

Faith Inspires Gratitude

Bible Background • Hebrews 12:14–29

Printed Text • Hebrews 12:18–29 | Devotional Reading • 2 Thessalonians 1:1–7

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **KNOW** the meaning of God’s forgiveness and promise of eternal life; **EXPLORE** our fears about death and assurances of God’s grace; and **REPENT** for sometimes rejecting God’s grace.

In Focus

Lamar lay in the hospital bed; he couldn’t remember anything. His brother, Warren, said, “Good morning. It has been almost six days since the accident. Do you remember what happened?” Lamar shook his head.

Warren said, “You had a stroke while you were driving. Your car just stopped on the side of the road.”

Lamar became frustrated when he tried to lift his right hand. As his wife, Joyce, hugged him, she whispered, “You are paralyzed on your right side. The doctors don’t know if it is permanent.” Tears ran down Lamar’s face.

Each day, Joyce prayed with Lamar, who became withdrawn. One day, Warren visited Lamar at the rehabilitation center.

Warren said, “You know God has His hand on your life. His grace and mercy are so evident. You could be dead, but His grace has allowed you to live. Be thankful!”

Lamar said, “I am not sure. I believe that death would be better than half a life.” Warren said, “You are blessed with life for a purpose. God’s grace has spared you.” God is gracious and merciful. When we experience difficulty in life, we should trust God.

In today’s lesson, we are reminded to trust God and not fear death but live each day with thankfulness as we experience God’s grace.

Keep In Mind

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.” (Hebrews 12:28, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Voice (Hebrews 12:19, 26) *phōnē* (Gk.)—A sound; a tone; speech; the sound of uttered words.

B. Mediator (v. 24) *mesites* (Gk.)—One who intervenes between two others to restore peace and friendship.

Say It Correctly

Moses. MOH-ziz, -zis.

Zion. ZI-uhn

KJV

Hebrews 12:18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,
19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:
20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:
21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)
22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,
23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.
25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:
26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.
27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.
28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:
29 For our God is a consuming fire.

NLT

Hebrews 12:18 You have not come to a physical mountain, to a place of flaming fire, darkness, gloom, and whirlwind, as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai.
19 For they heard an awesome trumpet blast and a voice so terrible that they begged God to stop speaking.
20 They staggered back under God's command: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death."
21 Moses himself was so frightened at the sight that he said, "I am terrified and trembling."
22 No, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless thousands of angels in a joyful gathering.
23 You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God himself, who is the judge over all things. You have come to the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect.
24 You have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks of forgiveness instead of crying out for vengeance like the blood of Abel.
25 Be careful that you do not refuse to listen to the One who is speaking. For if the people of Israel did not escape when they refused to listen to Moses, the earthly messenger, we will certainly not escape if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven!
26 When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also."

27 This means that all of creation will be shaken and removed, so that only unshakable things will remain.

28 Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. 29 For our God is a devouring fire.

The People, Places, and Times

Mosaic Covenant. The Pentateuch (first five books of Old Testament) record the conditions and requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, which was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai for God's people, the Israelites. Moses was the liaison between God and the Israelites. Moses communicated God's requirements for the covenant and pled Israel's case before God. After God revealed His power and rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the Mosaic Covenant was conditional based on Israel fulfilling its part of the covenant.

New Covenant. The New Covenant is based on Jesus Christ, the Mediator, who died for the sins of all humanity. Jesus established the New Covenant through His own death and commissioned His disciples and believers to share the Good News about the kingdom of God. Believers will dwell with God in the heavenly city of God, Mount Zion (Sion).

Mount Zion. This is a reference to the heavenly city of God and believers who will dwell with Him. The mountain is available through the blood of Jesus. It is a celebration of the Holy One where angels, believers, and righteous people dwell.

