

High Priest of the New Covenant

Fall Quarter: Covenants With God

Unit 3: An Everlasting Covenant

Sunday school lesson for the week of November 19, 2017

By Rev. Earnestine W. Campbell

Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29

Background: Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29; Psalm 66

Purpose: To pursue peace and express gratitude for the gift of God's unshakeable kingdom through Jesus.

Key Verse: Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken, let's continue to express our gratitude. With this gratitude, let's serve in a way that is pleasing to God with respect and awe, because our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28-29)

The *Adult Bible Studies*' writer refers to the shift in this week's lesson's readings as the "idea of covenant in the New Testament." Meaning, we begin to encounter Christ as a "mediator of the new covenant," citing the Letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 12:24).

Hearing the Word

Background

The writer begins with "The Letter to the Hebrews" and the scripture, Hebrews 4:14, NRSV, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession."

The writer says that this statement provides a basis for hope and a sense of urgency. The scripture refers to Jesus as the unblemished sacrifice for our sins. The writer makes the point that the author's perspective is clearly a plea for the Hebrews to keep the faith of their enduring past (suffering, pressure, sympathy toward people in prison, confiscation of their possession, etc.) The plea is also for them to continue to meet the challenges that are before them with the joy that they have done through all their experiences. What a powerful model for us to follow today as we meet the challenges of our lives and society.

The writer introduces the next scripture as an encouragement given for the people to remain in their covenant with the God: "Therefore, run the race that is before you" (Hebrews 12:1), says the author, knowing that you have been embraced by God into the new covenant of faith mediated by his Son, Jesus.

The writer shifts to the structure of the book and summarizes it as follows:

- *It is a letter meant to be heard, read aloud. Or better still, a sermon (or a collection of sermons) in the form of a letter.*
- *The author of the letter is unknown (written probably sometime between a.d. 60-70), its creative theological interpretation and pastoral concern reflect a person well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and rhetoric and thoroughly aware of the struggles and anxieties of his fellow Christians.*
- *The audience is uncertain. The letter implies an urban audience, most likely the house churches in Rome that had begun in the Jewish quarter and that were beginning to attract new Gentile converts. The letter was also for those who were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. He takes the hearers (readers) into the Israelite world of priestly sacrifices, wilderness journey, psalms, prophecy, and exile.*

The writer moves to the theme of “Christ as the Mediator of a New Covenant,” referencing Chapters Hebrews 8–10, which specifically and mostly focus on this theme. The writer provides the following covenant examination: “The Greek word for covenant is *diatheke*. It is found 17 times in the letter (7:22; 8:6, 8, 9 [twice], 10; 9:4 [twice], 15 [twice], 16, 17, 20; 10:16, 29; 12:24; and 13:20).

When the concept is first introduced in 7:22, Jesus, because he is the eternal High Priest who serves forever, is described as ‘the guarantee of a better covenant’ (Hebrews 7:26-28).” These scripture references further reveal Jesus as the true and eternal High Priest, the perfected mediator of God’s forgiveness and grace, and the drawing power in a new relationship, a new covenant, with God.

Scripture lesson

Hebrews 12:14-15, 18-29

Hebrews 12:14-15

“Pursue the goal of peace along with everyone – and holiness as well, because no one will see the Lord without it. Make sure that no one misses out on God’s grace. Make sure that no root of bitterness grows up that might cause trouble and pollute many people.”

The writer refers to text as an expression of the author’s pastoral concerns, continuing from verses 1-2. Citing these verses as metaphorically speaking of a runner in a race who has thrown off any “excess baggage,” rid himself of sin, surrounded himself by a “cloud of witnesses,” and set his eyes on his model Jesus. Plainly, referencing Jesus’ ability to defy the obstacles, endure the pain of the race, reach the finish line, and with joy. The people are urged to do the same. The writer says that the race is almost certain to be injurious but states “Faith can get you to the goal, even if you have to limp over it.” To this point, the writer quotes Thomas Long, “In the Christian faith, if you play hurt, you

end up healed; if you stay on the sidelines, the injury just gets worse.”

Verses 18-21

The writer recognizes the author’s perspective in the verses as setting the stage for contrasting the old covenant with Israel and the new covenant in Christ by reviving the ancient narrative of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. And says for detailed information that the author references to Exodus 19 and 20 and Deuteronomy 4 and 5 are for the characterization of the “three moments” at Sinai. These moments are: the Israelites were drawn into a physical and material experience, marked by fire, darkness, violent winds, a trumpet blast, and the thundering words of God. The Israelites were denied access to God and kept at a distance. And the overwhelming emotion was fear, so much fear that the people begged God to stop talking and Moses was himself “terrified and shaking” (verse 21).

Verses 22-24

The scriptures take us to the place of Mount Zion, and the writer identifies it as a mountain of historic and spiritual importance. It is a mountain that the new converts to Christianity were drawn to, unlike the Mount Sinai (which the author never mentions by name). The writer states the following details about its history: formerly a Jebusite stronghold in Jerusalem, the area was captured by David, who then made it the site of his royal residence and, by placing the Ark of the Covenant there, the center of Israelite worship. According to the psalmist (78:68-69; also, Isaiah 8:18), Zion was the place that God loved and established for his presence.

Verses 25-29

The scriptures provide a continuous warning to the people for them not to refuse the one that speaks. The writer connects the warning to the following passages (3:7-19; 6:4-8; 10:26-31). Verse 26: “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” The author reminded the people that if they willfully resisted the voice of God, they would no less suffer the consequences that the Israelites in the wilderness endured when they disobeyed that voice.

Conclusion

The lesson serves its purpose for our pursuit of peace and expression of gratitude for the gift of God’s unshakeable kingdom through Jesus. We, as believers, will sometimes face challenges and obstacles in the "race." But, the scripture lesson encourages us to keep running toward perfecting the faith. As we continue to achieve faithfulness in our

covenant with God, let us be strengthened by the “cloud of witnesses” of old and new that have encouraged us, knowing that Jesus is the true and eternal High Priest, the perfected example.

Closing prayer

Father, God, may we continue to hear your voice, let us not be shaken and detour from your will for us as believers. May we continue to do what is right in your sight even during difficult times and always in the spirit of joy and peace. Amen.

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The “Adult Bible Studies, Series Fall 2017” book is used for the content of this lesson.