

PFRS Commentary

Heb 12:28

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Hebrews 12:28

28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.
(NKJV)

Preterists and amillennialists sometimes use Hebrews 12:28 to prove that the Kingdom was currently being received by believers in the first century, and did not await a future establishment on earth. Some appeal to the present tense participle, "receiving," as proof that the Kingdom of God was a present reality rather than a future hope. But, the context proves the preterist interpretation greatly wanting. It defies both the grammar and the historical context.

Historical Context

In this passage, Paul based his argument on an Old Testament promise, which he quoted from Haggai. Therefore, the context of the Old Testament prophecy Paul quoted is essential to our interpretation of Hebrews 12:28, because his Jewish readers were certainly keenly aware of this prophecy and its historical context.

The book of Haggai was written after the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, as recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. Nebuchadnezzar had sacked Jerusalem in 586BC, destroying Solomon's Temple. Some of the elder Jews, those who were alive seventy years earlier and seen Solomon's Temple, were very disappointed with the much more humble structure being built by Zerubabel and the workman under his command on the former site of Solomon's Temple. The foundation for the rebuilt Temple was much smaller. And the materials at their disposal to complete the Temple were much more mundane than the huge amounts of gold, silver, and other precious materials Solomon used. This led to great discouragement among the Jewish people, particularly the older men, and all those working on the massive project.

This is the historical setting for the prophecy in chapter two. In order to encourage the workmen, and Zerubabel their leader and chief builder, God spoke to Israel through Haggai the prophet about the future plans God had for His Temple in Jerusalem. That is, one day that **Temple in Jerusalem** would far excel even Solomon's Temple. This would occur when God shakes the heaven

and earth, and brings judgment upon all the heathen nations. This is the passage that Paul chose to cite in Hebrews 12, in reference to the future hope of his Jewish Christian readers.

Hag 2:3-9,20-22

3 Who is left among you that saw **this house** in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?

4 Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the LORD; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the LORD, and work: for I am with you, saith the LORD of hosts:

5 According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.

6 For thus saith the LORD of hosts; **Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;**

7 And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill THIS HOUSE with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.

8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the LORD of hosts.

9 **The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former**, saith the LORD of hosts: and **IN THIS PLACE will I give peace**, saith the LORD of hosts. ...

20 And again the word of the LORD came unto Haggai in the four and twentieth day of the month, saying,

21 Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, **I will shake the heavens and the earth;**

22 **And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen**; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. (KJV)

Heb 12:25-29

25 See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth [cf. Heb. 3:7-10,15-19], much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: 26 Whose voice then shook the earth [cf. Ex. 19:16-20]: **but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.**

27 And this word, **Yet once more**, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 **Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

29 For our God is a consuming fire. (KJV)

It was the custom of the Jews when teaching to quote short phrases or sentences from the Old Testament. The student was expected to know the passage quoted, and its entire context and significance. The purpose of citing the brief quote was to bring that entire passage to bear on his subject. Unfortunately, Christians are usually ignorant of the contexts of such Old

Testament quotations in the New Testament, and frequently miss the importance of the quote. That is certainly the case here.

The prophecy of Haggai focussed on the Temple in Jerusalem, and its glorious future. It also focussed on the judgment that would befall the heathen nations, and the "peace" that would follow in "*this place*," Jerusalem. Many years before the destruction of Solomon's Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, Isaiah was the first to describe the coming Kingdom in detail, making specific mention of the Temple.

*"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of **the LORD's house** shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and **all nations shall flow unto it**. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to **the house of the God of Jacob**; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for **out of Zion** shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from **Jerusalem**. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,"* (Isa. 2:2-4 KJV).

Notice also in Haggai's prophecy that all this was to occur in "*a little while*." Preterists insist that these kinds of "time" statements demand a very quick fulfillment when dealing with New Testament passages. Yet, even if we grant that when Paul cited this passage, he was referring to his day and possibly AD70, that is hardly "*a little while*" by preterist standards. The prophecy that in "*a little while*" God would shake heaven and earth was made by Haggai in 520BC, almost 600 years before Paul quoted him. Similarly, other Old Testament prophets used similar language when referring to the coming "*Day of the Lord*." For example, Joel wrote that the Day of the Lord, when he would judge all the heathen nations, was "*near*" (Joel 3:14). Zephaniah wrote that "*The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly*" (Zeph. 1:14). Why then should New Testament passages that make similar statements demand fulfillment in that generation? These time statements are relative terms, not specific terms.

Grammatical Blunder

The argument that the present tense of the participle "receiving" indicates a current reception of the Kingdom by Paul's readers is not valid. It is common in the Greek New Testament for the speaker or writer to use the present tense for emphasis, even when he is speaking of the past or future. Even beginner Greek students understand that the present tense verbs in Greek are used in a variety of ways. The verb tense primarily indicates the KIND of action, with the TIME of action being only a minor component, and is usually inferred from the context.