Background

The majority of the earliest believers in Christ were Jews. When Paul went to Jerusalem, he was told, "Many thousands of Jews there are which believe" (Acts 21:20). The number of Jewish Christians grew, but the church communities endured physical and social persecution from the Jews and Romans. Many people were arrested and ostracized because of their faith, and some suffered physically and experienced loss of their property because of their belief. The writer of Hebrews expressed the superiority of Christianity and urged believers to keep their eyes on Jesus. The early believers may have considered returning to Judaism to hold on to the biblical truths. The people needed to remember that Jesus was the Messiah and that He would return. The writer of Hebrews wanted the believers to hold onto their faith and look forward to Jesus' return.

As the believers at the newborn church struggled, disciples who had victoriously run the race gazed at the struggling believers. The writer urged them not to be discouraged by struggles that perfect believers. He also urged them to be very careful and guard against defiling themselves and selling their birthrights, which would result in losing the promises of God. We must remember our actions have lasting consequences. Although we repent and seek God's forgiveness, we cannot eliminate the consequences of sin.

At-A-Glance

1. The Two Mountains: Sinai and Zion (The Heavenly City) (Hebrews 12:18–21)
 2. The Heavenly City (Zion or Sion) (vv. 22–23)
 3. The Heavenly City and Jesus, the Mediator (v. 24)
 4. Criteria for Entering the Heavenly City (vv. 25–26)
 5. Preparing for the Heavenly City (vv. 27–29)

In Depth

1. The Two Mountains: Sinai and Zion (The Heavenly City) (Hebrews 12:18–21)

The writer of Hebrews compares the Mosaic Covenant with the New Covenant by examining two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. God gave the Law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai with a majestic display of “thunderings, and the lightnings ... they (the people) removed (themselves) and stood afar off” (Exodus 20:18). The people came before God with fear and trembling at Mount Sinai. They feared that speaking directly to God would lead to death.

In contrast, through a New Covenant, Christian believers joyfully approached God through the blood of Jesus on Mount Zion (Sion), which is the Heavenly City of God. While God seemed distant and threatening at Mount Sinai, at Mount Zion, Jesus has made the believer’s faith personal. Through Christ, we have the promise of eternal life through forgiveness of our sins. We can accept God’s invitation through Christ, receive forgiveness and experience the presence of God.

2. The Heavenly City Zion (or Sion) (vv. 22–23)

Ancient custom approved special treatment for the firstborn son, who received a father’s blessings, which was a double portion. In the Old Testament, Joseph received a double inheritance among the sons of Jacob instead of Reuben, who had unacceptable behavior. The firstborn son received special blessings from his earthly father. The heirs in heaven are believers, who are justified and made perfect because they are in heaven, they are “just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23). Through Christ, believers will inherit the Kingdom: “Ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:24). We have the promise of eternal life, our inheritance.

By faith, believers’ names are recorded in heaven; they are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Believers can come to God by faith through Christ, make a supplication, and receive absolution for their sins and justification. We have an eternal home with God in heaven and the blessings of the firstborn. Thus, every believer is an heir with rights and privileges of the firstborn.

3. The Heavenly City and Jesus, the Mediator (v. 24)

Jesus Christ is the mediator or “go-between” uniting two parties: God and sinful humanity. Moses was the mediator of the Mosaic Covenant; he was the liaison between God and the Israelites. Moses gave the Israelites God’s Law, instruction, and the obligations for the covenant between God and the Israelites.

In the same vein, Jesus is the mediator for the New Covenant that was established through His sacrificial death on the Cross. He helps believers to remain in a covenant relationship with God. Therefore, through Jesus, humanity prays to God and receives His favor. Jesus pleads our cause before God. The New Covenant of Jesus Christ speaks forgiveness for the believer and new life through Christ, our mediator.

4. Criteria for Entering the Heavenly City (vv. 25–26)

Jesus Christ speaks to humanity and He offers forgiveness through God’s grace and mercy. Because we have more knowledge of Christ and the promise of eternal life, “If we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven” we will be judged for our unbelief (Hebrews 12:25). Therefore, our faith in God should inspire our gratitude for all that He’s done for us.

