

¹⁸ You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) 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, 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, 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.

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! 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.” 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. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

"Shaken, not stirred", a catchphrase that many may associate with the Ian Fleming's fictional British Secret Service agent James Bond and describes his preference for the preparation of his cocktail. James Bond surely shook things up in these fictional movies, seeking justice in those fictional truths.

In our reality, sometimes we try to shake things up, hoping that others, perhaps ourselves, are stirred to think, be excited, or perhaps inspired to act. We have witnessed many types of "shakings" in our world, through history and conflicts.

Right now, **this world** seems to be shaking. Whether it is due to shootings, corruption, instability, war, diseases, or poverty, people are vulnerable; tossed around by events beyond their control. With all life on earth depending on a relatively stable climate to grow food and have water, all of life on earth is being shaken by record temperatures and increasingly inhospitable living conditions.

The earth is burning.
The earth is melting
The earth is shaking.

Perhaps we wonder, "What are we to do?"

A shaking earth is a common biblical motif. God's appearance is heralded by the shaking of the earth (Psalm 18:7). The shaking of the earth is also a sign of God's wrath (2 Samuel 22:8; Jeremiah 10:10). There is also a prophetic nature to God shaking the Kingdoms. Haggai (2:20) is commanded by God to warn Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah who "obeyed the voice of the LORD" (Haggai 1:12), that God is about to "shake the heavens and the earth" and to "overthrow the throne of kingdoms." Zerubbabel, who listens to the Lord, is saved this tumult.

Throughout the New Testament, shaking is a characteristic part of the coming of Jesus and the end of the world. In Matthew 24:29, “the powers of heaven will be shaken” just before Christ returns. Revelation 8:5 combines fire from heaven with a shaking earthquake: “Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”

For many, until these end times prophecies, there is no rest here on earth for all of us. If even the best-case climate change forecasts are true, then we are in for a turbulent time.

“The kingdoms of this world are not more properly compared to anything, than the sea, which is always voluble and inconstant, and sometimes so violent, that he which expects rest there, must contradict both reason and sense” (The Everlasting Rest of the Saints in Heaven, Chapter 2 – William Bates)

William Bates was a seventeenth-century nonconformist. He made these remarks, based on Hebrews 12: “The kingdoms of this world are not more properly compared to anything, than the sea, which is always voluble and inconstant, and sometimes so violent, that he which expects rest there, must contradict both reason and sense” By contrast, Bates notes, God’s peaceable, unshaken kingdom is a place of true rest and calm, comparable to a sheet of glass (Revelation 15:2), with “no unquiet agitation” and “no disturbance.” God’s unshakeable Kingdom is built on the foundation of God’s rule. When the “The LORD is king!” reads Psalm 96:10, then “The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.”

Our reading from Hebrews is a reminder that God’s Kingdom is not of this world. This is seen in more detail in our reading and the contrast it makes between Mount Sinai (verses 18–24) and Mount Zion (verses 25–29). Such a contrast is also between two groups of pilgrim people. The first group is the Israelites who, having been freed from bondage in Egypt, are pilgrims looking for their promised land here on Earth. The second group is those who seek the eternal city of Zion, which is searched for in vain on this restless earth, and is one’s reward only after the current earth and heaven are removed.

This contrast builds on the tensions earlier in the book of Hebrews between the earthly kingdoms and the gathered believers who could have been broken by their persecution. The Hebrews to whom this letter was addressed had suffered “abuse and persecution” (10:32–33) and the “plundering of your possessions” (10:34). But they knew that they “possessed something better and more lasting” (10:34), would earn a “great reward” (10:35), and would ultimately, through their endurance, “receive what was promised” (10:36).

Part of this endurance was their perseverance in their faith and fearlessness in the face of political persecution, as seen in Hebrews 11. Moses is a great example of this for his fearlessness in the face of oppression. First, he only survived infancy because “his parents ... were not afraid of the king’s edict” (11:23). As an adult, Moses chose “ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures” (11:24–25) and disdained the “treasures of Egypt” because “he was looking ahead to the reward” (11:26). He then fled Egypt, “unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible” (11:27).

Those who persevered are promised a heavenly reward of eternal rest in God’s Kingdom. Hence, Christians have no abiding city on earth. We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). This is an expectation or hope for a better life.

How do we receive the unshaken Kingdom? We do not inherit it from our parents, for this generation might see that their inheritance as a declining world. Can it be made through human efforts? No utopia has ever existed.

- We cannot force the kingdom by force either.
- We cannot storm heaven, as the builders of the tower of Babel tried to do in a previous moment.

No scalable wall separates us from the unshakeable kingdom, nor is there any key maker who can open a door into it for us.

“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! ” (Hebrews 12:25)

This unshakeable kingdom is only gained by listening to Jesus. This is not only comforting to the oppressed recipients of this letter to the Hebrews, but also a comfort to those who are oppressed everywhere. Oppression is never forever.

So, what do we do? What do we pray for?

In a treatise on prayer by Origen, a great early Christian theologian from Alexandria, using prayers from both the Old and New Testament as examples, he creates a primer on what sort of things a Christian should pray for, and how. His primary tool for doing this is a detailed interpretation of the Lord's Prayer.

“And how will the mind that has contemplated the unshakeable kingdom of Christ fail to despise as worth nothing every kingdom on earth?” (Origen, On Prayer, XVII.2).

To obey God now in God's work for justice on earth is not to build heaven on earth, but to attain a more perfect place in the Jesus Way. To obey Jesus's message means to suffer our earthly distractions, to love our enemies, and to do justice here and now. As the Prophet, Micah, who spoke about how we might be shaken and stirred, said:

***“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)***

I hope we are shaken and stirred to follow this Way of Jesus as we strive for the Unshakable Kingdom in the Eternal. Amen!