

# “Finding the Unshakable City”

## // Christ is Better // Hebrews

### 12:15–29

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#### Scripture reading:

*[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. [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.*

*[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.”*

***[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 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.***

*[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.***

#### Introduction:

There has been one driving theme throughout the book of Hebrews, and that is that you find an anchor for your faith. As I’ve told you each week, these people the writer are in a storm of doubt, and they’re struggling, because faith is difficult, persecution is severe; temptations are acute; they’ve got unanswered questions and unanswered prayers.

- So many of you have come up to me in this series and said, “This is me. Believing is hard.” The book of Hebrews is for you.

Scholars think that Hebrews was originally delivered as one sermon (you think I preach long!), and chapter 12 was kind of like the crescendo; the conclusion of the sermon; when he starts bringing it home—making the application points.

In the text that was read earlier you heard this image of “searching for a city;” “searching for a Kingdom.” It’s an image the writer uses repeatedly in these final chapters. He’s using that as a metaphor for what we are all doing with our lives.

- A city, to these people, represented a place of safety, permanence and prosperity.
- Remember that the deeply embedded in the Hebrew memory was their experience as nomads wandering for years in the wilderness after they left Egypt. They had left Egypt in search of a promised land—a city that would belong to them, where they could settle and raise their kids in peace and prosperity and dwell forever. Throughout the Old Testament, all their hopes centered on “Jeru-salem,” or literally, “the city of peace.”

In a sense, the writer says, we are all searching for a city like that, aren't we? We want safety; we want permanence; a place of fulfillment and prosperity. Isn't that why you are working so hard to get the degree or to get the job; isn't that why you are saving your money; trying to ensure your kids have all they need; isn't that why you want to get married and have a family? You want a “city,” a Jeru-salem, a permanent place of peace.”

Maybe that doesn't connect to you... you're like, *“I hate the city. Traffic. Noise. People.* I want a mountain cabin with a dog where my kids grow up and build little cabins around mine and I sit out on a porch and think about how quiet it is.

- Well, in a way, that's kind of like your own little city, with only people that are related to you. A place of security, peace, and fulfillment.
- **POLL**

**So he does 3 things in this last chapter.** He asks you to consider what your city is and whether it is shakable; shows you the results of Jesus being your city; and then warns you about some very small things that can destroy your city.

### **I. What is Your “City” and is it Shakable?**

- What is your primary source of permanence, security? These are questions I present all the time here because they are the most fundamental questions of your life. Your answers to these are what drive you.

- Each of you has chosen a course of life that you think will make you happy; that will provide you with the peace and permanence and prosperity you crave.
- Like I said earlier:
  - When you're younger, it's getting the degree or the job or finding a good marriage or having children.
  - When you're older, it is having enough money in the bank so that you don't have to worry.
  - Some of you are dissatisfied with your marriage because you always WANTED it to provide that place where you were cherished and accepted and fulfilled and it's just not doing it so you want out.
- The invitation of Hebrews is to make God your primary source of these things. That He be your primary security; your identity; your fulfillment. That He be the foundation of your city—so that in Him you have the peace, permanence and fulfillment you seek whether or not He provides you with the home or the job.
- **He gives you two warnings:**
- **Vs. 26, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.”**
  - Now, there are two ways you can shake things. One is where you shake things up to make it more exciting... like a Mountain Dew bottle; the other is like an earthquake where everything without a solid foundation falls apart.
  - This is happening all around us. **When the stock market crashed** in 2008, there were all these suicides among Wall Street executives. *The acting chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, hanged himself in his basement... A French money manager who invested the wealth of many of Europe's leading families, lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money slit his wrists and died in his Madison Avenue office. A Danish senior executive with HSBC Bank hanged himself in*

*the wardrobe of his \$750-a-night suite in London.*<sup>1</sup>

You lose your job; you get robbed.

- **It happens through disease:** the entire outlook of your life changes when a doctor walks into an office and tells you that you have breast cancer.
- **The ultimate “shaking” is death.**
  - In Luke 12 Jesus told a story about a man who truly had nothing to worry about. His business was going so well that his only problem was his current barns couldn’t hold all of his stuff. This is a day before banks... that would be like your bank calling you up and saying, “We’re sorry, sir, we’re out of room here for your money.” That would be a nice change, wouldn’t it, instead of them calling you up and saying “OVERDRAWN”? This guy is at peace, plenty of money, people around him who love him. And when he dies Jesus says “you fool, because tonight you die and all that matters now is your soul and none of those things can save you.” You will be stripped bare of everything when you stand before God.
- God is shaking the earth, the writer says, and will do it again, and everything not built upon Him as a foundation will fall away.
- **Vs. 29, “Our God is a consuming fire”**
  - This is a common image for God, and the Bible uses it to depict God burning away everything that is impure and unclean. The way you would purify gold.
  - 1 Cor 3 says that on the last day, “(On the last day), each one’s work will become manifest. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will

