

“HEBREWS”

Session #31—Hebrews 12:18-24

The book of Hebrews makes frequent comparisons between the old covenant and the new covenant to demonstrate the vast superiority of the privileges and benefits believers enjoy in the new covenant. Tonight we come to another one of those powerful comparisons. This time the symbolism involves two mountains.

Mount Sinai is something like Jacob’s stew, while **Mount Zion** is like Esau’s birthright. The birthright and its blessings were vastly better, but these were future and thus “unseen.”

The revelation of God to Israel at Mount Sinai was seen, heard, smelled (the smoke), and felt (the earthquakes). The law that was given set forth God’s conditions for Israel’s enjoyment of an earthly kingdom. Judaism clung to Sinai, Moses, and the Old Covenant because it seemed to offer a more immediate and more visible kingdom.

Mount Zion, on the other hand, represents a spiritual city (“**the heavenly Jerusalem**”) and thus a spiritual kingdom. Mount Zion represents all that Christians hope for in the next life and that for which they are willing to make great sacrifices in this life. Just as Esau had to make a choice between a bowl of stew and God’s promised blessings, so the Jewish readers had to choose between a present, earthly, Jewish kingdom (Mount Sinai) with its earthly temple, or God’s promised eternal kingdom (Mount Zion).

This passage provides a fascinating and frightening warning of God’s judgment. Every human being will be judged by the law or by grace, by his own works or by Christ’s work, by the provisions of Mount Sinai or by the provisions of Mount Zion.

God has two sets of books. One set contains the names of those who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. The other set records the names of those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ by faith.

Hebrews 12:18–19a... For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, “IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED.” 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling.”

Vs. 18—The word *for* requires the reader to look backward. It grounds what the author is about to say in what he has just finished saying in verses 12–17. Esau was a man who lacked faith in God, and thus he made his choices based on what he could see and smell and taste. The mention of Esau and his rejection in the previous verse leads the writer to speak of the judgments of the Old Testament (covenant) as opposed to the blessings of the New Testament (covenant).

Vs. 18b-19a— The Old Covenant was associated with Mount Sinai because that is where God spoke to Moses when that covenant was instituted. It was a covenant of law, of judgment, and of fear. It said, “*Do this, or do not do that, or you will be judged.*” In some cases it said, “*Do not do this, or you will die.*”¹

Sinai was a physical mountain, and therefore was able to be touched and seen. The Old Covenant was the foundational covenant which supplied the elementary principles of God’s nature, will, and standards. It was therefore given and was to be obeyed.² In preparation for giving the law, the Lord God enacted some clear expectations (**Exodus 19:1-17**). The people were...

- to consecrate themselves by washing their clothes (v. 10)
- to abstain from sexual relations (v. 15)
- to avoid even touching the mountain (v. 12)

It was a unique day in human history. The demonstration of God’s power was through the physical means of thunder, lightning, thick clouds, loud trumpet

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 411.

² John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 411.

sounds, fire, smoke, and violent trembling of the earth (16–18). These remarkable signs were designed to convince the people of the absolute unapproachableness of God. No defiled sinner could come near and witness His holiness and live.³

Hebrews 12:19b-21... For you have not come to *a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED."* **21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."**

The Jewish people gathered at Mt. Sinai were gripped with fear and sheer terror (**Exodus 20:18-21**). Moses assured them that if they had the proper fear of God and if they obeyed Him they would have no reason to be terrified. All of this was intended to give them a desire to avoid sin at all costs!

The God of Sinai is truly a God to be feared, a God of judgment and of punishment. The writer of Hebrews is saying to his readers, *"If you go back to Judaism, you are going back to a covenant of law, fear, judgment, and death."*⁴

2 Corinthians 3:7–8... But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading *as it was*, **8 how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?**

John MacArthur stated...

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 411.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 411–412.

At Sinai, sinful and unforgiven man stands before an infinitely holy and perfectly just God. Guilty, vile, and undeserving of forgiveness, he has nothing to expect from Sinai but God's condemnation. The symbols of Sinai are darkness, fire, trembling, and trumpets of judgment. For an unforgiven sinner, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). There is good reason to fear at the foot of Sinai. The purpose of the Law was to bring the people face to face with their own sinfulness and to show them their need for the Savior.⁵

Even Moses, to whom God had spoken through the fiery bush and through whom He had challenged Pharaoh, could not stand at Sinai without fear.

Galatians 3:10... For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."

Partial obedience will not cut it with the one true God who is infinitely holy! That brings us to another mountain, Mount Zion.

Hebrews 12:22–24... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood of Abel*.

When David conquered the Jebusites and placed the ark on Mount Zion, this mountain was considered to be the earthly dwelling place of God.

Psalms 132:13–14... For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. 14 "This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it."

When Solomon moved the ark to the Temple, which was built on nearby Mt. Moriah, the name Zion was extended to include that area as well. Before long,

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 412.

