

THE SHAKING OF THE EARTH

by Ray C. Stedman

Having concluded our series of messages on the Upper Room Discourse, *Secrets Of The Spirit*, I hope to begin soon a new series on the book of Jeremiah. Meanwhile, I'd like to bring a number of single messages on various subjects. The first is based upon a passage in Hebrews, the closing words of Chapter 12:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. {Heb 12:25-29 RSV}

This passage tends to sober us, because it speaks of the shaking of the heavens and of the earth. There is something chilling about the thought of the shaking of the earth.

A week or so ago, I was sitting with Dr. Henry Brandt on the porch of his cabin on the shore of Lake Michigan. As we were talking together, looking out over the waters of the lake, he said, "Do you see how close the shoreline is to the cabin? When we moved here ten years ago, the waters were forty to sixty feet further out. I asked, "What made the change?" He told me, "No one seems to know. When they built the St. Lawrence Seaway and opened the Great Lakes to ocean-going vessels, many thought that a great deal more water would go out to the ocean than before, and that the water level of the lakes would drop. The interesting thing is, the exact opposite has happened. Gradually the level of the Great Lakes has risen. [That represents a tremendous volume of water, for as many of you know, Lake Michigan is almost 500 miles long and some 60 to 100 miles wide. And it is only one of five Great Lakes.] But no one really seems to know what is causing it. The only explanation they can think of is that something must be causing the beds of the lakes slowly to rise or tilt." As I sat there I got an eerie feeling, and I looked around to see whether there was access up the hill behind us, if suddenly the process should accelerate!

The Scriptures speak of a time, as we draw near to the end, when there will be a physical shaking of the earth. In the book of Revelation a key event, described repeatedly throughout that book of images and visions, is a great earthquake, so tremendous that the very foundations of the earth are shaken and every mountain and hill is removed from its place. That is a guide to the understanding of the book, for as you read through those visions, you find them returning again and again to the great earthquake which will wind up the course of human events in this age.

But when the writer of this passage speaks of God's shaking of the heavens and the earth, it is a different kind of shaking to which he is referring. He reminds the readers that once God shook the earth when he spoke from Mount Sinai in the giving of the Law. This was the time when the Law, coming to man, shook the nations of the world, shook their very foundations. Now, it is true that when God spoke from the mountain, the mountain itself shook and trembled like a leaf in the autumn wind, billowing smoke and fire. And the people were amazed and trembled with great fear when they saw this entire mountain shaking, as a symbol of the effect of the Law coming to men and nations throughout history.

And now the writer is quoting from the prophet Haggai, reminding them that there would come another shaking. "Yet once more," God says, "I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." If you look back to the prophecy from which that was taken, you will find that Haggai was looking forward to the coming of Messiah, the coming of Christ. This will be the time, he says, when God will shake not only the earth but the heavens as well. And this will be a shaking which no one can avoid. The warning of this passage is, "Do not

refuse him who is speaking, for there is no way to avoid the shaking that is to come."

The last word we have from the hand of Paul, as he writes from the Mamertine dungeon in Rome, to his young son in the faith, Timothy, is that most of his friends have forsaken him, that many to whom he ministered have turned away from him, and he sees all that he built apparently beginning to collapse. But he reminds Timothy that the Spirit of God had said expressly that in the latter days perilous times should come. And he goes on to describe them -- times of shaking, times when everything will be upset and all that men have counted as permanent and lasting will be overthrown, times of confusion and upheaval.

Many people have taken the phrase "the latter days" to refer to the time just before the return of Christ. But if you look at that phrase in other places in Scripture, especially in the book of Hebrews, you find that "the latter days" or "the last days" refers to the entire age between the first and the second comings of Jesus. We have been living in "the last days" since our Lord was here on earth. What the Spirit was saying is that, during this whole age, there would come repeated cycles of perilous times when God would shake the earth and the heavens, and things would be upset and confused, times of upheaval. One of the comforting things this passage sets before us is that the One who does the shaking is God himself. God shakes up the earth, shakes up the people.

I do not think there is any doubt that we are presently in one of those shaking times, and have been for several years. We have entered into one of those perilous times when all that we would normally have counted as strong and steady is being shaken and overthrown. I don't mean events such as we saw last week -- the overthrow of the government of Chile. Such episodes have been almost continual in the record of human history. The toppling of thrones, the changing of empires, are really incidentals, not the essential developments. When I speak of the shaking of that which seems to be permanent I am talking about far more important matters.