When Korah, a Levite who was the tabernacle assistant, instigated a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, God destroyed him. Korah and the other leaders directly challenged Moses and God. As a result, God judged and punished their unbelief. Today, God still judges unbelief. If we do not believe and accept Christ, we refuse Him. The “whole mountain trembled violently” when God gave the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18, NIV). When Christ returns, God will “shake not the earth only, but also heaven” (Hebrews 12:26). The entire universe will shake when the Son of God returns, but the kingdom of God will not be shaken. It will endure through eternity. The power of God will be evident, and everyone will recognize Him.

5. Preparing for the Heavenly City (vv. 27–29)

The writer of Hebrews explains that temporary things will be shaken and removed when Christ returns, while the eternal things will not be moved. The “things which cannot be shaken may remain”; they are eternal (Hebrews 12:27). Only God’s kingdom will last.

Believers will endure the shaking and endure through the grace of God. We will receive the kingdom of God that will endure; it is unchanging and cannot be moved. No power on earth or hell can destroy God’s kingdom.

The writer encourages believers to “have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28). Grace is the unmerited favor of God that offers the gift of salvation to humanity. We can hold to the grace we have received and trust the assurance that we have an eternal home with God. By grace, we serve God with love and respect. If you have rejected God’s grace, repent and receive God’s love and mercy today. Then accept the gift of His Son with gratitude.

Search the Scriptures

1. How did the blood of Jesus satisfy God’s revenge (Hebrews 12:24)?
2. When Jesus returns, the heavens and earth will shake. What and who will remain amid the burning and shaking (v. 27)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. As disciples of the New Covenant, how can we share the meaning of God’s forgiveness and the promise of eternal life?
2. Why do people knowingly reject Jesus Christ and God’s promise of eternal life?

Liberating Lesson

According to a recent Gallup poll, 35 percent of Americans said they attend church each week while 20 percent say they do not, and 25 percent say they seldom attend. However, the number of African Americans who say they attend church is much greater—53 percent. The economic turmoil has caused a surge in church attendance. Many people turn to God because of fear, judgment, or uncertainty to find security and seek a firm foundation that the world cannot offer. When believers accept Christ, the eternal promise of new life with God outweighs their temporary fears. By faith, we focus on the assurances we have through God’s grace. The firm assurances are not based upon the world but upon God’s promises. Through God’s grace, we can experience God’s continual presence. Receive God’s grace and experience His presence and His eternal promises.

Application for Activation

The news constantly reports details of natural disasters, economic hardships, and of lives that seem to have little focus on steadfast thankfulness for God. The struggles of life are not the focus in today's lesson. Instead, it is the challenge to be thankful for God's grace even when troubles shake our world. But that grace is only available to those who believe and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. Have you made that decision?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Hebrews 12:18–29

**18 For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,
19 And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:
20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:
21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake)**

Beginning from verse 18, the author contrasts the Jewish and Christian ways by juxtaposing the terrors associated with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai with the glory associated with Mount Zion. Although the description in verses 18–21 leaves no doubt that the writer has Sinai in mind, there is no explicit reference to the mountain of revelation. The phenomena listed are all associated with the Sinai event (see Deuteronomy 4:11). Elsewhere, they are all linked with the presence of God: “fire” (Judges 13:20; 1 Kings 18:38), “darkness” (1 Kings 8:12), and “tempest” (Nahum 1:3); the “trumpet” (Hebrews 12:19) are all associated with the End Times when God will manifest Himself (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). The picture is one that strikes terror in the heart. He sounds the note of warning that great privilege means great responsibility.

The Israelites were terrified by the experience. They responded to “a sound of words” by pleading that no further message be given to them (Hebrews 12:19b). The writer's statement summarizes Deuteronomy 5:23–27; it particularly reflects on Deuteronomy 5:25, where the people express the fear that they will be consumed by the fire if they continue to listen to the voice (see Exodus 20:18–19). So they asked that they should hear God's voice no more (Exodus 20:19; Deuteronomy 5:25–27).

