
The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON CXX : THE WISE AND SPIRIT FILLED LIFE OF SUBMISSION / THE HAUSTAFEL (5:15-6:9)

Ephesians 5:25-33 — Paul to the CHURCHES —

EXCURSUS — During our last lesson the question of ecclesia in Hebrews 12:23 came up. While we all have read that passage innumerable times, I have never studied it and could not address it intelligently. Since no one else in class offered their thoughts, I thought it would be good to interrupt our lessons to address the verses in question.

‘TO THE ECCLESIA OF THE FIRSTBORN’ – HEB 12:23

William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13* (Nelson Publishers, Nashville TN) 1991; Peter T. O’Brien, *Pillar NT Commentary: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids MI) 2010; Gareth L. Cockerill, *New International Commentary on the NT: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids MI) 2012; James Moffatt, *International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, Great Britain) first published 1924, last printing 1963; Paul Ellingworth, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids MI) 1993

INTRODUCTION — “Amid present suffering (12:1-13) the faithful find great joy in the privileges now theirs through Christ (12:18-24). The pastor, who has been addressing their sufferings with encouragement, introduces the description of their privileges in 12:18-24 with the warning of 12:14-17. Since the beginning of this history in 1:1 he has been urging his hearers to join the faithful of old in perseverance until they reach the heavenly City. He now warns them lest they disregard the ‘great salvation’ (2:3) that is theirs in Christ and fall away. This emphasis on warning reaches its climax at the conclusion of the temporal history of God’s people in the Judgment of 12:25-29. *While suffering requires encouragement, privileges call for caution lest they be squandered.*” [Cockerill, 631]

FLOW OF THOUGHT — While there is common agreement vv. 18-29 form a single literary unit and v. 29 marks the end of the section, there are differences of opinion regarding vv. 14-17. Some regard 12:12-17 as a unit, furnishing the end of 12:1-17. Others see a separation between the theme of enduring corrective suffering (12:1-13) to the peril of rejecting the God who continues to speak through His Son and through the Scriptures (12:14-29). The section consists of three paragraphs that are tightly laced together:

- vv. 14-17 provides the basis for sensitivity to this peril of falling away. Esau is given as the example of one who sought in vain to recover the blessing he had forfeited through his preoccupation with personal gratification.
- v. 18 begins with ‘for’, indicating what follows provide support for the exhortation and warning of the previous paragraph. The writer depicts the Sinai event as an occasion for stark terror, so that even Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, acknowledges his alarm (vv. 18-21). *“The awesome description of the tangible and menacing aspects of the scene builds in intensity until a vivid sense is conveyed of the majestic presence of the God who is unapproachable. So frightening is the experience that the people turn away from this awesome revelation of God. This is not the foundational experience of Christians; they order their lives in accordance with another, different revelation. They have come to Mount Zion to participate in a heavenly, festive gathering of angels and of persons who enjoy the new covenant (12:22-24). The scene is marked by joy rather than fear. The accent falls on the accessibility of God rather than on his unapproachability. Thus in one*

grand finale the writer graphically illustrates the difference between the old covenant and the new, and between Moses and Jesus, respectively, as mediators of the encounter with God.” [Lane, 449]

- The believers’ new status under the new covenant accounts for the sternness of the warning that Christians that show contempt for God will not escape His judgement (vv. 25-29). The concluding paragraph resumes the motifs of forfeiting the grace of God, of contempt for birthrights secured through the covenant, and of the consequent rejection by God, all of which were introduced in vv. 15-17. vv. 25-29 is connected with v. 24 by a ‘catch-word’ association, ‘to speak’ – ‘and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel (v. 24) ... See that you do not refuse Him who speaks (v. 25). ***As a result of Jesus’ sacrificial death, people of the new covenant have both greater privilege and greater obligation than Israel under the old covenant.*** We are to respond appropriately to the God who addresses us through the gospel and through Scripture.

These verses summarize what has been previously said throughout Hebrews concerning irrevocable loss through disobedience, unbelief, apostasy, and contempt for the covenant privilege (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 6:4-8; 10:26-31). ***“An impression of the awesome certainty of judgment pervades the entire section. Evoking threat of catastrophic loss, these verses possess a sense of urgency that compels insight.” [Lane, 448]***

