

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 46 August 14, 2022

Mount Zion & the City of the Living God

Hebrews 12:18-24

Introduction

In the verses preceding this section (12:14ff), we have been exhorted to *“strive for peace and holiness”*; *“to not fail to obtain God’s grace”*; and *“to not let any root of bitterness spring up”* in us; *“to walk a straight path with strength”*; *“to run the race set before us”*; and even as far back as 10:19-31, we are told to *“hold fast and not fall away.”*

The author of Hebrews has taken us through countless views of the practices and results of Old Covenant worship, and compared that to the New Covenant worship of Christ our Lord. Hebrews is not only a book of warning passages – the last of which will be assessed in our next lesson (Heb. 12:25-29), but it is a book of contrasts, a litany of comparisons to illustrate the message that, seeing Christ and His inestimable value for our salvation, then rejecting Him and turning back to the more familiar tenets of Judaism, even if it’s done to escape persecution, is a heinous refusal to embrace and rejoice in *“So great a salvation”* (Heb. 2:1-3). This then leaves a person unguarded against the coming wrath of a Holy God, as well as being on the verge of missing out on eternal life spent with Christ because of Christ with fellow believers in a place the Bible refers to as ‘heaven.’

The A.H. has masterfully connected our Christianity to the OT by bringing various OT passages right into his argument all the way through the book, one of his favourite referents being Psalm 110, to show these various passages from the Psalms and the Prophets build a foundation for the coming of Christ, the person and work of Christ and how that affects God’s redemptive history and purpose.

Through it all, the author continually points out the necessity of endurance and perseverance for the believer to reach God’s Kingdom, having stayed on the narrow path that Jesus has indicated is a critical precursor to reaching heaven, and which the 5 warning passages of Hebrews focus on to keep us from straying away from the glorious vision of the sort of joy that Jesus Himself (Heb. 12:2) saw as His motivation to obediently live and die for us, and then to claim His rightful place at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:4)!

You Have Not Come to Mt. Sinai (The Old Covenant) – vv18-21

In the contrast that comprises Heb. 12:18-24, the A.H. brings us first to Mt. Sinai (which he never names here), but the description in vv. 18-21 cannot be of any other

geographical / theological or biblical feature within the scope of God's Word. The contrast of v. 22's initial words also makes that plain.

As we have seen & as I hope we can all recall - because I have tried to put some emphasis on it – is that the old covenant presented an awesome God to be feared and worshipped, but the people were not to attempt to approach Him personally, which is why a holy priesthood had been established by God to be intermediaries between the people and God, through established laws and norms set out in His Word. Passages like Leviticus 10:1-3 (the instant death of Aaron's two sons because of unprescribed worship in the Tabernacle), and Leviticus 16 (the Day of Atonement and its strict prescription of how even the High priest was to approach God, being the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies, and that, on only one day of the year!), demonstrated that improper approach to God, even with holy intentions, was an act of rebellion which would result in the death of the priest. So, the decision by the A.H. to bring the events that took place at Mt. Sinai into his argument here is the old covenant side of the contrast he develops as he shows first, the OC, then the new covenant, and doing so by utilizing the symbolic differences between these two mountains – Sinai, and Zion. His construction and purpose is to show that something of huge magnitude had to occur to allow an approach to God in vv. 22-24, that was forbidden in vv. 18-21 – that event of such magnitude, as he has tirelessly stressed from Heb. 1:1 on, is the arrival, life, death, resurrection, ascension and intercession and High Priesthood of Jesus Christ!

V. 18 – (read vv. 18-21) – Notice that v. 18 begins with “For”, an instant indicator that what follows is an explanation for what has just come before this passage, as mentioned in the introduction above. These 4 verses are referring to the events of Exodus 19, a seminal event for the people of Israel, one chapter in advance of the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. It also comes on the heels of Israel's escape from bondage in Egypt and a series of tests, victories, and personal defeats along the way before arriving here at Mt. Sinai. Recall that when Moses and Aaron requested that Pharaoh *“let God's people go”* (Ex. 5:1)¹ – it was for a purpose, not just a general idea to leave Egypt and then ‘do your own thing’, but the stated purpose of letting the people go was so that *“they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.”*

In Exodus 19:1 we are supplied with a time mark from the Exodus (on Passover) till Israel's arrival at Sinai as *“On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.”* So, it took approximately 3 months from Exodus 12/13 to here. Exodus 14-18 describes the journey to reach Sinai in some detail.