What are the things being shaken today? First, and probably most evident to us right now, is the great shaking occurring in people's confidence in human government. We have been involved in the Watergate investigations during these long summer months. Few of us have failed to see how that whole matter has served to inhibit and stymie and prevent the proper functioning of government. It has been like a huge, paralyzing hand laid upon governmental operations. And regardless of how you may view it, or what sympathy you may have for those involved, one thing is evident: Watergate has shaken the people's confidence in the operation of government. Men who were selected for high office and who people were confident would make moral decisions, have proven to be untrustworthy. Yet everyone knows that these wrongful decisions were ones that they themselves might have made, had they been put in the same offices. The weakness which has been manifested in Watergate is the kind which is difficult even to recognize when it is happening to you, and many of us might have gone right along with it.

The inability of our government, and of other governments in the world, to control the inflationary spiral, resulting in terribly high prices and the undermining of our economic foundations, has shaken people's confidence in government. We see ourselves in the grip of economic forces too vast to manipulate or to control. Even with the best of intentions and the widest of knowledge, men seem unable to reverse the trend of what is happening today. This represents a shaking of that which we thought to be solid and dependable.

You see the same effect in the world of science and technology. I remember a few decades ago when it was thought that all these new inventions coming so rapidly upon the scene would bring us tremendous progress in the solving of human ills and social problems. I can go back at least as far as the advent of television! Everyone thought it would be wonderful to have entertainment and newscasts right in our homes, merely to turn a knob and have the world in our living room. Now we know that television has brought a curse along with its blessing. Too much exposure tends to make us artificial, turns us into robots. We lose the capacity to develop our own creative skills of recreation and entertainment.

We are even more frightened by some of the other things science has brought us, knowing that our cities are glutted with traffic, our skies darkened with smog, and our waters poisoned. No one seems to be able to stop it or to reverse it. We realize now that science has not been the benefactor we thought it would be, but has brought with it ills so tremendous they appear to be Frankensteinian monsters, threatening our very existence.

This has shaken people's confidence.

As you are well aware, a very definite shaking of our time is evidenced in the change in moral standards. What we once thought were irrevocable, steadfast standards, by which any decent people would live, are now being challenged, overthrown, and cast out. We see a tremendous shaking in the very foundations of the nation, as families are breaking up and the divorce rate is skyrocketing -- not only in those marriages of a few years' standing, but increasingly in those which have endured more than twenty years. And we wonder what is happening to our family life as, more and more, the philosophy of the day is that marriage is not important at all. "Unmarriages" are springing up all over, in which people choose to live together without any legal ties. There is widespread acceptance of this kind of arrangement. And sexual explicitness has come into the media, graphically portraying now what never would have been allowed in public even a few years ago. We see the shaking of the foundations in this area.

And perhaps more dramatic than any other development today is the rise of the occult, the return to witchcraft, black arts, and the open and acknowledged worship of demons and dark powers which influence and possess men. The rise of outright demonic possession is being found on every side. I wonder if we realize what dramatic changes have occurred in our nation. Look back across the almost two hundred years of American history and you find that at no other time in the history of this nation has there ever been this kind of outbreak of demonic powers. There has been a guard or shield over this nation, and other nations of the West, which somehow has inhibited and prevented this kind of attack. We could always have traveled to India and Africa and other places and found this, but now it is here at home in America. And California is the worst area of all. Why is this? It is part of the shaking of our times -- this dramatic breakthrough of demonic forces which is frightening people and giving rise to many new cults and bizarre practices.

As we look ahead we tend to be shaken ourselves by these shakings of the earth and of heaven. But this passage is intended to comfort us, for it says that this shaking comes from the hand of God. It is God who shakes the heavens and the earth, not the devil. He is only the instrument of God to do this. God is doing the shaking, and he is doing it for a very great purpose described for us in this passage:

"Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. {Heb 12:26b-27 RSV}

This is what God is working toward. He allows the shaking to come in order that what cannot be shaken may again become visible to men. One of the great encouragements of this day is to see that this is exactly what is happening. As the writer goes on to say, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken," he underscores one of the things that cannot be shaken today: the sovereignty of God.

This truth is emerging today in a new and fresh way, more than at any time in my memory, as men are beginning again to see God's hand in history, God at work among men. You can see this fact emerging in all these areas I have just covered. For instance, in the nation, as a result of the shaking of the confidence in men who were elected to office, and the resulting distrust of the democratic process, there is gradually coming into this nation once again a consciousness that righteousness and truth are important, and an acknowledgment that no nation can really stand unless it is based upon a people who love justice and righteousness.

