

Sermon Notes

WE HAVE COME TO ZION (Heb. 12:22-24)

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When Moses led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, he brought them out for one purpose. Pharaoh was required to let God's people go so they could worship and serve God (Ex. 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 8, 20). After their miraculous exodus, Moses led them to the Sinai wilderness where God descended on Mt. Sinai in fire. The author of Hebrews reflects on that experience in 12:18-21 as one that was sensible, tangible, it could be touched, and it was temporary. The mountain quaked under the weight of the glory of its creator. Smoke rose from Mt. Sinai like the smoke of a furnace. A trumpet blast grew louder and louder, and a disembodied voice spoke from the fire and cloud. If even an animal touched the mountain it was to be stoned.

The people at the base of the mountain cried out not to hear the voice. Light obeyed God at creation when God said "Let there be light." But God's rebellious creatures don't want to hear His words. So, Moses became their mediator and climbed Mt. Sinai in fear and trembling to meet with God.

Hebrews 12:18-24 is the climaxⁱ of the letter's argument of the supremacy of the new covenant. It is the summary encouragement as to why the people of God should remain confident in their faith, even in the face of persecution. In vv. 18-21 our author recalls Mt. Sinai experience as a symbol of the old covenant. He does this to demonstrate why they should not fall back to the old ways. He doesn't want them to go back to singing, "My hope is built on nothing less than Moses' law and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Moses' name. On Sinai the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."

He has written this letter to remind them of the high priestly work of Christ, and how Jesus offered a perfect, final sacrifice on the cross, ending the offerings of rams and bulls. Jesus, not Moses, is the mediator of a better covenant. Christ is greater than Moses, greater than Aaron, greater even than the angels.

It is Christ's work that removes them from Mt. Sinai, the touchable mountain that quaked in the presence of God. Neither have they come to the covenant that Mt. Sinai represented. If they haven't come to Mt. Sinai, and all it represents, where does that leave them? What is encouraging about leaving behind the defining experience of their religion?

²² 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 first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men 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. (Heb. 12:22-24)

PRAYER

Solomon's temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem became the center of God's activity. Yahweh identified Himself as "the One who dwells on Mt. Zion" (Isa. 8:18). God inhabits the Holy of Holies in the temple and works His atonement and His judgment from there (Amos 1:2). The Holy of Holies was the most sacred space of the three precincts of the temple. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and then only once a year with the blood of a sacrifice.

The people of God, says the writer, have come to Mt. Zion and the city of the living God. The readers would have assumed Jerusalem. But these places can be touched. They are physical places a person can lay their hands on. If the Hebrew Christians have come to a mountain that cannot be touched, they couldn't have come to the Mt. Zion or the Jerusalem of their experience.

Since the time they had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, they have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, which cannot be touched. This is the heavenly Jerusalem John saw in its glory and recorded in Revelation: "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

In Revelation the heavenly Jerusalem is described as a cube, 1500 miles by 1500 miles by 1500 miles. The Holy of Holies in the earthly temple was also a cube, twenty cubits on a side (1 Kg. 6:20). Their geometries represent perfect proportions, harmony, balance, and symmetry. The heavenly Jerusalem has all the properties we expect of beauty. It is the seat of beauty because God dwells there.

How have these Hebrew Christians come to such privilege and honor? Why these particular Jews and not all the Jews? These particular Jews have come to the heavenly Jerusalem because *they have come to Christ*. They have come to Christ the same way you and I have come to Christ. They have placed their confidence in Christ for their salvation. They sing a new song, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name."

If we have placed our confidence in Christ, we too have come to Christ; we too have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. In chapter ten we were taught, "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19, 22). We have come to the heavenly Holy of Holies. We have come to the dwelling place of God and the seat of beauty.

When I was ten or so a neighbor friend invited me to visit his church. He knew I wanted to be an architect, and he thought his church building was significant. I knew his church. It was St. Peter's, a gothic cathedral-like Roman Catholic structure, and I jumped at the opportunity.

When we went inside his mom crossed herself with holy water then entered the nave along a side aisle. When we reached the center aisle she genuflected in reverence to the body of Jesus she believed resided in the tabernacle behind the altar. Looking down the center aisle, past rows and rows of wooden pews, I saw the altar, a white marble slab on which stood a gold crucifix in a single ray of light. Behind the altar was more marble and ornately carved wood panels two stories tall. Colored light filtered in from between the stone and seemingly through the stone tracery in the windows. The ceiling reached in the heavens, supported by carved stone arches that rested on slender carved columns of stone.

The building seemed too tall for stone, and there was stone floating overhead in arches and ceilings. In spite of the mass of all the stone, the place was filled with light. The acoustics were intense. Every whisper could be heard through the aroma of incense. It was transcendent. I was no longer in the city. I was in a holy place, like Mt Sinai, dedicated to the worship of God. But it was not holy because of its architecture. *It was only holy if God made it holy.*

This morning we have come to a place that transcends our daily experience. We have come to the Holiest of Holies. It is not a place we can touch or smell or see, but our faith assures us of the things we hope for and is our conviction in the things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Although the final form of the heavenly Jerusalem is yet to come, this morning we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. Paul told the Ephesians, "God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4-6).