They were in the wilderness, well to the south of what would later be called Israel, and the first order of business was to establish the nature of the relationship God intended for the people to have with Him. An initial aspect of this relationship had already been established with Passover and the leading of God by virtue of a pillar of

¹ See also Exodus 7:16; 8:1,8,20; 9:1,13; 10:3,7,26

fire and smoke, bringing them here to Sinai after 3 months. They would worship God, and as His people, He would protect them. This was very evident in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14) on dry land, and the defeat of Amalek in Ex. 17:8-17, and the provision of the manna – Ex. 16f.

But, at Sinai, what took place was almost in the sense of “Now, let’s get a few things straight between us” moment. The specific parts of Exodus 19 that Hebrews 12:18-21 refer us to are found in Exodus 19:1-25 (specifically vv. 10-25). Having reminded his readers (remember – mostly Jewish converts to Christ) of this event and its position as establishing that OC relationship with Israel (Mosaic Covenant), recall that his first words of Heb. 12:18 are *“For you have not come...”* to this mountain.

Richard Phillips’ comment here is important;

“This is an excellent reminder that the purpose of our deliverance, the purpose of the church, is to worship and serve God – not to please the world, not to market goods and services to the secular culture, but to please God through our living worship. But it is not to Mount Sinai in the desert that Christians are told that they have come. Mount Sinai is brought into the picture, but only to present a contrast by which the mount of our salvation may be seen more clearly. It is a contrast between Sinai and Zion, between Moses and Christ, between the law and the Gospel.”²

V. 19 – The A.H. does not go into vast detail of this Exodus event, but instead only highlights certain key points: the mountain was not to be touched or even approached (Ex. 19:12-13); blazing fire, darkness, gloom and a tempest (Ex. 19:16); the sound of a trumpet (Ex. 19:13,16), and a voice (Ex. 19:19) which made the hearers beg not to hear it anymore (Ex. 19:16; 20:18,19 & Deut. 5:24-27)! Although what was taking place here was incredibly important for the people, it was a very unpleasant experience for them and even for Moses himself (Deut. 9:19).

The author’s point is to make his readers realize that this is what you go back to if you leave Christ to return to Judaism. “Is this really what you prefer?” In the Exodus 19 account – in order to prepare for this day – this 3rd day (Ex. 19:11), was to consecrate themselves and clean their garments (Ex. 19:10,14,15) and were to abstain from sexual relations for that time as well (Ex. 19:15).

Anyone who approached Mt. Sinai, including animals, would be struck dead (Ex. 19:12-13,24). God would immediately judge those who disobeyed this command to stay back. Later, in Ex. 33:20, God tells Moses, “Man shall not see Me and live.” The tenor of these 4 verses is that, under the OC, God’s presence was not accessible, except to the High Priest once per year. Those who broached this edict faced the danger of being summarily annihilated (Lev. 10:1-2). The requirement was so severe that even animals, who never intended (they did not have the capacity) to break God’s command (19:13) would be immediately killed.

² Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 565

In vv. 20-21, the A.H. now cites 2 OT passages – Ex. 19:12 & Deut. 9:19 – to explain why the people could not endure the voice of God & all the tempest associated with it. Not only the people, but Moses (cf. Deut. 9:20), and we learn that Aaron was also reacting in great fear over what was being manifested at Sinai. Moses' fear is not mentioned in Ex. 19, (but implied in Ex. 19:19) but in the Deut. 9 account of the golden calf it is implicit. By mentioning Moses per Deut. 9:19, the author is revealing the full implications of Sinai for Israel. It demonstrates Israel's and man's inherent inability to deal with their sin in the face of God's judgment. Notice something that the A.H. does not mention in these verses. See Ex. 19:3-8. Verse 8 is the people's hasty reply to Moses – *“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”* (cf. v. 5). This is a grave error on the part of the people, which will be highlighted in Deut. 9 and their heinous sin. Instead, they should have asked for God's grace to obey and keep their end of the covenant – they already had, in 3 short months of travel to Sinai, proved they were incapable of complete obedience to God, and throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, there is a clear record (in fact, throughout the whole OT) of their exhibition of traits of deplorable depravity, idolatry and rebellion against God. The OC was completely, from the outset entirely inadequate, and the author stresses this throughout the book of Hebrews! (cf. Heb. 8:6-7)

