

## **From the Mountain of Terror to the City of Joy Hebrews 12:18-24**

### **Introduction**

In the verses that precede our text today we studied the strategic priorities for spiritual endurance: energetic attention to your spiritual health, pursuit of healthy relationships with others and with God, and watching out for the person whose heart is turning away from Him, bringing poison into the community of faith. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God."

The verses that follow today's text exhort us not to refuse the God who is speaking to us. Our God gives warnings and our God makes promises. There is the terrifying danger of God's wrath against sin and the joyful prospect of God's fulfilled promises to those ransomed by Jesus. Our passage today paints that contrast in the most vivid way possible.

For you have not come to . . . the mountain of terror—earthly Mount Sinai.  
But you have come to . . . the city of joy—heavenly Mount Zion.  
From the Mountain of Terror to the City of Joy

**18** For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and

gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."  
<sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and 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, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

1. Mountain of Terror (18-21)
2. City of Joy (22-24)

### **1. Mountain of Terror (18-21)**

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Exodus 19-20 give the history to which the writer of Hebrews refers.

Exodus 19:12-13

**12** "And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. **13** No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain."

Exodus 19:16-18

**16** On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. **17** Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. **18** Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

Exodus 20:18-19

**18** Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off **19** and said to Moses, "You speak

to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

Between these two passages—at the beginning of Exodus 20, God had given Moses the ten commandments, summing up His law.

Important that we not to fall to the misconception that the God of the Old Testament is a different Deity than the God of the New. Nor is it true that people were saved by works under the Old Covenant, whereas they are saved by grace under the New Covenant.

Rather, under the Old Covenant given to Moses, God demonstrated that despite the terrifying warnings of His wrath against disobedience, human beings could not keep His law. From the beginning they felt fear and alienation from God because of their sin. So the Old Covenant prescribed blood sacrifice of unblemished animals to cover their sin, looking forward to when the promised Redeemer would come. An innocent life given for guilty lives. But as the letter to the Hebrews has already laid out, even the tabernacle and later the temple structure and protocol kept distance between God and the people.

*All false religion imagines that human beings can somehow better themselves to satisfy the*

*high demands of God's righteous law—or imagines that God just looks the other way and doesn't really care about sin at all—that He lowers the holy standard. They inflate the holiness of man or they deflate the holiness of God. Or both.*

Our hearts tremble at the justice we know we deserve. If we must be holy to see God (verse 14), then what chance do any of us have?

Even Moses trembled with fear. He himself was not sinless. And you remember, when he descended from the mountain after God first wrote the ten commandments on tablets of stone, he found the Israelites worshipping the golden calf as if it were Yahweh. He was so distraught with their bold failure and rebellion that he smashed the stone tablets to pieces, well picturing what human beings do with God's law.

So why the Old Covenant? It was to point us to the New. It was to make us see we could never obtain God's favor by our own works. Nothing but terror awaits us if we think that. It was to drive us to seek the coming Redeemer who would ransom us with His own blood, thus establishing the new covenant.

*If you go to the mountain of God's law you will be destroyed with the terrifying fire of*

*God's justice.* So the writer of Hebrews tells his readers, "you have not come to that terrifying mountain."

This fearful reality underscores how foolish it would be for any of his readers to turn away from Christ and the New Covenant in order to return to old covenant Judaism—no matter what pressures may be on them to do so. *The Old Covenant was never meant to be the permanent one. Its purpose was to prepare for the New.* No religion, including ancient Judaism, can save people through their good works. Only terror awaits those who imagine they can be that good.

The long history given in chapter 11 of those whose lives testified to faith in God was not a list of persons who merited favor with God through their good works. It is a list of people who were looking forward to Christ in faith. Abel died for his faith in the coming Messiah as evidenced by his offering of a lamb versus offering the fruit of his works, like wicked Cain. Moses himself counted the reproach of Christ—the promised Messiah—greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. *The faith of the OT saints was in God's power, not their own strength. Their hope was in the coming Redeemer, not their own righteousness.*

If you find yourself living in dread of God, tormented by your sinful heart and deeds, is

it possible you are trying to win favor with God on your own merits? Doing so leaves you with God's justice.

Or maybe you aren't worried at all. You think God will just go along with whoever you are and whatever you do with no consequences. That's just another version of works righteousness—making yourself the measure, not God.

We live in an age that calls us to affirm what God clearly calls sin and promises to punish. But we cannot escape our identity as moral beings. So at the same time, people set up an alternative definition of right and wrong and punish those who don't conform to the new definitions.

