

## WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY? (Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

### Study 17

## Higher Privileges--Greater Responsibility (Hebrews 12:14-29)

### Scripture First

Please read the entire passage carefully in more than one version *before* you look at the notes.

### A Passage to Heed

*Therefore, 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" (12:28-29).*

### Overview

The passage is relatively long. At its heart is the contrast between Old and New Covenants. It's as though the Writer says: "Look how much better off we are than our Old Testament counterparts. Therefore we have greater responsibilities. This is a recurrent theme in the book (2:1-4; 4:11; 10:28-29). In view of the greater light we have, disobedience would be catastrophic. But that's not all. We have the responsibility and the wherewithal to live exemplary lives

There is a wonderful flow in the writer's explanation. He presents us with a list of men and women who lived by faith (Heb 11). They saw themselves as strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Through faith many achieved great things, but others suffered, some to the point of death. The supreme example of this is, of course, the Lord himself (12:1-3).

If we suffer, we should see this as the discipline of a loving Father (12:4-11; cf. Rom 5:3-5; James 1:2-4). In the light of all of this, he mentions four really important responsibilities:

- **Be a real peacemaker** (12:14; cf. Matt 5:9; Rom 12:18). There is so much more to this than the avoidance of conflict. Jesus said, "Blessed are the *peacemakers*," not "Blessed are the peace *lovers*." There is a world of difference. Indeed, "peace-at-any-price" people are anything but peacemakers.
- **Pursue holiness** (12:14; 1 Pet 1:13-15). To be holy is to be set apart (dedicated) to God. It includes moral purity. We have been made holy (Heb 10:10). That is usually referred to as "positional" sanctification (we can take "sanctification" as synonymous with holiness). "Progressive" (experiential) sanctification has been defined as the process by which the holy nature imparted to us when we became believers (and were born again) is developed and strengthened (1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:3-11).
- **Remove bitterness** (12:15). Nothing is more likely to stifle growth and cause havoc in a church than "a root of bitterness." What should you do if you discover resentment in your heart on account of hurts? How can we help one another? What should we do if we are aware of ill-feelings and bickering in the church?
- **Get your priorities right** (12:16-17). Sexual immorality is a prime example of placing instant gratification before permanent well-being. It is not the only one. Again and again, the writer urges us to take the long view, to look ahead (e. g. Heb 10:35; 11:13-15, 24-26, 39-40; 12:2-3). Esau is a classic example of a person who places instant sensuous gratification above permanent spiritual advancement. "Esau is the antithesis of the paragons of faith in chapter 11. He trades off what is unseen and what lies in the future for immediate gratification in the present" (Donald A. Hagner).

From verse 18 to verse 24, the writer contrasts the mountain of fear with the mountain of joy, Mount Sinai with Mount Zion. If you read Ex. 19:12-19 and Deut. 4:11; 5:22-25, the impression is one in which the fear of God predominates. That was appropriate and necessary, but the new order stands in sharp contrast to this. In the Old Testament Mount Zion is synonymous with Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:6; 1 Kings 19:21; Ps 2:6; 9:11). Here it refers symbolically to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God (Heb 11:10, 16; Gal 4:26; Rev 21:2). In the future God's kingdom will be realized in its fullness, but right now we are participants in it. We keep company with thousands upon thousands of angels (Dan 7:10; Rev 19:6). We are part of the universal fellowship of believers whose names are inscribed in heaven (Luke 10:20), all of whom are heirs of the promise (Rom 8:17). The Jerusalem Bible translates verse 23, "with the whole church in which everyone is a 'first-born son' and a citizen of heaven." We come into the presence of the Judge of all, but have no need to be

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afraid. We are part of the company that includes "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (the Old Testament people of God). Above all, we have come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. If the blood of Abel cried out to God (Gen 4:10), so Jesus' blood speaks a better word.

The remainder of the chapter consists of a warning and an encouragement. Since the new order is so much better than the old, we ought to treat what we have heard with the utmost seriousness: "If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?" One day, God will shake both the earth and the heavens (Haggai 2:6; 2 Pet 3:10-13). On that day, his unshakable kingdom, of which we are part, will remain, so let us "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe."

### **Some Questions to Consider**

1. What does it mean to be a peacemaker? What does it *not* mean? What sort of things would prevent you from being a peacemaker? So, what are you going to do about it?
2. Are you holy? Why do you say this? Respond to the statement: "To be holy means we become more like Jesus." How do we do this?
3. What about deep-seated bitterness and resentment? Why do you think "a bitter root" is so destructive, especially in a church? What should you do if you detect resentment in your heart? What should we do if we sense that there is a "root of bitterness" among us?
4. What was so bad about Esau's choice (Gen 25:29-34)? What would be its equivalent in our situation?
5. Consider the contrast between Mount Sinai (where the law was given) and Mount Zion (which represents the dwelling of God both now and into the future). Think of the privileges that are ours (e. g. 2 Cor 3:4-18). Think of ways in which we can better avail ourselves of these privileges.