

Hebrews

Are You Living on Mt. Sinai or Mt. Zion?

Hebrews 12:18-24

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A. Stay Focused On What Christ Has Done For You.

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B. Maintain Fellowship with the Father and Remain Mindful of His Holiness.

Hebrews

Are You Living on Mount Sinai or Mount Zion?

Hebrews 12:18-24

INTRODUCTION:

ILLUSTRATION:

An article in *Newsweek* from 11/24/1986 told of a Texas gem dealer by the name of Roy Whetstine. He was digging through a Tupperware bowl of cheaply priced rocks at a mineral show in Arizona when he came across a lavender-gray, potato-size stone that looked a bit special. "You want \$15 for this?" Whetstine asked the amateur collector. "Tell you what," replied the collector. "I'll let you have it for \$10. It's not as pretty as the others."

Whetstine walked away with the world's largest star sapphire, later valued at as high as \$2.28 million! He planned to sell his 1,905-carat bargain in its uncut form for \$1.5 million and put the profits in a trust for his two sons, each of whom had given Dad \$5 to bring back a little something from the gem show. I don't know if he returned to the amateur collector and rewarded him a little for the find, but I hope he did.

If you do not know what you possess, you may disregard it or let it go for something worth far less. Esau did that—he did not appreciate the value of his birthright, which entitled him to the blessings of God's promises to Abraham, and so he traded it for a bowl of stew. He gave away eternal blessings for instant gratification. Bad trade!

But that is what the original readers of Hebrews were in danger of doing! Under the threat of persecution, they were tempted to abandon Christ to return to their Jewish faith. So the author here contrasts the terrors of **Mount Sinai**, representing Jewish life under the law, with the glories of **Mount Zion**, picturing grace and the joy of life under the new covenant. He wants us to know that right living flows out of right knowing. If you know the riches that you possess in Christ, you will not want to go back to the empty, fleeting pleasures of the world.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 12:18-24 (NASB95)

¹⁸ 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." 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 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.

Prayer

So the author does not want us to make Esau's spiritually fatal mistake. He draws a sharp contrast between life under the old covenant and life under the new covenant.

The feeling of the old covenant was terror and judgment. The feeling of the new covenant is joyous celebration with the saints and angels in the presence of God. There is still reverence, but the blood of Jesus has taken away the dread of judgment. The old covenant was physical and earthly; the new covenant is spiritual and heavenly. The old covenant put distance between the holy God and the sinful people. The new covenant invites us to dwell in the city of the living God through the blood of Jesus. So his message is:

If you have trusted in the blood of Jesus, you have not come to the terrors of the law, but to the joys of the new covenant.

BODY:

I. The Blood of Jesus Sets Us Apart from the Terrors of the Law.

Hebrews 12:18-21 (NASB95)

¹⁸ 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."

These verses summarize the story of God's giving the law at Mount Sinai.

You may wonder, "Why would God reveal Himself in such a terrifying manner?" Even Moses, who had seen God in the burning bush, who had performed God's miracles before Pharaoh, was full of fear and trembling. This does not sound like the kind of warm, grandfatherly God that you would want to cuddle up to!

The answer to that question depends on the answer to another question: "Why did God give the law?" Paul answers that question.

Galatians 3:19-24 (NASB95)

¹⁹ Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰ Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. ²¹ Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. ²² But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²³ But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us to Christ*, so that we may be justified by faith.

By nature, we are all blind to the extent of our sin before a holy God. We compare ourselves with terrorists and child molesters and think, “Sure, I have got my faults, but I am not a **terrible** sinner!” And, we know that God is holy, but we do not grasp what that means. But then the law comes in and shows us God’s absolute holiness. When we see the holiness of God we can proclaim with Isaiah...

Isaiah 6:5 (NASB95)

“Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

Isaiah did not know fully understand his dirty mouth **before** he saw God in His holiness. But the instant he saw the holiness of God, he was aware of his own sinfulness.

The route to Zion goes through Sinai, where we encounter the terrors of God’s law. His law should teach us two things:

A. God’s Law Should Instill in Us a Fear of His Holiness and Judgment.

The scene at Mount Sinai was that of a severe thunderstorm, but it was far more than that. In addition to the darkness, gloom, wind, and flashes of lightning, there was the blast of a trumpet, which was probably a supernatural sound from heaven. The earth quaked violently.

Exodus 19:18 (NASB95)

¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.

Whether the people could understand the exact words of God’s voice from heaven or not, I do not know. But it came across as a terrible sound.

