

CHAPTER 17
The Epistle to the Hebrews
THE FIFTH WARNING (Part 2) (Hebrews 12:18-24)
THE PRIVILEGES OFFERED AND AT STAKE
by G. H. Lang

Chapter 12:18-24

18. For ye are not come unto a mount which might be touched, and that burned with fire, and unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,
19. and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which *voice* they that heard entreated that no word more should be spoken unto them:
20. for they could not endure that which was enjoined, If even a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned;
21. and so fearful was the appearance, *that* Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:
22. but ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts, the general assembly of angels,
23. and to the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
24. and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel.

1. SAVED PERSONS IN VIEW.

It is very plain that this portion of God's word has no reference to the unsaved. Months before they reached Sinai, Israel had experienced the redeeming power of the blood of atonement, and were freed from the authority of the destroying angel in Egypt. They had also left Egypt for ever as their sphere of life, and the Red Sea was rolling between them and its scenes of bondage or of pleasure. They were thus a picture of us who have accepted the eternal deliverance from wrath through the precious blood of Christ, and who have thereupon been cut off from the life of heart-association with the world by the power of the love of Him Whose death at the cross at the hands of the world implies our death with Him to that world. This union with Him is set forth in our immersion in the waters of baptism in His name; and Israel crossing the Sea is declared in the New Testament (1 Cor. 10:1) to be an old-time parallel to our baptism.

Thus redeemed, and thus separated to a walk of faith in God, Israel presently drew near to Mount Sinai, there to gain a fuller knowledge of the great Jehovah, the God with Whom they had to do, But how terrible was the aspect in which they were to meet Him! With what dreadful accompaniments did He present Himself! The exhibition was indeed suited to their condition, for their first need was to know that their God was infinitely greater and grander than all the gods of Egypt or the other nations, so that the dread of these latter might be broken from off their hearts.

They stand, then, beneath the mountain, which towers above them some 7,000 feet, and gaze with terror at its cloud-capped, lightning-lit, earthquake-rent summit; and even Moses, the friend of God, says: "I exceedingly fear and quake."

2. The Prospects of the Christian.

But how different is the prospect at which we are called to look. From our present place as pilgrims in a world that affords our hearts naught by which we can profit, we are brought to gaze up to a height of privilege and glory which is as entrancing and encouraging as Sinai seemed to Israel to be forbidding.

"Ye *have* come," says the Scripture: it is a perfect tense that is used. As Israel had come to Sinai, so we "have drawn near" to these higher, because heavenly and eternal, glories. Let us then inspect closely what is spread before and above us. We will observe first the blood-besprinkled ground where Israel stood and where we stand.

i. "Ye have come unto the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better than that of Abel."

"Abel's blood for vengeance
Pleaded to the skies;
But the blood of Jesus
For our pardon cries."

No matter what is the privilege now known, or hereafter to be gained, all our standing and hope is based upon the atonement of Calvary. Had not the blood of Jesus put away our sin we had been destroyed in Egypt, and had never drawn near to God, nor had any prospect whatever to which to aspire. And if that same blood does not keep us clean, then will continuous communion be impossible; "but if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we [God and the saint] have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us [keeps us perpetually and wholly clean] from all sin" (1 John 1:7). And to all eternity, and in whatever height of glory we may reign on Mount Zion, we shall know our security to stand in that eternal redemption.

"I stand upon His merit:
I know no other stand,
Not e'en where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land."

ii. "Ye have come unto Jesus the mediator of a new covenant." This theme is a chief part of the burden of the Epistle. Hebrew believers, cast out of the synagogue, unwelcome at the temple, deprived therefore of the sacrifices and priesthood, seemed to have lost all that made life great and safe for the Israelite. Gentile believers similarly lost

completely their former religious associations, which carried serious consequences in an age when religion interpenetrated all departments of life. To comfort such they are instructed that there are heavenly realities of which Israel's earthly privileges were but shadows. The covenant made at Sinai gives place to the new covenant of which God had spoken through Jeremiah (31:31). This covenant has eternal force, being assured by a sacrifice which has eternal value; it carries promises which are far, far better than any limited to the earth could ever be; and it is guaranteed and administered by a Priest Who is none less than God's Son incarnate and glorified, and whose office does not pass from Himself to another, seeing that He ever liveth in the power of an indissoluble life (Heb. 7:16).

