

### **JESUS: The Better New Covenant Basis of Holiness and Worship**

Consistent with his typical epistolary style, Paul concludes this letter, like his others, with practical admonitions and directives. In the conclusive hortatory section (12:14–13:25), Paul employs imperative statements to exhort the Jerusalem Christians of their individual and collective responsibility to recognize their new covenant blessings (12:22-24), to respond with peace and holiness (12:14) and the obedience of worship (12:28), and to refuse to defect in apostasy (12:15-17, 25-27). The theme of enduring in faith (12:1-3) via God’s discipline (12:5-12), now gives way to the practicalities of living holy lives in peaceful Christian community (14) while listening to God in obedience (25) and engaging in genuine kingdom worship (28).

Connection with the previous paragraph is evident. The result of God’s discipline, Paul had explained, would be “the *peaceful* fruit of righteousness” (11) and “partaking of His *holiness*” (10). The practical and necessary pursuit of communal peace and holiness are Paul’s initial admonitions in this paragraph (14).

Paul, the apostle of grace, begins and ends this contextual section (14-29) of his letter with mention of “grace” (15,28). The grace dynamic of God’s action is required for peaceful and sanctified behavior (14), as well as for listening to God in worship (25-28).

Within this contextual section (14-29) are three (3) subdivisions or paragraphs. The first paragraph (14-17) connects to the previous section (as noted above), and encourages the Hebrew Christians to avoid apostasy by engaging in peaceful community and personal holiness. The second paragraph (18-24) provides the central foundations of Paul’s exhortations by establishing the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant in the imagery of the unapproachability and terror of Mt. Sinai (18-21) contrasted with the immediate presence and festivity for Christians at Mt. Zion (22-24). The summary of eschatological realities provides the basis of the privileged status that the Christian readers have in Jesus Christ. The third paragraph (25-29) has a connective link to the second paragraph in the privilege of listening to the voice of God, and worshipping in the unshakeable kingdom of Jesus Christ.

When summarized, Paul seems to be advising the Christians in Jerusalem that “Jesus is the better new covenant basis of holiness and worship.” The new covenant realities of being drawn into the immediate presence of God with angels and other Christians allows the Christian to manifest the peaceful, faithful, and holy character of God by His grace, rather than attempting to be “holy” by law-based performance. New covenant union with Christ allows the Christian to listen to the voice of God without fear and terror, and express the worth-ship of God’s character in worship, rather than in law-based worship forms of prescribed procedures in particular locations (such as the temple that still stood in Jerusalem). Paul continues to encourage the Jerusalem Christians that they have “everything better” in Jesus Christ.

**12:14** Perhaps Paul had received word that there was dissension among the Christians in the congregation at Jerusalem. His imperative admonition is to “*pursue peace with all.*” Paul is not advocating the pursuit of a subjective peace of inner tranquility by withdrawal into a cerebral or emotional spirituality. Rather, he is encouraging a visible social harmony and community solidarity in the local body of Christ in Jerusalem. Although Paul advises the Romans, “If possible, ...be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:18) universally, the “all” referred to here seems contextually to be “all” the saints in the Christian community. Later, in the context of the interpersonal relationship of the kingdom, Paul exhorted the Romans, “So then, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Rom. 14:19), which is more

akin to what he was writing to the Hebrews in this context. Paul's pastoral advice to Timothy was to "pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (II Tim. 2:22). Both Paul and his readers, being thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures, might have remembered the words of the Psalmist, "Seek peace, and pursue it" (Ps. 34:14), but the particular emphasis of this admonition to the Hebrew Christians was to implement new covenant social interactions in their local Body of Christ that were indicative of the peaceful interrelations of the Triune God.

The same imperative verb provides the admonishment of responsibility to "pursue" both peace, ***"and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."*** Paul had just explained that the purpose of God's discipline in the trials of life was "for the ultimate advantage, that we partake of His holiness" (10). The manifestation of God's holy character in the behavior of the Jerusalem Christians would obviously facilitate the social implications of a peaceful community. The sanctification or holiness that Paul is demanding is not the objective or positional imputation of being set apart and "sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ (10:10; 13:12), "through faith in Christ" (Acts 26:18), but is a command that the sanctified saints of Jerusalem should allow for the behavioral manifestation of the holy character of God. Already regarded as "saints" (13:24) and "holy ones" (3:1) by the presence of Jesus Christ, the Holy One (Acts 3:14) in them, the Jerusalem Christians needed to be involved in the process of expressing the holy character of God in present-tense salvation. Such sanctification holiness is not by ethical achievement or external conformity, but by the process of deriving from God's holiness.

Such progressive holiness in Christian behavior is imperative and indispensable, for "without it no one will see the Lord." Sanctification is not a static experience or event in the life of a Christian, but is the dynamic receipt and expression of God's holiness, initially and continually. The absence of progress in Christian holiness is necessarily regress, and Paul's concern for the Hebrew Christians was that such regress would result in apostasy. To the Thessalonians, he had written, "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (I Thess. 4:3). Paul wanted the Christians in Jerusalem to understand the importance of progress in the process of holy living, for only holiness can come into the holy presence of God. His concern for the Jerusalem saints was that the holy character of God so permeate their being that they would in no way be disqualified from the future and eternal seeing of the Lord (cf. I Cor. 13:12; I Jn. 3:2; Rev. 22:14).