test what sort of work each one has done.” 1 Cor 3:12–13\*\*

- This is a sobering reality for me. Every motive; every action. Was it done for the honor and glory of God? A phrase my father taught me as a child: “Only one life to live will soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.”
- Church, if the Bible is true, then that final day is the most important one in your entire eternity. Are you ready for it?
- God will shake the earth and He is a purifying fire.
- *He is shaking some of you now; and I know you may not understand what He is doing, but I am telling you, it is mercy.*
  - **He is trying to wake you up!** If your life is built on a faulty foundation, then it is God’s kindness to show you that before it is too late.
    - I talked with a professional athlete once who had had a career ending injury... wondering why God had let that happen to him. He said, “Why... my whole career was gone in a matter of a few seconds.” Now, this guy wasn’t a Christian, or at least a practicing one, and I told him that his professional career was nothing in light of eternity... and a much more terrible thing would be to stand in eternity and look back at your whole life and say “*I threw away my whole eternity for a few moments of fame on earth.*” If God had to take that away his career from him to show him it was built on a faulty foundation before it’s too late then it was one of the greatest kindnesses God could do to him.
- **Some of you, God is shaking you now: Your marriage is falling apart; your bank account just got rocked; your health is deteriorating... and it’s mercy.** Because you have falsely trusted in these things and God is shaking them to show you that the

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, ix-x.

only foundation that will survive the final shaking and the consuming fire is Jesus Christ!

- **And if you use this chapter of difficulty in your life to re-establish your trust in Him then the darkest chapter of your life could become the turning point of your eternity.**

## II. When Jesus is Your City (vv. 22-24)

In the middle of this passage the writer goes off on what almost seems like a tangent. Starts talking about Moses and a smoking mountain... You're like, "What?" Your mind probably started wandering a few minutes ago when we read that section. But it's not a tangent. He is showing you why Jesus is the only real, lasting city.

- OK, so here's the story: Israel had been called to the Promised Land. They were searching for a city; a place of permanence and prosperity. So they leave Egypt and they are going through the wilderness when they come to this mountain that is consumed with fire and smoke and darkness and lightning and thunder because the presence of God is there. God tells them to set up a perimeter around that mountain, and if anyone, man, woman, child, or animal crossed that line they'd be killed. It was so scary (vs. 21) that even Moses was terrified.
- The message was clear: A sinful people can't be in the presence of a holy God. If we even touched God's holiness as sinful people we'd be killed. **This image comes up several times in the OT. Sinful people can't be in the presence of God!** It would be like a tissue paper touching the surface of the sun.
- So the dilemma is, "How do we find the permanence and joy and fulfillment that only comes from knowing God and living in His land if we are too sinful even to be in His presence?" So they lived in a state of fear: What if we haven't been good enough? What if He is not pleased with us? Have we done enough for Him?

- Even for those of you who aren't particularly religious (this is deep)—ultimately, what you are most searching for in all your pursuits of life is a kind of divinity: ultimate satisfaction; a security that can't be taken away.
  - You're looking for a security that can't be snatched away. You're looking for pleasure that fully satisfies.
    - G.K. Chesterton: "*Even the man that knocks at the door of a brothel is looking for God.*"
  - So as you approach whatever mountain or whatever city represents your ultimate satisfaction and security, you encounter the same dilemma. **What if you're not good enough to obtain what you need? What if you fail? What if...**
    - You don't make the grade?
    - You lose the sale?
    - Your body gets sick?
    - Family members start making bad decisions you can't control?
  - Your life begins to be dominated by fear; worry; jealousy of people who have what you want and think you deserve; bitterness when you don't get it and you seem powerless to get it; self-doubt

Jesus, the writer says, is the "better" city. The only sure city. **[22] But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... [24] to Jesus...**

- Jesus' crucifixion bore an eerie similarity to Mt. Sinai. Jesus' crucifixion occurred on top of a small mountain. There was darkness all around. Rocks split and lightning and thunder flashed. He was absorbing the judgment of a sinful people in the presence of a holy God. So that now when I approach God I do so without fear, because anything that could ever make God reject me was put upon Jesus and He was rejected for me! He took my sin and I was given His righteousness. **He was shaken for me**, so that now my foundation is absolutely secure, unshakable, for my foundation is His righteousness.