We have lost this for some time. A decade or so ago a great wave of "super-patriotism" swept across this country. People began to run up flags and put reproductions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution on their walls. An effort was made to convince people that these were the undergirding of the foundations of our nation, that we had to look to these human documents to support this nation and make it strong and steady once again. But you don't hear much of this anymore, because God has allowed the foundations to be shaken, and men are now beginning to see that no human document is the explanation of a nation's strength. It is not the democratic processes or the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence that will hold us steady in the day of sweeping tumult. Rather, it is the righteousness and truth that people love which will do it, and the fact is that only men and women who are committed to these values can be trusted in the hour of pressure. Once again people are seeing this clearly.

The same is true in the realm of education and technological training. The revolt of youth just two or three years ago shook this nation, but it helped us to see that in educational processes we cannot indulge in the bizarre and untried. And although we must return to what has proven itself, the emphasis must no longer be on material values but on personal values -- love and harmony and peace. The gauges of success are no longer big cars and expensive homes and luxurious provisions and furnishings, but rather a family which relates lovingly to one another, does things together, and shares life. These values are coming back into our educational system partly as a result of the shaking of our times.

Even in the realm of morals this shaking has produced tremendously helpful developments. The shaking of the foundations of sexual morality is now beginning to produce an awareness of the true purpose of sex. Even churches, which have been so dead and dull in this area are now beginning to take a healthy view of sex and to teach their people what it was intended to be. I walked into a Christian bookstore not long ago and stood there looking at all the books that were available on the subject of sex, books which were wholesome and biblical and helpful -- and detailed, not in unwholesome, but in right ways. I rejoiced, for it took me back to my own early Christian youth when I was given the only book available to Christian young people on how to handle sexual drives. It was called *The Way of A Man With A Maid*. I read it again the other day, and I threw it down in disgust! It is one of the most perverted treatments of sex I think I've ever read. It distorts the whole biblical picture, makes sex appear to be dirty. Yet that was the commonly accepted textbook on sex when I was a young man. No wonder God shook us up in this area, and made us take a good look at what we had been thinking and the way we had been acting.

Out of the shaking is coming a realization of the things which remain and which cannot be shaken because they are based upon the fiat of God, the decrees of the Creator. One of the things which cannot be shaken is the realization again of the true nature of the church. It is so encouraging to see that Christian people are finally beginning to realize that the important thing about a church is not the building program. Just a few decades ago churches were knocking each other over to see who could come up with the most expensive, luxurious building. They were bragging about the softness of their carpets and comfort of the pews, the lushness of the furnishings, and the newness of the electronic marvels available for amplifying voices. Now, fortunately, we hear very little about this, for there has come a return to the fact that the church is not a building but people. A church is not functioning properly simply because it pays its bills on time and is able to send money to support a missionary program. It functions only when its people share a real and genuine faith, visible in their neighborhoods, when homes are being healed and families are coming back together, when long-standing arguments and divisions between church members are being broken down and love is being manifested.

I have recently been in the northwestern states which, as many of you know, are a citadel of conservatism in churches. It was so encouraging to see that in place after place congregations are forgetting about emphasizing their minor doctrinal differences with other churches, forgetting about labels and titles and "reverends," and all this kind of nonsense, and are returning again to the emphasis of the New Testament. Thank God for the shaking, because it produces an awareness of the things which remain.

And this is true in the whole realm of righteousness. As I look back at the church as I have observed it through several decades of life, and if I try to see it through the eyes of the watching world, I see that what most people have observed in the church is self-righteousness -- judgment and condemnation for certain practices, sharp and harsh words toward things which people commonly do. One of the most helpful trends of today is that this is disappearing. Christian people are now beginning to realize what has always been true -- sin does not consist merely of drunkenness and lechery and licentiousness and sexual misbehavior. Far worse are criticism and bitterness and resentment and jealousy and quarreling among believers. And we stand under the judgment of a holy God just as much for these sins as do those outside the church for the others. We have not a finger to point nor a stone to throw.

People are coming back again to an awareness that the only righteousness God will accept is that based upon his forgiveness. If there is any area of our life in which we have never been forgiven, it is there we are offending the Spirit of God. If there is an area about which we are saying, "Well, I've never done that kind of thing; I wouldn't do that!" it is *there* we are grievously hurting the Spirit of Truth. Righteousness consists of that gift of forgiveness which comes when one has known himself to be a sinner before God. That is why our uptightness about hair styles and modes of dress and bare feet is disappearing. We are beginning to realize that

these externals are not important; it is what we are in our hearts before God which matters. So the sovereignty of God and the centrality of the cross remain unshaken. The fact emerges again and again that human life is never realized until it comes to the end of itself. This explains the Jesus Movement, and all the other encouraging signs of the return of the life of the Spirit in America. We are once again understanding that there is no hope in man. That is what the cross says: "No hope in man." God is doing his work.

