

Jesus Is a **BETTER SHELTER**

(Hebrews 12:18-29)

Before category 5 cyclone Yasi passed through & left destruction in its wake, Queensland had only a few category 5 rated shelters.

Yasi's 'shake up' prompted construction of 10 new cutting edge category-5-rated shelters for our northerly state-mates.

That's the proper response to a **natural disaster**: learn from it and *prepare* shelters.

But natural disasters – like the magnitude 8.1 earthquake in Mexico a few weeks ago – they have a way of reminding us no matter how prepared we think we are, we cannot really prepare for "the **BIG ONE**" – the magnitude 10 quake seismologists keep anticipating. You see each number on the earthquake "Richter Scale" is 10x as strong as the previous number.

Compared to a magnitude 8 quake, a magnitude 10 would be 10x times 10x – or 100x stronger than what they just experienced in Mexico! How can you 'prepare' for **that**?!

Today's passage in the book of Hebrews presents a "shakedown" like the world has never known – the Day of Reckoning, when God will judge the living and the dead.

How can you be prepared for **that**?

The proper response to a natural disaster is to learn from it and prepare for it. But it is problematic if we equate **spiritual** disasters with natural disasters, regarding how we should prepare.

You see, **spiritually** speaking, each the of those *multi-million* dollar N.QLD shelters has the equivalent protection of those tragic "safety" suits the emergency workers wore during meltdown at the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986.

Those not killed by the explosion, died from radiation – *suits or no suits!*

They provided no safety at all.

Approaching a holy God with a man-made safety-suit for '*spiritual*' protection from sin = a *spiritual* disaster, because "God is a consuming fire" (12:29)! Our text says

God has promised, "I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

removing things that can be shaken—created things—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a KINGDOM that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe." (Heb 12:26-28)

No *earthly* bunker or shelter is strong enough or deep enough to protect us from God's coming spiritual shake-up, which will leave no one standing in its wake . . . **EXCEPT** those who've joyfully sought Shelter in Jesus! Jesus is a **Better Shelter!**

That's our Title. And the Main Idea of our passage is:

Seek Joyful Refuge in Jesus and His Unshakeable Kingdom!

If I had to pick 1 verse in the Bible to sum up all of Hebrews 12:18-29, it'd be the last verse of Psalm 2

Serve the Lord with reverential awe; rejoice with trembling!

Give homage to the Son lest you perish in your Rebellion.

Blessed are all who take REFUGE in Him! (Psa 2:11-12, CSB)

A summary showing 2 approaches to God – *Rebellion* or *Refuge*.

But we must understand this:

to seek *Refuge* **apart from** Jesus, God's Son, is equivalent to *Rebellion*.

Hebrews 12 shows us there is no refuge FROM the Son, but there is refuge IN the Son!

A contrast of 2 approaches to God is built off a verb used in contrast in Hebrews 12:

- "You have **not** come" . . . (Heb 12:18)
- "You **have** come" . . . (Heb 12:22)

And the contrast of the 2 approaches is a contrast of Covenants, which the writer pictures as "A Tale of Two Mountains" – Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion – 1 on earth, 1 in heaven.

And these 2 mountains function as our outline:

Approaching God with **Jesus** as your Mediator: *Finding Shelter!* (12:22-24)

Approaching God with any other mediator¹: *Facing a Shakedown!* (12:18-22)

And the writer of Hebrews is very deliberate in his contrast, as he uses

- 7 *bleak* descriptions for Mt. Sinai
which are offset by
- 7 *blessed* descriptions of Mt. Zion,

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1) Unapproachable earthly mountain | 1) Approachable heavenly Mountain |
| 2) Blazing fire | 2) Innumerable angels in joyful assembly |
| 3) Darkness | 3) Church, with names are written in heaven |
| 4) Gloom | 4) God |
| 5) Stormy Tempest | 5) the spirits of the righteous made perfect |
| 6) Trumpet blast | 6) Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant |
| 7) Voice speaking words of Law | 7) Jesus' blood speaking better than Abel's |

Before we consider the first approach to God – Sinai . . .