**12:15** Using another imperative verb, Paul exhorts, ***"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God;..."*** With a vigilance that senses the true peril, Paul wants them to "watch out" and "observe carefully" that none of their fellow Christians should "come short of the grace of God." Earlier Paul had addressed his concern that they not "come short" of entering God's rest (4:1). To the Romans, Paul had used the same word in writing of how sin caused all to "come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Paul's concern was that the Christians in Judea not renounce or repudiate the power of God's grace to preserve them, and thus fail to attain and forfeit all that God had for them by "shrinking back to destruction" (10:39) in apostasy (cf. 2:1-3; 3:12,15; 4:1; 6:4-6; 10:29-31,39). Previously Paul had mentioned the possibility of "insulting the Spirit of grace" (10:29). He intimated that some of the Galatians had "fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4), and urged the Corinthians "not to receive the grace of God in vain" (II Cor. 6:1). The preserving grace of God is the divine dynamic that energizes and enables all Christian activity. "He who began a good work in us will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6), so that we can "do all things through Him who strengthens us" (Phil. 4:13). But we must "grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Pet. 3:18), drawing on such grace by faith, and must avoid despising, repudiating and thus forfeiting the grace of God. We have a mutual responsibility as Christians (cf. 3:12,13; 4:1; 10:24,25) to encourage one another to receive the grace provision of God, rather than “coming short” by disinterest or lack of faith.

Paul’s exhortation of the mutual responsibility of “seeing to it” or “watching out” for one another has several subordinate clauses: See to it (1) that no one comes short of the grace of God, (2) that no root of bitterness causes trouble, and (3) that no one sells out their birthright, like Esau.

The second of the sequence of admonished observations is to see to it ***“that no root of bitterness springing up should cause trouble, and through it many be defiled;...”*** There may have been some within the Jerusalem fellowship who were speaking despairingly of the Christian endeavor and of the preserving power of God’s grace, perhaps even advocating they should give up on being Christian “hold-outs” and join the league of Jewish defense against Rome. Paul uses the figure of a poisonous root or shoot that produces bitter fruit and causes corruption or defilement for those associated with it. This was a figure that was used in the Old Testament when the Israelites were in the wilderness at Moab, and Moses warned them about the possibility of there being “a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away from the Lord our God...; lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood. ...the anger of the Lord and His jealousy shall burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book shall rest on him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven” (Deut. 29:18-20). In other letters Paul warned, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (I Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). Today we might say, “A bad apple spoils the whole bushel.” Whatever the metaphor, Paul is concerned that the malignancy of a few might affect the health of the whole Body. If there were some who had an “evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12), and had already determined to defect and apostatize from their Christian faith, their vexation could become contagious and cause many others to be corrupted and defiled by following their example of defection. Paul warns the community of Christians in Jerusalem that they have a mutual responsibility to disallow this kind of pervasive damage from within the Body.

**12:16** The third of the subordinate clauses is a warning to watch out ***“that (there be) no mercenary or desecrator, like Esau, who in the place of one meal gave up his birthright.”*** Paul was inculcating the mutual responsibility of the Christians in Jerusalem to be on guard for those who might contemptuously despise their spiritual birthright as a Christian and sell out to other causes for temporal gratification. The narrative concerning Jacob and Esau can be found in Genesis 25:29-34. There is no reference in the narrative of Esau being sexually immoral or a whoremonger, which is the direct meaning of the Greek  *pornos* (from which we get English words like “pornography”) used here. To avoid such undocumented reference to Esau, some translations (ex. KJV and NIV) have added a comma after  *pornos*  and made a separate and additional subordinate clause warning “that there be no immoral person” in their midst. Grammatically, it seems better to retain the word as referent to Esau and interpret the word in a figurative sense of a mercenary willingness to pay for the services of self-gratification. Esau is also represented as a coarse, profane and irreverent person to whom God’s blessings meant little, and therefore he was willing to contemptuously desecrate his inheritance rights by selling his birthright privileges for the temporal self-gratification of a solitary meal of bread and stew in his moment of hunger. Paul is warning against such persons who would “despise their birthright” (Gen. 25:34) and sell out their spiritual blessings and inheritance in Christ. “God has blessed us

with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Christians have “the promise of an eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15), “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven” (I Pet. 1:4). Any Christian who would contemptuously despise the fullness of God’s blessing and inheritance, and be willing to desecrate such, willing to yield and hand it over, selling out for the mercenary pleasures of temporal self-gratification, is obviously apostate and must be cautioned against.

**12:17** This statement may be parenthetical, but serves nonetheless as a warning comment on the consequence of such apostasy as that represented by Esau. Concerning the contemptuous action of Esau, Paul writes, “*For you know that indeed afterwards, desiring to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he did not find a place of repentance, though seeking it with tears.*” Though he despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34), Esau still wanted to receive the paternal blessing of the first-born son as his father was dying. His mercenary motives never diminished. Since no one can “pull the wool over the eyes” of God, and God knew that Esau had disqualified himself from His covenant dealings, God had rejected him (cf. Rom. 9:12,13). The narrative in Genesis 27:1-40 mentions nothing about any repentance on the part of Esau, but only an attitude of murderous revenge against his younger brother, Jacob. Paul does not indicate that Esau was repentant either, only that “he did not find a place of repentance,” meaning that there was no possibility of repentance for Esau, having experienced the irretrievable loss of having been rejected by God after his apostasy. No change of mind by Esau could have led to a change of action whereby God would work in Esau again. This is entirely consistent with what Paul had written earlier in 6:4-6:

“For those having been once enlightened, those having once tasted of the heavenly gift, those having been once made partakers of the Holy Spirit, those having once tasted the good word of God, those having once tasted the powers of the coming age, and having fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they recrucify again to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.”

Again in 10:26,27 Paul wrote:

“For sinning deliberately after receiving the full knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and ‘the zeal of a fire which will consume the adversaries’.”