Hebrews 12:19 (NASB95)

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.*

God had commanded that any person or animal that touched the mountain must be killed from a distance, either by stoning or by arrows.

Exodus 19:12-13 (NASB95)

¹² You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, ‘Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.”

Like Uzzah who was struck dead for touching the ark, so anyone who touched anything that had touched the mountain where God revealed Himself would die.

The only way we get a clear knowledge of ourselves is to look upon God's face. His holiness reveals our pride, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and sin. Until we have some understanding of God as revealed in Scripture, we flatter ourselves and think that we are not all that bad.

B. God's Law Should Instill in Us the Need for a Mediator.

At Mount Sinai, Moses and Aaron were the only ones allowed to go up the mountain into God's presence. But the people could not draw near to God through Moses or Aaron. They were men with sin of their own. But Jesus Christ is our **sinless** high priest, who offered Himself as our sacrifice.

Hebrews 7:26-27 (NASB95)

²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

As Paul wrote...

1 Timothy 2:5 (NASB95)

⁵ For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the man* Christ Jesus,

The author's point is that while the law reveals God's holiness and convicts us as deserving of His judgment, Jesus is God's mediator who paid the penalty for all that believe in Him. So, the route to Zion goes through Sinai, where we encounter the terrors of God's law. But once you have arrived in Zion, why would you want to go back to Sinai? So after describing the place we have left, the author goes on to show the place where we have come:

II. The Blood of Jesus Brings Us to the Joys of the New Covenant.

Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB95)

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 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.

The overall feel of these verses is in stark contrast to the preceding verses. Instead of fear and separation, we have joy and inclusion. He lists seven joys for new covenant believers in Christ:

A. You Have Come to the Joy of Inclusion in the City of the Living God.

Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB95)

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,...

The author describes the new place where believers have come with three terms. The **first term** that is used is **Mount Zion**. This was the name for the stronghold in Jerusalem that David conquered.

2 Samuel 5:6-8 (NASB95)

⁶ Now the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, and they said to David, "You shall not come in here, but the blind and lame will turn you away"; thinking, "David cannot enter here." ⁷ Nevertheless, David captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David. ⁸ David said on that day, "Whoever would strike the Jebusites, let him reach the lame and the blind, who are hated by David's soul, through the water tunnel." Therefore they say, "The blind or the lame shall not come into the house."

Zion became a synonym for Jerusalem. It represents the place where God, the King, dwells with His people.

Micah 4:2 (NASB95)

² Many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

The second term that you have come to is "**the city of the living God**". Hebrews mentions the *city* more than any other New Testament book. This is "**the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God**" (11:10). It is the city that God prepared for the Old Testament saints who died in faith without receiving the promises. (11:13, 16). And while we now dwell in it spiritually, there is a sense in which it is yet "**to come**" (13:14). "**City**" conveys a sense of orderliness and security against the enemy. It is a place where needs for food and water are met, and where there is fellowship with others.

But this is not any city; it is the city "**of the living God.**"

Hebrews 9:14 (NASB95)

¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the **living God**?

As opposed to ritualistic, legalistic religion, through Christ, we enter into an abiding relationship with the living God.

The third term the author uses to describe the same thing is "**the heavenly Jerusalem**". This is the holy city that John saw in Revelation.

Revelation 21:2-4 (NASB95)

² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

He goes on to say that it represents God dwelling among His people, and promises that when new Jerusalem comes down, God will wipe away every tear, and there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying, or pain. The fulfillment of these promises awaits the second coming of Jesus.

B. You Have Come to the Joy of Myriads of Angels in Festive Assembly.

Hebrews 12:22-23 (NASB95)

22 But you have come ...**to myriads of angels,** **23** **to the general assembly...**

Most scholars understand “**general assembly**” to be connected with the myriads of angels. The Greek word was used of a festival or celebration. It points to the angels joyously worshipping God, and the fact that we join their chorus of praise.

While we cannot begin to experience anything that glorious on earth, **I challenge you to work at your worship!** An apathetic, ho-hum, “worship” shows that we do not understand the majesty of our God, and we are not focused on His great salvation that He lavished on us by His grace. Shake off your apathy and ask God to fill your heart with His joy. You are joining the angels in chorus as you gather with the saints to worship!

