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Sermon Notes

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Worship: Timeless and Temporary

Hebrews 12:25-29

Opening illustration: The earth moved beneath my feet; Tuesday, January 17, 1995 at 5:46 am; the Great Kobe earthquake

Unsettling to realize the temporary nature of creation... everything around us is temporary; that feeling can be extremely troubling; we look for something permanent, something to cling to, something that never changes

Change itself if difficult to accept: we are personally changing constantly; we are aging, developing, at first for the better, then for the worse; children grow up, acquire new skills, parents are delighted; but then, the children are no longer children—they are grown adults; they no longer live at home, but are following their own life paths; we look in the mirror and see unmistakable signs of aging... the world around us is constantly changing as well; technology—especially electronic and computer technology—is constantly evolving before our very eyes; our cell phone becomes obsolete the week after we purchase it;

The one thing we feel we can turn to that never changes is our faith; we find stability and meaning as we go to church week after week and hear the timeless stories of the Bible; we embrace the doctrine of an unchanging God and an unchanging gospel, and we celebrate that with all our hearts; but even here, there is change; the songs we sung as children are no longer popular; another generation comes along and changes worship styles and the feel of church... we wonder if there is anything we can hold onto... anything that is truly timeless and permanent... that which cannot be shaken

This brings me to the point of this morning's sermon... I have jumped out of order in Hebrews to reach for a passage in chapter 12 which speaks of two categories of things: those things which can be shaken (the temporary), and those things which can never be shaken (the permanent; the timeless)

The passage is especially relevant for us, because it commands us to “worship God acceptably”, and this is the deepest desire of the hearts of all the elders... to “worship God acceptably” in a temporary world, in a temporary culture, in a temporary building, with temporary instruments, and in temporary worship forms... to lead FBC rightly in the area of corporate worship—neither drifting to the right or the left, neither abandoning what must NEVER change about our faith, but at the same time being courageous enough

to challenge temporary forms of worship and change them when the time comes to do so, so that FBC can still be connected to the culture and the times in which we live

Plain speaking: The elders at FBC have been praying about the forms of our corporate worship for several years; we have become increasingly burdened about the need to make changes that will enable us to connect with 21st century Americans in a way that is godly, without forsaking anything about our corporate worship that must never change. We see dangers on each side of the road we are seeking to travel: like the proverbial “third rail” in the subway that will electrocute anyone who touches it; or perhaps a better analogy is a steep slope heading down a cliff on each side... and we are seeking to walk in the middle

What are these opposite dangers? One the one side, the danger of theological compromise, of forsaking doctrinal truths that must never be forsaken; of doing this to please unsaved people, of making them comfortable in their rebellion against a Holy God; so, on the one side, we have the danger of forsaking what must never be forsaken... of uprooting pillars of our faith that are the very foundation of true, acceptable worship to Almighty God... of changing the gospel of Jesus Christ for something that is perhaps more popular but which is no gospel at all... of forsaking the perfect truths of the inerrant word of God... you get the idea... theological compromise is one of the dangers

But on the other side is another danger: of a cowardly clinging to church traditions because it is uncomfortable to change them... of lifting up certain patterns of worship—styles of music, Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, whose musical style spoke to one generation powerfully but which is now dated and whose time has passed... of being too afraid of trouble in the church, too afraid of upsetting people, too afraid to move when the Holy Spirit says to move, instead of a cowardly clinging to old patterns because they are comfortable and the “way we’ve always done it”; many good, solid, Bible-believing churches have made this terrible error—they have stuck blindly to what they’ve always done in corporate worship, and have failed to notice that times and culture have changed around them; their worship is now dated, and only the people who have been in that church for decades still enjoy it; these churches continually get older and older... very few younger people join them; there aren’t many young couples; the babies the church celebrates being born are grandchildren, born in other churches and in other states... after a while, the numbers of Sunday morning attenders gets so small it becomes questionable whether they should even continue. Now, many factors conspire to bring this about—the primary one is not usually clinging to old worship styles and traditions, but a cowardly and faithless retreat from evangelism and missions... it is all part of the same mindset, though; at some point, the church got comfortable and sought only to make it through this world with the least amount of trouble and greatest amount of comfort; this is a very sad and dangerous situation as well

NOT OUR CHURCH but it might be

So the elders of FBC, after much prayer and hours and hours of discussion, feel the time has come to make some significant changes to certain aspects of our corporate worship

experience; our desire is to communicate as clearly as possible what these changes will entail and what they won't. We do not want the church to be surprised or blindsided by what the elders want to do with our worship services; tonight, the elders will present the details in a unified way. They will be available for questions, and will seek to be clear about the direction we feel God leading us to go.