They were overcome with terror and wanted no further part in the wonderful events. The fearfulness of the giving of the Law on Sinai is mentioned with reference to one of the commands laid on the people, namely, that neither man nor beast should touch the mountain under penalty of death (Exodus 19:13). "The writer [of Hebrews 12:20] focuses upon the most stringent aspect of the command: 'if even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned,' in order to emphasize the gravity of the injunction and the peril of coming before the annihilating holiness of the divine appearing," (Lane, 463). In effect, the command that nothing touch it indicates the holiness of the mountain. Judgment for anyone who ignores the holiness of God is swift and terrible.

Hebrews 12:21 is a further indication of the awe of it all. At the time of the giving of the Law, Moses was the leader of the people. He was known as one who had an especially close relationship with God (Exodus 33:11). Yet, even he was terrified. It was a scary occasion, one that affected all the people and terrified even Moses, the man of God.

**22 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,
23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.**

"But" is the strong conjunction that (Gk. *alla*, al-LAH) introduces a marked contrast. Christians order their lives in accordance with a different revelation. Scholar William Lane writes: "In sharp contradistinction from the scene at Sinai, every aspect of this vision provides encouragement for coming boldly into the presence of God (see 4:16)...An overwhelming impression of the distant God is eclipsed in the experience of full access to the presence of God and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant," (Lane, 464-465).

The destination of the Christian pilgrims is described by various evocative images. First, they are "come unto" Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:22). This is to be understood not as the seat of temporal Israel but as a reference to God's eschatological rule through Christ, just as in Revelation 14:1-5. Second, Hebrews 12:22 states that they have come to the "city of the living God," a city with foundations that the patriarchs looked forward to and one that is eternal (13:14). The book of Revelation also uses this image for God's presence, when it speaks of a "holy city" (21:2; 22:19). Third, Hebrews 12:22 says they have come to the "heavenly Jerusalem" a designation that is called "new Jerusalem" in Revelation 3:12.

It should be noted that the City of God, later famously expounded upon by Augustine, is filled with life and contains a more vibrant, dynamic, and powerful sort than is available on earth. Hebrews 12:22 says there are "innumerable" or "countless numbers" (Gk. *urias*, moo-REE-as) of angels who are present as part of the welcoming and celebratory throng. Then we have the church of the firstborn. In verse 23, the Greek word *ekklesia* (ek-klay-SEE-ah), translated as "church," is taken from the common civic life of the Greeks and normally refers to the official gathering of the officials or their representatives. The "firstborn" (Gk. *prototokia*, pro-tot-OK-ee-ah) probably refers to all those "sons" whom God is leading into glory together with Jesus (Hebrews 2:10). Understood this way, it means "the spirits of just men made perfect" (12:23), or the spirits of righteous people. It is another way of describing the same participants in the true inheritance, which is a participation in God's holiness. In summation, the City of God is filled with angels and saints. The climax is reached in verse 24 with the reference to Jesus, who here is "the mediator of a new covenant." The author does not only affirm the humanity of Jesus and His role as mediator but also places Him definitively at God's side, a place

that was His from the beginning (Hebrews 1:1–4). Jesus' blood speaks "a better word" than that of Abel (12:24, NIV). His blood opens up a way into the holiest for people (10:19).

25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:

26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.