Repentance is not possible after a willful rejection of God in apostasy. Though the Genesis text indicates that Esau “cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry” (Gen. 27:34), which appears to be the anguish of failing to get what he wanted in his mercenary drive, it does not refer to Esau’s seeking anything “with tears.” What he sought in his anguish, which may have included tears, was not repentance, and certainly not God. He sought only the privilege of the paternal blessing which was part of the old covenant agreement, and this he could not have for he had repudiated the covenant arrangement of God by despising his birthright in apostasy, and was thereafter fixed in his condition of being rejected by God. Paul’s intent in including this commentary on Esau’s reaction was to warn the Jerusalem Christians that there is a point in the renouncing of God’s privileges beyond which there is no possibility of repentance, but only a fixed state of rejection by God. That is why they needed to “watch out” (15) and take notice of

their mutual responsibility to “encourage one another” (10:25) in the avoidance of selling out their Christian faith.

**12:18** This central paragraph (18-24) of the contextual passage (14-29) provides the theological and eschatological foundation for the imperative exhortations that precede and follow it. In fact, this paragraph (18-24) can legitimately be regarded as the eschatological climax of the entire epistle to the Hebrews, summarizing, as it does, the privileged eschatological blessings that Christians have in Jesus Christ.

Paul provides a connective foundation for the pursuits (14) and perusals (15-17) that he has advised for his Hebrew brethren in Jerusalem. He does so by contrasting the old covenant symbol of Mt. Sinai (18-21) with the new covenant symbol of Mt. Zion (22-24), and carrying over the judgment motif mentioned in his comments about Esau (17). He reminds the Jerusalem Christians, “*For you have not come near to (a mountain) being touched and having been burned by fire, and to darkness and gloom and tempest,...*” The Hebrew Christian readers would have known well the details of the inauguration of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19,20; Deut. 4,5). Though the earliest Greek manuscripts of this epistle do not include reference to “a mountain” in this sentence, the mention of “mountain” in verse 20, and the contrast of having “come to Mt. Zion” in verse 22, make it obvious that this is the intent, and for this reason some scribes inserted the word “mountain” in this verse in later manuscripts. Moses ascended Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:3) and came back to tell the Israelite people “not to go up on the mountain or touch the border of it” (Exod. 19:12). In Paul’s mind the mountain and all that occurred at that location were representative of the inauguration and implementation of the old covenant. He mentions seven features that were indicative of the theophany of God at Mt. Sinai: (1) forbidden touch (2) burning fire (3) darkness (4) gloom (5) tempest (6) trumpet blast, and (7) sound of words. Together these illustrate that the old covenant was a figure of external sensory phenomena and observation, all of which present God as a visual and auditory threat that made Him unapproachable. When God did come down on Mt. Sinai in fire (cf. Exod. 19:18; 20:18; Deut. 4:11,24; 5:22,23,25), and darkness (Deut. 5:23), and gloom (Deut. 5:22), and tempest (cf. Exod. 19:18), the reaction of the people was fear and uncertainty that led to dread and terror.

**12:19** Continuing the list of the sensory phenomena experienced by the Hebrew people at the inauguration of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai, Paul mentions, “*and to a blast of a trumpet, and to a sound of words, which those hearing begged that not a word be added.*” The trumpet blast (cf. Exod. 19:16,19; 20:18) is common imagery to announce the presence of God (cf. Matt. 24:31; I Thess. 4:16; Rev. 11:15). The “sound of words” was such that the Hebrew people in the wilderness “saw no form, but heard a voice” (Deut. 4:12) as God declared His covenant in the Ten Commandments. God’s voice from the midst of the darkness (Deut. 5:23) was a shuddering reverberation of His awesome power, and the Israelites were afraid that if they heard the voice any longer they would die (Exod. 20:19; Deut. 5:25; 18:16). They begged and pleaded with Moses to be the mediator who would listen to God and then relay God’s message to them indirectly (Exod. 10:19; Deut. 5:27). All of the external phenomena associated with God’s presence at the beginning of the old covenant caused the people to be terrified in fear and repelled from God’s presence. They did not want to draw near to God, but backed off to a distance of twelve miles according to Jewish tradition, regarding God as inaccessible and unapproachable.

**12:20** *“For they could not bear being threatened, ‘IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED’.*” The narrative in Exodus 19:12,13 does not include the explicit threat that Paul quotes, but it does record that bounds were to be set, so that people did not go up to the mountain or touch the border of it. In consequence of such action, “whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death” (Exod. 19:12). The offender was not to be touched, but “he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live” (Exod. 19:13). It is not difficult to see why some later manuscripts of this epistle extended the quotation to read, “or shot through with a dart” in accordance with the Exodus text, which was followed in the English translation of the Authorized Version (KJV). The threat of possible execution for merely touching the mountain where God was revealing His covenant was more than the Israelite people could bear. God’s holy character was so “set apart” from His people that they were repelled by His annihilating judgment.

**12:21** *“And so terrifying was the spectacle being displayed, Moses said, ‘I AM EXCEEDINGLY FEARFUL AND TREMBLING’.*” The Exodus narrative records that the Israelite people “trembled” (Exod. 19:16; 20:18), but there is no reference in the Pentateuch to Moses being afraid and trembling, other than his being afraid of God’s anger concerning the golden calf (Deut. 9:19). Moses’ fear at the inauguration of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai was included in the literature of Jewish tradition, however, and Paul may have been quoting from these sources. Paul’s objective was to impress upon the Jerusalem Christians, who were in danger of reverting back to Judaism, the inadequacies of the entire old covenant as inaugurated at Mt. Sinai. The law-based performance standards of the old covenant necessarily produced a fear-based religion, which bred dread and terror, gloom and doom. God was regarded as inaccessible and unapproachable (cf. 9:1-10; 10:1-2,11), distanced from any real relationship with people.

**12:22** In contrast to the old covenant inaugurated at Mt. Sinai, Paul reminds the Jerusalem Christians of the “better things” that are theirs in Jesus Christ via the new covenant inaugurated at Mt. Zion. *“But you have come near to Mt. Zion, even to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,...”* Having mentioned seven features of God’s presence at Mt. Sinai (18,19), Paul now identifies seven features of the new covenant blessings associated with Mt. Zion:

- (1) Mt. Zion, city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem (22)
- (2) myriads of angels in festive gathering (22)
- (3) the church of the first-born ones having been enrolled in heaven (23)
- (4) God, the judge of all (23)
- (5) the spirits of righteous ones made perfect (23)
- (6) Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (24)
- (7) the sprinkled blood (24)

Together, these sum up in the inaugurated and realized eschatological hopes of the people of God in the new covenant.