Thus those who have come unto Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant gain heavenly and eternal privileges; and these they receive for the sake of what 1-le is to God, and not out of regard to any merit of their own; even as God wrought for Israel in Egypt not because of ought that He saw in them, but because of His own unmerited love and because of His covenant with their fathers, the heads of their family (Deut. 7:7, 8). Christ is the Head of all the redeemed family of God, the Surety of this better covenant, in which all now share who accept Him as their sacrifice and mediator.

iii. Ye have come unto "the spirits of just men made perfect." As explained above at chi. 11:40 (p. 228 f.) we understand this to mean that we have come unto a point of privilege entitling us to anticipate a share in the first resurrection of the just, for the just are not yet made perfect, nor can be till resurrection. It is a prospect to which we aspire; just as Israel did not reach the summit of Sinai, but gazed up at it.

iv. Therefore the next honour named is that we have come unto "God the Judge of all." From the preceding clauses it will be seen that the force of the words "ye have come" is that we have come to *participate* in the privileges stated, and not merely to view them. Even thus it was open to Israel to share in the benefits of the sacrifices offered at Sinai, and in the advantages of the covenant there enacted. Keeping therefore to this sense, and thus interpreting the clauses with uniformity, the present words will not mean that we have drawn near to God to be judged, but rather to share with Him the honour of the office indicated by the title. As the Judge of all we shall not meet God, for Christ Himself declared this in the plain and memorable words, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth Him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). And as regards the appearing of the saints before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), this is indeed a solemn prospect to be ceaselessly reckoned upon, but is not the matter here in question. The saints are to judge the world and even angels (1 Cor. 6:2, 3). The apostles are assured of this office in relation to Israel as a nation (Luke 22:28-30). The same thought is suggested by the promise of sitting upon the throne with Christ, the Judge (Rev. 3:21); that is, by the dignity of kingship being conferred, for of old the king was the chief judge of the people; and by such a promise as that to the saints who

overcome that they shall rule the nations (Rev. 2:27).

In the administration of His mighty kingdom, and in the adjusting and rewarding of the affairs of the ages of human and angelic history, the glorified saints will be associated with the King in glory. Doubtless a large part of our training on earth is directed by our Father to capacitating us for such responsible and honorable office. If then a self-willed child refuses and nullifies the training, how shall he be found fit for the high but delicate position that he might have gained?

v. Being thus included in the company of the “kings and priests” of the future, we have come unto the “church of the firstborn [ones] who are enrolled in heaven.” The law of primogeniture is Divinely recognized in both the sphere of the family and in that of the nations, and also in the heavenly regions as well as the earthly. This honour is evidently the initial reason for the kingship descending as a rule to the eldest son of a monarch. The honoring of the eldest son is, indeed, founded in nature, and is further enforced by Divine sanction. It is still largely acknowledged in the east, as in the case of a young lawyer in Egypt remarking to the writer, that his eldest brother had just taken off a book, for, said my friend, he thinks that because he is the eldest he can do as he likes with our things.

In this we may see the explanation of Pharaoh’s prompt and dogged resistance to God’s call that he should free Israel. Egypt was then the chief of the nations in wisdom, wealth, power, and glory. To the proud sovereign of this haughty people a message comes from a God who claims to be the Lord of heaven and earth, the eternal one, Jehovah. The Egyptians, though by that time worshipping many gods, still owned that above all there was the great eternal Deity. From this overlord of heaven and earth the mandate comes to Pharaoh, “Israel is my son, my firstborn” (Exod. 4:22). No wonder if the monarch starts at the words. To him they mean nothing less than that Egypt’s supremacy among the nations is to pass to this race of miserable slaves. Greater humiliation could not be: it were worse than the national foe, the Hittites, wresting this glory from him in fair fight: and the foolish king will dare anything rather than consent.

This word of God remains in force. Israel is still God’s firstborn among the peoples of the earth, and must, as we have seen, “possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen. 22:17), “and the nation and kingdom that will not serve Israel shall perish” (Isa. 60:12). Referring to that coming period when this shall be fulfilled, and speaking of Israel’s King, “David My Servant,” Jehovah has said: “I will make him firstborn, the most High to the kings of the earth” (Ps. 89:27. *Variorum Bible*).

Thus the thought enlarges from the family to the State, and must now expand to the entire universe as the whole realm of God’s kingdom. Amongst all the various orders of beings that God will have to His praise in eternal ages, one company is to be

to the rest what the firstborn has been shown to be. This company is the church of God: “ye have come unto,” ye have membership in “the church [*ekklesia*, the selected, the called out] of the firstborn ones,¹ who are enrolled in heaven.” These will have a double share in the Father’s inheritance, that is the glory of the spacious and magnificent heavenly regions and conditions, as contrasted with the great but limited glory of the earthly section of the kingdom of God. To them will be given with Christ authority over all other beings, creatures, and things (“*all things* are yours,” 1 Cor. 3:22); and so fully will God dwell in them that they will be intermediaries, “priests,” between Him and His universe, “they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him” (Rev. 20:6). Well may the same Scripture exclaim, “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection.”

vi. The next point in the panorama of privilege is the relationship of the church to the angelic hosts on a day of festivity to which these will come. The English versions do not rightly divide the clauses here. Commenting on this Alford remarks that “it is difficult to see why the coupling of clause to clause by *kai* (and) which prevails through the sentence, should be broken through”; and Darby (*New Translation*; note) says, “The words ‘and’ (*kai*) give the division very clearly here,” and he translates thus: “and to myriads of angels, the universal gathering”; whilst Alford seeks to give the full force of the words by rendering, “and to myriads, the festal hosts of angels.” We may therefore read the clause thus, “Ye have come unto. . . myriads of angels, the universal festal gathering.”