My job this morning is to lay the groundwork for tonight's presentation by rooting in Scripture the ideas of that which is timeless (permanent) in corporate worship, and those forms which must be constantly evolving and are therefore temporary. I want to comfort those who fear we may be straying too far one way, doctrinally compromising... this we will NEVER do, by the power of the Holy Spirit we make this pledge to you. What must never change we will never change! However, I also want to challenge those who may be tempted to get too comfortable in our present forms of worship and urge you to look outside of yourselves to others, to even a generation yet unborn... and to embrace what may be for you some unsettling changes so that FBC will still have a strong connection to new generations, to new people, to new lifeblood for as long as the Lord chooses to tarry and wait for His return. We do not want FBC to become obsolete because we failed to keep in step with the Spirit when it was time to move out.

The Book of Hebrews: The Perfect Book to address this issue

No generation of Christians has ever had to embrace so much significant change in its worship!! Everything was changing!! The temple was obsolete... the Aaronic priesthood was obsolete... the animal sacrifices were obsolete... the ceremonial laws of Moses were obsolete... the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles were obsolete... the dietary restrictions were obsolete! And what is more, the author to Hebrews makes it plain that they MUST move ahead with God into the Promised Land of a whole new style of worship and religion!! If they shrink back through unbelief, and seek to return to the comfortable forms of their ancestors... if they shrink back from a courageous advance into New Covenant worship based on the blood of Jesus Christ and the invisible ministry of the Holy Spirit among them... if through unbelief they shrink back from entering that spiritual Promised Land, they will be no better than the generation of Jews who refused in the time of Moses to enter the physical Promised Land, and they will be destroyed:

Hebrews 10:38-39 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." ³⁹ ¶ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

The First Century Jews were being commanded by the Living God to turn their backs on almost all the familiar patterns of worship that they had inherited from their fathers and grandfathers... and which GOD HIMSELF had originally instituted through Moses. This was the most significant change in public worship in history

Christ had clearly prepared Israel for this immense change in worship. In Matthew 9:17, He said

Matthew 9:17 Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

In other words, the New Wine of the New Covenant could not fit into the old wineskins of Old Covenant Judaism. The New Covenant was a vibrant, living thing that was going to expand... like new wine still fermenting and giving off gasses... if the old, stiff, inflexible wineskins tried to contain it, it would rupture... God through the Spirit was making immense changes, and the people of God had to FLEX too, they had to move too... they had to YIELD to what the Spirit was doing

So it is today; forms of public worship have been changing for centuries; people have used many different types of music, many different cultural expressions to do the same kinds of things in worship: worshipping Christ by the power of the Spirit in submission to the New Testament, apostolic regulations

Any church that becomes static, inflexible, unyielded will have rupturing problems

No book speaks so eloquently to this issue as does Hebrews!

I. Central Call: Do Not Refuse the Lord Who Speaks

Vs. 25 See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?

A. Hebrews 12: Contrasting Mount Sinai vs. Mount Zion

1. Mount Sinai represents the Old Covenant and its earthly worship
2. Mount Zion represents heaven to which the New Covenant alone can bring us

B. Mount Zion (heaven) is infinitely superior to Mount Sinai (earth)

Hebrews 12:18-24 You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

C. Mount Sinai shook with the Voice of God... bringing terror

1. The setting itself was dreadful... terror-producing
2. Mountain burning with fire... darkness... gloom
3. Loud startling noises: a trumpet blast and the actual voice of Almighty God
4. The Law: "If anyone touches this mountain they must be stoned"
5. Even MOSES was trembling with fear