You Have Come to Mt. Zion

vv. 22-23

“But, you have not come to that mountain and all the things just said about the presence of Israel before these majestic but judgmental terrors. Note what vv. 22-23 now tell us. Philip Hughes strikes this contrast well;

“Such were the terrors of Sinai, the mount of God's law, where because of their sinfulness, the people were unable to draw near to God's presence. How different are the circumstances of Zion, the mount of God's grace, where, thanks to the perfect law-keeping and the all-sufficient sacrifice of himself offered by the incarnate Son of God in our stead, we are invited to draw near with boldness into the heavenly holy of holies.”³

What a stark contrast the A.H. now presents, as he lays out for us, in a sense, a brief vision of heaven. He shows us the scene as we might envision it upon entering the heavenly city – the New Jerusalem, called also here Mt. Zion. Of course, this scene begs the question – “What heaven is the author bringing us to in this vision?” The heaven of 65 AD, or of New Covenant times? Or of the church age? I will attempt to answer that near the end of this lesson.

Although the terminology, *“But you have come to Mt. Zion...”* is present tense, there is an obvious “already but not yet” aspect of these 2 verses, because if we are reading them, we are still here on earth, and looking forward to what is described here for us as the fulfillment of promise. Thomas Schreiner gives us some history of OT Zion;

³ Philip E. Hughes, Hebrews, p. 543

“Zion, historically, is part of Jerusalem and was captured by David (2 Sam. 5:7; cf. I KGS 8:1), and is henceforth identified with Jerusalem. Zion in the OT is God’s “holy mountain” (Pss. 2:6; 9:12; 20:2; 74:2; 76:2; 132:13; Mic. 4:2; Joel 3:17, 21; Isa. 8:18), where he specially dwells. Here in Hebrews, Mount Zion is linked with the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. We are prepared for this in the OT, for Mount Zion is identified as “the city of the great King” (Ps. 48:2; cf. Isa. 60:14). The promise to rebuild Zion (Ps. 102:16) is fulfilled ultimately in the heavenly Zion, for we find in Ps 110:2 (the favorite psalm of the author) that the Lord and his Messiah reign from Zion. Zion will not be shaken and destroyed but will endure forever (Ps. 125:1; cf. Isa. 24:23).”⁴

This is “the city prepared for the saints”, the “better, heavenly country” that the OT saints desired to reach (Heb. 11:10,16). It is the city that all believers, of all eras anticipate, because we are all citizens of that city (cf. Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20) and heirs of the promise (Rom. 8:16,17) and awaiting the glory (Rom. 8:18).

Remember, as a contrast to Mt. Zion and the Mosaic Covenant, this scene of Mt. Zion is representative of the NC truth for believers, “*the church of the firstborn*” [Greek – *ekklesia*].

The first point the author directs our attention to is that “this is the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” This Mt. Zion is the seat of God’s heavenly throne, the place of His presence, the place from which He exercises His sovereign rule, and from it, He sends deliverance and dispenses grace and mercy (Heb. 4:16), and to His throne are drawn near believers, in confidence, not in trembling fear. Since Christ came as our new Adam, as our substitute and sacrifice, this is the scene that awaits us – so why turn back from this?

Philip Hughes again comments;

“Sinai prohibited the entrance of sinful man. No man, woman or child could even set foot on that mountain. But here on the mountain of grace is a city in the clouds, where God’s people dwell. The sight of Sinai produced fear, but this is a scene of great encouragement. From Sinai boomed forbidding threats, but from this mountain sounds a voice of invitation. To approach the former mountain was to tremble with fear – even Moses felt it. To draw near to this mountain is to find hope renewed with every lightened step. This is the difference made by the coming of Jesus Christ, who has removed all that stood opposed to us with God, who has taken away the darkness, and fire, and gloom, who transforms the mountain of fear into the mountain of grace. What a magnificent portrayal of the difference it makes that Christ has come to take away our sin.”⁵

Although we find very few extended visions of heaven outside the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 1:9-20; 4-5; 21-22), there are occasional glimpses of it in both the OT and the NT – ie.) Gen. 28:10-12 (1st mention of heaven); Ex. 24:9-11; Job 1 & 2; I KGS 22:19-

⁴ T. Schreiner, Hebrews, pp. 398-399

⁵ Hughes, p. 568

23; Ezek. 48:30-35; Zech. 3:1-9 and in the NT, mostly mentions rather than descriptions.

