

# **Sermon: We Should Be Thankful**

**Text: Hebrews 12:18-29**

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**Introduction:** Being thankful, and even saying: “thank you,” is becoming more scarce in modern vocabulary. Yet, God has done so much for us - all of which has been undeserved. I hope this time of year especially we can calm ourselves long enough to voice our thanks to God for everything He has done for us.

**Bow your heads right now and thank God for one thing he has done for you.**

Our text is framed by the talk of worship and thanksgiving and a call for perspective. Worship has to do with memory of both what God has done and promised. Communion is certainly about what God has done through Jesus Christ by his death on the cross, but it also is about his soon coming. Warren Wiersbe outlines this passage starting at verse 14 by 1. Looking Back - the bad example of Esau, 2. Looking Up - the glory of the heavenly city, and 3. Looking Ahead - the unshakable kingdom.

## **I. We Do Not Live Under the Old Covenant (vv. 18-21, 25-26a).**

**Hebrews 12:18-21 (NIV)** <sup>18</sup>You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; <sup>19</sup>to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, <sup>20</sup>because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” <sup>21</sup>The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

### **A. Where there was predominantly fear.**

These first few verses deal with the senses: sight, touch, and sound and we hear words like fire, darkness, gloom and storm - all of them scary enough in their own right. Yet no one had ever seen God really, and to see Him meant certain death. The Israelites, coming out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, were warned to not even touch the area where God was residing under penalty of death.

Just the sight of all this brought great fear to Moses, and he was their leader. Couple that with sounding trumpets and panic could set in. The sounding of trumpets is a well-known symbol of war, judgment and the end of time in biblical literature. So much was not known about God. No wonder they were all afraid.

The Hebrew writer continues:

**Hebrews 12:25-26a (NIV)** <sup>25</sup>See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. 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? <sup>26</sup>At that time his voice shook the earth,

But, we do not live under the old covenant anymore...

B. Where access to God was restricted.

During the old covenant, only the leaders of God's people could approach Him. Later the high priest was granted access, but then only once a year. A few prophets were the recipients of God's words for the people. People, though, generally experienced God second-hand, vicariously through the lives of others.

Even though Moses was treated like a friend by God (**Exodus 33:11**), in that God spoke to Moses face to face, Moses was afraid. Even though Isaiah would speak the words of God to the people, he knew his place and was not unaffected in experiencing God's presence. Isaiah said:

**Isaiah 6:1, 5 (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>5</sup>"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

In verse 22 of our text the Hebrew writer makes the transition to the point of his comparison of old to new. Now he says in essence:

**II. We Do Live Under the New Covenant** (vv. 22-24, 26b-27)

**Hebrews 12:22 (NIV)** <sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,

A. Where there is a joyful assembly.

Under the new covenant, we have a proper respect for God, but are no longer terrified. Love casts out fear. Fear has been replaced with gratitude and joy. Joy ought to fill every place where God is worshipped precisely because of what Jesus has done. He has made us all fit to be in God's presence, perfect, if you will!

**Hebrews 12:23-24 (NIV)** <sup>23</sup>to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, <sup>24</sup>to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Paul describes Jesus as *the* firstborn in [Colossians 1:15](#), but what is unique about the new covenant is that everyone is seen as a firstborn. We are joint-heirs and will receive our crowns and reign with the King of Kings. That's quite a change in status.

Our names are written in heaven. We should rejoice because our names have been enrolled in the book of life (Luke 10:20; Revelation 21:27).

[Hebrews 12:26b-27 \(NIV\)](#) <sup>26b</sup> ...but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." <sup>27</sup>The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

We do live under the new covenant...

**B. Where there is a better covenant.**

The Hebrew writer repeatedly reminds us: the new covenant is better in every way. Jesus is better than angels, the old priesthood, and Moses. He fulfills the law. He is the perfect sacrifice. Jesus promises an eternal kingdom.

But when?

**III. The Kingdom of God Is Here and Coming (vv. 28-29)**

[Hebrews 12:28a \(NIV\)](#) <sup>28</sup>Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,

The kingdom of God is here now, but it will be fully realized when Jesus returns for the Church. This new kingdom cannot be taken away, successfully invaded or conquered. It is eternal, and because God reigns with Jesus there:

**A. It is unshakable.**

This is quite a contrast with the current world which is running toward the end of time. No one should confuse this world with all its problems and instability with what God offers.

What do you think would be prudent to do in an unstable world? Should we put our faith in unstable systems, fallible people, man-made peace? Of course not, that would be short-sighted like Esau's example in the text earlier in this 12th chapter. And besides, this world is passing away and will be destroyed in the future by God!

