.

[7 : 57] So, verse 22 and point 2, we are coming to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Now, Jerusalem, as we know, was the capital of Israel, established by God to be a picture or a shadow of what it's like for God to dwell with his people.

There, his people would come to worship him. There, he will build his temple, and he will establish his king. But, of course, in order to have a shadow, you must have a reality.

So, you just look at that wall over there. Many of you can't see, but down there, imagine. Where there is a light shining, it's not possible, is it, to create a shadow of that symbol without the symbol being there, right?

You actually have to have a real object in the way of the light in order to create a shadow. And so, in verses 22 and 25, the reality of which the earthly Jerusalem is a shadow is heaven.

We saw that already in chapter 9. That's where God's real tabernacle or temple is, and it is to that place that Jesus, our high priest, has gone to offer himself as the once-for-all sacrifice.

[9 : 12] And it is now where he's seated, at God's right hand, as his anointed king. And we get a sense of just how grand this is, because the writer then says that it is surrounded by thousands upon thousands of angels and all in joyful assembly.

Just imagine angels joyfully singing and praising God. It's an amazing scene, isn't it? But look who else is there as well.

Verse 23, the church of the firstborn. Church here simply means gathering, and the title of firstborn is given to Jesus because he's the heir over God's house, just like the firstborn of any family.

And who makes up the church of the firstborn? Well, everyone whose name is written in heaven. Or further on, the spirits of the righteous made perfect. In other words, it's all the believers of Jesus Christ.

Those whose faith have made them righteous because of the blood of Jesus. So that's us. That's everyone who has believed and put their trust in Jesus.

[10 : 25] But here, notice two things. First, the verb come is actually in the perfect tense. We have come to this heavenly Jerusalem, which means that every believer in Jesus is already right now

gathered at or in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Physically and temporally, we may still be on earth, here, now, but spiritually, we've been taken by faith into this amazing gathering.

That is why the writer in earlier chapters could say, could urge us to approach God's throne with confidence, now, and to enter this most holy place.

Now. We don't have to wait until we die. That's one of the great blessings of being a Christian. We can enjoy being in God's presence now, right now, to hear His voice, now, to know His will for our lives, for Him to love us and to know us by name.

Because why? Our name is written in heaven. And to be part of this great gathering, this great party, even, with people who love God, and therefore, who love one another.

[11 : 41] And so, when we gather each week, as we are doing right now, or when we go to a small group through the week, we are expressing this physical, we're giving physical expression to this actually spiritual reality.

so we may be only a hundred people or so here, and you look around and it doesn't seem that grand a party. But we're actually part of this great gathering around God's throne right now.

Now, of course, having said that, you're still gathered around God's throne when you leave tonight, okay? You're gathered around God's throne even when you're alone in your room. But the point is that if something is true spiritually, then we always try and give physical expression to it.

And so that's why it's important for us to gather regularly, especially when we're free to do so, unlike in other places in other countries. We want to gather physically because spiritually, we are gathered together around God's throne.

Now, the second thing I want you to notice is that notwithstanding the joy and celebration, and that's the sharp contrast, isn't it, between the second mountain and the first, we see in verse 23 that we're still to come to God who is the judge of all.

[13 : 03] Do you see that? God is still the same God and holiness, justice, and righteousness still remain a focus for Him. It's still a requirement in order for us to come to Him.

And sadly, as humans, we haven't changed, have we, since the time of Sinai? And yet, for us, there's no longer a fear of coming to Mount Zion, only joy.

And this is possible. Why? Because, verse 24, we have Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant who sprinkled blood. Again, this is language that goes back to the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

We have language of the Day of Atonement and Holy of Holies. We have His sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. So, if you remember the new covenant in chapter 8 and 10, what was the biggest thing that changed between the old and the new?

It was God's laceration, wasn't it? That He would remember our sins no more. So, God is still the judge of all and yet, He remembers our sin no more.

[14 : 11] How can that be? only because of the sprinkled blood of Jesus that speaks a better word than Abel's. Now, many of you would know Abel, Cain and Abel, chapter 4 of Genesis.

Well, Abel was killed by Cain, wasn't he? and his blood was spilled in the field. And the Lord said to Cain in Genesis 4 when that happened that Abel's blood was crying out to God from the ground.

That is, it was demanding justice because of his innocence. And God, as judge, then and now, had to act. And what he did was banish and curse Cain.

