

Hebrews 12:14-29
Exodus 19
Psalm 77

“Acceptable Worship”

June 6, 2021

Israel has come to Mt. Sinai.

God had told Pharaoh – “Israel is my son – my firstborn –
let my son go, that he may serve me – that he may worship me.”

Israel is the son of God – but as long as the son is a slave to another –
he is not free to worship the LORD.

And we hear in Exodus 19 what God’s purpose is:

“I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.
Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples,
for all the earth is mine;
and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Did you know that the priesthood of all believers is an OT idea?

The whole people of Israel – the whole church in the OT –
is a “kingdom of priests” “a holy nation.”

The apostle Peter uses this same theme in 1 Peter 2, when he says that
“you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
a people for his own possession,
that you may proclaim the excellencies
of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

God’s purpose in calling Israel out of Egypt is what Jesus brings to pass!

God desires to dwell with his people.

But for a holy God to dwell with his people,
they must also be holy.

And that is what the whole story at Sinai is all about –
indeed, it is what the whole story of scripture is showing –
because without holiness, no one will see the Lord!

But what God was showing them – and us –

is that there is no way to approach a holy God,
unless he makes that way!

We sing about this in Psalm 77.

Psalm 77 is the passage that the famous illustration “footprints” comes from.
You know the one –

Looking back over my life, I saw two sets of footprints in the sand –

but at the worst of times, there was only one set.
And I wondered why God would leave me at the worst of times –
but God said, “When you saw only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you.”

Except in Psalm 77 the Psalmist – Asaph – says it more honestly:
“Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

When Asaph looks back on the mighty deeds of God –
he understands that very often God’s own footprints are unseen.
Yes, God leads us!
But sometimes he leads us in ways where his presence is not at all obvious!

Sing Psalm 77
Read Hebrews 12

So where are you?

In church, right?
Well, where is that?

Um, sitting here in my pew, next to my parents!

Well, that’s what you see with your eyes.

I asked you a few weeks ago whether you can see Jesus.
Can you see Jesus with your eyes?
How do you see Jesus?
By faith.

With your eyes, you see a church building.
With your eyes, you see your pastor.
With your eyes, you see a group of people.

What do you see by faith?

What does “church” mean?
It doesn’t mean a building.
It means “an assembly.”
What assembly do you see by faith?
By faith, you see the heavenly assembly,
gathered in the heavenly temple,

and by faith you have come to this glorious assembly
By faith, the church gathers for worship at the throne of God.

We have come to the last section of the book of Hebrews.
It consists largely of pastoral directives to the church.
Most of these directives are well-known exhortations to the church,
and so do not have lengthy expositions connected to them.
Since the church already knows these things,
there was no need to argue for them.

The basic theme of this last section is the idea that the Christian life
is a pilgrimage to the heavenly city
lived out in the context of our covenant privileges and obligations.

That's a mouthful!
But think about the way Hebrews says it here at the end of the book:
13:14—"For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."
12:28—"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken"

Having heard in chapter 11 the call to faith—to believe that which we cannot see with our eyes—
it is fitting that the focus in the concluding section remains fixed upon that heavenly city.

But chapters 12-13 make explicit the implications of the call to faith in chapter 11:
faith is not just a warm fuzzy feeling.
Faith is not just an intellectual conviction.
Faith is a whole-souled commitment to Jesus.

1. Pursue Peace and Holiness (12:14-17)

And this is expressed in our pursuit of peace and holiness.

¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

"Strive for peace with everyone."
This section is focused on the life of the community,
and so the "everyone" is particularly focused on "everyone in the church."
Certainly you should strive for peace with all people,
but the focus is on the church as the community of peace,
the place where peace and holiness dwell in delightful harmony.

Peace and Holiness.
You can counterfeit peace.
It's called "tolerance."

Counterfeit peace is when everything is permitted.
Everyone is allowed to do whatever they want!
There is no discipline—no allegiance to God’s law.
This is common in liberal churches.
They have “peace” without holiness.

You can also counterfeit holiness.
It’s called “legalism.”
Counterfeit holiness is when the church comes up with strict rules
that everyone has to follow.
Outward conformity to manmade rules may produce the appearance of holiness,
but there is no love—there is no peace, only law.
This is common in fundamentalist churches.
They have “holiness” without peace.

But you cannot counterfeit both peace and holiness at the same time!
You can be tolerant, or you can be legalistic,
you can be all warm and fuzzy, or you can be straight and narrow.
But true peace and true holiness go hand in hand.

After all, we are striving for
“the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Holiness is not optional to the Christian life.
We are justified by faith.
And we are also sanctified by the same faith.
And that faith is a living and active faith that wholeheartedly obeys God!

Therefore without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

What does this mean?
This is expanded in the following verses.
Verses 14-16 is all one sentence in Greek.

¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

“Pursue peace and holiness,
watching diligently that no one fails to obtain the grace of God”
The warning of verses 15-16 is grammatically a dependent clause—
it is a participle that refers back to the main verb in verse 14—
“pursue”

In your pursuit of peace and holiness,

watch out for three things:

- 1) that no one forfeits the grace of God
- 2) that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble
- 3) that no one is like Esau—a spiritual adulterer

How can you “forfeit” the grace of God?