BE AWARE OF THE PERIL OF FALLING AWAY – 14 – ‘Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:’ — Christians must not become indifferent to the gifts they possess through the gospel. The members of the house church are to urgently seek that which they already possess, ‘peace’ and ‘the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.’ ***“How then can we pursue what are already God’s gifts to us? The proper response is that they should be worked out concretely in our lives as believers.” [O’Brien, 472]***

pursue = stronger than ‘seek’, it connotes earnest pursuance. The idea of pursuit echoes the imagery of the racecourse from 12:3, 13. “The hearers must not take these blessings for granted, but give diligence to preserve and cultivate them lest the harmony of their community be fragmented through rebellion.” [Cockerill, 633]

peace = not subjective but an objective reality that results from the redemption of Christ; it is an expression of the reality of Christ’s accomplishment

holiness = this is a word of action and thus speaks to our progressive sanctification, not our justification. While believers are positionally holy at our salvation, we are to make the pursuit of holiness the great quest in life. What follows in vv. 15, 16 is an example of one who forfeited the grace of God through spiritual carelessness.

with all people = this has reference only to persons within the community of faith, the sense is ‘together with all the other believers; together with the whole community’. Our churches is the demonstration in society of the presence of the new age, consequently it must be a dynamic reflection of the peace and holiness characteristic of God’s reign. “Although Christians are to seek peace with people in a whole range of circumstances (Matt 5:9; Rom 12:18), the immediate application, *with everyone*, in vv. 15-17 is maintaining harmony within the Christian community.” [O’Brien, 472]

without which no one will see the Lord = a somber reminder that holiness is that provision which alone allows one to come into the presence of God. Only those consecrated to God through the objective gift of Christ have access to God.

15 – looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; — this is a command to exercise vigilant concern for each member of our churches; a mutual responsibility for one another from which no one is released.

looking carefully = a present active participle which derives its force of a command from the main verb, ‘pursue’, and governs the three subordinate clauses of warning that follows, each of which is introduced by μή τις [mē tis], ‘lest any ...’ –

Watch ... lest any falls short ... (v. 15a; cp. Deut 29:17a LXX)

lest any bitter root grows up ... (v. 15b; cp. Deut 29:17b LXX)

lest any is apostate or irreligious ... (v. 16a; cp. Gen 25:34)

“The call to vigilance expressed in [‘looking carefully, see to it’] refers not to some official expression of ministry but rather to the engagement of the community as a whole in the extension of mutual care (cf. 3:12-13; 4:1; 10:24-25). Christian vigilance is the proper response to a peril that poses an imminent threat to the entire community. The danger is first envisioned as the forfeiture of the grace of God through carelessness. It is then presented as the peril of defilement that would alter the character of the community. It is finally identified as apostasy, resulting in the irrevocable loss of inheritance rights. In view this very real danger, the members of the house church are urged to vigilant concern for one another.” [Lane, 451f]

fall short of the grace of God = the grammar suggests the exclusion from some benefit through one’s own fault; a disregard of the grace of God issuing from unbelief, carelessness, and a willful renunciation of grace, thus a description of apostasy, a ‘drawing back.’ This can happen from lassitude (a state of physical or mental weariness; lack of energy), from discouragement at the rigors of the race, or through attraction to the rewards of an unbelieving world.

lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, — ‘growing up’ describes the root as living, sprouting and producing noxious fruit. The metaphor refers to a stubborn disposition that expresses itself in unbelief and apostasy. Nature abhors a vacuum; the absence of grace allows a ‘bitter root’ to spring up.

and by this many become defiled; — this root of bitterness can defile and corrupt the whole community; one who is defiled by unbelief and apostasy becomes a defiler of others.

16 – lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, — fornicator, immoral = while this word is most often used of sexual immorality, there is no indication in Gen 25 of this being used literally in reference to Esau (although there is a wide spectrum of late Jewish tradition that clearly associated Esau with sexual immorality). The emphasis in the biblical account falls on the fact that Esau despised his birth rights as the elder son and by implication, the covenant by which they were secured. Limiting ourselves to the biblical account, it is probably best to take this figuratively of ‘unfaithfulness to God, spiritual adultery,’ a common metaphor in the OT.

worldly, profane = irreligious, secular; this describes Esau as a man who was preoccupied only with his personal gratification. For such a person there is only self and the present moment. Neglect becomes outright disregard for the things of God and a positive preference for the things of this world. It is living without the ‘godly fear’ (5:7; 11:7; 12:28) of the faithful. It is living as if God’s power were not real and his promises of reward were invalid.