Whereas they had “not come near” (18) to God at Mt. Sinai when the old covenant was established, Paul now emphasizes in contrast that Christians have “come near” to God and are able to approach him in direct and immediate access through Jesus Christ in the new covenant. They can “draw near” (cf. 4:16; 7:19,25; 10:19,22) to God in the intimate spiritual communion

of immediate personal relationship. Paul uses a perfect tense verb to indicate that the Hebrew Christian readers have definitively “drawn near” to God and the consequences of such closeness remain to the present. The immediate access “already” enjoyed will be balanced later with the “not yet” of the “lasting city which is to come” (13:14).

In a triad of synonyms (cf. Ps. 48:1,2; 51:18; 102:21; Joel 2:32), Paul explains to the Jerusalem Christians that they “have come near” to God in “Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” The mountain “stronghold of Zion” was originally conquered by David and used as the location of his residence (II Sam. 5:7-10; I Chron. 11:5,7). When Solomon constructed the temple there later, God was identified as the One “who dwells in Zion” (Ps. 9:11). The entire city of Jerusalem was often identified as “Mt. Zion, the city of God, the holy mountain, the city of the great King” (Ps. 48:1,2; 76:2). King David’s mountain was prophesied to be the place where the Messiah would be “installed as King upon Zion, the holy mountain” (Ps. 2:6; 110:2). As the expected Messiah, Jesus’ reign is figuratively (but no longer geographically or topographically) located on Mt. Zion (cf. Rev. 14:1), representing the presence and dwelling place of God. This symbolic place is further identified as “even the city of the living God,” which would be the city that Abraham sought in faith, “the city having foundations, of which the designer and builder is God” (11:10). The “city of the living God” is the completed community of God’s people who live in God’s presence through Jesus Christ. The third designation identifies this as “the heavenly Jerusalem.” This removed the “city of peace” from all reference to a mound in Palestine, a walled city, or a temple mount – from all external tangibility and localized phenomena – for it is now equivalent to the “heavenly fatherland” (11:16) that Abraham sought. As “citizens of heaven” (Phil. 3:2), “partakers of a heavenly calling” (Heb. 3:1), “seated in heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6), Christians have come to the place that Jesus prepared (Jn. 14:3), “near to the heart of God.” “The Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26) is the city of peace where Christians dwell with immediate access to God, while at the same time looking forward to the consummation in “the new Jerusalem” (Rev. 3:12; 21:2).

The Christians to whom Paul was writing were residing in the earthly Jerusalem where the Judaic religion had its centralized headquarters at the temple. They were being pressured by their Jewish kinsmen to militarily defend the physical Jerusalem with their lives, having no idea that it was soon to be destroyed by the superior Roman armies. Paul is advising them to recognize and appreciate the spiritual presence of God, the perfect heavenly place where Christians dwell with the living God, in the heavenly Jerusalem. The heavenly Jerusalem is far superior to the earthly Jerusalem, and allows access to God wherever the Christian might be at any time.

The second feature of the new covenant blessings to which Christians have “drawn near” is “*to myriads of angels in festive gathering...*” The presence of God is often represented as accompanied and surrounded with angels (cf. Jude 14; Rev. 5:11). Even at the inauguration of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai angels were present (Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:38), and Paul had previously compared “the word spoken through angels” (Heb. 2:2) at Mt. Sinai with the Word revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. Jn. 1:1). In the new covenant, Christians have the privilege of approaching God together with the angels, who serve as “ministering spirits, rendering service to those who inherit salvation” (1:14). These myriads (literally “ten thousands,” but figuratively “countless” and “innumerable” – cf. Dan. 7:10-14) of angels join with Christians in “festive gathering.” This is the only usage of this Greek word, *panegurei*, in the New Testament, but in other Greek literature it referred to a festive crowd or assembly gathered for joyful celebration. Christians and angels celebrate all that God has done in the triumph of His Son, Jesus Christ, and

the angels rejoice whenever a sinner repents (Lk. 15:10) and joins the festivities. This celebratory festivity is certainly antithetical to the terror experienced at Mt. Sinai, and Paul wanted the Jerusalem Christians to see the contrast. It was not that the Jewish people did not enjoy festivals and feasts, but all of the old covenant festivals pictorially pointed to Jesus Christ, and their fulfillment is in the festive gathering of joy that Christians and angels have in Christ.

The grammatical variation of different English translations is influenced by how one translates the word for “festive gathering.” Some translations miss the linguistic meaning, and translate the word as “general assembly,” attaching it to the third phrase of “the church of the first-borns” (cf. KJV, NASB, NEB). Those translations (cf. RSV, NIV, LB) that recognize the Greek usage as “festive gathering,” also take into consideration that the conjunction *kai* occurs at the beginning of the “church” phrase and not prior to “festal gathering.” This latter punctuation and translation is preferable.

**12:23** The third subordinate clause signifying the new covenant benefits to which the Hebrew Christians “have come near” and entered into is ***“the church of the first-born ones having been enrolled in heaven, . . .”*** The church is comprised of the “called out ones” (Greek *ekklesia*), Christians who have been called out of their sin, selfishness and individualism into the assembled gathering of Christian community, the Body of Christ (Col. 1:18,24). For this reason, they are not “to forsake their assembling together, . . .but to encourage one another” (10:25). The church is not an organization or institutional entity, but is the Christian assembly of the praising community wherein Christ sings God’s praise in the midst of the congregation (2:12). The communal oneness of the church of Jesus Christ was an identification with community that was far deeper and more lasting than the commitment to the Jewish community that the Christians in Jerusalem were being pressured to defend.