In the early '50s I had the joy of working with some boys, five in particular, who attended high school here in Palo Alto. I have followed them with great interest through the years since. One is Brad Curl. I heard from Brad just this week. He is now a middle-aged businessman in Washington, D. C., where he operates an art gallery. If you are ever in Washington, look him up! It is the Curl Galleries. He wrote,

Lynn [his wife] and I are studying Ephesians together. It's fantastic! We have a Father who is really tremendous! >From most external observations, the world is going to hell. But here he is, in the middle of his creation, determinedly accomplishing his objective of shaping a family for himself. It costs him, and it costs us, both. But he is relentlessly getting it done. What a determined Friend we have, and what a heart of love!

That is what is emerging more and more in the shaking of our time -- that there is no hope in man, and there is no power in self, that dedication and discipline are not enough to find answers to the problems we face, that merely knowing the principles of life by which to act is inadequate, that the proper actions cannot be carried out except by a reliance upon the power of God at work within us to motivate us and empower us to do it. We cannot merely take a list of things which ought to be done and determine to do them. More and more the message of the cross is coming through to us: "There is no power in self." We cannot grit our teeth and clench our fist and say, "I AM GOING TO DO IT!" and get it done. We are like Paul, as he cried out in Romans 7, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," {Rom 7:15 RSV}. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" {Rom 7:24 RSV}. Once again the answer comes -- we are delivered by the activity of God at work within us: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" {Rom 7:25a RSV}.

Then the cross says, "There is no fear in love," {1 Jn 4:18}. The answer to fear is to understand the love of God for us, and his availability to us. That is why Paul can exult as he does in Romans 8: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" {Rom 8:31 KJV}. I love that, don't you? And as the writer of Hebrews puts it,

**Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Hence we can confidently say,
"The Lord is my helper,
I will not be afraid;
what can man do to me?" {Heb 13:5-6 RSV}**

Jesus answers his frightened disciples again and again:

- "Be not troubled.
- "Let not your hearts be troubled.
- "Be not afraid.
- "Fear not, for I am with you."

This is the word which cannot be shaken today.

What should our response be? The writer of Hebrews says two things:

First, "Therefore let us be grateful" -- grateful hearts, praise and thanksgiving to God that we have a place to stand when all around is being shaken.

Has your home been shaken this year? Mine has. And it is great to have a place to stand which cannot be shaken. What praise rises from my heart to God for the unshakable things which cannot be removed!

When everything else begins to rock and shake, when our foundations are trembling and there is upheaval on every side, how grateful we ought to be for things which cannot be shaken.

Then the second thing -- not only grateful hearts, but responsive wills: "Let us offer to God acceptable worship." Here we are this morning, gathered together to worship God. What will be acceptable to him? Certainly not perfunctory, mechanical worship. He doesn't want us just sitting here waiting for the meeting to get over so we can go do something else. Jesus said, "They who worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth," {cf, John 4:24}. Worship is the whole man aimed at God, the whole man looking toward him in thanksgiving and praise. And not occasionally, but continually. As Paul puts it in Romans 12, "... by the mercies of God ... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [acceptable] worship" {Rom 12:1b RSV} -- bodies available to him, ready to respond to needs around us, to respond to the plea for help in the Sunday School, and to your neighbor's need for encouragement, and to your children's cry for direction and love, ready to respond to your husband in his hour of despair, and to your wife when she is feeling neglected and worthless. That is what the acceptable worship of God is all about. "Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." He envelops life like a great flame, burning away -- either destroying us or purifying us. Love is a fire. The love of God, touching our lives, is either going to burn us up and destroy us, break us apart in the shaking of the foundations, or it will steady us, strengthen us, establish us, and purify us, burning up the dross in our lives.

This is the God with whom we have to do. So let us come to life with grateful hearts and responsive wills in the name of Jesus, in this hour of the shaking of earth and of heaven.

Prayer

Once again, our Father, we are grateful for what your word reveals to us about what is going on in our life, in our families and homes, and in our nation and world. Help us to respond as this word suggests -- that we not refuse him who is speaking, for we cannot avoid the shaking which is occurring. Lord, let us take a firm stand upon those things which cannot be shaken -- the love and government of our God, the greatness of his being and power, and his mercy toward us -- and with grateful hearts give thanks, and make ourselves available to you this day. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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