who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. — The grammar of the phrase sharply expresses the unthinkable exchange; the emphatic position of ‘one’ heightens the impression of the thoughtlessness and perversity of Esau’s action: Esau chose a single meager meal rather than the inheritance rights conferred upon him as the eldest son (Gen 27:36). This refers to not only Esau’s status as heir to the material possessions of his father, but it also included the blessing of Isaac, the conferring of the blessings promised in the covenant God made with Abraham (cf. Gen 12:2,3; 15:18-20; 17:3-8, 16, 19-21; 25:5; 27:28,29). Esau despised blessings that ultimately affected a whole posterity rather than endure an empty stomach. *“Esau’s willingness to give up all that was his as the firstborn son reflected a contempt for the covenant by which his rights were warranted. By descriptive analogy, he is representative of apostate persons who are ready to turn their backs on God and the divine promises, in reckless disregard of the covenant blessings secured by the sacrificial death of Jesus.”* [Lane, 455] *“Here the writer thinks of people who consider that immediate gratification of their wishes is worth more than any higher end in life; they value their spiritual positions as sons so little, that they let it go in order to relapse on some material relief at the moment.... [H]unger was not the motive. If the action were determined directly by the hunger, it would have no moral character, any more than have actions done in sleep, or strictly under compulsion, or from accident, or (so far as we know) the action of animals. Since, however, it is not the hunger as a natural force, but his own conception of himself, as finding for the time his greatest good in the satisfaction of hunger, that determines the act.”* [Moffatt, 210f]

17 – For you know that afterward, — In commenting on Esau’s frivolous behavior, the writer does not stress the disparity between the meagerness of that which Esau chose over the magnitude of the blessing. Rather the writer places the accent on the irretrievable loss that Esau suffered.

for you know = the writer only has to allude to this course of events for the entire scenario to be recalled

when he wanted to inherit the blessing, — in its primary significance, ‘inheritance’, came to connote that which was allotted by God and was possessed only on that basis; ‘inheritance’ implied ‘gift,’ and specifically ‘gift from God.’ Esau’s inheritance was ultimately from God, the father simply acted as God’s agent when he passed on to his eldest son the blessing bestowed by God in His covenant with Abraham. In Hebrews inheritance is associated with sonship. Jesus is the essential Son who has been appointed Heir of all things (1:2,4); Christians are those who enjoy the status of ‘sons’ through Him (2:10) and so inherit the divine promises (1:4; 6:12, 17-18; 9:15).

he was rejected, — what transpired ultimately has reference to God; the moment of judgment arrives when God bestows blessing or pronounces rejection of the promised blessing. In v. 16, Esau ‘gave up’ his inheritance rights; in v. 17, he was ‘rejected by God.’ Esau’s rash action displayed contempt for the gifts of God and for the covenant by which they were secured. For that reason he was rejected by God.

though he sought it diligently with tears. — Lane (among others) ascribe the previous clause, ‘for he found no place for repentance,’ as a parenthetical thought (see below). If that is so (and his arguments seem sound), then that which Esau ‘sought diligently with tears’ is not repentance but rather the blessing from Isaac. According to the account in Gen 27:30-40, there is no indication that Esau recognized his responsibility for what had transpired (cf. Gen 27:36) or the depth of his guilt. He only thought of the extent of his loss and sought to regain the blessing he had forfeited, even with tears. It is characteristic of the person ‘apostate and secular like Esau’ that does not think in terms of repentance.

for he found no place for repentance, — this parenthetical thought serves to underscore the ultimate seriousness of a rash and thoughtless rejection of the gifts of God. The phrase ‘*place of repentance*’ was common in Jewish literature as a set expression meaning ‘*opportunity to repent*’; see Wis 12:10; 1 Clem 7:5; 2 Clem 8:2; 4 Ezra 7:82; 9:12. [Cockerill, 640] **Repentance is one of those gifts from God, created only by the action of God and is conditioned by a time limit determined by Him. It does not depend upon the human will; God alone determines its beginning and its end. The deduction that repentance was denied to Esau follows from the fact that he had been rejected by God.**

BELIEVERS DO NOT HAVE AN UNAPPROACHABLE GOD – 18-19a – For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, — Using two well-crafted sentences (vv. 18-24) the writer now develops an extended contrast between Israel’s experience at Mount Sinai and the new covenant encounter with God. The one is sensuous, the other spiritual; the one striking terror with its outward circumstances of physical horror, the other charged with grace and welcome as well as with awe. “The terrifying atmosphere that characterized the theophany at Sinai (vv. 18-21) throws into bold relief the festive joy of Zion (vv. 22-24).” [Lane, 459]