Let me just mention that the Book of Hebrews does not have the typical *greetings, salutations, thanksgiving* that were standard in a Greco-Roman letter or "epistle". And so many commentators view the entire book of Hebrews as a "sermon", maybe one of the earliest *complete* sermons on record from the church.

And 12:18-29 serves as the climax to the "sermon" of Hebrews, tying together all the threads, the various ways that *Jesus is Better!*

Chapter 13 is the "application" of the sermon, unpacking what v.28 looks like, or should!:

Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and so let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.

[With camp next Sunday, then an October mini-series on the Reformation . . . I'll be doing the 'wrap up', the "application" section, chapter 13 in November. We still have application this morn, though!]

So, now let's consider the first of 2 Approaches to God: Mt. Sinai

- 1] Approaching God with *any other* mediator & *Facing a Shakedown* (12:18-21)

*"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)

In a book repeating the need to endure in the race of faith to the finish line, the writer is telling us, the old covenant did *not* adequately fuel joyful "endurance".

Ultimately, you cannot dwell at Sinai. You will be shaken up & shaken apart.

¹ Even Moses.

What in the OT is the writer of Hebrews specifically referring to?

An event from the book of Exodus, chapter 19 and following.

Already in Exodus 12, God had spared Israel by having the 10th plague of death 'Passover' them, thanks to the blood of a 'Passover lamb' without blemish (foreshadowing Jesus²). In chapter 14, God had delivered Israel through the Red Sea.

Already rescued/delivered, God had set His **love** on Israel before given them the Law, which was never meant to save. In chapter 19, God had carried them out & brought them to Himself, saying,

{DPb} *You yourselves saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings & brought you to Myself . . . I shielded you & cared for you as the apple of My eye.*" (Ex 19:3-4; Deut 32:10)

Now, they're camping . . . waiting.

God's people needed *direction, structure, governance* for living as a nation under God, so they could get 'moving forward' into the promised land. They needed a **Covenant**.

So, God gives them the **Law** to 'ratify/formalise' the Old Covenant under Moses. So... God has brought them to Himself and revealed His presence on a mountain, Sinai: where they learned that God is **HOLY** – set apart, sacred, pure.

Everything was designed to emphasise God's holiness to His people.

It was a dreadful sight in the truest sense, visible manifestations of divine power: *burning & blackness, tempest & trumpet.*

Along with the fearful vision was the equally fearful voice, (v. 19),

"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."

God's holy presence functioned like a spiritual 'police tape' or 'fire line':

Do not cross – Danger!

It was enough to chill the bravest heart! *Moses* was "trembling with fear" (v.21).

Moses – the mediator of the old covenant – who'd already met God at the burning bush!

And if you're thinking, you're holier than Moses, ask yourself:

"Am I a prince, who has voluntarily given up the riches of an entire kingdom, to follow God in the wilderness for 40 years, leading His grumbling people?"

We all would be trembling at Sinai!

Under the old covenant, emphasis was on the distance between holy God & sinful man.

Two ideas sum up the 7 'details of dread':

1] God's **UNAPPROACHABLE** Presence

2] God's **OVERWHELMING** Voice.³

The Old Covenant made distance imperative because the *Law* is about Holiness.

A Sacred God requires:

- Sacred *Space* (for His shekinah glory/'special presence', in the Tabernacle/Temple),
- Sacred *Offerings* (Sacrifices of atonement, for the unholy to make peace with Holy God)
- Sacred *Servants* (Priests to do the *mediating work* of sacrificial offerings⁴)
- Sacred *Time* (weekly Sabbath day of worship, monthly & annual religious festivals)

² See 1 Corinthians 5:7, where Paul explicitly calls Jesus "our Passover lamb".

³ Paraphrase of Raymond Brown, *Hebrews* (BST [Bible Speaks Today series]).