There is no apparent reference in the designation of “first-borns” back to Esau (16,17) who sought the blessing of the first-born son. Jesus, however, is often referred to as “the first-born” (1:6), and “the first-born from the dead” (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5) by virtue of His resurrection. To the Romans, Paul explained that Jesus was “the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29), those who would be spiritually “born again” (Jn. 3:3,6) and given divine life by the indwelling of the Spirit of the living Lord Jesus. Being “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3), Christians have the full blessing of His birthright and are “fellow-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). To be a first-born son physically was an important privilege and blessing in Hebrew culture. Paul wanted the Jerusalem Christians to recognize that they were all spiritual “first-borns” in identification and union with Jesus Christ, the “first-born.”

The “first-born ones” (note the plural), the Christians who comprise the church of Jesus Christ, “have been enrolled in heaven.” Having received the heavenly life of God in Christ, “every spiritual blessing in heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3, and become “partakers of a heavenly calling” (3:1), Christians are enrolled, recorded, and registered in heaven. Jesus told the seventy to “rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Lk. 10:20), and there are numerous New Testament references to Christians’ names being inscribed in the book of life (cf. Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 20:12; 21:27). Though the Christians in Jerusalem were registered and enrolled as citizens of Judea, Paul wants them to realize their superior “enrollment in heaven” as “citizens of heaven” (Phil. 3:20), already participating in “the heavenly Jerusalem” (22).

As the fourth feature of new covenant privilege, Paul explains to the Christians in Jerusalem that they have come near ***“to God, the Judge of all, . . .”*** At Mt. Sinai, the Israelite



people of the old covenant did not draw near to God. They cowered in fear and were repelled by the awesomeness of God's revealed presence, as well as what they perceived to be the judgmental consequences of violating God's commands. At Mt. Zion, representing the new covenant, Christians have drawn near to God in the direct access of personal relationship. The new covenant concept of God as judge is no longer that of a condemnatory magistrate in a legal context meting out punishment for improper performance. God as judge is the One who lovingly ordained and predestined that divine approval would be granted to all persons in Jesus Christ. All divine determinations or judgments are made referent to and in conjunction with Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus explained, as recorded in John's gospel:

“God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:17-19).

God is “the judge of all” men universally, because God determined to love the world of mankind and send His only begotten Son, so that those who believe in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Christians, who have received Jesus Christ by faith, therefore need not have any fear of being judged by God in the sense of being punished, condemned, or damned. Acceptance (Rom. 15:7; Eph. 1:6 - KJV) and approval (I Cor. 11:17) are the judgment of God for all believers. Unbelief, however, including those who apostatize, will bring the judgment of God's condemnation (2:3; 10:26-31). Paul wanted the Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem to rest assured that God's judgment of all was historically enacted in Jesus Christ, and those who receive Him by faith are approved and secure in a dynamic relationship with Him. At the same time, Paul warns them of the possibility of apostatizing in unbelief.

Continuing his panorama of new covenant benefits, Paul advises the Jerusalem Christians that they have drawn near **“to the spirits of righteous ones having been made perfect,...”** Previously Paul referred to God as “the Father of spirits” (12:9), and it was noted that God is “the God of the spirits of all flesh” (Numb. 16:22; 27:16), with particular reference to human persons capable of receiving His Spirit in their spirit. The Hebrew Christians of Jerusalem had been drawn into the fellowship of the faithful of humanity. Despite the opinions of many commentators who have attempted to identify “the spirits of righteous ones made perfect” as persons who have previously died, whether the Old Testament faithful (11:3-38), or deceased Christians, or Christian martyrs, there is no reason to limit or confine this designation to the dead. Paul's whole point is to emphasize the involvement of Christians in the divine dynamic of the eternal present. Christians have been joined together with the entire community of faithful people throughout all time. Human spirits have become “righteous ones” through faith (cf. Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). “Through the obedience of the One (Jesus Christ), the many (who receive Him) are made righteous” (Rom. 5:19), becoming “the righteousness of God in Him” (II Cor. 5:21). The indwelling presence of “the Righteous One” (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; I Jn. 2:1) creates a spiritual identity of righteousness for all Christians. They are also made perfect by the spiritual presence of the Perfect One, Jesus Christ. Earlier in this letter, Paul wrote that Jesus “has perfected unto perpetuity those being sanctified” (10:14), and to the Philippians he referred to Christians as those who “are perfect” (Phil. 3:15). The Jerusalem Christians needed to be aware that religious exercises of prescribed “righteous actions” make no one righteous or perfect

(cf. Isa. 64:6; Phil. 3:6-8) in spiritual condition, but as Christians they are drawn near in fellowship with “the spirits of righteous ones having been made perfect” in Jesus Christ.

**12:24** All of the realities that Paul identifies are encompassed in the Jerusalem Christians having drawn near in intimate union *“to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,...”* In eschatological fulfillment of the prophecies of old (Jere. 31:31-34; Ezek. 37:26,27), Jesus came as “the one mediator between God and man” (I Tim. 2:5), “the mediator of a new covenant” (8:6; 9:15). The old Sinaitic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the law covenant, kept people distanced and removed from God. Through the intermediary action of Jesus Christ in His death on the cross, the “eternal covenant” (13:20) was enacted to draw Christians into intimate communion with God, and provide every spiritual blessing in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3). Paul wanted to emphasize the superiority of the new covenant arrangement of God and His people, for he was aware that His Hebrew Christian brethren in Judea were being tempted to revert back to the defense of the old covenant religious expectations and practices, even though the old covenant was obsolete, antiquated, abrogated, and near to disappearing (8:13). (See extensive comments on “covenant” in 8:1-13).

