

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Hebrews 12:18-24

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. Today, we will continue reading Hebrews chapter 12, verses 18 to 24.

The fifth section of Hebrews, consisting of exhortations and warnings, follows immediately after the discussion of hope. The author knows that the path of hope is a race, and thus every participant must lay aside burdens and casting off sin to run the race set before them. In this process, they will encounter many tribulations, including tribulations of testing and tribulations of discipline. The tribulations of testing help us lay aside burdens, while the tribulations of discipline help us cast off sin. If we can endure with patience, we will partake in God's holiness and bear the fruit of righteousness.

Next, the author exhorts us to strengthen the hands that hang down and the feeble knees, walking on straight paths. On one hand, horizontally, we pursue peace with all people; on the other hand, vertically, we pursue holiness toward God. The author warns us to be cautious not to fall short of God's grace, including both our objective standing and subjective experience, and not to allow a root of bitterness to spring up. We must constantly address negative emotions in our hearts, avoiding immorality and worldly covetousness, lest we lose the birthright of the firstborn.

This brings us to today's passage, which is perhaps the most difficult section in Hebrews to interpret. It continues the author's exhortation and warning to the backsliding Hebrew saints, using two long sentences that correspond to each other. The first sentence describes the Old Covenant, focusing on the scene where God delivered the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. The second sentence describes the New Covenant, focusing on the future New Jerusalem, a glorious gathering in grace. The first sentence emphasizes God's righteousness, bringing forth God's law and judgment; the second sentence emphasizes God's love, bringing forth God's grace and forgiveness.

We must recognize that God is a righteous God and also a loving God. These two attributes cannot coexist in man, but in God, they exist simultaneously and complement each other. In terms of revelation, God first reveals His righteousness to humanity, using the law to convict people of sin and make them aware of the severity of judgment. Then, God reveals His love, granting grace through His beloved Son, providing a way for people to receive forgiveness and escape judgment. The order of revelation is first righteousness, then love. This sequence prepares people to accept love. However, the order of God's execution of judgment is the reverse—first love, then righteousness—giving people the opportunity to accept love and avoid judgment. Those who refuse to accept it will ultimately not escape the judgment of the lake of fire.

The first long sentence, which speaks of God's righteousness, law, and judgment, describes events that have already occurred; thus, in terms of interpretation, it poses no difficulty, and different theological systems can reach a consistent explanation. The second long sentence, which speaks of God's love, grace, and the glorious scene of New Jerusalem, describes events that have not yet occurred, so interpretations across different theological systems vary widely and are sometimes even directly contradictory. However, within the same theological framework, it can be self-consistent. Therefore, interpreting this passage cannot involve isolating a single statement and comparing it across different systems, as you will find differing or even opposing explanations. Instead, it must be viewed as a whole, and the differences will not seem as significant.

The most challenging issue is determining who the "firstborn" refers to. Some commentators say it refers to the Israelites of the Old Testament, while others argue it refers to the church of the New Testament. This is also why, in yesterday's daily reading, I included a lengthy section on the transfer of the firstborn birthright, to help the saints understand that the objective status of the firstborn can be transferred. Regarding the firstborn mentioned in this passage, I personally believe it does not refer to the firstborn in terms of status but rather to those who, in reality, possess the life and stature of the firstborn. Knowing that this passage allows for different interpretations, I will not mention others' explanations—saints

can refer to them on their own—and I will interpret it according to the understanding God has given me. Let us first read the first long sentence.

Verses 18-21: “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, which those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: ‘And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.’ And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.’)”

In Greek, these four verses form one long sentence. It begins with “For you have not come to,” followed by eight items, each connected in Greek with “kai,” translated in English as “and” or in Chinese as “and” or “furthermore.” In some translations, grammatical embellishments are added, making these eight items less distinct. In the following explanation, we will extract these eight items and examine them one by one.