(“fail to obtain” is an okay translation,
but it should be clearer that the reason why they fail to obtain the grace of God
is their own fault!)

By now we should be used to the way in Hebrews speaks of apostasy.

All those who are baptized are “sanctified by the blood of the covenant” (10:29)
and made “partakers of the Holy Spirit.” (6:4)

In other words, all those who are baptized share in the blessings of participating
in the eschatological community—namely, the church.

The church is the last-days people of God,
the place where the word of God and the powers of the age to come are revealed.

And so therefore all who are baptized into Christ and his church
share in these covenant blessings.

But there are some who only partake of these blessings partially and temporarily.

They are those of whom Jesus says that they receive the word with joy,
but they wither and die because they have no root.

The idea of the root is also key to Hebrews.

Because Hebrews says that the apostate have an entirely different root—
a “root of bitterness.”

The “root of bitterness” is a quotation from Deuteronomy 29:18

“Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe
whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God
to go and serve the gods of the nations.

Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,
one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant,
blesses himself in his heart, saying,
‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’”

The root of bitterness is found in those who hear the words of the covenant
and outwardly conform—but inwardly they only care about themselves.

The root of bitterness is deadly because it is masked with outward piety.

But it is rotten to the core.

The root of bitterness is the very opposite of
the “holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

The root of bitterness says, “hey, I’m part of the covenant, therefore I can do what I want!”
Holiness says, “hey, I’m a part of the covenant, therefore I am God’s son,
and he is training me to become like him!”

The fruit of this root of bitterness is “the defiling of many.”

The image of the “root” is crucial.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had to deal with poke plants –
but they have a nasty root that keeps growing every year!

It does no good to take out the plant unless you get the root–
otherwise it just comes right back next year!

Or “creeping ginny”–a plant that can send its roots out for 40 or 50 feet,
only to send up new plants in every corner of your yard!

Perhaps you’ve seen churches where outward conformity is the watchword.

Everyone “does what is right” on Sunday morning,
but then they follow their own desires for the rest of the week.

And what is the result?

The church becomes a social club
and the pursuit of peace and holiness falls by the wayside.

The third thing that you are to “watch out for” is that no one be a spiritual adulterer.

The example given is Esau, “who sold his birthright for a single meal.”

This is a perfect example of a man who lacks faith.

He does not see by faith the heavenly city,

He does not recognize that the inheritance is all about eternal life.

He sees with his eyes, and his god is his stomach.

Esau had been circumcised.

As Isaac’s firstborn, he was the heir of the covenant promise.

And yet he traded his inheritance for a bowl of stew!

And this is called “adultery” and “unholy.”

And when Esau later changed his mind and decided that he wanted his inheritance,
he was rejected, “for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears”

¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Why?

Because Esau’s inheritance was not just a piece of real estate in the middle east.

Esau’s inheritance was the heavenly Mt Zion.

And if you reject the heavenly city,

then there is no other city for you to inherit.

When *the* covenant blessing had been given to Jacob,

there was no longer any other covenant blessing to give!

In other words, “judgment day” for Jacob and Esau
was the day when Isaac pronounced his blessing—his one and only blessing.
Once the blessing was pronounced, there was no way for Esau to be blessed.
As Isaac said, “I have blessed Jacob, and he *will* be blessed.”

The point is *NOT* that there are some people who would like to repent but God won’t let them!
The “it” that Esau was seeking was not a chance to repent,
but the blessing itself.
The point is that if you reject the covenant blessing,
there is no other blessing,
so don’t be like Esau who waited until it was too late!

If you are seeking the blessing of God – then you will repent!
But if all you want is to avoid looking bad,
then you will wait until it is too late...

But having shown the similarity between the Old and the New,
Hebrews then explains the difference: (read 18-21)

2. Because You Have Come to the Heavenly Jerusalem! (12:18-24)

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”

You have not come to the darkness, gloom and tempest of Exodus 19!
You have not come to the terrors of the law from Mt Sinai!

Sinai was the central, formative experience of Israel.

All of Israel’s history was rooted in the covenant established on Mt Sinai—
the place where Israel worshiped God together for the first time.
Remember that Exodus 24 is the first corporate worship service recorded in the Bible.
God had called Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness for what purpose?
To *worship* me!
And all of Israel’s history echoed with the proclamation of God’s law from Sinai.

But that is *NOT* the central, defining experience for the Christian.
No, (read 22-24)

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly^[a] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better

word than the blood of Abel.

The central defining experience for the Christian is the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

“We see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor, because of the suffering of death”

Hebrews has told us about the better priesthood,
the better covenant, and the better sacrifice.

Now we hear the result of this: that we also have a better mountain—a better city.

In the same way that Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary, as we are told in Heb 9-10,
so also now we enter a heavenly assembly in our worship.