⁴ See Hebrews 5:1

Since the Fall, angels protect God's holy presence by keeping out the unholy

- at the entrance to the garden blocking access after Adam & Eve sinned & were expelled.
- in the most holy place, angels at the top of the ark of God's covenant, the footstool of His throne, guard His holiness, such that only 1 day a year, 1 high priest could draw near.

Distance & Dread.

Again & again in Scripture, those who have a vision of God or a visit from Him/His messenger some visible form (called a 'theophany') fall on their face, saying,

"Woe is me, for I am **ruined!**"⁵ SHAKEN to the core & falling way short. A kingdom sifted, built on sand.

Ultimately, you cannot *dwell* at Sinai! Eventually, you will be *shaken up & shaken apart,* **beaten down** by your conscience, **condemned** by God's law.

And that is why the old covenant was ultimately *inadequate,*

why the writer of Hebrews also called the old covenant '**faulty**':

If that first covenant had been FAULTLESS, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

*For God **finds fault with them**" (Heb 8:7-8)*

KEY:

The old covenant was *faulty* (8:7) because it continued *finding fault* with the people (8:8)

The old covenant did not ultimately **DEAL** with our faults, with our sins.

This is why God " *set it aside, because it was weak and useless . . .*

*We need "a better hope", a better covenant "to **DRAW NEAR** to God!" (Heb 7:18-19).*

The author means the Law is ' *useless* ' for **saving** us since 'the blood of bulls & goats *cannot* take away sin.' But the law is *useful* for **showing** us our need for a Saviour.

And this is where the "threads" weave together in the many ways *Jesus is **Better!***

2] APPROACHING GOD WITH JESUS AS YOUR MEDIATOR: **FINDING SHELTER!** (12:22-24)

We now come to a matchless one-sentence description of the Christian believer's destiny!

{DP} *But you **have come** to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God – the heavenly Jerusalem – and to innumerable angels in festive gathering, and to the church 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)*

Immediately we 'sense' the difference on this mountain!!:

- The uproar of whirlwind, trumpet blast, and a sound of condemning law is muted and replaced by the joyful praise of myriads of angels in a festive celebration.
- The trembling congregation of Israel at the base of Sinai, gives way to the security of the church whose names are already inscribed in the heavenly archives!
- An overwhelming unapproachability is outshined by experience of full access to the presence of God and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and believers who've already died and are with Him in glory ("spirits of the righteous made perfect")

What folly for Esau to give all this up for a bowl of stew!

Those persecuted *Hebrew Christian* readers in the 1st century, considering turning away from following Jesus, and turning back to Moses, should be thankful that they have **not** come to a place like Sinai, and instead have been offered a heavenly Zion!!

⁵ See, for example, Isaiah 6:5; Judges 13:20-22.

And WE are to be thankful just as much!

Please hear this: the voice in Zion is *no less holy* than that spoken at Sinai.

What's at the Centre? – God is **Judge** of all!

What's at the End of the chapter? – God is still *holy, a consuming fire!*

YET, from the opening paragraphs of the New Testament, God draws near to people with no margin/personal space bubble! Think of it. God in a manger. God in a fishing boat. God in the midst of a crowd. God who is seen & touched. God who is hung on a cross. And God, who is resurrected splendour, offering His body to be touched and embraced.

How is all of this possible!?!

Jesus! Jesus makes all the difference . . .

Although the 'voice' in Zion makes exacting demands, it *also* offers **enabling promises!**⁶

We've considered believers from the Old Testament were sinful, faulty,

New covenant believers are sinful. We are faulty!

God is Holy.

He does not lower His standards so His pathetic people can meet pathetic standards.

God's holy standards are met in His Son – fully satisfying God's righteous law.

That's why in the New Covenant God says, "*I will never again remember their sins!*" (8:12)

That's the good news: although we're still faulty, God "**finds**" no fault in us,

because by His faultless sacrifice Jesus paid it all!

The Blood of Jesus *can* take away sins!,

can take the consuming fire of the Fathers wrath upon Himself!