D. Mount Zion is infinitely superior

1. The "heavenly Jerusalem"
2. The "city of the living God"
3. Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly
4. The church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
5. The place where God dwells, He who is the judge of all men
6. The spirits of righteous men made perfect
7. JESUS: the mediator of a new covenant and to His perfect blood

E. You Have Come to Mount Zion... BY FAITH

1. The author says "You have come to Mount Zion"
2. By faith in Christ, you are already come there
3. But this "coming" is only by faith... we cannot see any of these things
4. The New Covenant worship is essentially and primarily by faith
5. God has not ordained a bunch of physical rituals and artifacts and sanctuaries and pilgrimages... that was all Old Covenant worship
6. New Covenant worship must be by faith alone

F. The Same God speaks today in the New Covenant

1. The author speaks yet another word of warning to these first century Jewish Christians
2. The same God whose voice shook the earth is speaking quietly today in the gospel... see to it that you do NOT REFUSE Him who speaks

3. Those who tried to escape God back then were completely unable to do so...
God judged them immediately for their sins
4. How much less can we escape now if we refuse the gospel of Jesus Christ
5. FOR that same voice that at one time shook just one mountain on earth will
someday shake the entire universe in wrath and judgment...
6. There is only ONE safe refuge: Jesus Christ

II. What Can Be Shaken: Temporary Things

Hebrews 12:26-27 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken-- that is, created things-- so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

- A. The "Shaking" of the Earth Shows its Temporary Nature
- B. The Future "Shaking" Will Be Universal
 1. Not only one mountain on earth but every mountain on earth and every portion of the earth
 2. And not only the earth but also the heavens
 3. Revelation 6 plainly describes this terrifying judgment that is coming on all creation

Revelation 6:12-14 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

- C. Everything Physical is Temporary
 1. Hebrews 1 already made this plain

Hebrews 1:10-12 He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ¹¹ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. ¹² You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

2. Many other verses testify to this as well

2 Corinthians 4:18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

D. Sunday Morning Experience

1. 414 Cleveland Street: This present structure is temporary
 - a. Built in 1927 in a “Neo-Classical style”... with pillars out front and no steeple, it looks like a Greek Temple
 - b. Used to have balconies extending all the way to this wall... removed with great debate and some rancor... people have a very hard time letting go of traditions and architecture is part of it
 - c. Renovated in 1995 under “Forward in Faith” for about 1.8 million dollars; it is comfortable and spacious, still eminently usable for worship
 - d. BUT it is temporary... what is seen may be shaken, and this building is no exception
 - e. Frankly, the renovations going on right now in this hallway out here show how temporary everything here is
2. Pipe organ is gone; replaced in 1990’s by a state of the art electronic pipe organ with no pipes... lots of discussion went into that decision at that time; electronic organ is temporary
3. Piano here—beautiful new Steinway—best piano in the world; it’s temporary too
4. Carpet, pews, folding chairs for the orchestra; choir robes, etc. lots of changes in the 13 years I’ve been here; everything you see with your eyes is temporary; at one point it didn’t exist at all; someone built it, and thought it would be useful for Sunday morning worship... but everything here is temporary
5. Every song we sing is temporary as well... the truths in the songs are not, but in heaven we will be singing a NEW SONG which every nation on earth will have to learn

III. What Cannot Be Shaken: Eternal Things

Hebrews 12:27-28 The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be 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 be thankful

A. "What Cannot Be Shaken"

1. The "Heavenly Zion" already described above
2. God the Creator, King, Judge
3. Jesus the Savior and His eternal blood
4. The Redeemed: the "firstborn" ransomed from every tribe and language and nation
5. The Heavenly Zion.... The New Jerusalem

B. The Scripture Reveals Other Things That Cannot Be Shaken

1. God's word never changes... it is eternal
2. God's character never changes
3. The gospel never changes
4. The dangers of the world, the flesh and the devil never change
5. God's call on our lives for 1) internal journey (personal holiness) and 2) external journey (evangelism and missions) never changes
6. These timeless pillars of corporate worship will never be changed from our corporate worship

C. So Also Certain Practical Aspects of Worship Must Not Change

1. We must have clear descriptions of God... His attributes, His achievements... as the basis for our worship
2. Every song we sing and every prayer we pray and every word we speak from the pulpit must conform to the apostolic doctrine of Scripture... it must pass the truth test
3. We are to give our attention to prayer and the public reading of Scripture
4. We are to sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs by the power of the Holy Spirit