Then secondly, in v. 22, *“we have come to innumerable angels in festal gathering...”*. In Heb. 2:2⁶ the A.H. told us that angels had *“declared [the reliable / message”*, and they would have been the ones blowing the trumpets to elicit the proper fear from the Israelites gathered at Mt. Sinai – cf. Ex. 19; Heb. 12:19. But now, they are a welcoming party, myriads and myriads of them, inviting us to join their joyous, resounding worship of the Lord! They rejoice over every repentant sinner (LK 15:7, 10); long to look into salvation (I Pet. 1:12); minister to the Elect (Heb. 1:14), and are found to be the primary agents bringing about God’s wrathful judgments in the Tribulation in Revelation. They are found praising God, “Holy! Holy! Holy! In Isaiah 6:3, and gathered about His throne in Revelation 4 – 5 – a picture that may be similar to what the author of Hebrews says here; and finally, for our purposes here, they attended with God as He created the universe – Job 38:7!

Next (v. 23), *“we have come to...the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”* This term, ‘firstborn’ presents us with the character, composition and enrollment precursor of the church. We are joint-heirs with Christ, heirs of the promise and we receive these benefits, not by achieving them by our own efforts, but through the new birth (JN 1:12). God said that Israel was *“His first born son”* to Pharaoh in Exodus 4:22-23, and now we too are His first-born sons and daughters. *“These citizens are those beloved of God, defended and delivered by His might for fellowship with Him and to worship Him forever.”*⁷

The fact that we are “enrolled in heaven” is of prime importance, and is a reminder of passages where we are informed of the existence of “the Lamb’s book of life.” Recall first, Jesus telling His disciples, in LK 10:17-20 – to “rejoice that your names are *written in heaven.*” *We find this book of life mentioned prominently in Revelation 13:7-8; and 17:8* and note in 17:8 that those names, those enrollment names were written down “from the foundation of the world” – i.e., the elect. The “book of life” also occurs in Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 20:12 & 20:15, and seems to always depict those who are alone bound for heaven. In Daniel 7:9-11, he envisions books being opened for use at the final judgment; and in Daniel 12:1-2, again books of judgment are opened and those delivered consist of *“everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”*

In Isaiah 4:3 (read Isaiah 4:1-6) we encounter a book in which is written *“everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem.”* These survivors have come through the doom for Jerusalem and Judah that had been prophesied and fulfilled in OT times, but this scene is not immediately following that or even the return to rebuild Jerusalem. The mention of “the Branch of the Lord” in v. 2, places this scene in Messianic / Millennial Kingdom times, but the point here is that those who are so blessed are blessed because “To have survived the calamity is no accident but arises from an

⁶ Psalm 68:17; Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19

⁷ Hughes, p. 569

elective decision of the Lord, a divine purpose expressed in the inscribing of the name in the book of life. Behind personal experience lies the predestinating mind of God.”⁸

This enrollment in Heb. 12:23 is reserved for those who have been gloriously saved by Christ’s blood, and them alone. In Rev. 21:22-27, we have a promise that those who are not saved, will never enter into heaven (& cf. Rev. 22:14-15).