And what a vista of splendor thus opens to view as the mind conceives as much as possible of the glory of the Son of God, in Whom “dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” coming in His own glory, and in the glory of the Father, and that of the holy angels (Luke 9:26). Such a monarch in such state and with such a retinue will eclipse all that the world ever thought grand and splendid. And in that glory the firstborn are to share, being the “bride, the wife of the Lamb,” who with Christ will be seen “coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God” (Rev. 21:9-11). To her as to her Lord the angels will be attendants, for already they are “ministering spirits sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14).

But this clause fixes the exact occasion when the church shall enter upon these supreme honors. For this gathering of angels is both “universal,” that is, all the holy hosts will be present at once, and it is also “festal,” that is, the gathering is on an occasion of joy and triumph. The Word of God elsewhere speaks only of one such day, and that the day of Messiah’s appearing in Jerusalem to establish His kingdom on earth. Zechariah foresaw that event, and cried rapturously, “Jehovah my God shall come, and *all the holy ones* with Thee” (14:5); and Christ Himself gathered up this and

¹ The noun is plural, and cannot refer to Christ personally, as is further shown by the plural verb following, “who are enrolled.”

some other prophecies into the thrilling declaration, “when the Son of man shall come in His glory, and *all the angels* with Him, then shall He sit on the throne of His glory” (Matt. 25:31). Thus shall be fulfilled the promise of God summarized through the angel that announced His birth: “the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:32, 33): and then shall come to pass the word concerning the church, “When Christ, our life, shall be manifested [to men on earth], then shall ye also with Him be manifested in glory” (Col. 3:4).

“Let that day come, O Lord,
And other days pass by;
Night is far spent, and dawning tells
That Thou art drawing nigh.

“Hasten Thy coming, Lord!
Dawn, O Thou glorious day!
Then shall the fairest days of earth
Pass into shade away.”

vii. But great as are the things thus enlarged upon, there are greater and higher glories unto which we have drawn near. Ye have come unto “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” During the reign of Christ on earth, Jerusalem, the “city of the great King,” will be His earthly metropolis, and the world’s center. But in the heavenly regions there will be another “city,” of which that on earth is but a reflection. In that upper realm where the substance of being is spirit, God will have a spiritual metropolis, Himself being the architect that designed and the builder that erected it (Heb. 11:10). And the persons of the church of the firstborn, perfected spirits inhabiting incorruptible spiritual bodies, will form that dwelling place of God.

3. *The Bride is the City.* During the panorama of the Revelation, John had heard a great multitude in heaven rejoicing that the hour had come for the long expected marriage of the Lamb, but he had not yet seen the bride. And it may be that as the mighty visions progressed, and the millennial age passed into the eternal state, he inwardly wondered at this omission. But after all else had been shown to him the Bride was unveiled to his enraptured gaze, for he says (Rev. 21:9, 10): “And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were laden with the seven last plagues; and he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and shewed me,” shewed me—what? a bride? no, a city, “the holy city, new Jerusalem.” So, then, the “city” is the “bride,” and the latter being a figure of a company of persons so must the former be. The assertion that the “city” is an *interpretation* of the figure of speech “bride” is not founded on the passage. The angel did not say to John, I will interpret, or explain, to thee the metaphor “bride,” but he said, “I will *skew* thee the

bride,” that is, give thee a vision of her. Thus the “city” is a second vision in symbol of the same company of which the “bride” was the former symbol. Such oriental duplicating of metaphors is common in Scripture. The figure of the bride was no longer adequate to reveal the glory of the church, nor her most exalted office as the dwelling-place of God in a reconciled universe, from which all the wicked had been banished. Therefore the city comes into view; and nature and art and language are exhausted to portray her splendor.

In interpreting this vision one error is particularly common, namely, to speak of the city as a region into which the members of the church of God will enter and be blessed. This notion effectually forbids any right understanding of the matter. The bride, that is, the glorified heavenly church of the first-born ones, *is* the city. Others of the saved enter its gates; these compose it.