- v. 18 begins with an emphatic negative particle, ‘not’, ‘*for you have not come to what may be touched...*’, while v. 22 begins with a strong adversative ‘but’, the sense being ‘*on the contrary, you have come to Mount Zion...*’
- the typological significance of Sinai and Mount Zion is set forth in two lists of seven features, all without the definite article ‘*the*’ (Greek: they are *anarthrous*), each connected with the word ‘*and*’, and each in the Greek dative case (v. 18-19, *mountain that cannot be touched ... burning with fire ... blackness ... darkness ... whirlwind ... sound of a trumpet ... a voice speaking words*; v. 22-23, *heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God ... myriads of angels in a festal gathering ... ecclesia of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven ... God, the Judge of all ... spirits of the righteous made perfect ... Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant ... the sprinkled blood*)
- **“It should be recognized that the writer compares two covenants under the imagery of two mountains in order to contrast the distance that separated the worshiper from God under the old covenant with the unrestricted access to God under the new covenant.”** [Lane, 461]

for = this links the unit as a whole with the preceding paragraph. The privileged experience of Christians indicates why they must hold fast to the objective gifts of peace and holiness (v. 14) and why they must guard against apostasy in their midst (vv. 15-17).

have not come = the developed contrast between vv. 18-21 and vv. 22-24 is governed by the initial verb ‘*to come to*’; cp. Deut 4:11 LXX ‘*you came and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire ... with black clouds and deep darkness.*’ This has religious significance since the Sinai event was understood in terms of a solemn covenant ceremony (cf. Deut 4:10-14). **This verb is found throughout Hebrews (4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6) and is used exclusively of an approach to God. The foundational experience of the people of God under both covenants is described in terms of a coming into the divine presence.**

THE SINAI EVENT — The writer of Hebrews draws selectively from the Pentateuch (Exod 19:16-22; 20:18-21; Deut 4:11-12; 5:22-27 LXX). What follows are seven elements, each

connected by the word ‘and’ which builds in intensity. Note no where is Sinai actually named; instead the writer chooses to emphasize the tangible and sensory aspects of the theophany to describe an atmosphere of dread and confusion. ***“It is the whole old covenant which our author describes under the guise of the Sinai theophany. It is not simply the mountain of Sinai which is the scene of a less than perfect encounter.”*** [Lane, quoting J. M. Casey, 460]

a the mountain that may be touched — probably referring to Exod 19:12,13 which decreed death to anyone who even touched the mountain, even animals. But the significance is that it was real, it was tangible, perceptible to the senses. It was right in front of them but untouchable; ***the writer’s re-creation of the event conveys an impression of an overwhelming of the senses by the presence of the God who is unapproachable in His holiness.***

and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, — cp. Deut 4:11; 5:22-23 LXX; ***and the sound of a trumpet*** — the trumpet blast is taken from Exod 19:16, 19; 20:18 LXX; ***and the voice of words,*** — cp. Deut 4:12 LXX. This suggests that which obscures rather than reveals; no clear vision of God is here, Israel does not see Him but only the violent effects of His presence. In like manner, the auditory terms (‘whirlwind,’ ‘a trumpet blast,’ ‘a sound of words’) combine to create an impression of great noise that effectively interfered with any distinct hearing. Note the ‘sound of words’: just as they heard a trumpet blast, they heard the noise of a voice but it evoked fear rather than understanding. The Israelites were incapable of enduring it. Sinai was not an occasion for revelation so much as for dread.

19b-20 – so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” — Israel was terrified, so much so that they pleaded that no further message be given to them. This summarizes Deut 5:23-27, especially Deut 5:25 LXX. God approved of their request and spoke to them through Moses (Deut 5:28). V. 20 is a reference from Exod 19:12-13. ***The emphasis here is the gravity of the injunction (‘do not touch the mountain’) and the peril of coming before the annihilating holiness of the divine appearing. Judgment for anyone who ignores the holiness of God is swift and terrible. In the context of vv. 18-21, the emphasis is upon the unapproachability of God under the old covenant.*** Of course later the law added the means by which the people could approach the Lord through a sacrifice but the point of the writer is that at Sinai, the holy God was unapproachable.

21 – And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.” — The climatic reference to Moses to the awesome event heightens the impression of terror evoked by the theophany at Sinai. ***The terms conveys the connotation of profound dread at the prospect of an encounter with the living God. The emphasis falls on the sense of immense distance that separates the worshiper from God under the Sinai covenant. Sinai has an inherent inability to deal with sin in the face of divine judgment.***

the sight, the spectacle = φανταζόμενον [phantazomenon] the verb, which appears only here in early Christian literature, implies ‘an extraordinary and startling appearance’

afraid and trembling = later Jewish homiletical traditions state Moses declared at Sinai, ‘I was afraid that the angels could consume me with the breath of their mouths’ (b. Shabbat 88b)

