

HEBREWS 45
(Hebrews 12:18-24)

Mt. Zion Is Better Than Mt. Sinai
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INTRODUCTION

The book of Hebrews is written to warn Hebrew professing Christians about the danger of returning to Judaism. There were many Jews in the early church who were sorely tempted to go back to that old religion because of the trials and hardships and persecutions which attended Christianity.

And the main thrust of the book of Hebrews is that Christianity is far superior to Judaism. Christ is better deliverer than Moses. He is a better captain than Joshua. He is a better priest than Aaron. His sacrifice is a better sacrifice than animals. All of these things pointed to Christ, but they were not Christ. They were mere pictures of Him.

Example: Would you prefer to have a picture of a beautiful beach or would you like to be lying there in person watching the waves come in.

And that is the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism was merely the picture. Christianity is the sum and substance.

And so, in the book of Hebrews we have seen the overwhelming excellence of Christ as compared to the things of Judaism. In Christ, there is a real sacrifice. In Christ, there is real deliverance. In Christ there is effective priestly mediation; not in a little cubicle in the tabernacle, but at the right hand of God in heaven. In Christ, there is forgiveness of sins. Not so in Judaism. In Judaism there was remembrance of sins every year. In short, if you have any concern for the eternal destiny of your soul, if you would like to be accepted by Almighty God, if you have eternal designs on that heavenly city, then you must have enduring faith in Christ and not in the rituals that prefigured Him.

And furthermore, the book of Hebrews has recently taught us that true faith in Christ entails a race. Christianity is not a religion that bids us to sit down in our ease and comfort. But it is a call to an athletic competition. We are running for a magnificent prize in the end. And we must run with great patience and great endurance.

The writer of Hebrews says that we must not let our weary arms hang down. Rather, we must lift up those arms and lift up those weak knees and strive in the race.

Now this morning we come again to a passage that will contrast this religious system of Judaism with true faith in Christ. And the writer paints a picture of the two systems and he says, "Which one do you prefer?"

Now let me say that the Scriptures always suggest that salvation comes only one way, and that way is by a gracious promise that was made to Abraham. God told Abraham that a Savior would be born. And this Savior would be from Abraham's loins. And all those of all generations who had faith in this seed, were the children of the promise. Salvation comes by grace, through faith. It does not come by the works of the law.

It was much later that God elected a nation and gave them a most impossible law. This law was given to Israel at Mt. Sinai and it was never a saving instrument at all. Rather, it was a killing instrument. It was an instrument of death and condemnation. And Mt. Sinai will forever be a foreboding place, because it represents bondage and death. It represents the harsh consequences of sin.

I want us to quickly look at Galatians 4:21-31 to see the stark contrast between the promise of God to Abraham and the law of God which was given to Israel. Read Galatians 4:21-31.

Here, Abraham had two sons. One was a child of promise. He was the elect of God. His name was Isaac. The other was a child of Sarah's handmaiden. His name was Ishmael. Isaac was saved. Ishmael was an outcast. Now Hagar and Ishmael correspond to Mt. Sinai and in the allegory these two outcasts are a picture of Israel and Judaism. (v.25) But Isaac corresponds not to the earthly Jerusalem but to the heavenly Jerusalem. (v.26)

Now, in our text this morning, there are two mountains. In verse 18 there is a mountain which is identified by description as Mt. Sinai. And then, in verse 22, the other mountain is Mt. Zion. We look first at Mt. Sinai.

I. Mount Sinai

You will notice with regard to the first mountain that it says,

For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words: which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake;)

Hebrews 12:18-21

These words describe that first mountain which was Mt. Sinai. And this mountain was not a mountain which signified God's love and kindness. It was not a mountain that gave off an air of mercy and grace. It was not a mountain that said I am a loving father who welcomes you with open arms. Rather, it was a mountain that burned with the fire of God's holy judgment. It was a mountain where God said, "I am holy and you are a wretched sinner."

This mountain did not emit an air of salvation. There was no hint of acceptance with God. This was a mountain that said, "Don't you dare come up here." It was a mountain that our text says was full of blackness. It was perpetual night on this mountain. It was not a suitable mountain for any man to travel. It was dark and foreboding. It was a very terrifying place. And the storms raged on this mountain. Our text calls it a tempest. The cold, fierce wind howled and it was no place for man or beast.

