

## Sermon 76, Listen Up!, Hebrews 12:25

**Proposition:** Because God is speaking to us in His Son, we had better listen — or else.

- I. God Is Speaking, v. 25a
- II. Listen to What He Says through His Son!, v. 25
  - A. The Wilderness Generation Suffered Severe Consequences, v. 25b
  - B. We Will Suffer Even More Severe Consequences if We Don't Listen, v. 25c

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, a couple of weeks ago we looked at the writer's last exhortation to us. It's in v. 15. He urges us to see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God. We need to watch out for ourselves and for each other by pursuing peace and holiness. Well, he repeats the same phrase here in v. 25, "See to it." It's an obvious callback to the "see to it" in v. 15, and it implies that one of the ways in which we should watch out for each other is to listen to the word of God. Now, again, this is hardly a new exhortation in Hebrews. Already 2:1 urges us to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." Ch. 6 warns about the field that brings forth thorns and thistles getting burned. Ch. 10 urged us to not trample under foot the Son of God because if we do, we will shrink back to destruction. Now, for one final time, the writer reminds us again: Listen! Pay attention to the word of Jesus Christ. Because God is speaking in His Son, we had better listen — or else.

#### I. God Is Speaking, v. 25a

The writer begins by alluding back to the very first words of his letter. God spoke at sundry times and in divers manners; now, in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son! And almost as though the rest of the book doesn't exist, the writer now continues that thought by applying it to us: "See to it that you do not refuse the one who is speaking." God has been speaking from the moment when He said "Let there be light." In fact, of course, He has always been speaking His eternally-begotten Word. But He has specifically been speaking to human beings ever since He created us. Genesis 1 records that "male and female created He them; and God blessed them, *and said to them . . .*" The very first thing God did for us after creating us was to speak to us. There was never a time when humanity existed without the word of God. His first word over us was a word of blessing, followed by a word of direction telling us how to live: "Fill the earth and subdue it."

To the atheists who say "I just don't see the evidence" we say "Open your eyes. Unplug your ears. Take the plastic wrap off your brain. Understand with your heart." God is speaking! Is there light? If so, it's because He said "Let there be light." Do the waters teem with fish? It's because He said "Let the waters teem." If you get down in the grass and look, will you see every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth? Of course you will, because God said "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind." God is speaking. He speaks in creation. He speaks

in providence. He speaks in redemption. His Word is His agent who accomplishes all of those things. His Spirit is the one who gives the breath of life to all that moves.

The Hebrew writer is not denying the importance of creation and providence. He surely also means that we should attend to the word of God in these arenas. But above all, he is speaking of the word of God in redemption, the word of life that the apostles saw, heard, and handled. God is speaking and saying “Follow me. Listen to me. Obey my voice.” The particular word that God is speaking in the book of Hebrews is to say “Stick with me. Do not apostatize. Do not walk away from the faith.”

God is speaking and urging us to stay the course, to stay in the race till the end. He is calling us to not be like the wilderness generation, who did not know His ways and did not enter into His rest. Instead, He calls us to learn His ways and to enter His heavenly rest.

At this point, we should ask “How is God still speaking?” The answer is given in 1:1. God is speaking through His Son. That speaking in Christ was a definitive, once-for-all, end-time word. Jesus is not just the Word of the Father. He is the last word of the Father.

What does that mean for us today? Does it mean prophetic silence? Does it mean that we should expect new books of the Bible? Does it mean that the church, the bishops, the self-appointed prophets, are now authorized to speak on God’s behalf?

You can find all of these answers and more in the contemporary landscape of the global church. You will find Christians who say that if you are not Pentecostal and hosting prophets and even apostles in your church, you are committing the exact sin this verse describes — that is, the sin of refusing to listen to the one who is speaking. You will find Christians who say that if you are not in submission to the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, you are, once again, failing to listen to the one who is speaking. You will find still others who will inform you that God is primarily speaking through the works of the church fathers and the acts of the synods and councils of the first 800 years of the church.

Where is the path through the maze? How do we know the voice of Jesus Christ? The answer is closer to you than you think. In fact, it’s sitting on your lap. The book that we have is where God speaks by His Son. That’s why Paul calls the Bible “the word of Christ” and says “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly by singing psalms.” The word of Christ is found in the Psalms! Jesus Himself taught that in all the scriptures, not only in the Psalms but also in the law and the prophets, were things concerning Himself. Indeed, all Christians agree that in the 66 books of the Bible as we have it you can and should hear the living voice of Jesus Christ.