MOUNT ZION — ***22 – But you have come to Mount Zion*** — The true position of Christians is now sketched. Christians order their lives in accordance with a different revelation. Corresponding to the Sinai event, what follows are seven features, each connected with ‘and’

which creates a single vision of the heavenly city of God. *In sharp contrast from the scene at Sinai, every aspect of this vision provides encouragement for coming boldly into the presence of God. The atmosphere at Mount Zion is festive. The frightening imagery given of Sinai fades before the reality of the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. The terrifying noises are muted and replaced by the joyful praise of angels in a festal gathering. The trembling congregation of Israel, gathered solemnly at the base of the mountain, is superseded by the congregation of those whose names are permanently inscribed in the heavenly archives. An overwhelming impression of the unapproachability of God is eclipsed in the experience of full access to the presence of God and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.* [quoting loosely from Lane, 464f]

you have come = the parallelism with the previous is emphasized by the repetition of the verb, ‘*you have come.*’ What follows is a metaphor of the believer’s experience of encountering God through Christ as a journey or pilgrimage to the city of God. *“What he describes is essentially an act of faith and personal commitment. Through faith that grasps the future as though it were the present (11:1), Christians in their pilgrimage come to that future reality that is not palpable to the senses, Mount Zion, the city of the living God. Just as eschatological faith stands firmly with the unseen reality for which one hopes on the basis of God’s promise (11:1), it grasps hold of those things as yet ‘untouched.’”* [Lane, 465] *“The perfect tense of the verb ‘you have come’ gives prominence to the action: ‘you have already come’, that is, in your conversion.”* [O’Brien, 482]

to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, — Most say the sense of the first ‘*and*’ should be translated ‘*even,*’ ‘*you have come to Mount Zion, even to the city of the living God...*’. The three designations are synonymous and should be treated as a unit. Rich biblical and apocalyptic traditions stand behind these three images. The biblical declaration that God laid the foundations of the city of Jerusalem on Mount Zion (e.g., Ps 48:8; Ps 87:1-7; Isa 14:32 LXX) was extended to the foundations of the glorified heavenly city as well (e.g., Isa 28:16; 54:11-14 LXX), and this theological motif is echoed in later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. The city of God, ‘*heavenly Jerusalem,*’ furnishes the writer with a fixed metaphor for the kingdom of God or the reign of God viewed comprehensively (cf. Ezek 48:35; Rev 3:12). Hebrews uses a variety of metaphors to develop this theme: ‘*the place*’ (11:8), ‘*the heavenly homeland*’ (11:16), ‘*the unshakeable kingdom*’ (12:28), and ‘*the abiding city which is to come*’ (13:14). This is elaborated by the themes of pilgrimage and promise. *Men and women of faith under both covenants are citizens of this city by virtue of the divine call and promise.*

heavenly Jerusalem = not used elsewhere in the NT (cf. Gal 4:26; Rev 21:2) nor in Jewish apocalyptic literature; nevertheless there can be no doubt that the metaphor was derived from apocalyptic tradition. This description of Zion is generally understood as pointing to the eschatological kingdom of God in Hebrews.

to an innumerable company of angels, — a vast array of angels surrounds God, just as they did at Mount Sinai (Heb 2:2; Deut 33:2 LXX; cf. Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19). The emphasis here is upon the density of the angelic population, as innumerable multitudes gather for an exultant celebration of worship.

23 – to the general assembly — The word used here is πανηγύρει [panēgurei] and is the only time used in the NT. It is used of joyful festivities in both pagan and Jewish sources. The thought is of a joyous worship assembly. *Dependent upon how this is understood with the preceding, the*

sense is either *‘and to the innumerable companies of angels, a festal gathering’* or *‘and to innumerable companies of angels in festal gathering.’* The fervent joy in the gathering distinguishes the atmosphere of Zion from the terror that dispersed the Israelites at the foot of Sinai. Heavenly Jerusalem is a place of blessing, where the redeemed can join with *‘angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven’* in celebratory worship of God.

and [ecclesia] of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, — gathered with the angels are a company described as *‘the assembly of the firstborn inscribed permanently in heaven,’* what in more Pauline language would equate to the elect. ‘Church’ places an incorrect emphasis upon the word ecclesia (but I have been saying as much throughout these studies). Of the versions which I refer to most, ‘church’ is a common translation (AV, RV, ASV, NKJV, NASB, NIV) but more correctly Tyndale translates it as *‘congregation’* and others translate it as *‘assembly’* (Geneva, YLT, RSV, ESV). The meaning here reflects upon the original meaning of the word as has been addressed in these studies. The use of ecclesia to describe those gathered for celebratory worship was anticipated in 2:12, the only other place where ecclesia is used in the book of Hebrews. Quoting Ps 21:23 LXX the writer says this:

*‘saying: “I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the **assembly** I will sing praise to You.”’* (Heb 2:12; note the NKJV translates ecclesia here as assembly yet defers to ‘church’ in 12:23)