"*Jesus blood is speaks better than Abel's*" (v.24)

because Abel's blood cried for vengeance & retribution against Cain,

while Jesus blood speaks of grace and pardon,

"**FORGIVE THEM, Father**", Jesus spoke, while 'them' we crucifying Him!

Under the old covenant, the emphasis was on the distance between God & man.

Under the new covenant it's **DRAW NEAR/GO UP** & live – because of Jesus bridging the gap!

• **Sacred Space** ('Special Presence', Jesus is the 'Better Word')

"*The Word was God...and the Word became flesh & dwelt among us*" (Jn 1:1,14)

"*The Son is the radiance of God's glory, the exact expression of His nature*" (1:3)

• **Sacred Offerings** (Jesus is the 'Better Sacrifice')

Christ...put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (Heb 9:26)

• **Sacred Servants** (Jesus is the 'Better High Priest')

*Since we have a Great High Priest – Jesus, the Son of God . . . with confidence let us **DRAW NEAR** to God's throne of grace!* (Heb 4:14-16)

• **Sacred Time** (Jesus is the 'Better Rest & Relationship')

Jesus offered up Himself once for all time...we who've believed enter His Rest (Heb 10:12; 4:11)

You see, while Jesus was tried, tested, **sifted & shaken** as He hung there on the cross, the **earth itself was shaken** in an earthquake, the Temple was rocked and the Temple curtain that separated the most holy place of God from man was tore wide open!

Our Mediator was shaken for us, so we can stand in the shelter of His unshakeable kingdom!

⁶ Great summary sentence from Raymond Brown, *Hebrews*, (BST, "Bible Speaks Today" series).

Jesus opened the way to God; He is the Way the Truth, the Life – no one accesses the Father but through Him. So draw near to Jesus.

Have you? How do you? And how can I know if my name is written in heaven?

In light of our 2 mountains, the 1st Question to ask might be:

Have I been humbled before God's Law (Mt. Sinai), recognising my *deep need* for a Saviour?

Please don't answer that flippantly, as "churchy" people. Give it serious thought.

Holiday Kids Club was a good reminder about this.

To protect the innocent, I will keep things anonymous.

This is just the reflections of just one HKC small group leader, who anonymously is my age, is from America, and I love her very much!

This small group leader was recapping the skit and the kids NEED for Jesus. She asked, For Jesus to take our condemnation (in the skit, the "reject room" for the voided warranty of us broken toys), and to make us right with God, (giving us His "tick of approval!" and access to eternal celebration with God @Taco Toysday), what did Jesus need to Achieve?

A: Jesus had to keep EVERY commandment, EVERYDAY, for ALL His life!

Fulfilling all righteousness . . . An entire life of obeying ALL Father's rules & living to serve others, even to the point of an unjust death on a cross.

Q: How do we go at that? If we narrow it down to just 10 commandments, or even just 1, like the 'greatest' commandment – to love God with all that we are, above anything else.

A: Yes, I TOTALLY keep that commandment.

Q: Really?

A: Totally!

Q: So what's it like when you have free time? Do you *totally* run the Bible to hear God's word about Jesus as your 1st priority, and talk to God in joyful response called prayer?

A: I totally do!

Q: How would you compare that to how often and how excited you are to go *play Minecraft* in your spare time?

A: Oh . . . I see . . . I *totally fail* at following the first commandment.

Grown-ups, we need to ask ourselves the same assessment questions!

And that's just 1 commandment!

Wind up the 'multiplier' and our heart is exposed!

God is SO patient and long-suffering with us.

But the initial question: *do I have conviction of sin before a holy God?*

Have I been humbled before God's Law (Mt. Sinai), recognising my *deep need* for a Saviour?

Q2:

To be righteous before God, are you trusting in Jesus' faultless life & sacrifice, His blood of the new covenant to pay for your sin, viewing Jesus as your Lord and your Saviour?

He's the only way, the only One who opens heaven's door!