But what made this mountain even more terrifying was that Almighty God came down upon it. And when he came down upon this awful mountain, it was set afire with his wrath. And Exodus says,

And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

Exodus 19:18

The wrath of a holy God is not a trifling matter. The wrath of a holy God will consume a mountain and it will consume sinners. It will burn away every living thing off of a mountain and it will burn the flesh off of sinners. And God came down that day on Mt. Sinai.

Now you will remember that God had chosen a nation in the Old Testament. Of all the peoples of the earth, God elected one nation. If nothing else, this teaches us that God is a choosing God. God can do with the vessels of his creation whatsoever he wants to do. Romans 9 teaches us that God makes one vessel unto honor and another vessel unto dishonor. And in his sovereign pleasure God chose one nation and he passed over many others. But the question is, "For what purpose did he choose Israel."

Now, I don't know if you would have liked to have been a part of that election, for most of those who stood at Mt. Sinai died in unbelief in the wilderness. The wrath of God that was evident on this mountain, also prevailed against these rebellious people in the wilderness and only two of the original nation entered Canaan.

In Elijah's day it was no different. The masses of the nation were in apostasy. Only a mere pittance of the nation refused to bow the knee to Baal. In the day of Jesus, the nation was a mass of reprobation. Jesus came unto his own and his own received him not.

Now, in general terms, I would suggest to you that the election of a nation for an earthly purpose, is not the same as the election of a people unto salvation; for it is very clear that those are two very different elections. And the election of Israel was not an election unto salvation.

Not every descendant of Abraham was saved. In fact, the evidence is that most of the nation was not saved. And as the Scriptures put it,

They are not all Israel who are of Israel.

Romans 9:6

The election of the nation Israel was a theocratic election. It was not the election of a people unto salvation, but it was the election of a nation to be under the direct rule of God. God would be their king. Now, if any were saved within the nation of Israel, they were saved on the basis of the spiritual promises to Abraham. They were not saved by the covenant that came from Mt. Sinai.

You see, God made spiritual promises to Abraham in about 2000 BC. And all those of faith, in all generations, are tied in with those spiritual promises. Those promises are for those in all generations who are elect unto salvation through Christ.

But, it was 400 years later when Moses came along and God appeared on Mt. Sinai and entered into a theocratic covenant with a nation. You see, God entered into this covenant not only with Moses, but also with all those who later died in the wilderness. Not only was Aaron a part of this covenant, but Aaron's wicked sons, Nadab and Abihu, were also included. The covenant that came out of Mt. Sinai was not the covenant that corresponded to Isaac in Galatians 4. Rather, it was the covenant that corresponded to Ishmael, the outcast.

And so we see that the covenant that came out of Mt. Sinai was never unto salvation. It was a covenant that created a theocracy. It was a covenant that created the government of a heavenly God over an earthly people. He became their King, they became his subjects, but the question of spiritual salvation is wholly another matter.

Did God save most of the people in Moses' day? It doesn't appear so. Were most of the people saved in Elijah's day? No, only 6,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Were most of the nation saved when Jesus came? No. Most were reprobate and they did not receive Him.

You will notice the paradox. They were his people, yet, they were not saved. They were His by a national covenant, but they were not his by a saving covenant.

Now the nation of Israel did serve a useful purpose, and had they had ears to hear and eyes to see, they had great advantages. They were the custodians of his law. (Romans 3:2) They would perform rituals and ceremonies which would prefigure the coming Savior. They would serve as

examples for future believers. (I Cor. 10:11) They would be the human vehicle through whom the Savior would come. God spoke to them through the prophets. But lest you envy them too highly, they were also the sinful people whom God brought to Mt. Sinai.

Mt. Sinai is a burning mountain which signifies the wrath of God against all manner of sin. And God didn't sit on the mountain with open arms for Israel. God didn't welcome them up to sit on his fatherly knee. Rather, he said, "Don't you dare. Don't you dare come up here. You are not worthy to come into my presence." And the mountain quaked and the people trembled with fear because of their great sin and because they were not welcomed into the presence of God.

It was not grace and mercy that was on display at Sinai. It was justice and wrath. And Israel recognized immediately that this was not a place where they wanted to be.

Example: If you are a convicted murderer, the electric chair is not a pleasant sight, is it?