Israel pursued peace and holiness, but never achieved it,
because the law was weak and unable to establish true holiness.

But Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, has established peace and holiness,
and so we come to Mount Zion—

we come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem!

This is what the prophets dreamed of!

Ezekiel imagined the day when a glorious temple would be built on Mt Zion.

Ezekiel’s temple was never built on earth,
but it has been established in the heavens!

And you have come here.

This is what Heb 11:40 said:

“God had provided something better for us,
that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come the assembly of the firstborn,
enrolled in heaven.

This is the language of the book of life—
these are those whose names are inscribed in the Lamb’s book of life.

This is the same verb “to draw near” that generally refers to the priests drawing near in worship.

We are now a kingdom of priests in Jesus.

In Exodus 24 only 70 elders joined Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu
in coming partway up the mountain to worship God.

Today we all get to come with Jesus!

We all come before the living God and enter his heavenly city.

When we gather together in Jesus’ name,
we come into the heavenly Holy of Holies!

And by faith, we see the roof of this building open,
and we ascend into the heavenlies where Jesus is —

sitting at the right hand of the Father!
This is where that line comes from in the liturgy:
“Lift up your hearts”
“We lift them up to the Lord”
By faith we ascend – we *draw near* to God.

And the reason why we can do this is given at the end:
because we come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

Remember how chapter 11 started—with the blood of Abel,
who “though he died, he still speaks”?
Well we have come to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel!
Abel’s blood may still speak to us of our call to be faithful unto death,
but Jesus’ blood speaks a better word,
because it calls us – even now! – to enter his glory! –
to share his holiness!

3. Therefore Do Not Refuse Him Who Warns from Heaven! (12:25-29)

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

But if Jesus’ blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel,
then “see that you do not refuse him who is speaking.”

The word at Mt Sinai came to all Israel.
All Israel was called to walk by faith,
but Israel chose to walk by sight—they saw the power of the nations
and did not believe that God would give them the land.

Now the word has come to you from the heavenly Mt Zion.
Jesus speaks from the city of the living God:
“do not refuse him who is speaking.”
“For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth,
much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.”
God warned our fathers at Sinai through the voice of Moses—
and those who refused to walk by faith perished in the desert.
Now God warns you through the one greater than Moses—
Jesus—who has declared the message of salvation to us from heaven.

And as God spoke at Sinai through Moses,
so now Jesus speaks from heaven through the voice of the preacher.
Jesus calls to you today:
What matters more to you?
The things you can see with your eyes?
Or the one whom you see by faith?
Where is your heart?
Do you endure patiently through discipline?
Or do you shrink back?
Do you use your covenant-status as a cloak for your own selfish agenda?

Or do you behold the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem,
and live as one who has an inheritance that cannot be shaken?

The OT is full of the language of “shaking.”
Sinai shook when God appeared in glory on the mountain.
The Song of Deborah says that the “mountains quaked before the LORD”--
that when God arose to deliver his people, the earth shook. (Judges 5)
Joel 2 speaks of the earth quaking before the coming of the day of the LORD.
And when Jesus died on the cross, the earth shook.

When God does something new in redemptive history, the earth shakes!

In verse 26 Hebrews cites Haggai 2:6,
“At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised,
‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’”
Haggai was speaking to those who had returned from exile.
Haggai calls Israel to be strong and work, and rebuild the temple,
because God will soon shake the earth once again.
And when God shakes the earth, he will overthrow the nations,
and the glory and wealth of the nations will fill his house.
Hebrews tells us that this is what God will do “yet once more!”
And that this means “the removal of things that are shaken.”

The shaking of the earth and heaven will separate the “movable” from the “immovable.”
All that seemed firm and stable—the heavens and the earth—will be shaken.
All that you can see with your eyes will be shaken.
And only the things that cannot be shaken will remain.

Verse 27 says this boldly:
“This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken –
that is, things that have been made –
in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.”

If this means that all things that have been made will be removed,
what does that mean for us?

After all, we are creatures!

We are “things that have been made” –
and so therefore, in the *shaking* that is coming – we are doomed!
And yet Hebrews has confidence that we are *not doomed!!*

Why is that?

Because there is *one thing* in all the universe that cannot be shaken.

And this is what Hebrews has been trying to tell us from the start:

Turn back to chapter 1 – verse 2

“but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,
whom he appointed the heir of all things,
through whom also he created the world.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.”

The eternal Son of God took our form –

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood,
he himself likewise partook of the same things,
that through death he might destroy the one
who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
and deliver all those who through fear of death
were subject to lifelong slavery....

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect,
so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest
in the service of God,
to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (2:14-17)

God alone is unshakeable!

But because of the incarnation of the Word –
because the eternal Son of God joined himself to our humanity –
therefore, there is now an unshakeable *man*.

There is one thing – one man – in all the created order that can stand before God.

And therefore, all who are united to him by faith – can also stand.

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,
for our God is a consuming fire.”

If you reject Jesus – if you turn away from him –

then you are turning away from the only solid, stable thing in the universe.