Also in Heb. 12:23, God is again mentioned, *“We have come to...God the judge of all...”*, and for sinners unsaved, this would be a chilling reminder of God’s judgment and wrath, but Romans 8:1 reminds believers that *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* And I Thess. 5:9 echoes that point – *“For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Tom Schreiner helps us see God as judge here;

“The word “judge” precedes God [in the Greek], stressing God’s awesome holiness. Why does the author refer to God as judge in a paragraph that stresses the joy of coming into God’s presence? The hearers are reminded that they will be vindicated on the last day. This joyful fellowship is not to be taken lightly. God has not relented in His holiness. They come boldly to God’s throne where He bestows grace because of Jesus (Heb. 4:16), and they draw near full of assurance (Heb. 10:22), knowing they will escape judgment because their bodies have been washed and cleansed.”⁹

Those attending this scene, around this God and judge have already been acquitted in His court! They have been judged at Calvary in the Person of their substitute, and have been declared righteous. It is in this fact we must rejoice! The words of Romans 8:31-34 are very appropriate here.

And v. 23 continues, “We have come...to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” This use of the word, “spirits” is an indication that those described here are not in their mortal bodies yet. This lines up with heaven prior to the resurrection of our bodies (which event we await – cf. Rom. 8:23) where we dwell as spirits until that time – cf. I Cor. 15. The vision supplied by the AH is not dated (as we find in Revelation 1 of John’s vision of heaven), so it could be about 65 AD when this letter was written, which I find unlikely, given the biblical prophecies of the resurrection of OT saints in the end times, and not as they died in their own era, or it could be in the church age prior to Christ’s return in Revelation 19. I doubt that this is a vision of the heaven chronology that John gives us in Revelation.

The key thing to notice here is that these spirits are *“the righteous made perfect.”* Declared to be righteous on earth when saved, when we enter heaven – our glorification (Rom. 8:30) results in us now being experientially righteous – now incapable of sinning. Our salvation is now complete! Here in heaven, we will lack nothing in our relationship with God. “We have been cleansed from sin (cf. I Pet. 3:

⁸ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, 1993, p. 65

⁹ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, pp 400-401

18) and brought into the presence of God through the work of Christ.”¹⁰ Of course, being spirits in heaven applies to those who have died as believers. Christians alive now will have to wait to experience this completion of the promise.

Jesus: The Mediator of a New Covenant

v. 24

Finally, the A.H. brings to us his final, most critical comparative point of *“to whom have we come?”* *“To Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant.”* – this is placed last in the list for emphasis. According to Heb. 8:6 & cf. Heb. 7:22, He is also the Mediator of a better covenant.

Richard Phillips, talks about this point;

“Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant in His blood, one who takes away our fear, strips away the clouds of fury and opens wide the gates to Paradise for all who come in faith.

We remember the point of the letter to the Hebrews, and we see what this passage is teaching. What folly it would be to go from this mediator, Jesus, to the old mediator, Moses, from this mountain of grace, to the mountain of fear and darkness that was Sinai!”¹¹

As we saw when we studied Hebrews chapters 7,8 & 9 (lessons # 17-26), the OC had been displaced, as it was ineffectual to achieve what only Christ could achieve. The NC of which He is the Mediator, guarantees *“an eternal inheritance”*(Heb. 9:15), because it secures full and complete and final forgiveness of sins (Heb. 10:15-18)! Those sins are only (and can be only) forgiven because of the shedding of Christ’s blood, intentionally to eradicate them from our debt-load. That is why Jesus’ blood is described here as better than the blood of Abel. Abel’s shed blood was said by God in Genesis 4:10 (Heb. 11:4) to be *“crying out to me from the ground.”* The blood of Abel cried out to God for justice and vengeance. The blood of Jesus cries out for mercy and grace and guarantees forgiveness, and brings those who seek refuge in that blood into God’s benevolent presence! (se JN 6:53-58). His blood gives eternal life.

The last word of this lesson goes to Richard Phillips;

“What a contrast there is between Abel’s blood and Christ’s! Both were killed by their brothers: Abel by Cain, and Jesus by His fellow Jews, and no less by the sins of His firstborn brothers who will share eternity with Him. Jesus was killed by us, His brothers. But what a different message Jesus’ blood proclaims! Abel’s blood brought storms upon the earth, while Jesus’ blood cries, “Peace, be still! Just as those words calmed the winds and waves when Jesus spoke from the boat, so too does the voice of His blood drive away the mountain storms, the fire and tempest of Mount Sinai, to make Mount Zion a place of peace and calm and joy forever.”¹²

¹⁰ Schreiner, p. 401

¹¹ Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 571

¹² Phillips, p. 572