[24] ...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Genesis 4 Cain had killed his brother Abel and when Cain tried to deny it God said to Cain, "Cain, what are you talking about? Your murdered brother's blood cries out to me from the ground for vengeance." We murdered Jesus, but His blood cries out from the ground not for our vengeance, but for our forgiveness.

- The gospel gives you God and all His blessings and all His promises as a gift: not because you deserve them, but because Christ has purchased them for you.
  - They are not given to you according to your merits, but as a gift of grace. Which is so counter-intuitive to you, because all of your life you have been taught that you have to earn everything you receive, which in most dimensions of life is true, but not this one.
  - The city is given as a gift of grace purchased by Christ, not as a reward for merits earned by us.
- The ways that you have tried to attain divinity, to secure "a city" of permanence and fulfillment leave you insecure and unstable and fearful. But when Jesus is your city, the writer of Hebrews says, it gives you:
  - a) **Security** (vs. 28, "a city that cannot be shaken") for the foundations of this city is the gift-righteousness of Christ and the unchangeable promises of God.
  - b) **Unbounded joy** (vs. 22, "innumerable angels in festal gathering"). Scholars say you could read this as "angels in party clothes." God's presence is like a gigantic party! Which totally messes up some of your images of God: an ethereal experience where you float on a cloud in a diaper and play a harp... every time God pulls back the curtain and we get a glimpse of it, it seems like a party.
    - Revelation describes heaven as the ultimate wedding reception.
    - Jesus' first miracle is fixing the broken tap at a party.

- The foundation of that joy is the perfect love of God in Christ. His blood assures us of our absolute acceptance and His resurrection of our complete healing.

c) **A spirit of worship** (vs. 28, "worship in reverence and awe (fear)")

- Worship... you stand in awe of God and what He's done and how He feels about you.
- You see the word "awe" there is translated fear. To worship in fear. This is not fear like "terror" fear. In Christ we can't be shaken so there is nothing to fear. Think of it as how a child fear a good father:
  - Kids have this thing where they think their daddy is the strongest person in the world. My kids will make statements like that every once in a while. Dad, was Samson as strong as you? "Yes, but just barely." I've figured out that the honeymoon is over. Watching the Olympics with Kharis, my 9 year old and say, "Do you think I could do that?" Not a chance, Dad.
  - A child has a fear of his parent, but it is not a fear of terror. It is an awe combined with intimacy. My kids may have been in awe of how large I was, but they have felt enough intimacy and security that, without hesitation, they come and crawl in bed with me at night when it's thundering. No one else in the world feels that kind of intimacy.
  - My favorite definition of worship: **awe mixed with intimacy.**
  - Do you feel that way about God? Like He is so massively awesome but you could come to Him and call Him

daddy... that he feels your pain and he cares about you?

- You were created for. That's what you loved in your daddy if you had a good one, and what you longed for in your daddy if you had a bad one. Those were shadows, echoes, of your heavenly daddy.
- Jesus is the only city that can provide what you need. He's the only God worth serving. I love how Tim Keller says it, **"Jesus is the only God whom, when you find Him, will satisfy you, and when you fail Him, will forgive you."**

### III. What can destroy your city

- In these verses he warns you against several things that can erode your faith. They seem like pretty mundane things. And I think that's significant. Because for most of you, the danger to your faith is not some big, cataclysmic event where you lose your faith. It's the slow, gradual dulling of your heart toward God; you slowly lose your capacity for faith. Think of it like termites in your house. You have no idea while slowly the foundation is eaten away and then someone shows up and hands you a bill for \$15,000.
- **Division [14] "Seek peace with all men..."**
  - Division and strife have a way of making you forget all about "Christ as your city." Your pride gets riled up and you start protecting your city.
  - To "seek peace" means that you be the first to offer forgiveness, even when you were the one who was wronged.
  - It means to take the towel, like Christ did, and you wash the feet of those in conflict with you; you serve "your enemies" and seek their blessing. What that does when you do that is renews your commitment to Christ's city and take the focus off of yours.
  - **Illus. African woman:** "I can't tell him about Jesus if I've argued with him about the land."

