

Hebrews: the Supremacy of Christ Above all Things
A Mountain You Can Touch
Hebrews 12:18-24

Text:

Hebrews 12:18-24 (ESV)

¹⁸For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Introduction:

My family and I are just a few hours away from beholding one of my most cherished sights – the mountains of Colorado. Just off my parents’ deck to the West will be two of the most majestic looking mountains that Colorado has to offer. Standing over 14,000 feet are two mighty twin towers, the twin peaks of Mount Meeker and Long’s Peak. Two of Colorado’s highest mountains stand side-by-side. It is an awesome sight, indeed.

Well, I do not want you to be left out so we will examine two majestic mountains this morning – two mountains placed side-by-side by way of comparison. One is foreboding and frightful; the other is fascinating and festive. And one of them will clearly tower over and thus over shadow the other.

The author of Hebrews is obviously contrasting not simply two mountains but two covenants and not just two covenants but two ways of coming to God. These two ways to God and these two covenants are represented by two mountains.

Notice the contrast. First note the phrase at the beginning of v.18, “For you have not come...” as it is contrasted with the phrase at the beginning of v.22, “You have come...”

Furthermore, the author only calls one of the mountains by name. The second one he names as Mt. Zion. The first mountain, however, is not all that mysterious. Anyone who has any Bible knowledge would have recalled the mountain upon which Moses received the Law, Mt Sinai. So the contrast is between Mount Sinai, representing the Old Covenant mediated by Moses, and the Mount Zion, representing the New Covenant mediated by Christ. For the sake of our purposes, we will call them: “Frightful Mt. Sinai” and “Festive Mt. Zion.”

Mt. Sinai – “*The Frightful Mount*”

Although the author of Hebrews has not clearly named Mt. Sinai, he has clearly described the mountain based from Israel’s encounter with God on the mountain as put forth in Moses’ own words in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4 and 5.

In the Sinai encounter, the physical people of God in the OT, Israel, came near to God in a solemn assembly in order to covenant with him. (Notice that I said they “came near” to God). But the experience was nothing short of terrifying. In fact, the author lists seven images from the OT to drive home the event’s terror:

1. They came to the place of God’s location – a mountain that could not be touched.
2. blazing fire
3. darkness
4. gloom
5. tempestuous winds
6. the blast of trumpets
7. and a thundering voice that struck panic into the heart’s of its hearers.

If you remember the story, as Israel was encamped around the base of the mountain, the command had been issued that no one was to touch the mountain, not even an animal. If an animal touched the mountain, it was to be stoned to death. As the people camped there, they could not see God they could only hear his voice. They were extremely frightened. In fact, in response to the thundering voice of God and to his commands, they people begged Moses to tell God to stop talking to them. This is vitally important to our text in Hebrews, for the author uses this terror-stricken request as an illustration of one who not only rejects God’s voice but rejects God’s words. Look at what is coming in v. 25, “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” The author clearly sees the people as rejecting God himself. We’ll come back to this in a few weeks.

Based on both the OT account and the Hebrews interpretation of the account, the people were well aware of the boundaries that separated them from God. There are some valuable lessons about God that one can glean from such an encounter:

- God is *transcendent* – He is much greater than his creation and thus removed from his creation.
- God is *inapproachable* – One cannot simply saunter into His presence uninvited or on one’s own terms.
- God is *holy* – He is in a class all to himself and separate from sinners.
- God is *just* – He will deal fairly with all undeserving sinners.

Let there be no doubt, the air in the assembly around the mountain of God that day was one of darkness and dread. The people trembled. They knew they were being kept at a distance. They knew they were not allowed to get too close.

It is important to remind you here just whom it is that the writer of Hebrews is addressing. He is addressing 1st Century Jewish Christians who, out of fear of persecution, are contemplating a return to Judaism. The author is crystal clear about what he thinks of such nonsense! To turn from Christ and return to Judaism is worse than a dead-end street. It is as nonsensical as someone fleeing to his nightmare for safety. Why would you return to such a mountain? But remember, it is not just a mountain. The mountain is but a symbol for a covenant, a way of approaching God.

This phrase, “approaching God” is a prominent theme throughout the book of Hebrews. It is encapsulated in the biblical language of “drawing near.” In fact, the word translated in vv. 18 and

22 as “come to” is translated as “drawing near” in every other occurrence in the book (4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6). It is the technical language used in the book for coming to Christ in salvation. There is the invitation into his presence on His part and there is the approach to God in faith on our part.

