

“God’s Mountains”
Hebrews 12:18-29
October 17, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The previous section of Hebrews compared the Christian life to a race. Those who run in races, especially long-distance races, must endure suffering. The Christian life is the same. Are you growing weary in the race? Some of you have difficult circumstances at work, and others face challenges at home. There are health problems, relational challenges, bouts of loneliness, financial difficulties, and just the general grind of life. All of these challenges are made more difficult by the pandemic we have been in now for more than eighteen months now. Those are just the normal challenges everyone on this fallen planet faces. For the follower of Christ there are added difficulties. We find ourselves swimming upstream from our culture. We have powerful enemies in Satan and his evil spiritual forces, and we have a sin nature that tempts us to do the things we don’t really want to do. Where can we find the strength to run this race? The answer given in today’s passage is the grace of God.

The bones of this passage feature two mountains: Mt. Sinai where Moses met with God to receive the Ten Commandments and the rest of God’s law, and Mt. Zion where the temple in Jerusalem was built. A temple is a place where God meets with his people. So both of these mountains tell us something about meeting with God, with Mt. Sinai portraying the law and Mt. Zion the gospel of grace.

I. A Mountain of Fear – v. 18-21

Though the mountain is never named in these opening verses, it is clear that this first mountain our author mentions is Mt. Sinai. When God told Pharaoh to let his people go, he said that the purpose of their release was that they might worship God in the wilderness (Ex. 7:16). This is a reminder to us all that true freedom is found in worshiping the true God. God did deliver his people and led them to Sinai to fulfill what he had said was the purpose of their release from bondage. Exodus 19 describes the scene, and it is summarized in this first paragraph of our section. I would imagine it is different than what the people of Israel imagined when they were back in Egypt contemplating their worship of God after being released from Pharaoh’s bondage.

When they came to the mountain, God appeared as a blazing fire. This reminds us of the angel God posted at the entrance to the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were driven out of paradise because of their sin. That angel held a blazing sword, sending the unmistakable message, “Stay away or you will

die.” Mt. Sinai sent the same message, not just with the appearance of fire, but explicitly through the words God spoke. **“If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned”** (v. 20). Sinai was also covered in darkness and gloom, another visual portrayal of death. There was a tempest or storm, a reminder of the hostile forces of nature that are beyond our control. The entrance of sin into the world has turned nature from a paradise to something that is often inhospitable to our presence. There was the sound of a trumpet. This was no pleasant-sounding trumpet. The Exodus account describes it as **“a very loud trumpet blast,”** whose effect was that **“all the people in the camp trembled”** (Ex. 19:16). It is likely that this was an angelic trumpet blast. Moses later spoke of his Mt. Sinai experience and reported that there were ten thousands of angels present (Dt. 33:2). Remember how even one angel often produced such fear in those to whom they appeared, and on Mt. Sinai there were tens of thousands of them. The summary description of it all is found in verse 21. **“Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’”** It was a mountain of fear.

How should we understand this? Let’s put it in the larger context of the Bible’s big storyline. God created mankind to live with him in paradise, but Adam and Eve sinned and lost that paradise for us all. But God did not give up. He provided a path for sinful humanity to draw near to him again. Stage one of that path was the tabernacle of the Old Testament, with its many sacrifices, its priesthood and its regulations. All of these point forward to Jesus as the new temple. He is the fulfillment of all those sacrifices, and it is through his blood that our sins are forgiven and we can draw near to God.

So why was Stage One of God’s restoration plan at Mt. Sinai such a terrifying experience? It was to make it crystal clear that there are two paths that don’t lead us back to God. These are two paths that mankind is drawn to instinctively, but two paths that will never take us to God. The first path seeks God while denying his holiness. It believes that God is wrong to have any requirements for how we should come to him. This path wants humanity to be able to decide for themselves what the path back to God should be, and God is supposed to be okay with whatever path we might decide upon. Sinai makes it clear that the holiness of God cannot be ignored in our coming to God. To ignore it is to die.