27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

29 For our God is a consuming fire.

The transition from exposition in Hebrews 12:18–24 to exhortation in verses 25–29 is abrupt. The author, with a sharp change in tone, resumes the expression of urgent concern that characterizes verses 14–17. Here, the sternness of the warning is justified by the detailing of the privileged status of Christians in verses 18–24. They have a qualitatively greater responsibility than Israel did to listen attentively to the voice of God. Those who deliberately ignore the eschatological revelation of God through his Son and who show contempt for the blessings of the New Covenant cannot possibly escape judgment. The concluding paragraph consists of a sober caution to listen to what God is saying, a concentration of His word in the form of prophecy, and a final admonition to respond appropriately with gratitude and worship. A tendency toward apathy or complacency is sharply rebuked with the phrase, "Be careful that you do not refuse to listen to the One who is speaking," (12:25, NLT). The form of the statement recalls 3:12, and it connotes a deliberate and culpable refusal to listen to the one speaking. The readers must also be aware that the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility, and the greater the peril involved in its rejection.

In 12:26, the author goes on to recall the solemnity of the events at Sinai. Repeatedly, we are told that then the earth shook (Exodus 19:18; Judges 5:4–5; Psalm 68:8; 77:18; 114:4,7.) The writer of Hebrews has already spoken of the awe-inspiring nature of what happened when the Law was given. Now, the reference to the shaking of the earth brings it all back. At the same time, it enables the author to speak of a promise that involved a further shaking that is recorded in Haggai 2:6. The prophet looked forward to something much grander than Sinai. Then God shook the earth, but Haggai foresaw a day when God would shake "not only the earth but also the heavens" (Hebrews 12:26, NLT). This will be no small event but one of cosmic grandeur. The reference to heaven and earth may be meant to hint at the concept of the New Heaven and the New Earth (Isaiah 66:22). At any rate, it points to the decisive intervention that God will make at the last time.

In Hebrews 12:27, the writer uses the expression "yet once more" (Gk. *eti hapax*, ET-ee HAP-ax) to point out the decisive significance of the things of which the author is writing. There is an air of finality about it all. God is going to make a radical and final change. This is the decisive time. This physical creation can be shaken, and it is set in contrast to what cannot be shaken. These are the things that really matter, the things that have the character of permanence. The author does not go into detail about the precise nature of the ultimate rest. But whatever it may be, it will separate the things that last forever from those that do not. It is God's will for this final differentiation to be made so that only what cannot be shaken will remain. As Donald Guthrie notes, what the writer is "concerned to demonstrate is that the Christian position, unlike the era of the Mosaic law, leads to a state of absolute stability," (Guthrie, 265).

The ultimate reality of God's sovereignty is evident in verse 28. Believers have received the Kingdom of God, which cannot be shaken. The Kingdom is something we "receive." It is not earned or created

by believers; it is God's gift. While not all details are provided in the New Testament, it is clear that the Kingdom is in stark contrast with earthly systems that can and will be shaken. This is untrue of God's kingdom! The author does not simply say that it will not be shaken but that it cannot be. It has a quality found in nothing earthly. It is on the strength of this that the writer gives two exhortations: "let us have grace" and "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." The exhortations could also mean, "Let us be thankful, and let us offer acceptable worship to God." The latter meaning is preferred. The appropriate response to the gift we have received is gratitude to God and acceptable worship, that is, in living a life that is pleasing to God. The qualification "with reverence and godly fear" constitutes a sober reminder of the holy character of God.

The chapter concludes with an expression apparently taken from Deuteronomy 4:24. The author of Hebrews 12 emphasizes that God is not to be trifled with. It is easy to be so taken up with the love and compassion of God that we overlook His implacable opposition to all evil. The wrath of God is not always a popular subject today, but it looms large in biblical teaching. Because God is in fact a consuming fire, we do best to come to Him on His terms.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Listening to the Voice of Warning
(Ezekiel 33:1-9)

TUESDAY

Listening to the Spirit
(Revelation 3:1-13)

WEDNESDAY

Anticipating a Better Covenant
(Hebrews 8:1-7)

THURSDAY

Giving Thanks for the Faithful
(2 Thessalonians 1:1-7)

FRIDAY

Loving with God's Kind of Love
(Matthew 5:43-48)

SATURDAY

Pursuing Peace and Holiness
(Hebrews 12:12-17)

SUNDAY

Offering Acceptable Worship
(Hebrews 12:18-29)