5. We are to have the word of God faithfully preached week by week
6. We are to assemble ourselves together weekly to do these things
7. We are to give ourselves faithfully to the administration of the ordinances—baptism and the Lord's Supper
8. We are to do everything we can to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace
9. We are to collect money-tithes and offerings—for the ongoing work of the church and the spread of the gospel worldwide

IV. Let Us Worship God Acceptably

Hebrews 12:28-29 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

A. Because We Are Receiving an Unshakable Kingdom

1. The first ground for our worship: the incredible GRACE of GOD to us in Christ
2. We are receiving a **Kingdom**...
 - a. To "receive a Kingdom" means to be counted an heir
 - b. It means to receive a vast inheritance of incalculable wealth
 - c. It means that we are joint-heirs with Christ and will reign with Him on His throne forever and ever
 - d. A Kingdom is centered on the power of a King, and our King is Jesus the Invincible One
3. A "Kingdom that cannot be shaken"
 - a. No power in heaven or on earth or under the earth can stop the Kingdom of Christ
 - b. It is an UNSHAKEABLE KINGDOM... nothing can make it tremble or shiver or rumble... Satan has no power against Christ's Kingdom; neither do all of the wicked men that have allied themselves against it
 - c. Psalm 2 describes this united effort to shake Christ's Kingdom and the heavenly response:

Psalm 2:1-4 Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? ² The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ³ "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." ⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.

- d. Nothing can stop the coming of this unshakeable Kingdom
 - e. And when we are finally saved, in the New Jerusalem, we will understand at last the awesome sovereign power of King Jesus and we will celebrate it forever and ever
4. "We ARE RECEIVING" this Kingdom...
 - a. We are in the PROCESS of receiving our inheritance
 - b. It is going on now, day by day, with our growing sanctification
 - c. It is going on now, day by day, with our growing fruitfulness in evangelism and missions
 5. This is the BASIS of our present worship... this gift of a Kingdom
 6. That will NEVER CHANGE... no matter what outward trappings our worship may take... no matter what instruments we use or style of music or visual aspects or any temporary thing
 7. The CENTERPIECE of our worship week by week will be the Kingdom of Jesus Christ... victorious over sin and death forever

B. Let Us Be Thankful

1. Gratitude is at the root of our corporate worship
2. God deserves to be THANKED for giving us a Kingdom that cannot be shaken!!
3. Jesus deserves to be THANKED for paying for our inheritance with His precious blood, shed on the cross; and for rising from the dead to give us an UNSHAKABLE HOPE
4. The Spirit deserves to be THANKED for taking the finished work of God the Father in election and the finished work of God the Son in redemption and applying it to us directly so that we are included in this vast salvation
5. Thankfulness should characterize our corporate worship... it should be a JOYOUS CELEBRATION... it should be radiating with joy and thanks and energy and love

C. Let Us Worship God

1. The word literally is “serve”... “Let us serve God”
2. BUT the context is one of the organized religious actions centered around the Tabernacle/Temple in the Old Covenant
3. Our whole lives should be actively given in service to the Triune God
4. In Hebrews 13, he will speak of this kind of active service in acts that are well-pleasing to God

Hebrews 13:15-16 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-- the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

5. But here, we focus on corporate worship
6. We should enter this building every Sunday morning ready to give a sacrifice of praise and worship to God
7. One of the biggest desires the elders have is to craft and lead a worship service that vigorously ENGAGES the hearts and minds of the people; you should come here ready to be summoned out of whatever self-focused discouragement or pre-occupation with worldly successes or failures and be ready to SERVE GOD in worship

D. Acceptably

1. There is ACCEPTABLE worship and UNACCEPTABLE worship
2. The Greek word means “well-pleasing”... we are to worship God in a way that is well-pleasing to Him
3. In the Old Testament, God was very plain about details of Jewish worship; they were not to worship as the pagans did under every tree and on every high place in whatever way they saw fit; God commanded them quite closely concerning acceptable worship
4. Now, in the New Testament, we are to worship God in spirit and in truth
5. We are to glorify Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit
6. We are to be holy, to cherish God’s word, to be empowered by the Spirit
7. We are to love one another, and serve one another sacrificially
8. When we come together for worship, we are to follow the clear teachings of the apostles as laid out in the New Testament