- **Worldliness [14] "...and pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."**
  - Holiness meant two things: purity; otherness.
  - Worldliness is the opposite of holiness. It is when your mind is consumed with impure things; earthly things (earthly things are not bad, and are a part of our lives, but they are not holy/other).
  - So he tells you to pursue holiness, because without it, you won't "see" God.
    - When your mind is saturated with the world, it is dulled to the purity and beauty of God. Your ability to see God, to have faith, is inhibited.
    - He says, *pursue*. Literally, in Greek, it says "persecute," or "hunt it down."<sup>2</sup> Like Jason Bourne. Track it. Relentlessly. ***Growing in holiness is an uphill climb, like riding a bike... You quit peddling, you are going backwards! You have to hunt it.***
    - **Spurgeon:** ***"You will never gain holiness by standing still. Nobody ever grew holy without agonizing to be holy. Sin will grow without sowing, but holiness needs cultivation.. Follow it; it will not run after you. You must pursue it with determination, with eagerness, with perseverance, as a hunter pursues its prey."*** Charles Spurgeon<sup>3</sup>
    - You have to discipline yourself to read the Bible; to memorize Scripture; to listen to good podcasts; read good books; be in accountability where you confess your sins.
      - I am constantly listening to podcasts. People ask me how I read so many books... You would be surprised what

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *What Spurgeon Says*, 354.

you can accomplish in 30–45 minutes every night.

- “I’m not a reader.” Well, (a) become one and (b) listen to podcasts or Scripture on your ipod while you drive around.
  - For most of you, the greatest enemy to your faith is not some cataclysmic event that messes up your faith, but the slow rot of TV, facebook, new cars and toys.
  - And you’ll likely continue to do “Christian things,” but you do it without the soul of passion for God and the faith that pleases Him.
  - *“Pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”* By the way, you can put up this idea that you can belong to God and cheat on the side. There are people who know they are doing things that are sins against God as if God will just turn His head. God forgives all sins... He does. But you have to repent of them, and to repent means that you stop willfully practicing them.
- **Bitterness [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;*
  - “Root of bitterness” is in quotes because it is a quote from an Old Testament passage warning the children of Israel not to let idolatry grow among them because it will, like a poisonous weed, infiltrate their whole garden.
  - What struck me as I read it are the consequences of this... there are a lot of people who will miss the grace of God because they are distracted by idolatry.
    - Idolatry is when something matters more to you than God. Money; people’s approval; the love of the first place.
    - **Kabod**

- Here’s how you tell: what dominates your thoughts. What upsets you? What makes you jealous?
  - Idolatry is subtle but very, very serious. It keeps people from grabbing hold of the grace of God. It’s choking you, it’s spreading to your children, to your friends.
- **Sensual pleasures [16]** *See to it... that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.*
  - **Esau’s story...** for a single meal!
  - Think about how much people arrange their lives just to “feel good.” Article in *Rolling Stone* about how the really good parties in Hollywood or Nashville are the ones that start on Friday night and go through Monday afternoon—that just flow with food, sex, alcohol, ecstasy... Just for a feeling that everybody says when it’s all over leaves you feeling hollow.
  - There has to be something more to life than sensations in the body. The addictiveness of immorality or bodily comforts can keep you drugged from thinking about what really matters.
  - **Pascal:** Immorality can murder your soul by keeping it from thinking about eternity!<sup>4</sup>
- **Inattention [25]** *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.*
  - This is God speaking! The author says, “Think about being there at the mountain that day. God’s voice booms out from the mountain and you say, ‘Yeah, yeah. Could you turn it down? I’m trying to do something here.’” No, if God’s voice speaks to you from the mountain you had better pay attention.
  - How much more... Jesus was God become flesh. And look what He did to save us: **You know the details of the beating, the whipping...** Cat of 9 tails with pieces

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<sup>4</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Thoughts for Young Men*, 22.

of bone and metal and glass embedded in the leather that would have shredded his skin...

- Those familiar with the beating say it was not uncommon to see the glass in the leather strap latch hold of a **rib** and send it flying off of a man's frame;
- We are almost certain he was at least partially **disemboweled**
- The prophet Isaiah said He was beaten to a point he didn't look like a man, unrecognizable
- He was nailed up on a cross, naked, in a public place in the full light of day...
- If God did all that to save us, and you ignore Him, or make Him a secondary thought, do you really hope to escape!
- This is God... Your eternity and eternity for your children depend on you listening!
- J.C. Ryle, A lack of seriousness is what keeps a lot of people from heaven; the carefree way they go through life. *"God is serious in observing us—Christ is serious in His death for us—the Spirit is serious in striving with us—the truths of God are serious—our spiritual enemies are serious in their endeavors to ruin us—poor lost sinners are serious in hell—why then should we not be serious, too?"*
- I'm not up here telling jokes. If Christ is true, I am preaching to SAVE LIVES!