It may be hard to assign an exact meaning to each of the details given, but the main features described readily yield their teaching.

i. In the persons of His heavenly saints God will dwell so personally and be so actually present, that they will be to Him what a capital city is to a monarch—a place of residence, a scene for the display of His majesty, a spot to which His subjects may come to have dealings with Him, and a center of government around which the corporate life of the empire may revolve.

ii. “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14). To members of the church this was not a new thought, for it had been before taught that they, as a body corporate, were “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). Historically it is the preaching, teaching, labors, and sufferings of the apostles upon which the church is founded; and of their teaching Christ Jesus Himself was the all-prominent theme (the “chief corner-stone”), binding together the foundation, and affording unity and stability to the building.

iii. “The nations shall walk in the light thereof; and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it” (Rev. 21:24). It will be under the beneficent guidance of the heavenly saints that the nations, so long “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them” (Eph. 4:18), will learn to walk in His fear; and they in return will honour those who are thus the occasion of their eternal blessing.

iv. But as it will be by recognizing Israel as the chief nation on earth by God’s will that the Gentiles will own God’s sovereignty, therefore through Israel mediately it is that they will enjoy the blessings dispensed through the church; and hence on the portals of the city are written the names of the tribes of Israel. For the Gentiles the means of access into heavenly blessings will be by honoring Israel (Isa. 14:2; 49: 22,

23; 60:12; 66:20; Zeph. 3:10, marg.: Zech. 8:20-23). It would be as unreasonable to “spiritualize” the literal Israel out of this picture as to “spiritualize” out of it the twelve apostles of the Lamb who are next mentioned (Rev. 21:12, 14).

v. The Holy Spirit of God will thus flow out through the church for the quickening of all, as pictured by the river of the water of life; and it will be in response to obedience that the peoples will have the benefit of the River, for this proceeds out of the *throne* of God and of the Lamb.

Further into such fascinating details we may not give time to go; but it is unto no less privileged service and glories that we have come.¹ Such is the ravishing prospect unto which the saints of this age are called, for God hath called us “unto His own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12).

4. But we have anticipated the highest feature of all: “ye have come unto Mount Zion.” In the earthly Jerusalem, two mounts have been prominent, Mount Moriah and Mount Zion. The former was presently crowned with Solomon’s temple; but in the heavenly Jerusalem there is no temple seen (Rev. 21:22), for God no longer dwells hidden behind a veil, or Calvary has made possible His manifest dwelling with men (Rev. 21:3). But Mount Zion is found in His eternal realm. On that hill in the earthly city David’s palace stood (2 Sam. 5:7-9), and it was the supreme court of justice for the kingdom, for “there were set thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David” (Ps. 122:5). Not a throne, but thrones, are mentioned. How accurate a prophetic picture of the heavenly things yet to be; for Christ, the son of David, will associate with Himself in His kingly office those who have been counted worthy of their calling, and who have reached this pinnacle of honour to reign with Him for ever and ever (Rev. 22:5). And as many dwelt in Jerusalem and but few comparatively on Mount Zion, is there not here again the suggestion that many more may reach the blessedness of the “city” than will reach the crowning honour and reign on a throne on Mount Zion? “One star,” though truly a star, that is, a heavenly being, “differeth from another star in glory” (1 Cor. 15:41).

Only one man, Moses, was permitted to climb to the top of Sinai; the rest of God’s people could but look from afar to that height of glory, and in truth they had little enough desire to draw near to those devouring fires. But many are the sons now being brought unto glory in Christ Jesus, and such as walk in the power of His fellowship may approach unto that same God with boldness. Let us therefore “abide in Christ; that if He shall be manifested, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed from Him at His presence” (1 John 2:28). Let us look to ourselves that we lose not the things that we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward (2 John 8).

Of that supremely and eternally glorious state a sevenfold perfection is declared (Rev. 22:3-5). “There shall be no curse any more “—perfect sinlessness and blessedness: “and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein “—perfect

government: “and His servants shall do Him service “—perfect service: “and they shall see His face “—perfect communion: “and His name shall be in their foreheads “—perfect resemblance and identification: “and there shall be night no more”—perfect knowledge and strength: “and they shall reign unto the ages of the ages”—perfect glory.

“Oh, what a bright and blessed world
This groaning earth of ours will be,
When from its throne the tempter hurled
Shall leave it all, O Lord, to thee.

“But brighter far that world above
Where we as we are known shall know;
And, in the sweet embrace of Love,
Reign o’er the ransomed earth below.”

Truly it is said of the unspiritual that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love Him. But unto those who, by faith in Christ, have received the Spirit of the Lord, God hath revealed these things so vast and deep and high, for “we received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is from God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:9-12). And therefore, both the knowledge of and the attaining to these things is possible through the Spirit.

The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Practical Treatise for Plain and Serious Readers *The Fifth Warning* [Part 2: The Privileges Offered and at Stake] Chapter 16 by G. H. Lang.

First Printing, The Paternoster Press, 1951

Second Printing, Schoettle Publishing Company, Inc., 1985

Schoettle Publishing Company, Inc.

P.O. Box 1246

Hayesville, NC 28904

(706) 892-3333

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