

NEW COVENANT BLESSINGS
(SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2020)

Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:18-26; Hebrews 12:18-24

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther: "If we knew what we had been saved from, we would die of fear; if we knew what we had been saved unto, we would die of joy."

God has given to us in His Word a glimpse into the true glory of what we enjoy now and the glory still to come.

1Cor. 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 John 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. **3** And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Last verse of Amazing Grace, likely not written by John Newton:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

We will have eternity to understand more of the greatness of God and His grace to sinners.

The book of Hebrews calls attention to the blessings that we now enjoy in Jesus Christ.

The challenge we face is that the blessings are not things we can just reach and touch or experience in a sensual way.

That doesn't make them any less true; it means that we need the guidance of God's Word to appreciate all that we have in the saving work of the Triune God.

The original readers of this book faced pressure to turn back to Judaism and away from the salvation found in Jesus Christ alone.

We don't have the exact same temptation today, but still the world, the flesh, and the devil call us to turn away from our Lord.

I would say that Hebrews 12 is the climax of the book. Hebrews is a sermon and in chapter 12, the writer, the preacher of this sermon reaches the high point of the message he is giving.

Heb. 12:25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven,

Throughout the book you find warnings and encouragements.

Heb. 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.

Heb. 3:1 Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus,

Heb. 3:12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;

Heb. 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Heb. 10:19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,

Hebrews can be summarized then as the superiority of the new covenant in Jesus Christ and the warning of turning away from Jesus Christ.

I have chosen for our main text, Heb. 12:18-24.

I thought it good to take a short break from Ephesians and to use this text as a reminder of the incredible privilege that we have especially as we gather for worship as God's people.

Our text is easy to outline:

- 1) You have not come to this, vv. 18-21
- 2) But you have come to this, vv. 22-24

We will briefly consider the whole of this chapter and then focus on verses 18-24.

Keep your focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and the incredible blessings and privileges that we have in Him and in God's sovereign work.

1) OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 12

The NKJV divides chapter 12 into five sections.

This is not an inspired division. Others would outline the chapter as having 3 main parts.¹

Let us consider briefly the five sections according to the NKJV.

1] Focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, vv. 1-2/3

2] God's Discipline, vv. 3-11

3] Challenge, vv. 12-17

4] The Blessing of the New Covenant and our Worship, vv. 18-24

5] Do not refuse, vv. 25-29

2) YOU HAVE NOT COME, VV. 18-21

In Exodus 19 we read that in the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land on Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.

It is not until you get to Numbers 10:12 that the children of Israel moved again.

Israel spent about one year at Mt. Sinai.²

So, after the incredible display of God's power in the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, it is Mt. Sinai that we can say is at the center of God's work.

It is Mt. Sinai that looms over the entire time that Israel was in the wilderness.

There is question about where Mt. Sinai is located.

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47B of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 404.

² "The people of Israel have been at Sinai for almost a full year (see Ex. 19:1)."

Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds. *The ESV Study Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), paragraph 3113.

I think this is a fascinating question in terms of archaeology and history, but as we see from our text, theologically Mt. Sinai has no importance.

Our goal in terms of worship and the Christian life is not to find Mt. Sinai.

The key chapters that are most connected with our text are Exodus 19-20 and also Deut. 4 and 5.

We have in verses 18-21 four main descriptions of Mt. Sinai and then the response of holy terror.

First, you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire.

Not all versions have the word mountain.

What is interesting is that although we know the writer is speaking of Sinai, it is not named in the text.

It is not that the name is unimportant, but theologically we have moved beyond Sinai, such that this significant place is not even named.

Exodus 19:16 speaks of thundering's and lightnings.

Deut. 4:11 and 5:22 also speak of the mountain **burning** with fire to the midst of heaven.

The **second** description of Sinai is of blackness, darkness, and tempest.

This is interesting isn't it?

There is fire.

There is also a blackness, darkness, and stormy winds.

Deut. 4:11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, **with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness.**

The **third** description is that of the sound of a trumpet.

Ex. 19:16 Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled.

Ex. 19:19 And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.

The fourth description is that of a voice of words such that the people begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore.

The word **voice** in Greek could also be translated as sound.

Gen. 3:8 And they heard the **sound** (LXX - φωνή) of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Ex. 20:18 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood afar off. **19** Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

Then as I outline this text, we have two reflections on the terror of Sinai.

In verse 20 we read that the people could not endure what was commanded.

And what was commanded was that they were to stay away from Mt. Sinai such that if even an animal touched the mountain it was to be put to death.

The children of Israel could not endure or bear this command.

What does that mean?

It is not that they couldn't obey and stay away from the mountain.

The idea is this command was a reminder of their **unworthiness**.

Donald Guthrie states, "They were totally overawed by the glory of the occasion."³

And then second, even Moses was gripped and shaken by the awesome nature of God and His presence.

There is a question about where we read about this reaction of Moses in the OT.

One possible passage is Deut. 9:19.

Deut. 9:19 For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the LORD was angry with you, to destroy you. But the LORD listened to me at that time also.

But it might be that what the author of Hebrews is recording in verse 21 is not something we directly see in Exodus or Deuteronomy, but it is not surprising.

³ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 261.

Moses was the earthly mediator of God's covenant with Israel.

Even given this tremendous calling, he himself was overwhelmed with God's power and presence.

Donald Guthrie provides a good summary of verses 18-21.