Q3: Not a 'quantity' question, but a *qualitative* question:

Like those on Mt. Zion, do you **rejoice** in God's grace for you in Jesus?

Do you **love** the Lord?

That Bible says that inheritance in God's kingdom is,
"promised to those who LOVE God" (James 2:5).

Heaven is not a place for those who simply flee from wrath to come.

Heaven is a place for the those who love God and are *thrilled* by His astonishing grace in Jesus Christ!

Fear of Hell is no proof of love for God.⁷

Jesus calls us to relationship with God, to know Him.

This is why I deliberately put the word "joyful" in the main idea:

Seek Joyful Refuge in Jesus and His Unshakeable Kingdom!

Evidence of a genuine believer, those with their name written in Heaven, is seen in the response of v.28:

*Therefore let us **be GRATEFUL** for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
 and let us **offer** to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe!*

So: Is the astonishing good news of Jesus **REJOICING** your soul and leading you to offer acceptable worship?

And so the author gives this compelling summary to act, in repentant joy, v. 25a,
*"See that you **do not refuse Him** who is speaking!"*

What an offer! What grace overflows flows down Mt. Zion, like an avalanche!
 What an inheritance awaits those who love and trust in Jesus!

Verse 25b speaks with the voice of compelling love, that loves enough to warn:

*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.*

Regarding those 'category 5 rated' storm shelters in North Queensland,

"Premier Anna Bligh has indicated that the cyclone shelters will be available for recreational use when not being used in an emergency."

The writer of Hebrews **urges** you to take Jesus seriously, not viewing Him or His good news as someone/something "*available for recreational use*".

Joyful Trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

This leads us to a couple **APPLICATION Qs for Christians**:

Q1: Are we calling people to **FESTIVE JOY** of salvation in Christ?

How can we build a community that *REFLECTS* the festive gathering of Mount Zion?

Start by recognising we already are that community! Past tense, "*we have come to Mt. Zion*"
 So how can we live that truth out?

Joy Davidman writes a little book about a Martian student been sent to earth on assignment.

The student sweeps over the world on a Sunday morning, writing furiously with his tentacle.

He notes that creatures of the third planet from the sun are obviously sun worshippers, this one day in seven set aside for religious observance . . .

⁷ Great summary sentence by John Piper, "The Echo & Insufficiency of Hell", part 1.

- Some go to the ocean, ecstatically hurling themselves into the waves. When they are exhausted, they anoint their bodies with holy oils & lay flat on the ground, surrendering completely to the sun deity.
- Others conduct loud & rowdy rituals in open air, drawing large crowds to arenas or bodies of water.
- Some of the religion's mystics address a holy ball in open green fields – sometime with feet, sometime with racket or club or bat.

The Martian goes on to write about a small group of unbelievers who have rejected sun worship. They gather behind closed doors in stained-glass buildings, obviously designed to keep the sunlight out. Their faces and gestures demonstrate none of the “festivity” that sun worshipers pursue their in devotions. In fact, they almost appear placid, “indicating minds blank of thought or emotion.”

Reflecting on Christian believers and their lack of joy in their faith, Davidman asks:

Was the Martian wildly wrong?

Many come to church out of a dull sense of duty rather than a joyous sense of devotion. Davidman is concerned with how joy has somehow been leeches from Sunday worship.

Do we live joyfully in our covenant with God?

From the picture of the Mount Zion festivities in the angelic assembly, we are terribly out of place or out of step with eternity if we do not.

If we do not live joyfully, reflecting the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem, how can we invite people to that reality? If our lives reflect the gloom of Sinai more than the joy of Zion, we do the kingdom poor publicity.

This does not mean, of course, that we always are thrilled with every situation.

But are we characterized by joy?

If we are not, then the reality of Zion is not invading our lives. Perhaps we need a clearer view of that mountain and must hear again the song of the angels and the message of Jesus' sprinkled blood.

Q2: Are we calling people to God's GRACE, to salvation BY GRACE in Christ?