The first item is the mountain that may be touched. This refers to Mount Sinai. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and three months later, they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai. God called to Moses from Mount Sinai, marking the first time the Israelites heard God speak. Recorded in Exodus 19, God delivered the law on Mount Sinai, establishing a covenant with the Israelites, known today as the Old Covenant, which was founded on the law.

The characteristic of the Old Covenant is that it is tangible and visible. For example, God’s guidance to the Israelites was through a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, both of which could be seen. God used the Urim and Thummim to reveal His will to the high priest, which was very clear and unambiguous. The priests’ offerings on behalf of the Israelites followed specific ordinances. But in the New Covenant, it is entirely different—everything is by faith, not by sight. We must live and act according to the Spirit, worshiping God in spirit and truth, all of which are invisible and intangible.

The second item is that it burned with fire. Exodus 19:18 states that God descended on Mount Sinai in fire, and the whole mountain smoked, with smoke ascending like that of a furnace. God is a righteous, holy, and glorious God; His coming is like fire, burning away everything incompatible with His nature.

The third item is blackness (dense cloud). Exodus 19:16 says that when God descended on Mount Sinai, He came with clouds that covered the entire mountain. The cloud was for human protection; people could hear God's voice from the cloud but could not see Him, for anyone unclean could not see God's face without being struck dead. Thus, the dense cloud shielded them, preventing them from seeing God.

The fourth item is darkness. The entire mountain was covered by dense clouds, so to human eyes, it appeared as darkness, leaving no path for people to come before God. This also indicates that under the condemnation of the law, the path ahead for a sinner is darkness. Though sacrifices could temporarily cover sin, people remained in darkness, unable to see God's light.

The fifth item is tempest. Exodus 19 describes God descending on Mount Sinai with lightning and thunder. Lightning and thunder produce localized high temperatures, causing air currents to expand rapidly, resulting in a tempest. Unlike seasonal winds with a fixed direction, this tempest shifted rapidly with the falling of lightning and thunder, raging in all directions, making it impossible for anyone to stand firm. This illustrates that before God, who can stand?

The sixth item is the sound of a trumpet. In Exodus 19:19, the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. The trumpet's sound announces that something significant is about to happen, drawing people's attention.

The seventh item is the voice of words. This is God speaking to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19:9, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever.'" To prepare for God's speaking, Moses instructed the Israelites to sanctify themselves for three days, wash their clothes, and abstain from intimacy, readying themselves properly.

As a result, when God spoke, the people heard and were terrified, trembling with fear. They said to Moses in Exodus 20:19, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” Those who heard God’s voice begged that He not speak to them directly but through Moses, because they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” The people could not bear God’s words; God commanded that anything approaching Mount Sinai—whether man or beast—be stoned to death.

When God manifests His righteousness and holiness, no defilement is tolerated; anything that crosses the boundary must be stoned to death. Hearing this, the Israelites were afraid, unable to bear God’s words. This is a stark contrast to the New Testament. Today, saints long for God’s word because it brings the supply of life; God’s word is our daily spiritual bread, and we rejoice in it. Yet the Israelites of the Old Testament were terrified to hear God speak to them.

Now we come to the eighth item: a sight so terrifying. God’s appearance was so fearsome that even Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.” Fear is an inner feeling of dread, while trembling is its outward manifestation—shaking and not knowing how to respond. Moses was faithful in all God’s house, yet even he was afraid and trembling before God—how much more the Israelites?

The Old Covenant manifests God’s righteousness, encircling all people in sin through the giving of the law. People feared hearing God speak and had no standing to come before Him; even Moses was afraid and trembling. We are truly more blessed than Moses, for today, through the blood of Jesus Christ, we can boldly approach the throne of grace to seek mercy and find grace for timely help. Next, we will read the second long sentence.

Verses 22-24: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the

new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

The previous long sentence, starting from verse 18, begins with “For you have not come to.” The second long sentence, starting from verse 22, contrasts this with “But you have come to.” The former describes the Old Covenant scene, while this one describes the New Covenant scene, with a sentence structure identical to the previous one. Here, it speaks of coming to eight items, also connected by “kai” in Greek. We will explain it as we did the previous sentence, examining each item one by one.