The standard, well-known grammar by Dana and Mantey lists eight uses of the present tense. Included among these is "the customary present." This use of the present tense denotes something that may be expected to occur. Also included among these is "the historical present" which, as the name implies, refers to something that actually occurred in past time. The reason for using it in a context where the action is obviously past is to add vividness to the narrative. The "historical present" is frequently used even in English. Listen to your local news, or read the newspaper, and you will hear the reporters speaking of things that recently occurred (past) using present tense verbs. For example, how about this headline: "The Tampa Bay Bucs come from behind and win the super bowl!"

Another common use of present tense verbs listed by Dana and Mantey is the **"futuristic (or prophetic) present."** This usage is very common in prophetic passages. According to Dana and Mantey, *"This use of the present tense denotes an event which has not yet occurred, but which is regarded as so certain that in thought it may be contemplated as already coming to pass."* According to Winer, it is *"employed to denote a future action either because it is already firmly resolved upon or because it follows because of some unalterable law."* And according to Robertson, *"The other use of the futuristic present is the dramatic or prophetic. This present - a sort of counterpart to the historic present - is very frequent in the predictions of the N.T. It is not merely prophecy, but certainty of expectation that is involved. As examples note Matt 17:11; 24:43; 26:2; 26:18; 27:63; Luke 3:9; 19:8; John 4:35; 8:14; 8:21; 10:15; 12:26; 20:17; 21:23; 1 Cor 15:26... The futuristic present startles and arrests attention. It affirms and not merely predicts. It gives a sense of certainty."* So, from a grammatical standpoint, the present tense in this passage does NOT indicate they were currently receiving the Kingdom.

There are many passages of Scripture that use the present tense in prophetic passages in order to stress the certainness of the thing being predicted. For example, when Jesus sent out the Apostles the first time, he predicted that certain things would occur, but used **present participles**.

Matt 10:19-20, 40-41

19 But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak.

*20 For it is not ye that **speak**[are speaking] , but the Spirit of your Father which **speaketh**[is speaking] in you. ...*

*40 He that **receiveth**[is receiving] you **receiveth**[is receiving] me, and he that **receiveth**[is receiving] me **receiveth** [is receiving] him that sent me.*

*41 He that **receiveth**[is receiving] a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that **receiveth** [is receiving] a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. (KJV)*

Each of the above participles are in the present tense in Greek. Yet, the context is very clear that the entire passage is prophetic. It is the certainty of these things that is the reason for the use of the prophetic present, not the current activity. The prophetic context lets us know when such prophetic present tense verbs and participles are used. Hebrews 12:28 is clearly a prophetic context, because Paul had just referenced what was "promised," quoting Haggai. The "kingdom" we are receiving is the one prophesied by Haggai, when God shakes the heaven and earth.

Even in English the use of the **prophetic present** in these kinds of contexts are common. Notice in my last sentence in the above paragraph, I used present tense participles. Yet, you understand me to be referring to the future because of context. Here is another hypothetical example: Suppose that all the heirs named in the will of a wealthy old man are discussing the future inheritance they will receive when he dies at some point in the future. It is perfectly acceptable in English to use present tense participles in reference to the future inheritance, when **certainty** is being stressed. "*Since we all are receiving an equal share of the inheritance, we should not envy one another.*" Does my use of the present tense participle, "receiving," in this sentence demand that all the heirs were at that time enjoying the inheritance? No, of course not. The present participle points to the certainty of the fact, and not a current happening. The context of the discussion indicates it is future. And that is in English, where tenses are far more weighty regarding time than they are in Greek! When Paul wrote, "*wherefore, we receiving a Kingdom that cannot be moved...*," he was emphasizing precisely the same kind of certainty as my hypothetical statement above. This is very common in the Greek New Testament in prophetic passages. Preterists simply have no grammatical basis for the claim that this passage proves a current "receiving" of the Kingdom by Paul's audience.

Here is another clear example of the present participle used prophetically. I have included the four preceding verses for context.

1 Pet 1:5-9,13

5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith **unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.**

6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, **though now for a season**, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory **at the appearing of Jesus Christ:**

8 Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, **though now ye see him not**, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

9 **Receiving** the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. ...

*13 Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and **hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ**; (KJV)*

The situation here is precisely the same as in Hebrews 12:28. The context clearly indicates a prophecy -- the realization of the promise. In Heb. 12:28, it is our receiving the Kingdom, when the promise in Haggai of God's once more shaking the heaven and earth is realized. Here, it is our receiving the ultimate reward of our faith, at the parousia of Jesus Christ. Both passages use the present participle to describe the ultimate (future) realization. The context indicates the realization (receiving) when we see Christ. The certainty of ultimately receiving the end of our faith is stressed by the use of the present tense participle.

For those seeking more cases to compare, where a present participle is used in a future context, here are a few examples. There are many more. There are also literally hundreds of cases where the present participle is used in a historical context: Matt. 13:41; Matt. 24:19,41,46; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:12,23,25,26,36; Luke 22:30; John 13:11; Rom. 8:18; 1 Thess. 4:15,17; 2 Thess. 1:8; 2 Thess. 2:4; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 6:12; Heb. 13:13; James 2:12; 2 Pet. 2:1; Rev. 11:10; Rev. 13:8.