Throughout the era of law, separateness had been a feature of God's dealing with his people, as the holy of holies showed. This build-up of awesomeness was calculated to set out in greater relief the approachableness of God under the gospel, as verses 22-24 show.⁴

3) BUT YOU HAVE COME, VV. 22-24

The verb **to come** is an important verb in Hebrews. It is used in both verses 18 and 22.

It is used five times before this text.

Listen to two of these uses.

Heb. 4:16 Let us therefore **come** boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Heb. 10:22 let us **draw near** with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

There are seven things listed in verses 22-24 that are part of the blessing now that we have in Christ and that we especially consider in worship.

The first is that rather than coming to Mt. Sinai, we have the privilege of gathering before God's heavenly throne.

We come into the presence of Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Zion is a name found many times in the OT, especially the Psalms and Isaiah.

Zion was another name for Jerusalem and was connected with God's covenant and love for His people.

His foundation *is* in the holy mountains.

The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the dwellings of Jacob.

Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God! **Psalm 87:1-3**

⁴ Guthrie, 261.

There is no longer any central, earthly sanctuary that we must visit.

It is not Rome, it is not Jerusalem, certainly not Chicago.

Rather we approach God and have fellowship with Him in the heavenly places.

Though our worship on earth may be very humble as we worship God we join in with an innumerable company of angels.

Rev. 5:11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, **12** saying with a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain

To receive power and riches and wisdom,

And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”

The third blessing highlighted is the work of God’s grace.

The word translated as general assembly sounds very Presbyterian, doesn’t it.

Some translations connect this word which could be translated as a festal gathering with angels in verse 22.

Other versions connect this word and join it with the phrase church or congregation of the firstborn.

There is so much rich OT language throughout this text.

Throughout Genesis especially you see the battle among sons as to who will be the firstborn.

The firstborn son played an important role in the family.

And often in the OT you see highlighted the failure of the firstborn.

These themes found throughout the OT are fulfilled in Christ.

The true firstborn is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church of the firstborn speaks of those who by God’s sovereign grace are in union with Christ.

They are registered not just in an earthly list but are registered in heaven.

Luke 10:20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”

Fourth and centrally in this listing we come to God the Judge of all.

The NT emphasizes not that God becomes our buddy.

The NT emphasizes the access that we have. We are blessed to come into the very presence of God.

And we do this because we now have peace.

We do this still confessing that God is the judge of all.

Heb 12:29 For our God *is* a consuming fire.

Fifth, we have reference to the spirits of just men made perfect.

What an interesting expression.

Listen to the last verse of Hymn 270, The Church’s One Foundation:

Yet she on earth hath union
With the God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won:

What can we say about this mystic sweet communion or what we have described here at the end of verse 23?

Certainly, it is not that we are communicating messages with dead saints.

This is not praying for the help of those who have gone before us.

But there is something that the living and the dead can join together in doing and that is the worship of the living God.

The elect who have finished their work on earth still await the resurrection as we do, but in the presence of God, they participate in the heavenly worship even as we do here on earth.

This is not something we probably often consider.

Rev. 5:13 describes the worship of the Lamb as including those in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth.

And we have already noted several times from Ephesians the phrase the *heavenly places*.

Eph. 2:6 and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus,

When we keep these things in mind, the phrase here at the end of verse 23 makes perfect sense.

God is worshipped by all those He has sovereignly redeemed.

We do not yet experience the fulness of that glory to come, but we even now participate in the glorious worship of God.

Heb. 10:19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,

Finally, from verse 24 we have two more things to which we have come.

We come now to the new covenant mediator, **Jesus**.

You might say this is expected.

We have to consider the great contrast also that is presented.

The saints in Israel were not able to come into God's presence directly. They had to have a mediator, Moses.

And even Moses as we see in verse 21 trembled in the mighty presence of God.

We now have the blessing of coming directly to the Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man.

Heb. 8:6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

And then finally from this listing - to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

I am guessing that if you or I were making a list like this, we probably would not have thought of including Abel.

What is significant about this?

Well, likely Abel was the first person to ever die. Abel according to Jesus was the first martyr.

Matt. 23:35 that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous **Abel** to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

The author of Hebrews here is most likely thinking of Genesis 4:10 in this verse.

Gen. 4:10 And He [God] said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.

Abel's blood cries out for justice, for vengeance.

The blood of Jesus Christ speaks of atonement and forgiveness.

There is nothing so beautiful as to know peace with God through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

How much do you focus on this glorious truth?

If you are honest, probably not very much. We can all say, not as much as we should.

Col. 3:1 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. **2** Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. **3** For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

1. We desire to be faithful in worship. There is even I place for what we call beauty. A beautiful choir for example. But what could ever compare to the heavenly privileges that we have been given?

If you think you are going to create something better than what we have already in Christ, then you are totally missing the point.

While we might like to have more people join us in this place for worship, what matters most is that we join the heavenly worship service.

Man's glory is nothing in comparison to what we enjoy by God's grace.

2. This text is a warning to those who seek the sensual worship that some churches claim to provide - bells, smells, etc... It is not that we are gnostic, but we focus on the heavenly glory that we have in Christ.

What does Scripture command in terms of worship? It is singing, the Word, prayer, sacraments, and giving.

Keep your focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and the incredible blessings and privileges that we have in Him and in God's sovereign work.

Prayer

Hymn 359