And this comparison is now being made with Jesus that if Abel was innocent and required God to act justly, then how much more the death of Jesus, the sinless human.

Does not Jesus' blood then speak a better word requiring God to act justly? And so, by his blood, Jesus answered all the requirements of the law.

[15 : 16] So, if at Mount Zion God was declaring those requirements by giving the law, then as Jesus comes to Mount Zion, he's the only one who's able to, as it were, touch the mountain, approach it without fear or trembling because he has met the requirements of the law fully.

That's why he's opened the way for us into the Holy of Holies. That's why he's able to initiate the new covenant by his blood. And that is why God remembers our sin no more.

His blood is speaking a better word and God has to act justly by allowing us to come to him through that blood. And that's why we can come without fear or trembling but in joyful assembly.

Now, all this we've already looked at in the last few weeks so I'm not going to dwell on it. Instead, what our passage does tonight is offers us two ways by which we come to God.

And as we turn to our final section, which way we end up coming to God by is determined by the way we respond to God when he speaks.

[16:26] Which way we come to God is determined by the way we respond to God when he speaks. So verse 25, friends, if you've ever read the Bible for yourself, God has spoken to you.

and they refused and they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven. Friends, if you're here tonight, then God is speaking to you by his word.

Even as the word was read, God is speaking to you. If you've ever read the Bible for yourself, then God has spoken to you. If you heard your friend share the good news of Jesus to you and showed you from the Bible, then God has spoken to you.

And every time we gather at church, at Bible study or in our personal devotions, when we open God's word, God is speaking to us. And so the challenge every time tonight and at every occasion is, how do we respond when God speaks to us?

Do we have a sloppy attitude? when the word of God is read? Do we refuse to obey when he speaks? For pay attention to the warning here in verse 25.

[17:50] What happens when we refuse him who speaks? I remember a long time ago at school, we used to have a really strict teacher.

It was a boys-only school, so you know, teachers I think have to be a bit stricter. but this teacher of ours had a sort of, he was a rather robust kind of character. He was actually also in charge of the school's judo team and so we were all terrified of him.

And whenever he spoke, he always spoke with a deep, stern voice. I can't do it, but he, and it always seems more stern when you're a small little boy. Anyway, he was quite a short man, not very tall, but even so, every time he gave out orders in class, every boy, even those, and there were some boys that were much taller than he, every boy would obey him without any argument.

It didn't matter whether it was to be quiet in class or, you know, to move from one room to another quickly. There was just no back chat, no dilly-dallying. We were afraid of him and therefore, we obeyed him.

We listened and we did exactly what he said. And that's what fear produces, right? Whether for good or for bad, there's always a correlation between fear and obedience.

[19:08] If someone strikes you with fear, then instinctively, you're going to want to just listen and obey. But the amazing thing here is that that was not what the people of Sinai did.

They heard God's voice, they trembled with fear, and then what happened? They refused to obey him who spoke. Remember back in chapter 3, when Psalm 95 was quoted, I put it on the slide again, what did the people do when they heard God's voice?

They hardened their hearts. God's very first commandment at Sinai was to worship him only, and yet, what did they do in the desert? They made and worshipped a golden calf.

And then when they came to the land, they refused to trust God to give it to them. And the danger is that for some of us, for some of us, some of the times, even when we say we love hearing God's voice, we too can end up doing the same, can't we?

You see, we may hear God's voice and tremble, we may even be moved emotionally by it, but unless it translates into an obedience by faith, then it's actually tantamount to refusing it.

[20:31] You see, we may be like the heroes of the faith and come like them to God at the heavenly Jerusalem. In fact, the Bible says we have come there, but there is one crucial difference that separates us from them, and the difference is this.

They have finished the race, they have persevered in their faith, whereas for us, we're still in the race. And so in one sense, even though we've come, we have not arrived as yet.

I'm not saying this to discourage you or to cause you concern. I mean, Jesus is still the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and we still need to look to him constantly, and he will give us the confidence to finish that race.

But there is a warning here, isn't it, for a reason, because we still have work to do. We still have the work of completing this race, not by our own strength, no, but by hearing God's voice and obeying it by faith until the end.

I don't know about you, but I cherish this great privilege of hearing God's word. What a wonderful thing it is to have a speaking God, isn't it? Someone who's guiding us on our journey of faith, revealing himself by his word, who assures us of the promises that he's already fulfilled in his son,

so that we can trust him and worship him.