On the other hand, God's kingdom is perfect. It is eternal. It is based on love, grace and mercy. So...

[Hebrews 12:28b-29 \(NIV\)](#) <sup>28b</sup> let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our "God is a consuming fire."

## **B. We need to appreciate this gift.**

Our worship ought to reflect our love and reverence of God. We need to be careful not to become too casual, forgetting Whom we are addressing. When we sing, we are singing to God. When we eat the Lord's Supper, we are the guests; and He is here with us. When I preach/teach, my hearers also include God - so it must be my best gift. And when an invitation is offered to accept God's gift of salvation which includes the Holy Spirit, your answer is given to the one and only God whom we worship.

The Apostle John provides quite a contrast between Moses' sensual experience under the old covenant and what should be ours under the new. Listen...

**I John 1:1-4 (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. <sup>2</sup>The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. <sup>3</sup>We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We write this to make our joy complete.

**Conclusion:** (*Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* by William J. Bausch, pp. 217ff.)

The long gravel driveway that led up from the highway was filled with cars and pickup trucks. The two-story, white farmhouse and large barn were surrounded by tractors and other farm machinery, together with furniture and a variety of household articles. The farm had been in their family now for two generations and, like so many other Midwestern farms, it had been sold recently to some European businessmen. Today, Tom and Mary would sell their furniture and all of their farm machinery. After trying different solutions, even a part-time job in town, Tom was giving up at attempting to make a living from farming.

The farm auction had attracted neighbors and strangers alike. The farmers gathered in small clusters, chatting about the price of cattle or recent futile efforts of the government to help farm prices. Their wives exchanged local news and gossip, but the general mood was sad. The auctioneer, a fat man wearing a white cowboy hat, stood on the haywagon and began the auction with gusto. The furniture went first. The antique oak dining room table and Victorian picture frames were purchased by strangers. After the furniture and antiques came the machinery. The large, orange Allis Chalmers tractor, the combine, and cultivator changed hands to the Morse code of the auctioneer's chant. Most of the sale items had been sold when the auctioneer held up a small tin box and began his usual spiel: "How much do I hear for this small tin box?"

Before a single bid could be placed, Tom shouted, “Sorry, friends, the tin box is not for sale...everything else is, but not that!” He came forward and took the tin box from the auctioneer’s hand saying, “Sorry, it must have gotten mixed up with the sale things by mistake.” Tom walked away through the crowd smiling, with the battered tin box under his arm. The remaining items went quickly; the auction was over.

The day also began to quickly disappear as the long shadows of afternoon crisscrossed the old white farmhouse and the barnyard. The pickup trucks slowly rolled down the gravel driveway, the life possessions of Tom and Mary stacked on them or being towed behind. The ladies of the VFW auxiliary, who had served the sale with a lunch of sandwiches, donuts, and coffee, gave Mary some of the leftover food and drink. She carried them into the kitchen as Tom settled with the auctioneer, who echoed the sympathies of their neighbors about having to sell. He placed his fee into a worn-out, brown billfold and drove down the drive...the last car.

Mary was alone at the kitchen table as Tom entered the back door. The glare from the single bare lightbulb (the antique glass shade had brought a good price) made that once cozy room now seem as stark as a morgue. The house was empty except for the kitchen table and three chairs, and the large, old bed upstairs. The antique bed had belonged to Tom’s parents and was solid walnut. It and the table were not included in the sale, but had been given to one of their sons. Tomorrow he and his wife would pick them up.

Tom and Mary had planned on leaving the farm that night. Their suitcases and a pile of cardboard boxes stood ready by the door. The couple sat in silence at the kitchen table sharing the unsold ham sandwiches and coffee. The tin box had a place of honor in the center of the kitchen table. Mary was the first to speak: “They almost sold your little tin box.”

“Yeah, that was close, wasn’t it?” said Tom, as he slowly opened the lid of the box. To the average eye the box appeared to be empty, but in reality it was filled almost to the top. The old battered tin box was filled with memories. Mary opened a suitcase and removed a small tin box that could have been a twin to Tom’s. Slowly, one after another, they took out memories from their tin boxes and passed them to each other. One memory would awaken another one to be the leader of an entire parade of memories: “Remember the first night we stayed here after we were married...or when Dick came home from the Army...or that Christmas day in the 50’s when we and the kids were snowbound? Their little tin boxes held memories that went back to their early childhoods. In one corner of Tom’s box was a memory of him and his friends, when they were young men, swimming in that deep pool down the creek, the one that’s surrounded by the giant cottonwoods.