Having come to the heavenly Jerusalem, we have come to the inhabitants of heaven, to myriads of angels (v. 22b). Your Bible may say we have come to an innumerable company of angels, or to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly. The point is that the number is simply too enormous to take in. It requires a vast number of angels to reflect the vastness of God's glory.

These are the angels that ministered the law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2 also Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17). In the heavenly Jerusalem they are no longer concealed in the darkness and the gloom of Mt. Sinai. They are in joyful assembly. Their primary function is to glorify God and worship Him (Isa. 6:1-3; Rev. 4-5). They rejoice at the repentance of one sinner (Lk. 15:10). Hebrews has already told us that God sends them into the world to serve all those who inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14).

They provided sustenance for Hagar (Gen. 21:17-20) and Elijah (1 Kg. 19:16). They protected Daniel in the lion's den and the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:24-25; 6:22). They released apostles (Acts 5) and Peter from prison (Acts 12). They strengthened and encouraged Jesus after His temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:11). They cared for Lazarus at the time of his death and shepherded him into the Lord's presence (Lk. 16:22). What a privilege it is for us to worship with the myriads of angels who glorify and minister unto God and to His people.

We have also come to the general assembly of the church (v. 23a). God has assembled His people from all generations, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation into one fellowship, into one and the same Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit of God that indwells every believer with the same holiness and love and unity that joins the Father to the Son.

We have come to the church, the assembly, which belongs to Christ, the church of the first-born (v. 23b). When we hear the term, "first-born," we typically think of Jesus. He is the first-born among many brethren (Rom. 8:29), the first-born of all creation (Col. 1:15), the first-born from the dead (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5), and He is the first-born whom all the angels are to worship (Heb. 1:6).

The term "first-born" would have reminded the Hebrew readers of the privileges of a first-born. The first-born received the first share of their father's inheritance. The first-born was the heir to the throne. The first-born was to be dedicated as God's portion (Ex. 13:12; 34:19; Nu. 18:15).

We saw last week how Esau gave up his birth-right, his inheritance, to satisfy his hunger. These Hebrew Christians are being pressured into giving up their birth-right in Christ to avoid persecution and to embrace a false peace. We can lose confidence in the work and purposes of Christ whenever the world tries to pressure us into its mold.

Having come to Christ we are joint heirs with Christ. As heirs with Christ we have the peculiar privilege of receiving our heavenly Father's inheritance. We are to receive the kingdom of God and to sit down with Christ on His throne (Rev. 3:21). Jesus told Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36). It is not made up of a mountain that can be touched, thunder, gloom, and storm. And do not think that the Father is begrudging you His kingdom. Jesus told His disciples that His Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom (Lk. 12:32).

Our names may not show up on the roll calls of earthly kingdoms and republics, but our names are enrolled in heaven (v. 23c). From the foundation of the world, our names have been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb who has been slain (Rev. 13:8). Jesus told the disciples not to rejoice in the fact that the spirits were subject to them but that their names were recorded in heaven (Luke 10:20).

God told Isaiah, "Behold, I have inscribed you [the people of God] on the palms of My hands" (Isa. 49:16). It is impossible for God to forget you. God has always foreknown you. If He has foreknown you, He has predestined you. If He has predestined you, He calls you. If He calls you, He justifies you (Rom. 8:29). To be justified, we must come to God, the Judge of all (v. 23d).

We have come to the same Godⁱⁱ who descended on Mt. Sinai: holy, immutable, unchangeable, and perfect in His ways. He is a consuming fire. Those who have come to Christ have come to the same God through the gospel.

The gospel conveys the Christian to God, the Judge of all, wherein all the terrors and judgments of breaking the law have fallen on Jesus our Mediator. When God the Judge of all brings down His justice, His gavel, on the sin of His people, it comes crashing down upon His own Son. While we tremble before the Judgment Seat of Christ, knowing full well we are not holy or good or righteous, and if we could, we would flee from the face of the Judge of all as fast as our feet could take us.

While we stand there hoping like we have never hoped before that God would really be as gracious as He has promised - but we can't imagine how He could ever forgive the depth and breadth and height of our treachery - God, the Judge of all, brings down the gavel of His righteous justice, looks into your soul, and speaks the unspeakable: "You are acquitted. By virtue of my Son's blood you are forgiven. By virtue of my Son's perfect righteousness, you are righteous in my eyes just as you always have been in my thoughts and my purposes. Enter into the joy of your salvation."

You are acquitted. There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). No condemnation. None. There is great and eternal consolation in the fact that God's never changing, perfect justice is *for those who are in Christ*. He does not judge *against* us. If God, the Judge of all, is for us, who can be against us?

