

## **A Better Kingdom**

Hebrews 12:18-29

One of the classic competitions designed to help young people to get interested in engineering is the popsicle stick bridge contest. This is a big deal that a lot of high schools and middle schools participate in—some of our own students have done this before. It happens nationwide, organized by the American Society of Civil Engineers.<sup>1</sup> And the idea is that students must build a bridge at least 24 inches long, wide enough to fit one matchbox car, using only standard-issue popsicle sticks and Elmer's glue. There are awards for innovation and aesthetics, but the primary contest deals with efficiency, which is measured by how much load the bridge can bear divided by the actual weight of the bridge. And the way you test this, is by putting the bridge under stress. They hang weights from the center of the bridge to test the quality and see how much it will hold before it breaks. If it doesn't hold at least 5 pounds, it's disqualified. Some of the winners from a recent 2018 competition were able to hold over 300 pounds.

So how do you test the quality of a model bridge? You put it under stress. The load it is able to bear will reveal its true quality.

God promises to do something similar at the end of time—not to the bridges we build—but to the kingdoms we invest in and belong to—in order to reveal their true quality. He is going to put them under stress—to “shake” them, as our passage puts it. To shake both the heavens and the earth, in order to expose every sham kingdom—to shake it until it breaks—and so reveal the only true kingdom—the only one that lasts, that's bigger than the created world, and can therefore never be shaken.

Our passage this morning invites us into a comparison between two such kingdoms, or rather two versions of the same kingdom. The kingdom of God under the old covenant given to Israel at Mount Sinai, and the kingdom of God under the new covenant given to all nations through faith in Jesus Christ. One is represented by Mount Sinai, the other by Mount Zion. One is dominated by fear and terror, the other by joyful worship.

But these two kingdoms are not the only options facing people today. Nor were they the only options in the author's day, or the only ones implied in our passage. Apart from these two versions of God's kingdom, there are a myriad of other options available that we can summarize as the kingdoms of the world—competing dominions (whether nation states or cultural movements or religious systems) that compete on earth and against heaven.

But among all these kingdoms—the kingdom of God under the old covenant, the kingdoms of this world, and the kingdom of God under the new covenant—only one of them will survive the

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<sup>1</sup> See the 2018 rules of the [Richmond Branch](#) of the ASCE competition.

stress test when God shakes the cosmos in the end. And what Hebrews tells us is that if we have Jesus, we belong to that better kingdom, wherein real worship is possible.

And so in looking at chapter 12:18-29 I want us to consider how these kingdoms compare—like a model bridge competition: who it exists for, who's on the team, what holds the structure together, and what it all leads to as a result. And then in light of that comparison, we'll consider our response.

We'll start where the author starts, with the kingdom of God under the old covenant, vv. 18-21.

### **The Kingdom of God under the Old Covenant: Terror and Distance (12:18-21)**

Now if you've been following this series or have spent time in Hebrews, you'll remember that one of the major reasons the author wrote this book to a church back in the first century was because they were facing intense pressure to leave the gospel of Jesus behind and go back to Judaism and the old covenant. To approach God as though Jesus wasn't the Christ, or the Christ still hadn't come. And so throughout the book the author has been showing us how Jesus is better than the old covenant in every way—he's a better Word, a better messenger, a better priest from a better priesthood, who offers better sacrifices for a better purification, who fulfills better promises, and offers us a better rest. He fulfills the old covenant with something better.

And so here, as the author continues his call for us to hold fast to the gospel and not turn away, but to run with endurance the race set before us (as we saw last week, cf. 12:1-2), he begins by reminding us what God's kingdom was like under the old covenant—how it was dominated by fear and distance, rather than worship and belonging. And he does so by taking us back to Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4, to the very mountain where God made that covenant with Israel, and what that experience of approaching God was like. Verse 18:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." (12:18-21)

So what can we say about the kingdom of God under the old covenant? Not that we're in any position to judge the way God accomplishes his work, but as he invites us into this comparison, what do we see as we approach this bridge to examine it? Who does it exist for? Who's included on the team? What holds it together? And what is its ultimate result?

The first question—who is it for—is clearly God. Every kingdom revolves around a king. And the king at the center of Sinai, the ruler who speaks and the object of worship around whom the people gather, is God himself. A God merciful and gracious, who had just rescued his people from centuries of slavery and oppression in Egypt, who bore them on eagles' wings and brought them to himself (Exod. 19:4). But a God who is not to be trifled with. He is a holy God—above us, over us, beyond us in his radiance and majesty and moral perfection. And that holiness is on full display in the creation of his covenant at Sinai.