The “blood of the covenant” was sprinkled on the people at the inauguration of the old covenant (Exod. 24:8), but the blood of animals had only a temporal effect for the people of God (Heb. 9:11-22). Paul emphasizes again to the Christians in Jerusalem that Jesus “through His own blood” (9:12), “offered Himself without blemish” (9:14), as “the mediator of a new covenant” (9:15), and “the blood of the covenant” (10:29) has “sprinkled our hearts clean” (10:22). In the seventh of the glorious eschatological realities of the new covenant, Paul reminds the readers that they have drawn near *“to the sprinkled blood, speaking better things than that of Abel.”* The “sprinkled blood” is a euphemism for the redemptive efficacy of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross at Mt. Zion. No Hebrew Christian would have missed the connection of the sprinkling of blood as the seal of the old covenant, and how the death of Jesus by crucifixion was the establishment and seal of the new covenant. The Hebraic terminology of the Christian being “sprinkled with His blood” (I Peter 1:2) was recognized as the redemptive action of forgiveness whereby the Christian could draw near to the presence of God “by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). Christians remember such every time they partake of the Lord’s Supper and hear Jesus’ words, “this cup is the new covenant in My blood” (Matt. 26:28; Lk. 22:20; I Cor. 11:25).

Paul adds a comment that “the blood of Jesus speaks better than that of Abel.” This may appear at first to be off the subject, but we must attempt to discover how these were connected by contrast in Paul’s mind. The account of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1-15) records how Cain murdered his brother Abel in anger, and the Lord told Cain, “the voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). Both the death of Abel and the death of Jesus were the deaths of innocent persons. Abel’s blood cried out for vengeance and justice. Jesus’ blood declares the gospel message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Abel’s blood led to the imposition of a curse (Gen. 4:11,12). The blood of Jesus secures the redemptive blessing of the new covenant. Abel’s blood testified only of death, whereas the blood of Jesus testifies of divine life restored because of the vicarious death of Jesus for all men. It is not difficult to understand why Paul thought, “the blood of Jesus speaks better than the blood of Abel.” The thrust of Paul’s argument throughout this letter is to emphasize to the Jerusalem Christians that everything is “better” and more effective in Jesus Christ.

It is important to note, however, that Paul refers to the blood of Jesus “speaking” in a present tense. The death of Jesus is more than just an historical event or statement. Because

Jesus died and rose again, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus continues by the Spirit to proclaim the “good news” that spiritual death has been taken for all men in His death, in order that His life might be restored to mankind when received by faith. This eschatological message of the new covenant restoration of humanity in Jesus Christ is certainly a better message than that of Abel.

**12:25** This third paragraph (25-29) of this contextual passage (14-29) has a connective link to the present tense “speaking” of Jesus’ blood in the previous verse. **“See to it that you do not refuse the One speaking,”** Paul exhorts with another imperative verb. The One speaking is God in Christ by the Spirit. God’s revelatory “speaking” did not cease at the death, resurrection, or ascension of Jesus, nor at the conclusion of writing or the canonization of scripture. Such concepts of “cessationism” set up various forms of deism with a detached deity who can no longer interact and reveal Himself to His creation. God in Christ “is speaking,” and “those who are being led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). Christian obedience is “listening under” (Greek *hupakouo*) the speaking and direction of God. Paul wanted the Jerusalem Christians to recognize their ongoing responsibility of listening to the voice of God in obedience. He did not want them to disregard, reject, or refuse what God was saying to their hearts. His warnings against rejecting Jesus Christ in apostasy continue to reveal his heart of concern for the brethren in Jerusalem.

In a comparative warning similar to what he expressed earlier in 2:2,3, Paul cautions the readers in Jerusalem: **“For if those did not escape having refused the One warning on the earth, much rather, we (shall not escape), those turning away (from the One speaking) from heaven.”** If, as was the case, the Israelites, as the prefiguring people of God, refused, rejected, and “begged off” (19) of having to face God, and distantly “stood away” from God when He warned them through the visual and auditory phenomena of His presence at Mt. Sinai (18,19), and they did not escape the consequences of their unbelief (3:19), then the greater blessing of the new covenant implies a greater responsibility with severer consequences. The same God spoke in both covenants, but He spoke “on earth” in the old covenant, while He speaks “from heaven” in the new covenant. Christians have the superior privilege of God’s speaking to them and revealing Himself to them “from heaven,” and “for this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (2:1). Paul is making an argument from the lesser to the greater. The “we” of the second phrase, signifying Christians, is emphatically juxtapositioned against the “those” of the first phrase, signifying the Israelites. “If the word spoken through angels (to the Israelites) proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall *we* escape so great a salvation?” (2:2,3). The divine voice of God in Christ by the Spirit speaks to the hearts of Christians, for as Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice” (Jn. 10:27; cf. 10:1-17). The superior revelation of God to Christians demands a greater responsibility to be faithful and avoid “turning away” from God in unbelief and apostasy.

**12:26** The contrast of old covenant and new covenant continues: **“His voice shook the earth then,...”** Paul explains, referring to the inauguration of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai. The Exodus narrative records, “the whole mountain quaked violently” (Exod. 19:18). Reiterating the occasion, Deborah and Barak lyrically recall, “the mountains quaked at the presence of the Lord, this Sinai, at the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel” (Judges 4:5). The Psalmist, David, likewise explained in song, “The earth quaked ... Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the

God of Israel” (Ps. 68:8; cf. 77:18). The earth was shaken when God revealed Himself at Mt. Sinai, and the people recognized the awesome power of God.