Having been made perfect in Christ, it is no surprise that we have come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect (v. 23e). These are God's people who have died in the Lord. They have shed this earthly tent, and they wait for the resurrection of their bodies. They dwell in the company of angels and the general assembly of the church. This should have been an encouragement to these Hebrew Christians. They have come to the spirits of their righteous brethren who had suffered for the gospel and had now been made perfect.

These righteous men have accomplished the works God had prepared in advance for them to do (Eph. 2:4). They have run with endurance the course set before them (Heb. 12:1). They did not abandon their faith. Their perfection is absolute for they no longer experience sin. Once they looked through a glass darkly, now they see the perfections of God in the brilliance of His glory.

These righteous men made perfect have not been made perfect on the basis of their works. They have been made perfect by their having come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant (v. 24a).

We were once God's enemies and under the guilt of breaking His law. There can be no peace between God and rebels unless someone mediates a peace between them. The mediator, Jesus Christ, offers peace and salvation from God's wrath if we would believe in Him.

His mediation produces peace with God, reconciliation, deliverance from guilt, deliverance from damnation, and an interest in Christ's righteousness. He causes our natures to be sanctified, that we would be become like Christ. He has

come to live in us and defend us and preserve us and give us eternal life. Christ mediates a new promise, a new covenant.

At their last supper Jesus told His disciples "this cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in My blood" (Lk. 22:20). The cup that was poured out for you was the out-pouring of His Father's wrath onto Jesus. Jesus knew no sin. Yet He took on the sins of His people. The new covenant is new in time. It has come after the first covenant. It is a more excellent covenant (Heb. 8:7-13) because it reveals more of the glory of God because the new covenant is the old covenant fulfilled in the blood of the Lamb of God. So it is that we have come to the sprinkled blood of Christ, which speaks better than the blood of Able (24b).

In chapter nine we read that there is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22). But the shedding of blood in itself is not enough. The blood has to be applied so that the sins of the person are covered in the blood of the sacrifice. Jesus, our Great High Priest, sprinkles our hearts and our consciences to make them clean (Heb. 10:22).

The voice of God at Mt. Sinai was so terrifying that the people did not want to hear God's words. On Mt. Zion God speaks to us through Jesus' blood, and it is a better word than the blood of Abel. Both Jesus and Abel were hated for their righteousness, and both died at the hands of sinful men. Abel's blood cried out from the ground for vengeance. Christ's blood speaks out for peace and pardon for the guilty. To ignore all that His blood says to you is to have His blood speak judgment against you.

This is knowledge almost too wonderful to comprehend. We are like the Samaritan woman at the well who asked Jesus about where it was proper to worship God. He told her, "Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers" (Jn. 4:23).

This was written to encourage the people of God to persevere in the faith. Jesus tells us in Revelation that he who overcomes will be given authority over the nations, his name will not be erased from the book of life and Jesus will confess his name before His Father and His angels. He who overcomes will be made a pillar in the temple of God and Jesus will write on him the name of God and the name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem. He who overcomes will sit down with Jesus on His throne. He who overcomes will inherit these things and God will be his God and he will be God's son (Rev. 2:11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7).

Have you come to Christ? You have this morning. You have come to the general assembly of the church of the first-born, to the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to Jesus who has mediated peace between you and God, and you have come to His sprinkled blood. Do not walk away without embracing Jesus. Place your confidence in Him. Abide in Him. Stay at the cross, have the blood cover your heart and sprinkle your conscience. Trust Christ and Christ alone, and show Him gratitude for His love with reverence and awe.

In the closing verses of this chapter our author encourages the people of God to stand firm in the faith, to remain confident in the words they have heard in the blood of Christ.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned *them* on earth, much less *shall we escape* who turn away from Him who *warns* from heaven. ²⁶ And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.” ²⁷ And this *expression*, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:25-29)

PRAYER

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore [You]! All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before [You]. Let the Amen sound from [Your] people again, gladly for aye we adore [You].

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ⁱ G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, 2011) pg. 320.

ⁱⁱ The Father is identified as the Judge of all and Jesus is identified as the Mediator. Christ came to fulfill the law by obeying it and by offering up the perfect sacrifice to satisfy it. He did not do this for Himself but to satisfy His Father. This is why the Father loves Him: because He lays down His life for His sheep (Jn. 10:17).

Jesus told His disciples, however, that “not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son” (Jn. 5:22). Based on Jesus’ own words, how can the Father be “God, the Judge of all”?

Jesus’ authority is a delegated authority. It is the Father who has given Him authority to judge and to represent the Father’s interests. Jesus said, “I only do what I see my Father doing” (Jn. 5:19). Again, Jesus said, “I can do nothing on my own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just because I do not seek my own will but the will of Him who sent me” (Jn. 5:30).