So the kingdom under the old covenant revolves around God. He is the center. But who is on the team? Who is included in this kingdom? This kingdom is unique to the people of Israel—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom God promised to make into a great nation and whom God chose to be his special covenant people. A people who despite their election, are frequently given to sin and rebellion against their covenant God.

What holds the kingdom together under the old covenant? What's the glue? According to the terms of the covenant, what holds it together is the faithfulness of Israel. God will always keep his end of the deal, but for the kingdom to work under this covenant, Israel must keep their end of the deal too. Those were the terms. God says to Israel at Sinai in Exodus 19: “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6). If Israel's sin and unfaithfulness hangs on this kingdom bridge, it will collapse.

So you put all of that together—a kingdom that centers around a holy God, includes a frequently rebellious Israel, and is held together by Israel's obedience—what are the results? The scene described in Exodus 19 and Hebrews 12 is dominated by *terror* and *distance*. Those are the results of God's kingdom under the old covenant. A “blazing fire and darkness and gloom and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words make the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them . . . so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear’” (Heb. 12:18-21). Terror for sinners approaching the presence of a holy God, and therefore distance from that God. No security or lasting intimacy of relationship. They were unable to truly draw near.

This is what those pressuring the early Hebrew church were trying to get them to go back to. And it makes no sense. Why hold onto a kingdom which falters under the weight of my own sin, when there's a much better kingdom available?

But before we look at the kingdom of God under the new covenant, we need to take a moment to consider the kingdoms of this world—the myriad of alternatives that people come up with on their own, as their own answer to the problem of God's kingdom under the old covenant.

### **The Kingdoms of this World: Divisiveness and Disillusionment**

It's easy to conclude, when looking at the terrifying scene at Sinai, that the problem is that we've made sin too sinful, or God too holy. We're giving God a bad name. And we're beating people up with a burden they can't bear. What the world really needs is \_\_\_\_\_. And whatever we put in that blank is our vision of the good life. How we think life should be. And then what we do is look for someone or something who can give that good life to us, and we crown it as king.

We crown money as king, and look to the promises of Wall Street. Or entertainment as king, and look to the promises of Hollywood. We crown Mother Nature as king, and move to Portland. Or our nation as king, and set our eyes on D.C. In fact, every nation-state on earth operates as a kind of kingdom—Moscow makes its promises, just like Cairo and Beijing. Every cultural movement is driven by an impulse to create or guard a certain kind of kingdom. Every world religion. Even our companies or careers, our personal aspirations, can take on a kingdom-like role in our lives. Each kingdom promising to deliver some version of the good life.

But what happens is that as soon as you crown something as king, it not only makes promises, it also demands loyalty and sacrifice. You have to rearrange your life around the king. Pay homage, make offerings. And anyone who's not willing to pledge allegiance or pay the price becomes a suspect, or an outsider. A threat to be monitored, and if necessary demonized and marginalized, lest the kingdom be compromised.

You think of the story of Saul in the Old Testament. Up to that point in Israel's story, God had given Israel judges to rule them, because he was their King. But now Israel demands a king of their own, like the other nations. And when they made that demand, they did so because they had a certain vision of the good life that they wanted to attain, and a strong suspicion that God was not capable of giving it to them. They were no longer willing to trust a God whom they couldn't see to protect them; they wanted a king they could see, who could go before them and fight their battles (1 Sam. 8:4-5, 19-20; 12:11-12). A king who promised safety. But that king would also demand their loyalty and sacrifice. And even though Samuel the prophet warned them this would happen—that “he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots . . . He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards . . . He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards . . . He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves” (1 Sam. 8:11-17)—they didn't care. The promise of a king who keep them safe and deliver to them the good life was too much.

And it worked great for a while. Saul defeated the Ammonites and brought safety to the land. Until he grew in pride and rebellion against God, and became a paranoid maniac bent on protecting his throne at all costs—even if it meant killing the man God himself chose to replace him (cf. 1 Sam. 19–31). Kingdoms are ruled by kings who demand loyalty and sacrifice.