And the nation Israel trembled at the sight of Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai will forever be known as the place of God's terrifying law. It is the place where he revealed to Israel his holy requirements. It is where they learned of the heart-stopping, high standards of God's holiness.

And so, you see in verse 18 of our text that Mt. Sinai is described as a place that burned with fire. It is a place described as blackness and darkness. Furthermore, it is a place described as a tempest. A tempest is a violent storm. You hide in the storm cellar when there is a tempest. And when God came down upon this mountain, the storm raged. And it raged according to the anger of God.

And in verse 19, Mt. Sinai was the place where God blew the trumpet.

We learn from Exodus 19 that Moses gathered the people at the foot of the mountain and they waited on the Lord. And when the Lord was coming down, there was the sound of a trumpet. And this heavenly trumpet sounded out from this mountain. And it says the trumpet was exceedingly loud.

Example: We have all heard the sound of a weather siren when it goes off to warn us of a coming storm.

And at Sinai, the people were advised of the coming of God by the sound of a trumpet. Now this was no ordinary trumpet. This was God's own trumpet. And it was a trumpet that rang out like none other. It shook the whole mountain and it rang out so that everyone heard it. The Scriptures say it was exceedingly loud and the people trembled in great fear. And it says the trumpet sounded long and it waxed louder and louder. (Ex.19:19)

Example: Now in these olden times, when it was time for the King to speak to the people, the heralds would blow the trumpets to announce the King's speech.

And so, God's angels blew the trumpet, and the people quivered in fear at the foot of the mountain and waited for God to speak. And because the people could not bear to hear the voice of God, God called Moses up to the top of the mountain and God spoke to Moses. And I would suggest that he spoke in a very austere tone. And here is what God said:

1. Don't you dare have any other gods before me.
2. Don't you dare make unto thee any graven images.
3. Don't even think about taking the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

And furthermore,

4. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.
5. Thou shalt honor thy father and they mother.
6. And don't let me hear about you killing another human being.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
10. Thou shalt not covet.

Now, Moses, take these tablets with you and go tell the people that they better not violate these, my precepts.

I think you can sense the tone of these commandments. Now Mt. Sinai is not a place of mercy and grace. But it is a place of law.

Example: A criminal does not like to hear the Judge read the law.

And it says in verse 20,

For they could not endure that which was commanded.

Not only were the people completely terrified by the mere presence of God, but also they were overwhelmed by the impossibly holy words of God. And when God commanded the people, they could not endure his words.

All of us, at some time or another, will be brought before the holy law of God. And in our own merit, we will not endure. Just like Israel, it will be said of us, "They could not endure that which was commanded." We will be broken down. His law will pierce us like an arrow through the heart. Every one of us must stand before the law of God. And all of us will fall short before his law.

There is none righteous, no not one.

Romans 3:10

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:23

The wicked will be judged according to the law in that final day. And they will be utterly slain by its holy demands. But the righteous, that is, the elect of God, the faithful in Christ Jesus will not be utterly slain, for they will be approved by the righteousness of Christ.

The righteous are slain daily in this life by God's law. The righteous fall down in this life in holy conviction over sins. The righteous are pierced in this life by his holy precepts. And when they fall down in sorrow and repentance, slain by his holy law it is the first fruits of salvation. When he shows the faithful their vile sin against the backdrop of his perfect righteousness, then they will lay down in full repentance before their Holy God.

Now either the law will slay us in holy conviction now in this life, or it will slay us in eternal punishment in the life to come. But slay us it will.

There is no escape from the holy law of God. There is nowhere for you to run. There is nowhere for you to hide except in the merciful arms of Christ.

Now as to the law of God, I want you to see several things:

The law is a ministry of death and condemnation

When God brought Israel to Mt. Sinai, he brought them there not to issue a word of salvation but to issue a death warrant. And that death warrant is known as the Mosaic Covenant.

You see, the Mosaic Covenant was a minister of God. It was designed to do God's bidding. Just as angels were sent out to do various acts of service for God, the law was also sent out to accomplish the purposes of God. The law was God's minister.

Look at II Corinthians 3:7, 9. You will see there that the Old Covenant, that is, the Mosaic Law, specifically referred to as that which was written and engraven in stones, (the Ten Commandments) was a ministration of death.

This word translated ministration, is the Greek word, "diakonia." It is the same word that is translated deacon or servant or minister.

And so the law was God's servant to bring about a certain result.