The first item is Mount Zion. Mount Sinai was in the wilderness, while Mount Zion is in the Promised Land. David first captured Mount Zion and established a stronghold there; later, he built a palace on Mount Zion, so it is also called the City of David. North of Zion is the city of Jerusalem, within which stood the temple, and in the temple was the Holy of Holies containing the Ark of the Covenant—God’s dwelling place and testimony.

The second item is the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Here, the city of the living God and the heavenly Jerusalem are synonymous. This heavenly Jerusalem is the city designed and built by God Himself. This is also the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21; by that time, it will be completed and will descend from heaven. In the temple’s Holy of Holies, the length, width, and height are equal, and in Revelation 21:16, the New Jerusalem is also equal in length, width, and height. Thus, this holy city, Jerusalem, is also God’s dwelling place and testimony.

It is called the heavenly Jerusalem here because it is still in the process of being built. This heavenly city corresponds to Mount Sinai from the previous long sentence. Paul makes this clear in Galatians 4:22-26: “For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar.”

This “Hagar” refers to Mount Sinai in Arabia, corresponding to the present Jerusalem, for she and her children are in bondage. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. The two women represent two covenants: Hagar prefigures the Old Covenant, the bondswoman who bore children into slavery according to the flesh, under the authority of the law, represented by the earthly Jerusalem. Sarah prefigures the New Covenant, the freewoman who bore a son through promise in grace. This son is free from the law, represented by the heavenly Jerusalem here.

The third item is an innumerable company of angels. The “general assembly” in verse 23, in the Greek original, is tied to the innumerable company of angels. This assembly refers to a celebratory gathering for a special purpose, often associated with festivals in that era. The translation “general assembly” is misleading, suggesting a distinction between a main assembly and sub-assemblies, but it is simply a large gathering for celebration.

This specifically refers to a great gathering when the New Jerusalem is completed. In this gathering, the first mention is of an innumerable company of angels, for angels are ministering spirits sent by God to serve people. Now that God’s will is about to be fulfilled, their task is nearing completion. Their final task is this great gathering. We can imagine millions of angels joyfully preparing for this glorious assembly in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Next is the fourth item: the church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven. The NIV translates this as “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven,” or the assembly of the firstborn whose names are registered in heaven. First, the word “church” (ekklesia) originally means “assembly.” Because it is often translated as “church” in English, some commentators believe this refers to New Testament saints, while others argue that Israel is God’s firstborn, suggesting it refers to Old Testament saints.

This heavenly Jerusalem is being built by God, and the names of the firstborn are registered in heaven. This likely does not refer to the Book of Life, which, in Revelation 20, is used during the judgment at the great white throne for the second resurrection of all nations. The Book of Life is the basis for judging all people, but

this register in heaven is likely God's book of remembrance. This is mentioned in Malachi 3:16-18: "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be Mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.' Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him." Clearly, this is a book recording the overcomers of the Old Testament, and it should also include the overcomers of the New Testament.

In Revelation 2 and 3, the seven churches represent all New Testament churches, and in each church, God calls for overcomers—seven times, in 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, and 3:21. Beyond God calling for overcomers in the churches, there is also a set number of overcomers.

In Revelation 6:9-11, when the fifth seal is opened, the souls of the martyrs cry out, asking how long until their blood is avenged. God directly answers in 6:11: "And it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed." This means waiting until the number of overcomers is fulfilled.

Based on these considerations, I believe the "firstborn" here refers to those whose life and stature have matured, enabling them to inherit God's promised inheritance, with their names recorded in the heavenly book of remembrance. These are all the overcomers of both the Old and New Testaments, bearing Christ's character and manifesting God's glory—a gathering of overcomers.

The fifth item is God the Judge of all. God is the designer and builder of the heavenly Jerusalem, so of course He is present. Notably, He is called "the Judge of all" here, emphasizing His righteous attribute, meaning every constituent of this city must meet God's righteous standards.