And we see this same tension among the competing kingdoms of the world today. The economic disputes and spear-rattling among global powers. Everyone who doesn't pledge loyalty is suspect. Or think of the political rhetoric that floods our news channels and social media feeds. You can't just have a conversation anymore; you can barely ask questions without your loyalty to whomever being called into question (whether on the right or the left). People aren't looking for dialogue; they're looking for fealty. It's the same way with the culture wars. Today we judge someone's effectiveness or fitness for a job based on their personal views on the most recent controversial issue, rather than their actual experience or qualifications. And why is it? Why are politics or social issues so tense and divisive these days? It's a clash of kingdoms. Alternate versions of the good life, competing claims of authority or morality; warring kingdoms.

And so you examine the bridges. All these competing kingdoms on earth. *Who are they for?* Each one is for its own king; everything must revolve around whoever or whatever is wearing the crown. That's whose calling the shots. *Who's included?* Whoever is loyal. Our tribe—that's who belongs. Those who pledge allegiance and pay the price. The great irony of so many cultural movements that champion tolerance and inclusivity today is that they're just as exclusive in practice as everything else. And *what holds each of these kingdoms together?* The obedience of the people. It's no different than the old covenant law—it's just a different law-giver with different laws. It's still based on human effort and resolve, which means it still results in fear and distance. Only it's worse than that, because at least God kept his word under the old covenant, whereas the kings of this world regularly break theirs. Power corrupts. Kingdoms disappoint.

Suspicion poisons relationships. We're left with divisiveness and disillusionment—the collateral damage of competing worldly kingdoms. That's the result.

We were never meant to remain under the distance and fear of the old covenant. But this world, in its attempt to make the holy God common and replaceable, is incapable of coming up with something better. We were made for God and his kingdom, but that kingdom finds its ultimate realization in the new covenant in Christ—the better kingdom. And that's the third bridge to examine this morning.

### **The Kingdom of God under the New Covenant in Christ (12:22-24)**

This brings us to vv. 22-24. If you belong to Jesus, you have not come to Mount Sinai, dominated by fear and distance, or to Hollywood, Moscow, Mecca, or D.C., dominated by disillusionment and divisiveness.

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, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (12:22-24)

This is the real kingdom—the kingdom we were meant for. The kingdom Jesus redeems us for. Not the historical city of Jerusalem, but the heavenly city it points to. The heavenly city that Abraham was looking forward to in ch. 11 (cf. 11:10, 16). The true Zion that is above us and will one day come down to us (cf. Rev. 21:1-2). This is what we are enduring for. What we are running our race in hopes of. The kingdom of God under the new covenant in Christ.

And so what do we see in this kingdom? *Who is it for?* Who wears the crown? It's God—not us. You have come to God, the judge of all. And what's interesting is the description of God here as judge. If we're not careful, we might think that we would see a lot softer picture of God here than we saw in the description of Sinai. In contrast to the “blazing fire and darkness and gloom,” you've come to God the soft and cuddly Father who just wants to love on wherever you are. And God is loving; his love for his children is unconditional. But that doesn't make him less holy, or mean that he isn't judge. He's still the king, which means he's still judge. And that's the emphasis here. In fact, our passage begins and ends by describing his holiness in terms of fire: “a blazing fire” in v. 18, and in v. 29, “for our God is a consuming fire.” The new covenant doesn't make God less holy. It gives sinners like us access to a holy God without being burned up.

And that brings us to *who's included in this kingdom*. Who on the team? This kingdom includes people from every tribes and nation and language on earth, anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and King. You have come to “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven”—that's Old Testament language for the covenant people of God (cf. Exod. 4:22). But it's no longer based on Israelite heritage, but being united with Christ by faith. And you have come “to the spirits of the righteous made perfect”—those who have died in Christ and are already in God's presence, perfected from sin (though still waiting for the resurrection, cf. 11:40).

Now there's still an exclusivity about the kingdom of God in Christ. Every kingdom is exclusive in some way. But Christianity is the most inclusive exclusive kingdom.<sup>2</sup> You have to turn from sin and trust in Christ personally as your Savior and King to be part of his kingdom. But *everyone* is invited to do so—it's not limited by race or gender or age or economic class or nationality or ethnicity or education or language or social status or religious upbringing. And God's grace is what gives us the power to do that—not our own smarts or effort or background. It's the most inclusive exclusive kingdom in the world.

And the reason that personal faith in Christ is necessary is because his work is what holds this kingdom together, not ours. Jesus is the glue. You have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:24). The old covenant was held together by Israel's obedience, and therefore it fell apart. The new covenant is held together by Jesus' obedience, and because he was perfectly faithful to his Father, and then suffered the punishment for our sin and disobedience on the cross, the new covenant can never fall apart. It's held together by Christ.