C. You Have Come to the Joy of the Church of the Firstborn Who are Enrolled in Heaven.

Hebrews 12:23 (NASB95)

22 But you have come to the...**church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,...**

The word “firstborn” occurs nine times in the NASB New Testament. Seven times it refers to Christ. Once it refers to the firstborn in Egypt. Here it is in plural form and refers to the saints. It emphasizes our rights of inheritance as God’s children. Natural families have only one firstborn. But in God’s family all the people of Christ are the ‘firstborn’ children of God. Our birthright is not to be bartered away, as it was by Esau.

D. You Have Come to the Joy of a Judge, Who is God of All.

Hebrews 12:23 (NASB95)

22 But you have come...**to God, the Judge of all,...**

You may wonder, “How is it a **joy** to come before an all-powerful **Judge** who knows your every thought and motive?” There are three answers to that question.

First, the author was writing to a persecuted church. They could rest in the fact that one day God will judge all their enemies who do not repent. No one will get away with anything. When God judges wicked Babylon, the saints are encouraged...

Revelation 18:20 (NASB95)

20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her.”

Second, we can rejoice that God will reward everything that we have done for the name of Christ.

Galatians 6:9 (NASB95)

9 Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.

Third, we can rejoice that we have come to the Judge, who is God of all, because living with that awareness will cure us of the sin that damages us and others. Who would commit a crime while standing before the judge in court? At His judgment seat, all our wood, hay, and straw will be burned.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15 (NASB95)

¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and **the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work**. ¹⁴ If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

We can rejoice to serve such a Judge, who disciplines us for our good!

E. You Have Come to the Joy of the Spirits of the Righteous Made Perfect.

Hebrews 12:23 (NASB95)

²² But you have come...**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*.

This refers to all of the saints who have died and gone to heaven. They have not yet received their new resurrection bodies, which awaits the second coming of Christ, but their spirits are made perfect. They are **absent** from the body, but **present** with the Lord. For them, all temptation and sin is over. They are completely righteous in Christ, and will be throughout all eternity. Although we are still in the body, fighting against sin, we are one with these saints, and one day soon we will be with them in heaven.

F. You Have Come to the Joy of Jesus, the Mediator of a New Covenant.

Hebrews 12: 24 (NASB95)

²² But you have come...**to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**,...

Although I must be brief, this is the best of all. We have already considered this in previous studies. The author uses His human name, Jesus, because it is **as a man** that Jesus shed His blood for our sins. **As God**, He is the only one who can mediate between the Holy Father and us as sinful creatures.

Change is difficult. You can almost hear some of the old guard saying, "Why do we need this **new** covenant? The old one is good enough for us!" But the author is saying that the new is better. The old is obsolete.

Finally,

G. You Have Come to the Joy of the Sprinkled Blood, Which Speaks Better Than the Blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12: 24 (NASB95)

²² But you have come...**to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel**.

I believe this is alluding to Genesis 4:10.

Genesis 4:10 (NASB95)

¹⁰ He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground.

As the blood Abel cried out for vengeance and justice, the blood of Jesus, sprinkled on the believer, speaks God’s word of forgiveness and mercy to the guilty sinner. God demands blood as the penalty for our sin. Our blood was stained and could not pay the extreme price for our sins and the blood of bulls and goats could never atone for sin. But the blood of Jesus was perfectly pure. When you are sprinkled with His blood, you have the joy of knowing that God has forgiven all your sins!

CONCLUSION:

So the question is, “Where are you living?” Are you living on Mount Sinai, trying to earn acceptance with a holy God by keeping His law? If so, you should be in terror, because it is impossible to meet the demands of His holiness. If you have trusted Christ, you are living on Mount Zion.

I would like to make two applications or you to consider:

A. Stay Focused On What Christ Has Done For You.

In a similar context where Paul is warning about the dangers of legalism, he wrote...

Colossians 3:1 (NASB95)

³ Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, **keep seeking** the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

That’s where all of our treasures lie! Don’t forget it! “**Keep seeking**” implies a lifelong quest. If you lose sight of the benefits of Zion, you may be tempted, like Esau, to trade your treasures in Christ for the empty pleasures of the world.

B. Maintain Fellowship with the Father and Remain Mindful of His Holiness.

We are to draw near to His throne to receive grace for our every need. But we also need to remember that “**our God is a consuming fire**”.

If you are at Mount Sinai, you are in grave danger before the holy God, because you are exposed to His judgment. But if you are on Mount Zion, you are secure because the blood of Jesus has covered your sins. You can enjoy life in God’s holy presence without fear of His judgment! Live on Mount Zion!

What a Day That Will Be!