Some sectors of Christendom argue that these books need to be supplemented by the word of the church, or of the prophets. The living voice of Christ is found in the Magisterium! In the councils! In the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge! That may be. I would not presume to deny that continued ability of God to speak. But as the hymn puts it, “What more can He say than to you He has said?” Insofar as the Magisterium and the prophets elucidate the meaning already contained in Scripture, we value their contributions to the church. Insofar as they contradict it, adding traditions of men that render void the word of God, we reject them as no true teachers.

In short, to the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to this word, it is because they have no light in them. Brothers and sisters, the bottom line is that in Scripture we have all we need of the living voice of Christ. We measure and judge all claimants to His voice by the record that is unchangeably written on these pages. His word is forever settled in heaven and unalterably fixed on earth. We know how much to value the contributions of the Magisterium when Pope Francis announces that he would like to amend the Lord's Prayer from "Lead us not into temptation" to "Lead us away from temptation." We know how much to value the contributions of the prophets when they promise to cure all your ills when you send them money, or describe the next Israeli holiday as the date when the Lord Jesus is certain to return.

These speculations are worthless. They are mud pies compared to the pure word of the LORD, purified seven times. None of His words will fall to the ground — but many words of the prophets and the Magisterium alike have fallen to the ground and will continue to fall to the ground. You need not fear them.

## **II. Listen to What He Says through His Son!, v. 25**

But you most certainly need to fear the God who speaks, not through colorful weirdos in Pentecostal churches or colorful cardinals in Roman office buildings, but through His Son's written word. Listen to what He says through His Son. Otherwise, you will not escape the consequences, which will be highly unpleasant.

### **A. The Wilderness Generation Suffered Severe Consequences, v. 25b**

The writer points us once again to the consequences that befell the wilderness generation. Those who stood at Sinai and refused to listen to the one who spoke standing on the mountaintop suffered death in the wilderness, exclusion from the promised land, and eternal judgment.

The Levitical system that was spoken on earth has lesser penalties. But even in the Levitical system every last transgression and disobedience received a just payment of wages. In other words, the Israelite living under the Mosaic system didn't get away with sins. He did not just do what he wanted and then go down to the Temple with a lamb and say "We are delivered!"

Let me just pause here to say that this penalty is not talking about people outside the covenant. The Bible is not saying "Egyptians and Canaanites who disregarded the Mosaic system were severely punished." Rather, it's saying "Israelites who disregarded the Mosaic system were severely punished." The message here is not for outsiders, but for insiders — not for nonbelievers, but for believers. We can get wrapped up in the perfectly true idea that without Christ, people are going to Hell. But we need to spend a little more energy on the truth that people in the visible church, who are pretty sure they have Christ, can also be headed to the bad place. The Old Covenant had sanctions against sinners, and those sanctions were enforced both by human justice and by God Himself.

Think, for instance, of the principle of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life." The basic principle here is life for life. If you take life, your life will be taken. Not only is that the clear teaching of this passage and many others in the Bible (esp. Gen. 9), but it is the mainstream view in the historic Christian church. Though Pope Francis has said that the death penalty should not be used today, his traditionalist defenders hasten to assure us that what he means is merely

that in view of the present circumstances and spirit of the age, the death penalty should perhaps be suspended for a time. Of course, even that is contrary to historic Christian doctrine and the plain teaching of Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Murder demands the death penalty.

In the Levitical system, every transgression received a just reward. I'm telling you what. The OT is clear about this. Think, for instance, of Ahab, struck down by Jehu right on top of Naboth's vineyard. Think of the Benjamites, almost exterminated from Israel after one of their cities became worse than Sodom. But arguably the worst consequences befell the wilderness generation, the whole lot of whom perished in the wilderness excluded from God's rest.

**B. We Will Suffer Even More Severe Consequences if We Don't Listen, v. 25c**  
But here's the thing: the writer isn't arguing "Thank God that those barbaric days are over and we live in an enlightened era when mercy triumphs over judgment. You won't be cut off from your people, stoning is banned, and when you smite someone's eye or tooth, he will just turn the other cheek and you will get off scot-free." He isn't saying "Under the old covenant, every transgression received a just recompense of reward, but under the new covenant justice is out the window and mercy rules everything."