[21 : 57] And yet, even though it is a great thing, God also uses his voice as a means of sifting humanity. He uses his word to actually divide people into those who will be received into his kingdom and those who wouldn't.

look now at the final few verses, verse 26. At that time, the Bible says, his voice shook the earth. That's what happened at Sinai, but now he has promised, once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.

Now, this is a quote from Haggai, chapter 2 and verse 6, and together with verse 27, it speaks of a time of final judgment when everything in creation, including humans, will be subject to shaking. It reminds me of how farmers traditionally sifted wheat. I think many of you have seen this handheld sieve on the slide. They'll put the wheat in it and shake it, and what happens is that the chaff, doesn't it, gets shaken off, and what's left behind is the edible wheat.

And so there will come a time, just like this sieve, where once more God will again sift and shake the heavens and the earth, and those who remain in his kingdom, remain in the sieve, as it were, are those that hold on to God's word, those who continue to hope in Jesus for their salvation.

[23 : 19] These are the ones that the Bible calls in verse 28, those who will receive God's unshakable kingdom. Friends, this almighty shaking will come at the very end, but we also see God doing a bit of the shaking from time to time in our lives.

It's a prelude, as it were, to the final shake up. God does this actually for our good, for the good of the church. Because you see, God's church sometimes is a bit like an ornament that you've put on the mantelpiece, and it's so precious that nobody touches it.

But then over time, what happens? It starts to collect dust, doesn't it, and cobwebs. And so you need to take it down and shake the dust off. And friends, if we look around today at our society, I wonder whether that's exactly what God is doing, shaking the church and Christians a bit.

Because when things are too easy for us as Christians, it does breed complacency, doesn't it? We become nominal as Christians, we think that just because we're baptized as a baby and we turn up at church twice a year, that we're saved.

or we think that we can be just like the rest of the world and things will be okay. We stop hearing and seeking God's voice.

[24 : 43] And when things are easy, the church itself can get complacent. It becomes just like the world. It gets hooked on prosperity. It lives just for this life instead of the life to come. It seeks the praise of this world and its elites rather than the praise of God.

And so God brings on trials and tribulations to shake things up for us a bit, to truly test our faith. And yes, as we saw last week, it's not pleasant, it's painful, but it's a good thing, isn't it?

Because God is separating from the world those who truly remain in Christ. So friends, the plea of the writer and my plea tonight is, do not refuse him who speaks.

We have already come to the ultimate goal of our lives. We have come to this heavenly Jerusalem, the church of the firstborn, the unshakable kingdom. Do not refuse him who speaks, but, verse 28, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

Now, the word worship here isn't simply just a reference to singing songs, not even to just giving God praise with words. Rather, as in Romans chapter 12, it is to offer our whole lives in obedience to God.

[26 : 06] Next week, in chapter 13, we'll see the practical implications of this. So we'll leave that for next week. But for tonight, again, let me say, let us resolve never to refuse God when he speaks.

In our final verse, God is described as a consuming fire. And that's an appropriate image, isn't it? We all know how useful fire is. It keeps us warm.

We cook with it. Beautiful steaks, wonderful roast, chicken and chips. Even our cars and planes and machinery, all that work based on combustion, doesn't it?

But if we are callous with fire, what happens? It consumes us, doesn't it? Each year, the risk of bushfires is a testimony to that. And so it is with God's word.

It's the very means by which we're saved. God uses it to save us. It's only by God's word that we can have faith in his son. In fact, God has spoken his final word through him, through Jesus.

[27 : 14] And so without it, we're actually without hope. We can't receive this unshakable kingdom. And yet, on the other hand, the very means of salvation is also the very means of judgment, isn't it?

Because if we refuse this word, if we harden our hearts when we hear it, then it becomes the very thing that brings God's judgment on us. And that day, one day, it will consume us because we have not trusted in the better word, the blood of Jesus.

Let's pray that God will help us not to refuse his word when he speaks. Let's pray. Father, we sometimes we take your word for granted and we do want to ask you for your forgiveness.

What a precious word you have given to us, great revelation of your son, the great promises of what he's done, the great encouragement that if we put our hope in you and your son, we will never go astray.

And yet, Lord, we sometimes hear your word and we dismiss it. Forgive us. Give us the strength by your spirit to obey, to worship, to have the proper reverence and awe when we hear your word to live by it.

[28 : 40] We pray this and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.