This is what the author has been arguing throughout the whole book of Hebrews—that it's on the basis of Jesus' work that we have access to God. That sinners—people like you and me, who have rebelled against God in big and small ways—are invited to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (4:16). Because Jesus is better, and he is enough.

Where the kingdom under the old covenant was marked by fear and distance, in Christ there is no fear of condemnation, and therefore no reason to hang back from God at a distance. Where the kingdoms of this world are marked by disillusionment and disappointment, in Christ we are promised an inheritance that can never perish or let us down. Where the kingdoms of this world are marked by suspicion and division, in Christ there is forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, restoration, and place for all. Because *everyone* in Christ is invited to draw near to God with confidence and joy.

And so the result of this kingdom is *worship* and *belonging*. That's what dominates the scene in vv. 22-24. The angels set the tone—“innumerable angels in festal gathering”—that's language of worship. And that's what you do in the presence of a holy God who loves you and welcomes you as his child, despite your sin and rebellion. You worship. That's what's happening in heaven right now by the saints who've gone before us; that's what we will do in the end, when heaven comes down. And that's we are invited to do right now while we remain on earth. Notice the past perfect tense of the language here—“you have come to Mount Zion”—not you will come, but you have come. In Christ there is an *already* and a *not-yet* to our worship in God's presence. Through Jesus, by his Spirit, when we lift our worship to God on earth, we already offer it in his presence in heaven, even though we're not yet there. That's amazing. That's the dominant theme of God's new covenant kingdom in Christ—worship and belonging. In Christ we belong to a better kingdom wherein true worship is possible.

And there will come a day when all of these kingdoms undergo a test. Where God will hang his weights on the bridge, when he will shake heaven and earth, and only one will be standing.

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<sup>2</sup> See Tim Keller, *Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 36-38.

Because of that, there is only one proper response, and that's what we see in vv. 25-29—the urgency of heeding God's Word and the joy of offering acceptable worship.

### **Our Response: Urgent Heeding and Acceptable Worship (12:25-29)**

Having examined the differences between Sinai and Hollywood and Wall Street and Zion, and seen so clearly the superiority of God's kingdom in Christ, the author warns us not to ignore the one who warns us of these things from heaven. Verse 25: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven." This is serious business. Which king you worship, and which kingdom you align yourself with, is no mere matter of taste or preference. This is life and death on an eternal scale.

Most kings demand your allegiance because they need you. The success of the kingdom rests on the obedience of the people. Jesus demands our allegiance because we need him. There's no other way to escape judgment or find wholeness, significance, justice, or peace. He alone can offer it, and he loves us enough to tell us.

Because the day is coming when the kingdoms of this world will once and for all be exposed for the shams that they are. Verse 26: "At that time [back at Sinai] his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.'" The author takes us back to God's pledge in the book of Haggai, where God promises to restore the glory of his temple—his special dwelling place on earth—by shaking "the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts" (Hag. 2:6-7). And in filling his temple with glory, the true kingdom, he exposes the emptiness of all other manmade kingdoms (cf. Hag. 2:20-22). As the author of Hebrews explains, "This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, *things that have been made*—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain" (12:27). Only one kingdom will survive the stress test—only the kingdom of God in Christ.

And so how do we respond? Don't ignore God's warning (v. 25). And offer acceptable worship to God. Verses 28-29: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." If you have Jesus, you belong to the winning team. Be grateful for that; that's his grace. And do what you were saved to do—what dominates the new covenant kingdom scene—worship and belonging. Draw near to God through Christ and offer *acceptable worship*—worship that truly honors God. What does that mean? We're going to talk about that next week, because that's what chapter 13 is about—what acceptable worship to God looks like. But it's worship that treats God as God. Worship on his terms, that recognizes his true worthiness, and responds appropriately and accordingly. You can read ahead to ch. 13 to learn more.

But the worship we offer is to be done with reverence and awe. God is our Father who loves us deeply and lavishes upon us his mercy and grace; he is also our king and our judge, holy and above us—a consuming fire. The new covenant doesn't make God less holy; it allows sinners like us to approach our holy God with confidence, reverence, gratitude, and love.

And so let's live like new covenant people. Let's be about belonging—about relationship with God and with each other. A relationship not based on our common interests or common ethnicity or occupations, but on our common Savior, Jesus. And let's be about worshiping God with gratitude and reverence. Humility and confidence. Because we belong to a better kingdom—one that will not let us down, and can never be shaken. We are marching to Zion. We are citizens of “heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).