Zion became synonymous with Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was therefore the city of God.⁶

- Sinai symbolizes law and Zion symbolizes grace.
- Sinai confronts with commandments, judgment, and condemnation. Zion presents forgiveness, atonement, and salvation.
- Sinai was forbidding and terrifying. Zion is inviting and gracious.
- Sinai was covered by clouds and darkness; Zion is the city of light.
- Sinai stands for judgment and death; Zion for forgiveness and life.⁷

The kingdom of God is inaugurated (already) though not consummated (not yet). In other words, Christians can experience, in part, the fulfillment of God's promises even as they await the complete experience of those promises in the new creation. This is the tension we feel between this age and the age to come. In coming to Mount Zion—that is, by becoming a Christian—we receive seven blessings...

1. The City of God

This is heaven, the city Abraham was looking for (**Hebrews 11:10, 14-17**). From the moment we are born again, heaven is our home (**Philippians 3:20-21**).

Colossians 3:2... Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

Romans 8:17–18... and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. **18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 413.

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Hebrews](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 414.

The heavenly Jerusalem excels its earthly counterpart, for sin and death are banished eternally in heaven; the city has no need of sun or moon, “for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (**Rev. 21:1-7, 23**). The living God lives among his people forever.⁸

2. Myriads of Angels

“Myriads” refers to a great, indefinite number. Picture this massive number of angels in festive clothing gathered in worship around the throne of God (Revelation 4-5).

Daniel 7:9–10... “I kept looking Until thrones were set up, And the Ancient of Days took *His* seat; His vesture *was* like white snow And the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne *was* ablaze with flames, Its wheels *were* a burning fire. **10** “A river of fire was flowing And coming out from before Him; Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; The court sat, And the books were opened.”

3. The General Assembly and Church of the First-born

In one sense, the author is referring to the examples of faith in Hebrews 11, those who trusted Christ even before his incarnation. The author tells Jewish believers then—*along with believers today*—that they are united in faith with those who have gone before them, with the firstborn enrolled in heaven (“*You have come*”). We have already joined with the congregation of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. This is the church eternal and the church universal.⁹

The first-born is able to lay claim to the inheritance. Christ is therefore the heir, and we are coheirs with him (Rom. 8:17). We value our birthright, whereas Esau despised it (Heb. 12:16). We are first-born because of Christ who makes us holy, and we who are made holy belong to the same family (Heb. 2:11).

⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, [Exposition of Hebrews](#), vol. 15, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 392.

⁹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., [Exalting Jesus in Hebrews](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 210–211.

4. God, the Judge of All

Imagine the day in which all human beings in the history of humanity will be judged. For those who are judged because of their sin and their rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ the day of judgment will be a day of unmitigated horror. Eternal hell stands on the other side of that day.

Revelation 20:11–15... Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. **12** And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. **13** And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of *them* according to their deeds. **14** Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. **15** And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

For those who have turned to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, the day of judgment will be a day of unmitigated glory. Eternity with the infinitely righteous, gracious, and merciful God stands on the other side of that day. The author of Hebrews talks about this day as if we're already there. We're already standing before his throne.¹⁰

5. The Spirits of the Righteous Made Perfect

This refers to all who come to Mount Zion. There will be no one who is imperfect or unrighteous in heaven. Our righteousness and perfection are derived completely from the imputed righteousness of Christ. His perfection is our perfection. His righteousness is our righteousness. There is no human righteousness in Zion. There is only Christ's righteousness.¹¹ We will not be

¹⁰ R. Albert Mohler Jr., [Exalting Jesus in Hebrews](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 211.

¹¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., [Exalting Jesus in Hebrews](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 211.

inferior to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Elijah, Peter, James, John, etc. Glory to God!

6. Jesus, the Mediator of a New Covenant

In earlier chapters the writer explained the covenant (**7:22; 8:6, 8–12; 9:4, 15–17, 20; 10:16, 29**); once more he reminds the readers that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. He purposely uses the name *Jesus* (His redemptive name—Matthew 1:21). As mediator of the new covenant...

- **Jesus calls the believer to joyful and thankful obedience**
- **He removes the burden of guilt and cleanses the sinner's conscience**
- **He grants him the gift of eternal life**
- **He functions as intercessor on behalf of His people.**¹²

7. The Sprinkled Blood

When Moses confirmed the first covenant at Mount Sinai, he sprinkled blood on the altar, the scroll, the people, and even the tabernacle (**Exod. 24:6–8; Heb. 9:17–22**). Sprinkled blood signified forgiveness of sin. Jesus inaugurated the new covenant by shedding his blood once for all at Golgotha. Because of that sprinkled blood, believers enter the presence of God as forgiven sinners (**Heb. 10:22; 1 Peter 1:2**).¹³

The comparison between the blood of Abel and the blood of Christ sets up quite the contrast. Abel's blood is the blood of a martyr that called for revenge. The blood of Jesus is the blood of the Lamb of God who "takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

¹² Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, [*Exposition of Hebrews*](#), vol. 15, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 395.

¹³ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, [*Exposition of Hebrews*](#), vol. 15, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 395.