These small tin boxes were what made Tom and Mary the richest people in the county. Early in life they had learned a great secret from Tom's grandfather. "The purpose of any possession," the old man said, "is to make memories! The only purpose of money --only purpose --is to make memories. Things and possessions only rust and age, but memories, Tommy, memories are like fine wine...they grow in value with time." Now that the farm sale and auction had completely dispossessed them of their belongings, they knew the wisdom of what grandfather had said to them in his funny, broken German accent.

Tom returned the last memory to his tin box. He had to rearrange some memories for it to fit. He closed the lid and looked at his watch. They had visited over their memories so long that it seemed too late now and too much trouble to drive into town to their new apartment. Instead, they decided to spend just one more night at the farm. Mary unpacked some sheets from one of the cardboard boxes by the door and made the bed. By now the moon had risen and the wind blew waves of moonlight through the open windows. With no curtains or pictures, the bedroom was empty of things, but full of pale, white moonlight. Tom placed his little tin box on the windowsill as he climbed into the ancient great bed. Their last night on the farm was one of the most beautiful of their lives. Mary was asleep as Tom arose and stood by the open window. The fields, the barn, the windmill and, off in the distance, the cottonwoods along the creek were all silent but beautiful, bathed in the light of the giant moon.

Tom smiled as he opened, once again, his little tin box and gently placed inside it the memory of this beautiful night. He attempted to close the lid, but it wouldn't close; the box was so full. Gently he rearranged the memories so they would all fit. Then he closed the lid. As he did, it made a strange click that he had never heard before. Tom placed the old tin box on the windowsill and slowly laid back in the bed. He closed his eyes and was asleep almost at once. The next morning, when she awoke, Mary found him sleeping peacefully in the gentle arms of death.

The following days were hectic. The arrangements for the funeral, the arrival of their children and relatives, and the visits of friends and neighbors took Mary's time. Three nights later, accompanied by the family, she went to the funeral home. As they entered, the lobby was filled with many of the same farmers who, only a few days before, had stood in their yard on that auction day. They stood in small groups, discussing how selling the farm had been just too much for Tom. As she passed, Mary overheard their comments. She smiled to herself as she walked down the aisle toward the casket in the center of a sea of flowers, for she knew that selling the farm had nothing to do with Tom's death. Dressed all in black, she was regal in her serenity as she stood by the casket, looking down at her husband.

Tom looked peaceful, his weatherworn face relaxed, his hands folded across his chest. His fingers still had tiny grease-darkened lines from all the years of hard work. Intertwined among his fingers was a black rosary. Mary opened her handbag and then, reaching down, she removed the rosary from Tom's hands and placed it in her bag. She then took from the handbag the little tin box and placed it in Tom's hands. The parish priest, who had been standing by the foot of the casket, stepped forward and, with his authoritarian but hushed voice (the one that came from years of speaking in the confessional), said to her, "Mary, Mary...you can't do that! He started to reach down to remove the tin box from Tom's hands.

"Leave it there, Father Cryziski," Mary said, in an equally authoritarian voice, "*that's* Tom's rosary. Hardly a day would pass that he wouldn't take some memory out of that box and be filled with gratitude. He was a holy man, and he understood what poverty and prayer were all about. No, Father, the box remains because it's the only thing he's taking with him to heaven."

The priest began to object, but Mary outwitted him. She turned to the crowded funeral home, filled with people wall-to-wall, and said in a loud, clear voice, "Father Cryziski is now going to lead all of us in the rosary;" and with that she knelt beside the casket. The priest was trapped...and so, forced to kneel beside her, began, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son...."

When the wake was over, and family and friends had all departed--even the Polish pastor who, while unhappy about the seeming sacrilege, had decided to let it go without further discussion--Mary returned to her apartment. Her black dress hung on the back of the bedroom door as she sat on the bed and smiled, thinking how much Tom would have approved of what she had done that night. Then she carefully took out her own little tin box and opened it. She placed the memory of the wake--the many, many kind words about Tom, even the expression on Father Cryziski's face--all of it, into her little tin box. That memory fit perfectly on the very top of the full box. As she closed the lid, it made a strange little click. Mary smiled and lay back on the pillow. She was asleep, peacefully, almost at once.

CLICK

As Christians we tend to honor the past accomplishments of the people who have brought us to this point in time. And memory is a big part of our time of worship. Yet, so we do not dwell exclusively in the past and simply idealize the imperfect, a question must be asked in the present concerning the future: What kind of memories will *we* leave? Life is but a vapor and we have so little time...

**I address this to both young and old: Is *your* box full or would you like to help us make more memories for future generations?**