Under the Old Covenant, there were invitations to come into God’s presence, but they were always followed up with limitations and restrictions.

- “Come into my presence” was the invitation at the Mt. Sinai. So the whole assembly assembled at the base of the camp only to here the further limitation, “Come into my presence...but don’t touch the mountain!”
- “Come into my presence...Not all of you, just him – Moses. The rest of you watch and wait!”
- “Come into my presence” was the invitation at the tabernacle. So the whole assembly assembled at the Tabernacle only to see signs of further restrictions and limitations. “Come into my presence...but don’t pass the court of Gentiles” (if you’re a Gentile); or “Don’t pass the court of women” (if you’re a woman).
- They all heard, “Come into my presence...Not all of you, just him – the high priest...and make sure you have atoning blood with you or you’ll die!”

Do you get the picture? To come into God’s presence was always limited and restricted. The only word that seems to fit is the word *foreboding*. Mt. Sinai represents the fearful and foreboding invitation to come into God’s presence.

Mt. Zion – “*The Festal Mount*”

Ah, but there is a New Covenant, a new way of approaching God. The writer of Hebrews has already said it like this, “Therefore, brothers...we have confidence to enter the holy places...by the new and living way...opened for us...” (10:19-20). NEW!!

This new way – this new approach – this new covenant – is so far superior to the old way that it makes the old obsolete. In other words, it doesn’t exist. So if one were to abandon this new way to God, this new covenant approach to God they would, in fact, be abandoning the only way to God. It is not like you can double back and re-trace your steps and take a different path to the same destination. Oh no! This is the only way to God! So to abandon the New covenant way to God in favor of the Old covenant way to God is to, in fact, abandon God all together.

You see, in drawing near to God, you are not drawing near to a mountain that cannot be touched, blazing with fire, surrounded by darkness and gloom and blowing winds, blasting trumpets and booming voices that strike terror into the heart of sinners. Oh no! In drawing near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ, you are coming to Mt. Zion, “Festal Mt. Zion.”

Notice the seven things the author mentions here so as to balance his contrast:

1. You have come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem
2. filled with innumerable angels in festal gathering
3. to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven’s registry
4. to God, the judge of all
5. to the spirits of the righteous now made perfect
6. to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant

7. and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Let me first point out that the verb tense behind the words “you have come to Mt. Zion” are in the perfect tense. That means two things: (1) the audience is deemed by the author as having come. That is to say, he views them as believers who have reached their destination of heavenly Jerusalem, though they are not yet dead. (2) Being in the perfect tense means that through an action that occurred in the past, present ramifications and future realities are being enjoyed now. In other words, in coming to Christ, you do not have to wait to enjoy the benefits of the New Jerusalem. There is a sense in which you are already enjoying them. That is his point. In turning back to the old way, you would be abandoning certain present and certainly, future benefits of the new covenant.

Secondly, let me point out that no matter what your system of theology, it is certain that the heavenly Jerusalem, Mt. Zion, the city of the living God is the true fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant. Look back to 11:10

- Hebrews 11:10 (ESV)
¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.
- Hebrews 11:16 (ESV)
¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.
- Hebrews 13:14 (ESV)
¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Heaven is the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. The New Jerusalem in heaven, not a physical fulfillment here, is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. We know this is certain because the Old Covenant dealt with physical people through physical types – shadows; but the New Covenant deals with a spiritual people through spiritual realities – substance (cf. 10:1).

Hebrews 10:1 (ESV)

¹For since the law (Mt. Sinai, the Old Covenant) has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

So in coming to Mt. Zion, you come into the very presence – the dwelling place of God on high.

But not only have you come into the heavenly presence of God, you have also come into “the assembly of the firstborn.” This is a reference to the earthly assembly of God’s people, i.e., the church of Jesus Christ, who is called the “firstborn” in 1:6. In coming to Christ, you come into the relationship that is precious and peculiar to the church. In coming to Christ you enter the ranks of the new covenant people whose names are inscribed on heaven’s roles. You are now one who shares in the inheritance to come.

Next, you have come to the Judge of all. Only on this mountain, you do not cower in fear because he is not coming as your judge but as your vindication. For those who fear persecution, they are to know that God will vindicate his righteous people.