Contrasting the “then” of the old covenant with the “now” of the new covenant, Paul writes, “***But now He has promised, saying, ‘YET ONCE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.’***” Paul quotes from the prophecies of Haggai (Hag. 2:6,21; cf. Isa. 13:13), which referred to the coming eschatological shaking that was to occur at the inauguration of the new covenant. Jewish interpreters in the Talmud regarded these prophecies of Haggai to be Messianic. The prophet Joel also foresaw that “the earth shakes, the heavens tremble” (Joel 2:10), and there will be “wonders in the sky and on the earth” (2:30-32), which Peter explicitly indicated were figuratively fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21) in the implementation of the new covenant. What was still future at the time of Haggai and Joel was fulfilled in the cosmic shaking of all things in the advent and work of Jesus Christ, allowing for the unshakeable realities of the new covenant for Christians “now.” The shaking of the earth at the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Matt. 27:51-54; 28:2) was but the preliminary to the cataclysmic phenomena that affected heaven and earth at the inauguration of the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

Other interpretations have been made of Paul’s quotation of Haggai’s prophecy: (1) that Paul was referring to the specific “now” of Jerusalem Christians being “shaken” by their persecution and suffering at the hands of their fellow Jewish countrymen. (2) that Paul was referring to the “shaking” that was soon to occur in AD 66-70 when the Roman armies would destroy Jerusalem (cf. Matt. 24:29; Lk. 21:26). (3) that Paul was referring to a yet future “shaking” of earth and heaven that will result in a “new heaven and a new earth” (II Pet. 3:10-13). The first two of these interpretations fail to give adequate import to the shaking of “heaven” as well as earth, and the third fails to address the “now” contrast that Paul is drawing with the old covenant. It is preferable, therefore, to recognize that Paul is using Haggai’s prophecy to refer to the metaphorical impact of the inauguration of the new covenant.

**12:27** Paul proceeds to give his commentary on Haggai’s prophecy. “***So the*** (phrase) ***‘YET ONCE,’ indicates the removal of those things being shaken, those things having been made,...***” The word “yet” denotes a contrast with the shaking at Mt. Sinai. “Once” indicates the singularity and finality of Christ’s action. Paul has used this word (Greek *hapax*) and its derivatives throughout this epistle to explain the singularity and completeness of the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ (7:27; 9:12,28; 10:10) in the establishment of the new covenant. Consistently, Paul refers to how the work of Christ was the shaking of heaven and earth that removed (cf. 11:5) and displaced the external, physical, material, perishable, and temporal things that could be shaken and removed. The externalities of the old covenant community and its religious practices have been shaken, have fallen, have been destroyed, and have been removed in the sense of having any significance before God. The physical city of Jerusalem and its temple were still standing, but were soon to disappear (8:13).

The tangible and temporal things of the old covenant were removed by the work of Christ, “***in order that the things not being shaken might remain.***” The contrast is between the physical and created things of the old covenant which have been shaken and removed, and the spiritual, heavenly, and eternal realities of the new covenant which cannot be shaken and remain forever. This coincides with the contrast between perishing and permanency that Paul drew from Ps. 102:25,26 in the introduction to this epistle (1:10-12). The uncreated spiritual and heavenly realities of the new covenant that find their substance in the eternity of Christ Himself are

unshakeable. They remain and abide as unchangeable, permanent, and eternal for they are comprised of God's Being in action in the living Lord Jesus. Jesus "abides forever, and holds His priesthood permanently" (7:3,24), and that is why Christians have the "abiding possession" (10:34) of a heavenly inheritance in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (22).

Paul continues to emphasize to the Christians in Jerusalem the necessity of recognizing all that they have in Jesus Christ in the new covenant. Only if they accept the permanency and sufficiency of the new covenant grace of God in Jesus Christ will they respond with fidelity and endurance. Paul does not want his physical and spiritual brethren in Jerusalem to be shaken by the Jewish and Roman hostilities, nor does he want them to capitulate and stand against Jesus in apostasy.

**12:28** In consequence of God's having shaken heaven and earth in the implementation of the new covenant, and removed the externalities of the old covenant which were never meant to be permanent – its religious practices, its physical connections, its legal impositions, its political kingdom, etc. – Paul concludes, *"Therefore, receiving an unshakeable kingdom, we may have grace, through which we may serve God well-pleasingly, with reverence and awe;..."* The unshakeable realities of the new covenant in Christ (27) are summed up in the Christian's receipt of and participation in an unshakeable kingdom. This is a spiritual kingdom not based on might and power (Zech 4:6; I Cor. 2:4), but on the reign of the living Christ by the Spirit in Christian individuals and the Christian community. Paul uses a present participle to explain that Christians are presently "receiving" this dynamic reign of Christ. The unshakeable new covenant kingdom is a process that involves the dialectic of "already" and "not yet." God has "delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). Jesus Himself said, "The kingdom of God is within your midst" or "within you" (Lk. 17:21). The kingdom reign of Christ as the indwelling Lord of His people is already a reality. God has "made us to be a kingdom, priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6; 5:10), but kingdom is the dynamic reality of the Lordship reign of Christ in His people and His church. God is presently "calling us into the kingdom and glory of Himself" (I Thess. 2:12), and His kingdom involves "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). All the while Christians are looking forward to the ultimate and unhindered expression of "the eternal kingdom" (II Pet. 1:11) at Christ's appearing in the future (II Tim. 4:1).

The Zealot insurrectionists were pressuring the Jerusalem Christians to join the fight to restore the physical and political Jewish kingdom in Palestine by ousting the hated Roman oppressors. Paul was advising the Jerusalem Christians that the political Jewish kingdom was one of those old covenant realities that was shakable and had been removed – displaced and replaced by the unshakeable spiritual kingdom wherein Christ reigns as "Lord of Lords and King of Kings" (Rev. 19:16). The "heavenly kingdom" (II Tim. 4:18), the "eternal kingdom" (II Pet. 1:11) is permanent and unshakeable, and Christians "reign in life" (Rom. 5:17) as Christ reigns as Lord in them.