No. He's saying "Under the old covenant, every transgression received a just reward, and under the new covenant, every transgression also receives a just reward."

The God who speaks is speaking now from heaven. His revelation from there through His Son is (1) greater in clarity and (2) greater in cleansing power.

God's last-days speech in His Son is final. It is complete, unlike His piecemeal revelation in the Old Covenant. What He said from Sinai was true and useful for the time in which it was given. But what He said in Christ will not, cannot, be superseded or even clarified. In Jesus, we have seen and heard the Father directly. No longer is He hidden in thick darkness. Second, the blood that speaks a better word than Abel's blood is full of cleansing power. It cleanses the conscience and not just the body. The revelation of God's character is greater. Such a thing stands to reason. The one who dwells in heaven is the one who can show Himself to the best advantage by speaking from heaven.

Justice hasn't changed. Justice is what it always has been. Wages earned are still wages earned. But because the salvation is a greater salvation, to sin against it is a greater sin. To sin against 200 lumens of light is not as great a sin as to sin against 2000 lumens of light. In other words, in the New Covenant you more clearly know what you're doing, and you more clearly know what the stakes are.

Allow me to just put it this way: How much does the OT speak about Hell? The answer, of course, is "not really at all." We see Daniel saying that "those who have done evil will rise to the resurrection of judgment" in Dan. 12. But all the statements about the worm not dying and the fire not being quenched are eternized, taken out of the context of earthly punishment where they occur in Isaiah 66, and rendered statements about eternal judgment and eternal hellfire only in the teaching of Jesus and in the book of Revelation. If you want to know about Hell, don't turn to Psalms and Proverbs, but to Matthew and Revelation.

The punishment in the New Covenant is greater and said to be greater. The punishments in the Old Covenant are primarily described in this-worldly terms. The punishments in the New Covenant are primarily described in next-worldly terms.

To say “You will be imprisoned for the term of your natural life” is a stiff punishment. To say “You will be imprisoned in Hell for the term of your immortal soul’s life” is a far stiffer punishment!

I’m not saying that apostates like Ahab escaped hellfire. But clearly, the Old Covenant speaks of Sheol as the undifferentiated abode of the dead, while the New Covenant speaks in much plainer terms of Heaven and Hell.

The last sermon R.C. Sproul preached before his death in December 2017 was on our passage’s parallel text in ch. 2. It is a fantastic sermon. Look it up if you can. He focuses on this question: How shall we escape? He gives an involved illustration from *The Count of Monte Cristo* and speaks of the Chateau D’If, the great fortress in which Monte Cristo is imprisoned and from which he so thrillingly escapes in the novel. Escape was possible from that earthly prison. But there are no escapes from Hell.

People get out of North Korea. People fled Stalin’s Gulag. Earthly justice systems have holes, hatchways, secret passages. Guards can be bribed. Judges are ready to reverse their predecessors’ decisions. But how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? The implication is clear, brothers and sisters. God’s wrath, His just punishment for the sin of neglecting the great salvation we have in Christ, is utterly inescapable. Many fled Hitler’s Germany. A few escaped Stalin’s Gulag. But none has ever walked away from Christ and lived to evade the jaws of Hell.

Stop thinking that Hell is primarily for unbelievers. The Mormons are partly right to emphasize that Hell is for those who were once part of the church and walked away. They take it too far; unbelievers can and do go to Hell. But the warnings of Hebrews are not to unbelievers, but to believers.

There is no escape for those who drift away or stop paying attention. There is no clause that says “If you had good grounds to choose secularism/entertainment/the status quo/the zeitgeist/pop culture over Me, you walk.” No. We cannot escape.

So what are you doing to listen to the voice of the one who speaks from Heaven? If you stop listening to Him, you will not escape His judgment.

You are here in church this morning. That’s a good start. Listen to His voice here, as He speaks from Mt Zion. Open your Bible and listen to His words there — alone with your God. Also read the Bible with your spouse and with your children. Practice listening to the one who speaks. And do what He says. If you don’t, you won’t escape. Amen.