And look,

A. The law is a minister of death and condemnation.

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious . . .

I Cor.3:7

For if the ministration of condemnation be glory . . .

I Cor.3:9

Was the law life-giving? No, the law was the minister of death. Did the law set Israel free from guilt? No, the law condemned them. And so, God issued a death warrant to Israel.

Example: It is like a criminal who is brought into court. And the Judge says, "If you have not committed any crime, then you have nothing to worry about, but if you have committed a crime, then you will be executed. And the criminal knows that he is utterly guilty and without defense. And the Judge has issued him a death warrant.

And so, the law was read to that criminal Israel. And Israel stood terrified at the base of the mountain.

But lest you think there was no merciful intent in the law whatsoever, there was actually a good intent. God intended the law for good. For no one can fully partake of the grace of God until he understands that he is condemned by the law of God.

Example: A criminal would never know the joy and grace of a pardon until he was strapped in the electric chair ready for execution. But when he is fastened in and they are ready to flip the switch and then the phone rings and it is the governor issuing a pardon, then he knows the meaning of grace.

B. It is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

Now unless you think that the law is unduly harsh; unless you think that God would mercilessly bury them under the condemning weight of the law, remember that the ultimate purpose of the law was to bring them to Christ.

For it says in Galatians 3:24.

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

Galatians 3:24

Was the law Christ? No, it was the schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. Was the law salvation? No, it was the minister who led us to salvation. Was the law merciful? No, the law was unrelenting in its demands. But it was designed to lead them to mercy. Was the law forgiving? No, the law was unforgiving. But it was the minister designed to drive them to that other option, which was Christ.

It seems to me that whether we are Jew or Gentile, whether we gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai or whether we gather at Grace Baptist Church, the law serves the same purpose. It causes us to run screaming

into the Father's arms of grace. Israel could not bear up under the demands of God's law and neither can we. Just like Israel, we must first stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai and tremble at the holiness of God. We must see our awful condition as we stand before his law. We must learn that there is no hope under the law. We must hear the harsh voice of God's law, before we can appreciate the kind word of his grace.

And I pray that if we have not already done so, that God will bring each of us to the foot of Mt. Sinai. I pray that God will show us his law and cause us to tremble. I pray that we will see that there is no hope whatsoever for us under the law of God. I pray that we will cast off any hope of being justified by our own merit. I pray that we will read the death warrant that has been issued for us. It has our name on it and it says that we have violated the law of God and that we will be executed on such and such a day. That is the testimony of the law of God.

Now this is what the Hebrews were tempted to go back to. They were tempted to return to the Mosaic Law. They were tempted to place themselves back under the condemnation of the law. They wanted to turn away from Christ and go back to the foot of Mt. Sinai.

II. Mount Zion

But look, there is a better mountain than Mt. Sinai. And that mountain is found in verse 22. It is called Mt. Zion.

Now the literal Mt. Zion was a hill just outside the walls of the city in Jerusalem. David captured this hill from the Jebusites in the book of II Samuel. Eventually the city of Jerusalem began to be known as Zion. It was where the temple of God was built. It was the one city in all the earth where God dwelled.

Now just as the land of Canaan is a picture of a heavenly land, our text this morning makes it clear that Mt. Zion (that literal city of Jerusalem) is a picture of a heavenly city.

And so there are two mountains in view in our text. One of them, Mt. Sinai, is a physical place which can be touched. (See v.18) But the other is a spiritual place, a heavenly place that cannot presently be touched.

Now let's take a look at this second mountain called Mt. Zion.

A. It is called the city of the living God.

Note the great contrast between Zion and Sinai. Sinai was not a city at all. It was a desolate and forbidden place. It was the place of God's law. It was a place of death. There was no acceptance there for man or beast. It was a place where only God could go.

Ah, but look at Zion. It is a city. It is a place where people live. It is inhabited. Sinai was a place where God said, "I will kill you." But Zion is a place where God says, "I will protect you and cause you to live." At Sinai God said, "Don't touch this mountain." But in Zion God says, "Come right in and enjoy fellowship with the living God."

Do you see the great difference in the two places? One place describes your condition with God under the law. You are excluded from his presence. But the other describes your condition with God under the grace of Christ. Under grace, God says, "Come right in and fellowship with me." You are invited into the wonderful and beautiful city of the living God. It is a city that has foundations, that is, it is a permanent city. It is a city whose builder and maker is God. God has prepared this place for his people, but not by the law, by grace.