Psalm 9:7-12 (ESV)

⁷But the LORD sits enthroned forever;
he has established his throne for justice,
⁸and he judges the world with righteousness;

he judges the peoples with uprightness.
⁹ The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
¹⁰ And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
¹¹ Sing praises to the LORD, who sits enthroned in Zion!
Tell among the peoples his deeds!
¹² For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

You have not come to Mt. Zion for God to pass judgment on you, but for him to vindicate his righteous people.

Then, in the next breath, he says they join the spirits of the righteous now made perfect. This is undoubtedly in reference to all the deceased in the faith, especially that hall of heroes from chapter 11 who are awaiting the resurrection of their bodies along with us.

But most importantly, you are coming to Christ, the mediator of the new covenant whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. We know that God asked Cain in Genesis 4:10, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is calling to me from the ground.” What was Abel’s blood crying out for? It was crying out for revenge and vindication, for judgment. But what does the blood of Christ cry out? It cries out to God that the new covenant people who trust the blood of Christ have won forgiveness and have been cleansed.

So far superior is Christ to anything the old covenant had to offer!

When you come to Mt. Zion, you are coming into a festal mountain – a celebration!

Application

So what is the application? How does talk of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion apply to Christians who live 2,000 years after Hebrews was written?

Well, I think there is negative application and I think there is positive application. In other words, I think the text calls us to beware of certain things as well as to pursue other things. Let’s take the negative first.

Negative

Notice that the first word of v.18 is the word “for,” or “because of.” Notice how the author advances his argument from the previous section. His last exhortation in vv.16, 17 was to see to it that no one is like immoral or unholy Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal...because you have not come to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion. How does the argumentation of Mt Zion being preferred over Mt. Sinai ground people so that they do not sell-out like Esau did? You can probably already see the answer coming.

Esau’s selling-out was a selling-out of the ultimate for the sake of the immediate. Esau sold out the meaningful for the tangible. So the negative application comes in the form of a further exhortation: don’t take shadow over substance; don’t desire physical over spiritual; don’t embrace external at the sake of internal; don’t walk by sight when God calls you to walk by faith.

Remember that the word “because” at the beginning of v.18 is providing the necessary grounding you need as ballast in the bottom of your ship so that when God designs pain in your life as a form

of discipline, you will not digress to the point of Esau selling-out the ultimate for the immediate, the tangible for the substantial, the shadow for the substance.

The anchor you need is that you have come to Christ – the substance. He brings you into his very presence – his city – where angels sing praises and the deceased in Christ are resting in perfected spirits; he brings you into the relationships of the church of the first-born; he brings you into joy and security of the blood of Christ that all this suffering is not judgment but discipline.

Positive

1. When you come to Christ, you come to grace!

I am sorry to say that it is the mixed message of the pulpits that has caused so much undo fear in the hearts of hurting people. Why do people feel as though God is punishing them every time something goes wrong in their life? The blame rests at the feet of preachers who do not adequately preach the atoning death of Jesus and the mercy and grace found in the Gospel.

It is the tendency of the church to brow-beat its sinners that causes Christians to believe that God is angry with them and eager to thump them when they go wrong.

Well, I have news for you, when you come to Christ, you do not come to frightful Mt. Sinai but to festal Mt. Zion. You come to grace!

There is application here, namely, we need to change our language. We need to change the way we deal with sinners. We need to love sinners. We need to talk more and often about the truly atoning nature of Christ's death. We need to exalt the cross-work of Jesus!

2. When you come to Christ, you come to relationships!

When I say #2 – relationships, I mean the church! When you come to Christ, you enter the church. You are coming to an assembly that exists to help you approach (draw near to) God. This has been clearly seen now in Hebrews 3, 10, and now 12.

It is unthinkable to the author of Hebrews to be a Christian and not faithful to the assembly of new covenant people. In fact, the author of Hebrews implies that one is as committed to Christ as he/she is committed to the church.

Are you committed to the church? If you think you can draw near to God on your own; if you think that you can adequately watch for your own soul in solitude; if you think you can keep yourself from drifting; if you think you can adequately lift your own drooping hands, you are severely deceived!

Are you causing people to draw near to God or to run from his presence by the way you both portray God and minister to others? Do you bring people to Mt Zion and join with them in the festive celebration or do you bring them to Mt. Sinai and hold their feet to the blaze, the wind, the thunder, the lightning?

3. When you come to Christ, you come to joy!

Are you happy right now?

If you're not, you need to ask yourself, "What does the God that I believe in look like? Does he look like the God of Frightful Mt. Sinai or the God of Festal Mt. Zion?"

You may have the wrong mountain in focus. Look to Zion and live!