The second wrong path is the path of legalism that says I can come to God through making myself worthy of his presence. Note the separation God makes between sinners and himself. God’s restrictions are clear. No one was allowed to touch the mountain, upon pain of death. Imagine someone saying, “But I’m a pretty good person. I’ve been mostly honest. Maybe a few white lies have passed my lips, but nothing too serious. I think I should be able to go up the mountain and see God.” This is the default condition of the human heart. All the world’s religions outside of Christianity teach that our performance can

somehow earn us a path to God. Even as Christians we are prone to believing this lie, a lie the entire book of Galatians seeks to expose and refute.

Early in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is on his way to the heavenly city of Zion and is lured away by Mr. Worldly Wiseman's counsel and directed toward the futility of Sinai. He goes to Mr. Legality's house for help. But as he approaches the house he finds that it is up a steep hill that he is unable to climb. What's more, the house is hanging over the road in such a manner that he is afraid it is going to fall on his head. Christian's burden feels heavier to him now and he is sorry that he took Mr. Worldly Wiseman's counsel. At the moment of despair, as he is sweating and trembling with fear, he looks up and sees Evangelist coming to meet him. Bunyan's message is clear. If we think our path back to God depends on our performance, our righteousness, we will be left with fear and despair. This path can never bring us to God. There's a little well-known saying that expresses this well. "To run and work the law commands, Yet gives me neither feet nor hands; But better news the gospel brings; It bids me fly, and gives me wings."

II. A Mountain of Grace – v. 22-24

Mt. Zion is the mountain of grace to which we have come through Jesus. It is described as the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. It's called the city of God because it's the place where God lives. It is the completion of God's restoration project begun after man was chased from his paradise in Eden. The first thing we encounter in this city is **"innumerable angels in festal gathering"** (v. 22). We're not given a precise number of these angels, only that they are too numerous to be counted. And they're having a party. The book of Revelation is clear in stating that the source of their festive joy is the Lamb on the throne. They are engaged in joyful worship.

Next, we come **"to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven"** (v. 23). The word for "assembly" is the common Greek word for the church—*ekklesia*. This is describing the church universal, consisting of all who have placed their trust in Jesus. They are described as the "firstborn" because in the Old Testament the firstborn are said to belong to God in a special way. They are given a two-fold inheritance and inherit the covenant blessing. Firstborn sons do not earn their status but simply receive it through being born first, something they had nothing to do with. All of God's people have firstborn status. Their names have been written in God's book of life. Isn't it a glorious thing to consider the coming reunion with our good friends and loved ones in Christ who have died before us? And then there will also be countless opportunities to make new friends of those you never knew in this life but who will be present in that great heavenly assembly.

We come to **“God, the judge of all.”** Does this mention of God as judge take us back to the fear of Mt. Sinai? What’s it doing in this description of Mt. Zion, God’s mountain of grace? One commentator answers that question like this. “For this host God stands as judge, not to condemn, but to vindicate. Indeed, the very fact that he is the Judge increases our comfort all the more, for he will be righteous in accepting us in Christ, who already paid the entire debt of our sin.” In other words, God would be unjust were he not to grant full pardon to those for whom Christ died and paid the penalty for their sins. Our forgiveness is grounded not in the mood of the judge at a particular moment, but in the reality of his justice and Christ’s substitutionary atonement.

Next, we come to **“the spirits of the righteous made perfect”** (v. 23). This is another description of God’s people. They are “the righteous made perfect.” When he says they are righteous, he has in mind both the imputed and imparted righteousness of Jesus. God both declares us as righteous in Christ, and then sets about the task of changing our character so that we begin to become in nature what we have been declared to be. But even with the most mature Christian, we are all far from being made perfect. So this phrase reminds us again that God will finish the good work he has begun in us. Imagine the weakest, most immature Christian you have ever met. By God’s grace, that person will be made perfect. She will be a complete version of herself, as God always intended her to be. If you could see this version of her, you would be in awe and marvel at the grace of God that made her so.