9. This is acceptable worship

E. With Reverence and Awe

1. These words show the fear and reverence that is due to Almighty God
2. Jesus had this kind of pious awe for His Father in Hebrews 5

Hebrews 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

3. Awe should characterize our worship... a sense of the infinite majesty of Almighty God; every godly person in the Scripture that had an encounter with the living God was overwhelmed with the holiness, the majesty, the grandeur, the sheer immensity and infinity of God
4. Forever, our corporate worship MUST BE CHARACTERIZED by this same kind of holy fear and awe of the Triune God
5. Sadly, too much contemporary worship is characterized by a lightness and frivolity and irreverence and disrespect for God in the name of setting everyone at ease and making everyone happy
6. There is a way to combine the JOYFULL THANKFULNESS we discussed a moment ago with the REVERENCE and AWE of this verse; we have to find a way to do that every single time we come together in worship
7. That is TIMELESS

F. For Our God is a Consuming Fire

1. The fear of the Lord comes from the holiness of God... a sense that God is a CONSUMING FIRE...
2. This phrase comes from Deuteronomy 4 where Moses commanded the Israelites not to make any idols

Deuteronomy 4:23-24 Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

3. Isaiah picks up on this as well:

Isaiah 33:14 The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?"

4. So God never changes! We should tremble JOYFULLY in His holy presence
5. Our corporate worship must be characterized by these seemingly opposite experiences: bathed in the infinite love of God for us in Christ... He is our “Abba, Father” who loves us dearly and tenderly; AND “Our God is a consuming fire” who can in no way tolerate wickedness

V. Applications

A. Be Ready for Change

1. It may be unsettling, but we cannot stay comfortably locked in a musical/cultural pattern of worship and keep in step with the Spirit
2. Understand that no aspect of our physical lives here on earth is permanent
3. Also trust what God will do through the elders of this church: not a single thing will be changed that is timeless and part of God’s unchanging will for every culture and every era of human history

B. Ask God to Open Your Heart

1. God loves more worship styles than you do!!
2. In every tribe, language, people, nation... people coming to faith in Christ immediately express thankfulness and reverence/awe to Almighty God in ways very different than you might
3. Across twenty centuries of church history, worship styles have changed dramatically
 - a. In the era of the monks, Gregorian chants wafted ethereally up toward heaven; at some point that pattern of worship became obsolete
 - b. Isaac Watts was a trailblazer in taking the Psalms and versifying them for hymns; some people thought what he was doing was blasphemous; but for others it became a mainstay of worship
 - c. In the early 18th century in New England, in Jonathan Edwards’s childhood, there were no standardized melodies; each person sang whatever tune they liked best; the result was a kind of cacophony that Isaac Watts and others helped solve
 - d. Martin Luther loved music and was a trailblazer in church hymnwriting; many have linked Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach who came centuries later saying that Bach would never have been possible in Lutheran Germany if Luther hadn’t been such a lover of musical expressions of worship

- e. The early Methodist church was blessed by the hymnwriting prowess of Charles Wesley, who broke away from the strict Psalm-only approach to write spiritual songs that are now classics
 - f. The revivalist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries have filled Baptist hymnals with many songs that are cherished classics for some; but whose tunes and lyrics come across as dated and perhaps obsolete to others
 - g. I would venture to say that there is no congregation in America that worships in a style that would have been pleasing to 4th century Christians, or vice-versa
 - h. These forms have been changing constantly
 - i. To hold on to any of them as though they were as sacred as the Scriptures on which they are based is harmful to the ongoing mission of the church
4. Learn to think of others when it comes to corporate worship
- a. At any moment a song we may be singing may be your favorite and someone else's least favorite
 - b. The next song, it may be exactly reversed! Learn to look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others
- C. Pray for the Elders
- 1. God has entrusted the navigation of this issue to the elders of the church
 - 2. Pray that God will guide us as we seek to glorify Him and make wise decisions
- D. Come Tonight to Find Out More Details