Some identify this *‘assembly of the firstborn’* as the highest angels but the qualifying phrase *‘permanently inscribed in heaven’* is a strong indication this to be a reference to the redeemed since this expression is never used of angels. ***“The reference sustains the note of joy and fellowship in worship introduced with v22b and indicates that the redeemed take their place in the festive assembly at Zion. What is striking here ... is that here angels and the people of God are ‘no longer separated as at Sinai, by signs of great terror, but united in one vast assembly.’”*** [Lane, 468]

firstborn = The title *‘firstborn’* was given to the Israelites when God brought them out of Egypt in order to lead them to Sinai (Exod 4:22,23 LXX; cf. Jer 31:9). *‘Firstborn’* in the plural (as it is here in v. 23) is an apocalyptic title applied to the redeemed community. ***In contrast to Esau, who disparaged his legacy and forfeited his right to the blessing (vv. 16,17), this company consists of those who persevere in faith and so secure the inheritance and the objective blessings associated with it. In this vision of the ultimate, completed company of the people of God, membership of which is now enjoyed by faith, is generally agreed to be the vast multitude of believers from all ages, under both covenants.***

registered = Lane observes the force of the perfect participle used here emphasizes ***the indelible permanence of the registration or enrollment;*** cp. the use of the Greek perfect in parallel expressions elsewhere in the NT: Luke 10:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27. ***The metaphor of a heavenly book or register is common in both the OT and NT. The phrase occurs in the context of judgment (e.g., Dan 12:1; Rev 3:5; 20:12). The detail that the names of the firstborn are permanently inscribed has reference to those who in some sense have stood in judgment and have experienced acquittal or vindication.*** The expression can be used in regard to those who are still on earth:

‘Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.’ (Luke 10:20 NKJV)

THE ECCLESIA OF ISRAEL — The use of the phrase here is rooted in the description of Israel in the Pentateuch, where the Israelites are designated *‘the ecclesia, the congregation’* in Deut 4:10; 18:16 LXX. Note Acts 7:38:

*‘This is he who was in the **congregation** in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us’* (Act 7:38 NKJV; the word ecclesia in bold underline)

The occasion when God addressed the people at Sinai is called *‘the day of the gathering (ecclesia)’* in Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16 LXX. **Thus a direct corollary is being given between Israel at Sinai and believers gathered at the heavenly Zion.**

IS THIS AN INSTANCE OF THE ‘GRANVILLE SHARP’ RULE? — Forgive the focus upon grammar but it was questioned in the last lesson whether this was an instance of what is known as the ‘Granville Sharp’ rule, so named after Granville Sharp (1735-1813), English political reformer, slavery abolitionist, and Greek scholar. His ‘rule’ is as follows:

“Basically, Granville Sharp’s rule states that when you have two singular nouns, which are not proper names (such as Cephas, or Paul, or Timothy), which are describing a person, and the two nouns are connected by the word *‘and,’* and the first noun has the article (*‘the’*) while the second does not, both nouns are referring to the same person.”

Detractors say this rule does not always hold up but as pointed out by Daniel Wallace, the detractors misapply the rule; ***the rule distinctly notes it only applies to two nouns that are singular and apply to persons, not things.*** Two verses which are often used to illustrate the importance of this rule speaks of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ (note both these verses adhere to the conditions of the Granville Sharp rule although it may not be obvious in our English translation):

*‘looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great **God and Savior Jesus Christ**’* (Titus 2:13 NKJV)

*‘Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our **God and Savior Jesus Christ**’* (2 Pet 1:1 NKJV)

But returning to our current lesson, the question arose because of the relationship of *‘the general assembly and ecclesia.’* We can see from the definition above that the Granville Sharp rule would not apply here since these two items are not persons but things (although one could argue that the *‘general assembly’* and *‘ecclesia’* consist of people). Even if we were to consider these two groups *‘people,’* while not obvious in our English translations, the first noun *‘general assembly’* does not have the definite article, which would negate the Granville Sharp rule.

to God the Judge of all, — Lane (among others) makes the observation that if the word order is deliberate (*‘and to a Judge who is God of all’*), the initial term *‘to a Judge’* is in emphatic position. ***This is confessional; it acknowledges God as Judge and Creator, vindicating His rights over the whole human family.*** The phrase evokes an eschatological perspective, namely, the prospect of standing in the immediate presence of God as Judge. As such, it provides a powerful motivation for the stern warning that follows in v. 25, *‘see that you do not disregard the one who is speaking.’* However, for those who have been *‘decisively purged’* and *‘consecrated’* to God by the sacrificial death of Jesus (10:10, 14) and who *‘hold firm to the end the basic position’* they had

at the beginning (3:14), there remains the certainty of eschatological acceptance. The association with ‘*to a festal gathering*’ in the immediate context are reassuring; they imply an approving judgment for the assembled multitude.

