One Thing is for Sure...

Introduction

During MYC 2009 [1] I was part of a workshop that studied how to compile a Bible study for a passage in the New Testament. We were given Hebrews 12:18–29 and had three days to complete our Bible studies.

The **main idea** of this Bible study is: *Through Jesus, we do not need to fear condemnation, but can be sure of redemption if we follow Him closely*. The Bible study was presented on 19 July 2009.

The **target group** I wrote this passage for is students who are growing in their faith and who have at least a very basic knowledge of the Old Testament.

The Bible Study

> [18]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, to 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.
> [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? [26]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 heaven." [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. [28]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." — Hebrews 12:18–29 (NIV)

1. Given a choice by a close friend to go on a blind date with either someone she knows to be kind, gentle, funny, upright and faithful, or with someone she briefly met in the Pick'n'Pay yesterday and who she says looks "sort of OK", who would you choose?
2. People often fear the unknown. vv. 18–21 are set against the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt as they came to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). Why was the mountain so terrifying?
3. vv. 24–25 paint a very different picture than the first part of the passage. What does it mean to "come to Mount Zion"?
4. Who is the "firstborn" mentioned in v. 23 and what is the "church of the firstborn"?
5. By using the word "have" in vv. 22–23, the writer indicates the past tense. But these verses clearly speak of heaven and we are still on earth. How "have" we entered heaven?
6. Genesis 4:10–12 speaks of how Abel's blood cries out from the ground. Able was murdered by Cain for his righteousness, thus the blood of Abel symbolises a testimony against the unrighteous. What is the "better word" the blood in v. 24 speaks of?
7. Entering the new covenant is conditional, not universal. In what ways can people "refuse Him who speaks"?
8. What is the warning spoken of in v. 25?
9. Who will be affected by the shaking up of the earth and the heavens (v. 26)?
10. How do you think the shaking of the earth and the heavens will look like if you consider vv. 18–21? What will remain, based on vv. 22–24?

11. We have said that people often fear the unknown. Sometimes knowledge of something is much more terrifying. Do you think the fear for God of an unbeliever would be irrational?
12. Fire is mentioned at the start (v. 18) and end (v. 29) of our passage. In each case, which trait(s) of God does the fire symbolise?
13. Sometimes we allow things which would be beneficial for us to slip away from us, because of uncertainty, fear or just plain apathy. Is this something we can afford with heaven in light of the passage?
14. What/who makes it possible for us to approach Mount Zion while the Israelites could not approach Mount Zion?
15. Fear of God comes from not knowing Him and being under His judgement. To know God through understanding what Jesus has done for us on the cross and believing that our sins are thereby forgiven leads to joy and celebration. How do you show this celebration outwardly? How do you share this joy with other people?
16. Do you fear the perfect holiness of God? Is this fear different from that of the unbeliever?

Critique

The passage was well received by the group. Admittedly, I didn't have time to progress past a first draft. I was therefore expecting (and hoping for) some criticism, but didn't get any. I can, however, highlight some of the things which bothered me:

- I realised too late that the opening question can conceivable backfire for certain individuals, although probably unlikely. A different opening question with the same idea would be better.
- Question 13 doesn't seem to fit well with the flow of the rest of the questions. I'm am also unsure of the specific relevance of the question at this specific point. (But maybe that's just me.)

Addendum

We were strongly urged not to use any Bible commentaries or other study aids in writing our Bible studies. The idea was that we should wrestle with the passage ourselves and come to insights for ourselves. When I returned home after MYC, I was eager, however, to see what the NIV study Bible had to say about the passage. I was shocked when I learned that, in v. 23, "Firstborn cannot refer to Christ, since here the Greek word is plural. Now, I (as well as other members of my workshop group) had question 4, for which the intended answer was "Jesus". This again highlighted how careful one needs to be when compiling a Bible study. The NIV text makes an ambiguous effort to dispel what seems to be an obvious assumption: the word "firstborn" does not indicate singularity of plurality, but the phrase the "church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" uses "names" which indicates plurality. But does this mean that "firstborn" is plural, or does is refer to those who are within "the church (of the Firstborn)"?

The KJV/MKJV might also lead to confusion: "the general assembly and church of the firstborn"

The ESV and ISV are more helpful: "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven". (This is also very close to what is in the 1983 Afrikaans translation.)

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