No doubt the Law points out God's holiness and our unholiness, so that we see our need for a Saviour!

Tick.

The good news salvation only makes sense in light of the bad news of condemnation.

Tick.

And yet, our only HOPE is approaching God and the 2nd mountain, Zion, through Jesus.

With people's natural tendency to pursue *self*-reformation in *self*-righteousness (legalism), the 2nd mountain reminds us we need to carefully ensure that **grace** is also “heard.”

Here is a caution from commentator George Guthrie, who mentions the church's need to speak prophetically into society about righteousness, but then adds this crucial balance:

As our society unravels, morally speaking, if we're not careful, grace can get lost amidst our shouts.

Most unholy people do not like Sinai and will respond, “I don't want to listen to that voice anymore!”

In short, if we bear a message of ungrace, they run the other way when they see us coming... {DPb}

It would be a shame if people never hear the music of the heavenly Jerusalem because the thunder of our Sinai drowns it out, if they never move past trembling Moses to meet Jesus, who stands with His outstretched hands....”⁸

You see, the worst of sorts were somehow drawn to Jesus! Prostitutes, tax embezzlers,

⁸ George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC series.

We must be careful that our church – which claims to be the body of Christ – does not **repel** the type of people who were so drawn to Jesus himself!

The people *drawn* to Jesus were the humbled & broken, *not* the proud, revelling in their sin.

But will we – *the broken* – receive other broken sorts?

(If there is anything Holiday Kids Club drummed home, is that we are ALL broken toys, who've voided our warranty, and without Jesus, deserve the 'Reject Room').

It's easy to say "amen" to this as a general principle. But how about as a specific practice?

I share this example because it is so confronting and challenging TO ME!...

In his book *What's So Amazing about Grace*, author Philip Yancey writes of a most tragic case of a prostitute so depraved, for extra cash to support her drug habit, she'd rented out her daughter in the trade (a daughter whose age was still in single digits of age).

Speaking to Yancey, here she was: weeping, sick, homeless . . . completely **broken**. Yancey writes,

I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable — I'm required to report cases of child abuse . . . what do I say to such a woman?

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help.

I will never forget the look of pure shock that crossed her face.

*"Church! Why would I ever go there? I already feel TERRIBLE about my choices!
They'd just make me feel worse."*

She'd already been to Sinai:

"I already feel terrible about choices!"

But would she hear the music of the heavenly Jerusalem, from other broken people like me, like you? That there is HOPE for her in Jesus, as there is for us?

I do hope so!

We must have the humble mindset of grace C. S. Lewis described the church as a spiritual hospital, and himself, well . . . **[DP]:**

"Think of me as a fellow patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice."

I quote this so often, because I struggle with pride so much!

Are those to whom we minister, those to whom we reach out, encouraged to draw near to God or to run away from God?

In Conclusion, I encourage you to press on, brothers & sisters, endure in the race!

When believers encounter hard times we need more than a reminder of the **PAST** (11:1–40), we also need a vision of the **FUTURE** (12:22–29) – the city of the living God to which we belong and the kingdom which cannot be shaken!

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 heavens." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that can be shaken—created things—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

This vantage point gives us eyes to live now in light of the unseen then, Christ appearing. True Christian hope not only comforts us about the future, it *transforms us in the present*.

In contrast to Esau, the firstborn fool, who gave up his inheritance for a meal, Jim Elliott wrote these words & lived out these words:

He is no fool if he should choose to give the things he cannot keep to gain what he can never lose.
He and his 4 friends gave his life for the gospel in Ecuador, which not only saved & transformed a tribe, but started a huge revival in foreign missions.

Knowledge of the coming shaking of the world must causes us to evaluate what we are investing our life in.

May we do the same, knowing . . .

what is now untouchable will become touchable,
when the New Jerusalem in Heaven comes down to a refashioned New Earth,
when a physically resurrected Jesus, the first-fruits of our physical resurrection, will return and bring untold joys of us being with the Him, *with* His people, *without* our sin!