to the spirits of just men made perfect, — In Jewish apocalyptic literature ‘*the spirits [or souls] of righteous persons*’ is an idiom for the godly dead. ***An intimate relationship exists between the reference to the presence of God in His office as Judge and the allusion ‘the spirits of the righteous persons men made perfect;’ the juxtaposition of the two phrases implies God’s powerful intervention in His fallen creation. Between God as Judge and Creator, and Jesus as mediator of the new covenant, the writer inserts a reference to those who enjoy the presence of God in the heavenly city.*** Hebrews uses this expression to refer to faithful men and women under both covenants who have died but now inhabit the heavenly city that was the goal of their pilgrimage (11:10, 13-16; 13:14).

just, righteous = in Hebrews, the citation of Hab 2:4 LXX in 10:38a makes explicit this group are ‘*righteous*’ because their lives reflected the faith which God approves (cf. also 11:4).

made perfect = τετελειωμένων [teteleiōmenōn], indicates that they lack nothing in their relationship with God. The perfect participle implies the stable and definite character of their condition. The key to the interpretation of the participle must be supplied by the writer’s prior use of the verb, which is used specifically with reference to all who have been ‘*perfected*’ by the sacrifice of Jesus (10:14).

24 – *to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant,* — This introduces the ground and reason for this festive gathering on Mount Zion. The writer earlier pointed to Jesus as mediator of a better, more effective covenant (8:6), contrasted with Moses, mediator of the old covenant, terrified and trembling in the presence of God (v. 21). The use of the personal name ‘*Jesus*’ is significant. It places emphasis upon the full humanity of Jesus, who was qualified for His mediatorial office through the suffering and death on behalf of the redeemed community (2:9-10; 9:28).

and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. — The ‘*sprinkling of blood*’ recalls Exod 24:8 where the sprinkling of blood of the sacrifice sealed the covenant between God and His people. Just as Moses inaugurated the covenant concluded at Sinai in the blood of the sacrifice, so also was the new covenant inaugurated through the blood of our Lord Jesus.

than that of Abel = people differ as to why this statement is given. If we consider this to be a reference to the blood of Abel it must allude to his death at the hand of Cain (Gen 4:8), and according to Gen 4:10-12 the blood of Abel cries out to God for avenging his murder. The shedding of Abel’s blood is also associated with the imposing of a curse (Gen 4:11,12). Some therefore make the comparison that as was Abel, so the death of Christ was a violent affair (12:2,3) despite the innocence of the victim (4:15; 7:26). But the blood of Jesus secures a blessing, not a curse as Abel’s death; salvation, not condemnation. Others make the observation that it is the faith of Abel which speaks (see below), thus because Abel was the first explicitly mentioned by God in Heb 11 as ‘*righteous*,’ the author of Hebrews may have just have intended to draw attention to the whole sweep of redemptive history, i.e., from the righteous Abel to the sacrificial redemptive death of Jesus.

speaks better things = Abel is said to be ‘speaking’ through his faith, not his death (11:4). Some therefore say the reference is not to the death of Abel but to the record of his integrity and his

sacrifice (Gen 4:4). Those taking this understanding notes the verb used in 11:4 and 12:24 is not the verb *'to cry out'* used in Gen 4:10 LXX but the verb *'to speak'* which in Hebrews is never used of speaking to God. Abel's faith continues to speak *to us* (11:4) through the written record in Scripture. Similarly in 12:24 the reference to what the blood has to say *to us* is that it was unable to effect reconciliation. Thus Christ's blood accomplishes what Abel's blood could not achieve.

GREATER PRIVILEGE INVOLVES GREATER RESPONSIBILITY – 25 – *See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.* — The transition from exposition in vv. 18-24 to exhortation in vv. 25-29 is abrupt, achieved by the literary device of a 'hook word.' *'Speaking'* in v. 24 is repeated with a slight variation in v. 25a, *'the one speaking.'* ***The tone changes as the writer returns to the urgent concern, the sternness justified by the privileged status of Christians in the previous paragraph. The responsibility under the new covenant to listen attentively to the voice of God is greater than Israel under the old covenant. Those who deliberately ignore the revelation of God through His Son and show contempt for the blessings of the new covenant cannot possibly escape judgment. The concluding paragraph consists of a sober caution to listen to what God is saying through His Word and through the final Word, His Son.***

25b-26a – *For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised,* — some have inferred there are at least two speakers but v. 26a makes it clear that only a single speaker is in view. The one who is speaking now from heaven to the members of the churches is the one who in the past issued his warning from earth and whose voice shook the earth *'at that time.'*

spoke on earth ... speaks from heaven = the reference is to two different revelational events, the first took place at Sinai and the second is that which is intrinsic to Christian experience. Note the *'then'* in v. 25bc and *'now'* in v. 26a. The first is identified with the old covenant, the second with the new covenant.

