

International Bible Lessons Commentary

Hebrews 12:18-29

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, September 23, 2012
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, September 23, 2012**, is from **Hebrews 12:18-29**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lessons Commentary* (formerly, *Bible Lesson Forum*) below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further** discuss the five questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the **International Bible Lessons Commentary** website. For additional **International Bible Lesson Commentaries**, see the complete and comprehensive **International Bible Lessons Commentary Index**. The weekly **International Bible Lesson** is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught at <http://InternationalBibleLessons.org> and in **The Oklahoman** newspaper.

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Hebrews 12:18-29

(Hebrews 12:18) You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,

The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* describes the experience of the Hebrews in the wilderness with Moses. They came to the foot of the mountain, Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments. They could touch the mountain for it was physical, but Moses warned them that if they did touch the mountain they would die (see Exodus 19:12). When God descended on the mountain to talk with Moses the people became frightened because the sight was so dramatic, involving a blazing fire, darkness, gloom and a tempest.

(Hebrews 12:19) and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

The people were so afraid of God that they did not want God to speak to them directly or face-to-face. They wanted Moses to be the mediator between God and themselves. They wanted Moses to tell them what God expected and wanted from them. From what they saw and heard, they learned that God existed, was holy, and powerful. Fear of God inspired them to obey God; still, they disobeyed God and rebelled against God. Fear did not motivate them to obey God as they ought, and obeying out of fear for their lives did not lead to a lasting obedience or obedience with the right motive (the right motive is love for God).

(Hebrews 12:20) (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.”

Here, the writer explained his meaning and referred to the Old Testament (Exodus 19:13) to prove his argument. For the early Christians, and all Christians since the time of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament is the authoritative Word of God that Jesus came to fulfill and will completely fulfill after He comes again. Therefore, Christians study both the Old Testament and New Testament as the inspired Scriptures and to learn how these Scriptures teach about Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Notice from this verse that God did not directly destroy an animal that touched the mountain (for example, God did not strike the animal with lightning). God expected His people to consider the mountain so holy and to obey Him so perfectly that they would enforce His law by executing the penalty for breaking His law. God would not do for His people what He expected them to do. God could, and probably did because He loves His creation, keep wild animals from wandering close to His holy mountain. God expected His people to watch over and restrain their domestic animals from coming near and touching the mountain. Perhaps His people could not endure the order because they did not choose to properly look after and restrain their domestic animals.

(Hebrews 12:21) Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”)

Since this quotation of Moses is not recorded in the Bible, it may have been handed down by word of mouth and became a part of the tradition about Moses on the mountain. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* to record this tradition to show that the Hebrews in the time of Moses had good reasons to fear God because of His Holiness, since even Moses trembled in fear before God when he ascended the mountain and first met God at the burning bush (when Moses received the commission to go to Pharaoh to demand that Pharaoh free God’s people from slavery and let God’s people go to serve God).

(Hebrews 12:22) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

Unlike what Moses and the Hebrews saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears, and what was so terrifying for them, Christians have come to Mount Zion instead of Mount Sinai. When reading about Mount Zion, readers might have first thought of Jerusalem in Israel, until the writer explains that he means “the heavenly Jerusalem.” Today, we gather spiritually with “innumerable angels,” and we find true joy in worshiping God as at a festival. Some interpreters identify Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem with the Church of Jesus Christ. When the Church gathers for worship, believers join with “innumerable angels” in the worship of God.

(Hebrews 12:23) and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

Jesus Christ is the “firstborn,” the only begotten Son of God, and the “firstborn” to be raised from the dead and receive a glorified human body. The “assembly of the firstborn” is the “assembly of Jesus Christ,” believers who gather around Him and in His name. Christians who love and follow Jesus Christ assemble or gather with other believers here on earth and in heaven. When we come to Jesus by grace through faith and trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are “enrolled in heaven” (for example, think of going to be enrolled as a student in a school). To be “enrolled in heaven,” we must comply with the standards or requirements to be enrolled, which is faith in Jesus Christ, Who enrolls us. The “spirits of the righteous made holy” are those Christians in heaven who have gone before us. They lived on earth “righteous” *in Christ Jesus*, Who guided and empowered them. Jesus Christ is the One who forgives sin and cleanses from sin the “righteous” *in Him*, which is part of the way He makes believers “perfect.” God, “the judge of all” approves our enrollment in heaven and the work of Jesus in making believers perfect in heaven.

(Hebrews 12:24) and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

God is “the judge of all,” and Jesus is our living mediator in heaven; the only mediator between God, “the judge of all,” and ourselves, “the assembly of the firstborn.” Whereas Moses represented the old covenant of works of the law, Jesus established a new covenant that leads believers to works of faith, hope, and love – not works motivated by fear. Abel died a martyr’s death for his faith. Jesus’ sacrificial death enables God to justly forgive and cleanse believers from all sin.

(Hebrews 12:25) See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

The living God, the judge of all, is speaking to us and warning us from heaven. Just as we have a better covenant and can gather spiritually with others in heaven – though we cannot see them with our physical or mental eyes or imagination – so we want to be certain we always trust and obey Jesus Christ, Who also warns us from heaven and while He preached on earth. Just as the disobedient Hebrews did not escape God’s discipline when they wandered in the wilderness, so we will not escape if we reject Jesus Christ and refuse faithful obedience to Him.

(Hebrews 12:26) At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.”

When God spoke to Moses and the Hebrews from Mount Sinai, the earth shook. After Jesus Christ comes again the earth will shake once more (and also heaven). Heaven may mean the area where airplanes and spacecraft fly and also the area where demonic principalities and powers abide. Jesus will defeat death and all of His enemies, physical and spiritual, human and demonic.

(Hebrews 12:27) This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Though we are created beings living on a created planet in a created universe in space and time, some day we will live where our surroundings cannot be shaken. Earthquakes can destroy property and lives, and the ruined areas can be rebuilt, hopefully stronger, but they can be shaken again. After the old creation is removed, the new heaven and earth will never be shaken.

(Hebrews 12:28) Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe;

In contrast to life in the Promised Land, those who trust in Jesus Christ receive a kingdom that Jesus said, “is not of this world.” When we consider what it means to live in “this world,” we have even more reason to give thanks to Jesus Christ for all He has done for us. Moreover, we have good reasons to love God and worship God through Christ in ways acceptable to God. We should come to God with respect for His holiness and in true amazement that He loves us and saves us from our sins and sins’ consequences. Understanding this about God should move us to love Him more and more, and move us to want to do everything He says to bring happiness to Him and others.

(Hebrews 12:29) for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Our God is a consuming fire; therefore, if contemplating the gracious love and forgiving Spirit of God in Jesus Christ will not move us to repentance, love for God and neighbor, faith, and obedience to God; then, we need to contemplate what it may mean for God to become a “consuming fire” for us. Perhaps fear of God and the consequences of disobedience will lead us to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, to faith in Jesus Christ, love for God and Jesus Christ, and a change of our ways of living.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How does the writer describe the experience of those who came to God in the time of Moses under the old covenant?

2. How does the writer describe the experience of those who come to God since the coming of Jesus Christ under the new covenant?
3. What does the writer say that should make believers think of heaven as a happy place?
4. How does the writer warn people not to reject Jesus?
5. Read Hebrews 12:28 again. How should believers approach God? Why?

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