In the last week of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry, He went up to Jerusalem and spoke many parables to the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who would persecute Him. In Matthew 22:1-14, He told the parable of a king preparing a

wedding feast for his son. The king is God, the son is Christ, making this a parable of the marriage supper of the Lamb. The king sent servants to invite those who were called, but they were busy with their own affairs and refused to come. These invited ones prefigure the Israelites, God's chosen people of the Old Testament, who did not recognize God's Son.

So the king sent servants to the highways and byways, inviting all they met, and the feast was filled with guests—prefiguring New Testament saints, also called ones. When the king came in, he saw a guest without a wedding garment and said, "Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?" He was bound and cast into outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 22:14 adds a note: "For many are called, but few are chosen." The called are the saints who receive grace and salvation through Jesus Christ's redemption, justified by God and thus qualified to attend the Lamb's wedding feast.

However, they must wear a wedding garment. This garment, as described in Revelation 19:7-8, is: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." This garment is the bright, clean fine linen—the righteous acts of the saints, or, as stated in this chapter, verse 11, "the peaceable fruit of righteousness." These are not only called but also chosen, meaning they are overcomers. In the holy city New Jerusalem, God, who judges righteously, ensures that every saint who enters meets His righteous requirements, wearing the clean fine linen.

The sixth item is the spirits of just men made perfect. The translation "souls" is inaccurate; the original Greek is "spirits." In the fourth item, the firstborn refers to overcomers, while the spirits of just men here refer to those saved but not victorious—those cast into outer darkness, weeping and gnashing their teeth, during the marriage supper of the Lamb. In the millennial kingdom, they lose their reward and cannot reign with Christ.

Yet, because they believed in Jesus Christ, they have a righteous standing, though their lives did not mature, lacking their own fine linen. Their life's work is burned up before Christ's judgment seat, but they themselves are still saved; thus, Scripture emphasizes their "spirits" and not their "souls." At the end of the millennium, they will be perfected and ultimately included in the building of the heavenly holy city.

The seventh item is Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant. In Hebrews 9:12, Jesus, "with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." With His blood, Jesus established the New Covenant, becoming its Mediator and accomplishing eternal redemption. Every saint who comes to the heavenly Jerusalem, whether from the Old or New Testament, has Jesus as their Mediator because He has completed eternal redemption. Mentioning Jesus as Mediator here especially pertains to the previous item—those saved but not victorious—indicating that their ultimate inclusion in New Jerusalem is also through Christ's mediation.

And the eighth item is the blood of sprinkling. Objectively, Jesus' blood took our punishment, enabling our sins to be forgiven. Subjectively, it cleanses our conscience, freeing us from condemnation and guiding us not to commit the same sins again. This blood "speaks better things than that of Abel." Abel's blood was that of a martyr; after his death, it still spoke, accusing Cain of his sin before God.

But Jesus' blood is not a martyr's blood—it is the Redeemer's blood. This blood speaks favorably on our behalf before God, securing forgiveness for our sins; it also speaks to our conscience, saying, "Go in peace, and sin no more." This blood also ensures that those saved but not victorious are, at the end of the millennium, reintegrated into the holy city New Jerusalem.

Dear brothers and sisters, through the author of Hebrews' description of the great gathering in the holy city New Jerusalem, we see God's eternal plan and its ultimate fulfillment. This holy city New Jerusalem is where the saints of both the Old and New Testaments dwell with God, with Christ as Mediator and His precious blood speaking favorably for us—what a glorious and peaceful scene.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You! Through the description of the New Jerusalem, You have given us a clear understanding of our ultimate destination. We especially thank You for the New Covenant established by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, enabling us to be securely included in the New Jerusalem. Help us, during our days of sojourning on earth, to heed the author's exhortation and warning, laying aside burdens, casting off sin, enduring with patience, and running the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Help us become overcomers, partaking in the assembly of the firstborn. Guard my daily life, that it may please You. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.