Since Christians are receiving the kingdom reign of Christ, "we may have grace, through which we may serve God well-pleasingly, with reverence and awe." The grace-dynamic of God's Being in action expressing His character and activity is operative in the Christian who is participating in the kingdom reign of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul uses the same word (Greek *charis*) that he used in verse 15 when he cautioned the readers about "coming short of the *grace* of God" (15). When this word is translated in its primary sense, recognizing that "God is able to make all *grace* abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an

abundance for every good deed” (II Cor. 9:8), then it follows that through this grace-dynamic the Christian may worship God acceptably. As Paul will later write, “God equips you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is *well-pleasing* in His sight through Jesus Christ” (13:20,21). Paul had exhorted the Romans to “present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, *well-pleasing* to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (Rom. 12:1). The word Paul uses for “serving” God (Greek *latreuo*) was used by the Jews to refer to temple service and worship (8:5; 9:1,6,9; 10:2; 13:10), but Paul transforms the word in the new covenant to refer to the Christian’s “service of worship” in the heavenly temple wherein Christ “cleansed our consciences from dead works to *serve* the living God” (9:14). It is only by the grace-dynamic of God that Christians, in the priesthood of all believers, can worship God acceptably and well-pleasingly, reverently recognizing His good authority in awesome fear, and expressing the worth-ship of His character. If the word *charis* is translated with its secondary meaning of “gratitude” (cf. Lk. 17:9; I Tim. 1:12; II Tim. 1:3), then Christians “service of worship” is prompted by thanksgiving (Greek *eucharisteo* – cf. Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17; I Thess. 5:18) that recognizes God’s “good grace.” The danger of using the secondary meaning, “gratitude,” instead of the primary meaning, “grace,” is that it can be misunderstood as the grateful and thankful incentive that causes Christians to attempt by works of self-effort to offer acceptable service of worship to God, while failing to recognize that genuine Christian service of worship is only through, and by means of, the grace-dynamic of God’s activity (cf. Fowler, *Christocentric Worship*). Hermeneutic principles call for the primary meaning of the word *charis* as the preferable choice of translation of this verse.

**12:29** Although this concluding phrase, “*For indeed our God is a consuming fire,*” may seem abrupt, the conjunctive “for” provides a connective link to the service of worship that stands in awe and fearful reverence at the character of God (28). Paul wanted to advise the Hebrew Christians that God holds Christians accountable for functioning in His kingdom by His grace (15,28). Because He created mankind as choosing creatures, they are responsible for the choices of receptivity by which they live.

The God of the old covenant at Mt. Sinai is the same God of the new covenant at Mt. Zion. His character is not altered in the new arrangement of the new covenant. At the inauguration of the old covenant, “the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a *consuming fire* on the mountain top” (Exod. 24:17). Moses told the Israelites, “The Lord your God is a *consuming fire*, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:24). Paul repeats this figurative designation of God to explain the accountability of Christians in the new covenant to recognize that there are determinative consequences to their choices: “For indeed our God is a consuming fire.” The fire of God’s passion for absolute purity must eventually consume all that is not consistent with His character. It will be burned up like “wood, hay, and straw” (I Cor. 3:12-15). God’s absoluteness demands that everything that is not His Being at work in His creation unto His glory be removed, so that His perfect purity of Being can be expressed in His eternity.

The difference between the old covenant and the new covenant is that the Israelites committed themselves (Exod. 24:7) to performance that attempted to measure up to God’s character, and they failed miserably because the endeavor was impossible (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16; 3:11). In the new covenant Christians are responsible to believe in the performance of the One God sent, His Son, and to be receptive in faith to the grace of God whereby God will generate and express His own character in sanctification (14) and worship (28). The basis of God’s determinative judgment is belief in Jesus Christ. “He who does not believe has been judged

already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (Jn. 3:18). Those who revert to unbelief in apostasy and rejection of Jesus Christ are likewise judged by the single criteria of belief in Jesus Christ. For this reason Paul emphasizes to the Jerusalem Christians that “our God is a consuming fire,” and “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). The determined consequences of God’s judgment referent to belief in Jesus Christ are not inconsistent with God’s love (I Jn. 4:8,16). The other side of God’s love is the “tough love” that demands that man function as God intended by deriving all from Him, or be accountable for the consequences of God’s consuming fire.

### **Concluding remarks:**

As Paul prepares to draw his epistle to the Hebrew Christians to a close, he continues to make repeated reference to their historical heritage. He mentions Esau (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:1-40), the terrifying fear at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19,20; Deut. 4,5), and the blood of Abel (Gen. 4:1-15). In addition, he alludes to the shaking of the earth at the inauguration of the old covenant (Exod. 19:18; Judges 4:5; Ps. 68:8), Haggai’s prophecy of the shaking of earth and heaven (Hag. 2:6,21), and reiterates that “our God is a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24). The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were facing the militant Zealots who wanted them to join the insurrection and revolt against Rome. They were being accused of being traitors who were divorcing themselves from their Jewish heritage. Paul, on the other hand, emphasizes that they are intimately connected with their Hebrew heritage, having received the better and intended fulfillment of all the Hebrew prefiguring in Jesus Christ. In the “better things” of Christ Jesus, they have realized all of the eschatological hopes of Israel.

Many of the major themes that Paul has used throughout the epistle are drawn together in this contextual passage (14-29). These include the contrast of the old and new covenants (8:5-13; 9:11-23; 10:15-18), and the contrast between separation from God and access to God (4:15,16; 9:1-14; 10:1-25). The danger of “coming short” (2:1-3; 3:12-15; 4:1) is reiterated, alongside the warning against apostasy (3:12; 6:4-8; 10:26-31), and God’s judgment (2:2,3; 6:8; 10:29-31).

Paul was very concerned that the Christians in Jerusalem should not forfeit all they had received in Jesus Christ. He wanted them to recognize that in Jesus Christ they had “the better new covenant basis of holiness and worship.” In the remainder of the letter he provides practical admonishment of how this Christian holiness and worship is worked out in the situations of life.