All these approaches effectively deny the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **2. City of Joy (22-24)**

<sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and 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, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

## **Mount Zion**

Where David situated the tabernacle and eventually set his capital city of Jerusalem. It was where Christ would take our place on the cross and where He will one day reign.

## **City of the living God—the heavenly Jerusalem**

Hebrews 11 has already described this city as the homeland for which Abraham and the OT saints longed, a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God Himself.

It is the heavenly Jerusalem that one day will come down from heaven to earth as the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21), holy and radiant with the shining splendor of God.

## **Innumerable angels in festal gathering**

Feast days celebrated the goodness of God to His people. Rejoicing not terror. The angels minister to the heirs of salvation, traveling back and forth to earth on mission for God to the benefit of his people. They rejoice over every sinner than repents and turns to Jesus. Think of it, *there's likely not a day in the history of humanity on which there is not joyful celebration in heaven as the Lord adds to his everlasting kingdom saint after saint. Every new birth of a sinner turning from darkness to light. Every safe arrival home as the saints leave their earthly dwelling to enter*



*their forever home.* To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, where there are pleasures forever. He himself welcomes them home to the joy of their Lord.

## **Assembly of the firstborn, enrolled in heaven**

The firstborn Son Jesus Christ is the rightful Heir of all things.

Colossians 1:15-18

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Hebrews 2:10

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

The assembly—the church—includes all those enrolled as heirs with him. God has granted them firstborn rights—plural of firstborn used here.

According to Romans 8, we who are trusting in Jesus are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ," and "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God."

Enrolled in heaven

Luke 10:20

Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Philippians 4:3

Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In contrast—

Revelation 20:15

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:27

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

**God, the judge of all**

You can't go beyond His jurisdiction.

You would think this would inspire terror, but in Christ we are blameless before God the Judge of all.

Romans 8:31-34

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

### **Spirits of the righteous made perfect**

They have died in faith, and have reached the goal for which Christ paid. They live in the heavenly city, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies.

Hebrews 10:14

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

### **Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant**

Hebrews 9:15

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems

them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

**Sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**

Hebrews 10:22

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Abel's blood shed in murder by Cain his brother cried out for justice and vengeance:  
Genesis 4:10-11

<sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

Christ's blood cries out for mercy and forgiveness:

Ephesians 1:7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

Hebrews 9:14

how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself

without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

*When Satan tempts me to despair  
And tells me of the guilt within  
Upward I look and see Him there  
Who made an end to all my sin  
Because the sinless Savior died  
My sinful soul is counted free  
For God the just is satisfied  
To look on Him and pardon me*

## **Conclusion**

You have come to Mount Zion—so don't turn back to Mount Sinai. You have come to the heavenly city of joy—by coming to Jesus and putting your trust in Him, all heaven and eternity is yours—so why return to fear and dread?

Are you still stuck at Sinai, where judgment burns and terror reigns? Come to the city of the living God, where the mediator Christ Jesus has made a way for you to be an heir with Him.

John Newton in *Olney Hymns*, *The Rebel's Surrender to Grace* (Saul's conversion)

*If thou hadst bid thy thunders roll,  
And lightings flash to blast my soul,  
I still had stubborn been:  
But mercy has my heart subdu'd,*

*A bleeding Savior I have view'd,  
And now, I hate my sin.*

*Now, Lord, I would be thine alone,  
Come, take possession of thine own,  
For thou hast set me free;  
Releas'd from Satan's hard command,  
See all my powers waiting stand,  
To be employ'd by thee.*

*My will conform'd to thine would move,  
On thee my hope, desire, and love,  
In fix'd attention join;  
My hands, my eyes, my ears, my tongue,  
Have Satan's servants been too long,  
But now they shall be thine.*

(Communion)

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why is terror an appropriate human response to a holy God and His perfect law?
2. In what ways does manmade religion—legalistic or permissive—show an insufficient appreciation for God, His law, and His justice?
3. What are some of the ways the old covenant made the necessary preparation for the new covenant Jesus would bring?

4. In what ways do we distort the gospel if we conclude that the God of the OT is different from the God of the NT?
5. In what ways do we distort the gospel if we conclude that OT saints were saved by works and the NT saints are saved by grace?
6. "Innumerable angels in festal gathering" speaks of celebration and joy. What do the Scriptures teach angels rejoice over, and why would their doing so make the heavenly city a place of daily joy?
7. In what ways does knowing that your name is "enrolled in heaven" an encouragement to persevere in your faith?
8. What is the contrast between what Abel's shed blood cried out for and what Jesus' shed blood cries out for?
9. How does Jesus' being our mediator comfort you as you think of standing before God, the judge of all?