Last of all in his description of Zion, God’s mountain of grace, he mentions Jesus. He is saved for last because he is the center of it all, and seated on the throne in the center of heaven. He is the **“mediator of a new covenant”** (v. 24). He has mediated this new covenant by his death, the shedding of his blood. The blood of Jesus, we are told, speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel was the first human blood to be shed on the earth. He was killed by his own brother, Cain. Fueled by anger, hatred and jealousy, Cain took matters into his own hands to create the kind of world he wanted. He considered a world without his brother to be preferable to a world with his brother in it. So he killed him, after which we read in Genesis 4 that God said to Cain, **“The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground”** (4:10). The blood spoke a word that could not be silenced, and it was a word of vengeance. The shed blood of Abel brought a curse on the head of Cain. The blood of Jesus, too, cannot be silenced. Only it speaks a different word and a better word, crying out not for a curse upon our heads but for forgiveness and blessing.

Notice the words that began this section: **“You have come”** (v. 22). He doesn’t say “you will come one day to this mountain of grace,” but that you have already come. Though we are not yet back in paradise like we will be one day, our return to that place is so certain that he can speak of it with such certainty. Mt. Sinai made it clear that the path back to paradise would not be

through denial of God's holiness or through our effort. Mt. Zion makes it clear that it is by God's grace.

III. A Mountain of Stability – v. 25-29

The final paragraph doesn't mention a mountain, but I believe Mt. Zion is still in the background here. The paragraph begins with a warning. There were warnings given at Mt. Sinai, warnings for the people to keep their distance. Now there is a warning from Mt. Zion, and it is the opposite from the warning at Sinai. Instead of a warning not to come near, it is a warning to make sure to come near through Jesus. Enter Zion by faith in the blood of the mediator, Jesus.

Zion is described here as the kingdom that cannot be shaken, in contrast to everything else in creation. There is only one place of stability in the universe, and it is with the church for which Jesus gave his life. Perhaps the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is in the background of this passage. He was the king of Babylon in the days of Israel's exile, and he had a dream of a statue that Daniel interpreted. The statue represented the kingdoms reigning in the days of Daniel. It was a glorious statue. But then a stone arose, cut by no human hand. The stone struck the statue and completely destroyed it, after which this stone **"became a great mountain and filled the whole earth"** (Dan. 2:35). That stone is Mt. Zion, the church of our Lord which will one day fill the whole earth.

At the time Hebrews was written, the church was small, weak and persecuted. If you had asked someone, "Which is going to last? The Roman Empire or Christianity?" people would have laughed. "Of course," they would have said, "Rome will last forever." But we know what happened. That "eternal city" was overrun by barbarians, its buildings looted and burned, and its treasures destroyed or confiscated. The church, on the other hand, has continued to advance.

CONCLUSION:

The text concludes with two applications: be grateful and worship God with reverence and awe. We are grateful that there is a mountain of grace with God, and that by God's mercy we are citizens of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. If you are not a citizen of that kingdom, of Mt. Zion, Jesus invites you to become one. Let Mt. Sinai teach you that you have no hope save in the blood of Jesus. Remember that Jesus is a better Savior than you are a sinner.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 12:18-29

1. Today's passage features two mountains: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion is the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments and the rest of God's law, while Mt. Zion is where the temple in Jerusalem was built. What are some of your good memories of mountains in your life?
2. Mt. Sinai sends a message of "Don't come near lest you die." It is a clear statement about the holiness of God. Why is it important to affirm God's holiness? What are some modern-day examples of denying God's holiness?
3. Mt. Sinai also shows us that we cannot come to God through obedience to the law. It was mentioned in the sermon that the default of the human heart is to think that my performance can win God's approval. Do you see that attitude anywhere in your own heart?
4. Review the description of Mt. Zion, which describes heaven for us (verses 22-24). Which of these descriptions do you find particularly impactful for you right now?
5. What is the better word that the blood of Jesus speaks than the blood of Abel? To whom is that word spoken? Where do you need strength in your life right now? How does the thought of that word strengthen you?
6. All things will be shaken and destroyed except the kingdom of God, which cannot be shaken. How does that truth (see verses 26-27) affect your priorities?
7. The concluding application (v. 28) is to be grateful. How does God's grace help us to be more grateful? What are you feeling particularly grateful for in your life right now?