Look who are the inhabitants of this city:

1. An innumerable company of angels. (v.22)

This innumerable company of angels is also called the general assembly. This general assembly is not the word *ekklesia*. It is a Greek word that is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It appears that most commentators now think that the general assembly is referring to the general convocation of angels. It is all the good angels gathered together in festive joy to honor God in heaven.

2. The church of the firstborn.

The word church here is the word "ekklesia." It is an assembly of people. This heavenly Jerusalem is inhabited by an innumerable company of angels and by an assembly of people. And who are these people? These

people are described as firstborn ones. The word firstborn is plural in the Greek. So it refers to a bunch of people who are firstborn. It is an assembly of firstborn sons.

Now Isaac was not Abraham's firstborn son, but by election he assumed that position. Jacob was not Isaac's firstborn son, but he was by election. And all of God's chosen are firstborn sons.

And so, this heavenly city is inhabited not only by an innumerable company of angels but also by all of God's redeemed of all ages.

You will notice in verse 23 that the names of the redeemed are written in this great heavenly city. These are not all those names which are written on church rolls. Rather, these are all those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. They are genuine Christians and not mere professors. They are all those who have rejected any attempt to gain heaven by the law. They are all those who have run the Christian race to its completion. They crossed the finish line believing in Jesus Christ and they won the prize by the grace of God.

When we get to heaven, there will be a roll call. And God will call off all those names which are recorded in his book. And oh how we will rejoice when our name is called.

Jesus told his disciples, "Rejoice, because your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:20)

3. God, the Judge of all.

Notice that in this New Jerusalem, we will not fear drawing near to God who is the Judge of all. At Sinai, there was great fear of the Judge. But in the Heavenly Jerusalem, we draw near to him with holy boldness, because his law has nothing against us. His law is satisfied and we come right in to Him.

4. The Spirits of just men made perfect. This may be a reference to all the Old Testament saints who preceded us. Moses and Abraham and Isaac and Joseph.

5. Jesus. And Jesus in heaven will be the greatest prize of all, for

he will mediate for us day and night and we will be accepted there because of the sprinkling of his blood on our behalf.

Now it says that the blood of Jesus speaks better things than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance. But Christ's blood cries out for mercy. Christ's blood says to the Father, "Be kind to my people. Be merciful and gracious to my little lambs on account of my blood."

CONCLUSION

In the immediate context, if you are leaving Christ and returning to Judaism, then you are coming back to Mt. Sinai. And Mt. Sinai is a place of death and condemnation under the holy law of God.

Now I know that most of us are not considering joining a synagogue somewhere. But there are millions of people everywhere in the world who reject the grace of God in favor of a merit system of religion. And when you reject Christ and you say, "I can do something to make it on my own," then you stand at the foot of Sinai while the wrath of God shakes the mountain all around you. And you are in great peril because God's wrath will consume you.

If you prefer Mt. Sinai to Mt. Zion, then you will run the race of life only to receive the prize of death and condemnation in the end.

Do you think you are going to heaven because you are a pretty good person? Then you are standing at Mt. Sinai under the death sentence of the law of God.

Do you think you are going to heaven because you have performed some ritual like joining a church or being baptized? Then you have rejected the grace of Christ in favor of the law. And there is a death warrant for you. And you will be arrested soon and executed according to the demands of God's law.

But if you have emptied your pockets of all your good deeds and all your supposed merit, and if you have come to Christ, trembling in fear of the law, in utter dependence on him, then you have come to a different mountain. You have come to the mountain of grace. You have come to Mt. Zion. You have come to a city where your name is written down on the city

rolls. You have come to a city where God knows you. You have come to a city where you are accepted by the same God that rejects other law breakers. You have come to a city where the blood of Christ is sprinkled on your behalf.

Let me ask you to bow your heads this morning and look diligently into your own heart and ask this question of yourself, "Do I stand at the foot of Sinai trembling before the law of God, condemned under the law of God? Or, have I come to that better mountain? Have I cast myself at the feet of Christ? Or am I standing at Mt. Sinai under a death warrant? Have I laid myself in Christ's arms of grace? If by faith you are clinging to Christ and him alone, then you are standing at the gates of that heavenly city and you shall be welcomed in very soon.