IT IS GOD SPEAKING — The one who *'spoke on earth'* is not Moses, it was the Lord who spoke to Israel. The writer of Hebrews has already insisted that it was God's voice that Israel chose to disregard in the wilderness (3:7-11, 16-18). "It is necessary to recognize that the text gains in clarity when the speaker is identified as God, whose voice shook the earth at Sinai, who swore that those who broke the covenant would not enter his rest (3:7-11), who promised that he would establish a new covenant with the house of Israel (8:6-12), and who now continues to speak to the new covenant community through his Son (1:1-2a). The sermon prepared for the house church began with a majestic sentence declaring that God has spoken his final word through his Son (1:1-2a). This significant theological motif is elaborated in 3:7-4:13, where the fact of God's speaking *at this present time* is driven home by the recurring refrain, *'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart'* (3:7-8a, 15; 4:7, citing Ps 95:7 LXX). The sermon is brought to its pastoral climax with the cautionary admonition in v25a, *'Be careful you do not disregard the one who is speaking.'*" [Lane, 476f]

'IT IS AXIOMATIC THAT THE RESPONSE TO ANY MESSAGE MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE DIGNITY AND COMPETENCE OF THE ONE WHO IS SPEAKING' — In response to the declaration that God has spoken through His Son, the writer deduces, *'We must pay the closest attention, therefore, to what we have heard'* (2:1). The writer in this paragraph makes an appeal based on a comparison: since the word spoken at Sinai proved to be valid, and every infringement and disobedience was appropriately punished, a disregard for the word from the

Son to the community must inevitably be catastrophic. *“The argument reflects a recurring theme in the homily, namely, the superior basis for responsible commitment to God under the new covenant as compared to the old and the appropriately greater certainty that those who disregard their covenantal relationship with God will be severely punished.”* [Lane, 477]

26b – saying, “Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” — this is the last of three distinct moments: the past event of Sinai, the present moment of the promise, and the announcement of a future shaking that will affect not only the earth but heaven as well.

shaking heaven and earth = a recurring feature in the prophetic announcements of the Day of the Lord that throws nations into confusion and heralds their destruction (Isa 13:1-22; Joel 2:1-11; Hag 2:6-7, 21-22). Within the historical context of Haggai’s prophetic ministry, the prophecy of another shaking was a message of encouragement and hope (Hag 2:6-9). Addressing the future glory of the temple, Haggai announced that the fall of Babylon which made possible the return from exile, was not the great shaking. The future shaking of earth and heaven would overthrow the nations and will be the means by which he will fill his temple with glory. He Himself will rule His people from that place.

27 – Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. — The writer here interprets the prophetic text just given, then gives the implication in v. 28. The thought progresses from the pending promise of the future shaking in v. 26b to the effect that event will have on all that can be shaken and on what is incapable of being shaken in v. 27. The antithesis between ‘earth’ and ‘heaven’ in v. 26 is replaced with that which is shakable and the unshakable. *Note that the essential difference between the shakable and the unshakable lies not in their natural status as ‘created’ as opposed to ‘uncreated’ but in their relationship to God.*

28 – Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. — The severity of vv. 25-27 is momentarily softened when the writer announces that Christians are in the process of receiving an unshakable kingdom. *This gift, secured on the ground of the new covenant, calls for gratitude expressed in thankful worship of the God whose awesome and holy character was disclosed in the fiery epiphany of Sinai. The present tense of the participle ‘receiving’ emphasizes that Christians are now only in the process of receiving this gift and that this process will continue into the future.* This is part of what has become known as the ‘now / not yet’ character of salvation. A ‘kingdom which cannot be shaken’ occurs only here in the NT.

29 – For our God is a consuming fire. — The climactic statement in the writer’s concluding part of his speech is the austere reminder, ‘for our God is a consuming fire.’ The expression ‘for’ indicates that it is God’s essential character that provides the reason for the fear and awe that are appropriate to His worship. This description of God evokes the images of holiness displayed in the fiery epiphany of Sinai. There is a clear allusion to Deut 4:24 LXX where Moses reminded Israel that ‘the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.’ In these texts, consignment to the flames is a metaphor for the completeness and severity of the judgment the apostate can anticipate. As such, the concluding statement in 12:14-29 furnishes a sharp caution against the rejection of the divine voice, complementing the sharpness of the cautionary command in v. 25a, ‘Be careful that you do not disregard the one who is speaking.’