

4. The writer understood that his readers' perseverance in faith depended on them recognizing their suffering as the Father's instrument in His wise and loving discipline. Far from disregarding their affliction, He was diligently working in and through it to mature them as His beloved children in view of the day when they would receive their inheritance as fellow heirs of all that the Messiah had inherited. That was the perspective from which they were to draw strength and resolve and orient their response to their various hardships (ref. again 10:32-39). But it wasn't simply that an inheritance was held in trust for them; in a very real way that inheritance was already theirs. They were already living as sons in the Father's house together with the preeminent Son; they, like, Him, were sons of the everlasting kingdom.

Thus the writer returned to a key theme at the very heart of his epistle: his Hebrew readers were covenant sons of Israel's God in the way that their forefathers knew only by promise and longing. Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh was privileged and glorious, but it was only a prophetic and preparatory shadow of the ultimate relationship He had planned for His children. One day, the children of Abraham would become sons *indeed* – true sons abiding in the Father's house – through the person and work of Abraham's singular son (3:1-6; cf. John 8:31-36).

Israel's covenant sonship corresponded as a prototype to the covenant sonship that has now been realized in Jesus the Messiah, but it also fell woefully short of it. And not merely as promise comes short of fulfillment, but as failure comes short of success. Israel failed to fulfill its identity and calling as covenant son, and that failure, given God's everlasting covenant with Abraham, necessitated a future family of covenant children who would prove faithful as Abraham's offspring (ref. Isaiah 49:1-6; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 34-37; Hosea 1-2). God ratified the Abrahamic covenant relationship with Israel at Sinai, and now had consummated it in the "fullness of the times" in the son of Abraham who embodied Israel in truth. Thus the Sinai Covenant fulfilled its own prophetic and pedagogical purpose, yielding at the appointed time to the New Covenant in Jesus the Messiah (cf. Matthew 11:1-15; Galatians 3:15-4:7). This covenant dynamic is the premise behind the Hebrews writer's instruction in 12:18-24, and he underscored the crucial distinction between the two covenants in terms of sharply contrasting imagery.

- a. Again, the writer had a pastoral purpose in penning his letter; he wrote with the specific intent of helping his beloved brethren stand fast in their faith and faithfulness through all that they were suffering as Jewish disciples of Jesus. And he understood that their *thinking* was the key to their perseverance in faith: right understanding that would afford them a right perspective on their suffering and motivate a right response to it (inward as well as outward). Thus the inferential conjunction ("*for*") that introduces verse 12:18 looks back to the immediately preceding instruction, but as that instruction contributes to the writer's overall intent in his epistle. Put simply, these readers were to perceive and embrace their affliction as the means of their Father's discipline. He was using it to nurture them and prepare them for their inheritance and vocation as His sons – sons, not as their Israelite forefathers were, but as Jesus *is* (ref. again 2:5-13); sons of the everlasting kingdom that is defined and governed by the New Covenant in Him.

- b. And of first importance in their understanding is the fact that they were *already* sons of that kingdom. Yes, they were still very much subject to the kingdom of this world whose ruler is the prince of the power of the air. But their affliction *within* that kingdom was itself proof that they were no longer citizens *of* it (John 15:18ff). For their suffering was the suffering of contradiction and opposition; it came to them because they served another ruler. They were now “aliens and strangers” in a foreign land, enduring what their Lord had endured as He manifested true sonship in a world that knows nothing of it, and is even hostile toward it. By their Father’s will, and in accordance with His purpose and grace in His Messiah, these Hebrews had become citizens of another kingdom ruled by another King – the consummate, everlasting kingdom of God’s new creation in King Jesus (cf. Ephesians 2:1-6; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 1:13-14, 3:1-4).

On the other hand, their forefathers had inherited the land of Canaan and the kingdom established there, but with a nagging and relentless sense of insecurity and foreboding. For overshadowing Israel’s covenant sonship was the separation, threat and terror of Sinai. Yahweh had ratified His Father-son relationship with Israel at Mount Sinai, but while keeping His distance and warning His sons to stay away, and then punctuating His warning with ominous and terrifying manifestations of power. But it was not so with their descendents who had embraced Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. The sonship these Hebrews enjoyed wasn’t associated with Mount Sinai; rather they had come to *Mount Zion* as the site of the heavenly Jerusalem and its sanctuary (12:22).

- c. Echoing Paul’s exhortation in his Galatian epistle (ref. 4:21-31), the Hebrews writer depicted the distinction between the Old and New Covenants in terms of their sharply contrasting features and circumstance. And like Paul, he particularly associated the two covenants with Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Many have noted that the writer didn’t mention Mount Sinai by name, but referred only to a tangible entity – “*that which may be touched.*” But it’s clear from his other descriptors and his citation from Exodus 19:12-13 that he was referring to the episode of covenant ratification at Sinai (12:18-21). For all of Sinai’s glory, it was a deeply traumatic experience that remained etched into Israel’s consciousness. Indeed, its terror of sight and sound was so intense and frightening that the people pled with Moses to make it stop by interacting with Yahweh on his own (ref. Exodus 20:18-21; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-16). According to Jewish tradition, even Moses himself, the Lord’s beloved servant, was terrified (ref. 12:21). Thus the writer depicted this encounter in terms of *blazing fire, darkness, gloom and whirlwind*, images that underscore the distant and tenuous relationship between God and His covenant children.

But these Hebrews, though descendents of those Israelites, had a very different encounter with Israel’s God; theirs was the relationship that Sinai pointed toward. They had come to Mount Zion – not the physical site in Jerusalem, but the true and everlasting habitation of the living God, the “heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22).

These entities and images were well familiar to the original Jewish audience, but not so much to many contemporary Christian readers. But they are profoundly important for understanding the writer's meaning, especially his sense of what God has accomplished in Jesus and the significance of that work for those who embrace Him as Messiah. *The place to begin, then, is with the concept of Mount Zion and its historical role in Israel's life with God.*

- Mount Zion is a particular hill in Jerusalem, but the expression came to be synonymous with Jerusalem itself, specifically as it was Yahweh's dwelling place (Psalm 48:1-2). God had disclosed to Moses that He would eventually identify a place to situate His "name" – i.e., a place where He would manifest His presence and His people would meet with Him (Deuteronomy 12:13-18).
- When David conquered Jerusalem (the Jebusite stronghold that had eluded Israel's conquest to that point in time), he made it the capital of his kingdom. He established his own residence there, and also installed Yahweh's ark there (2 Samuel 5-6). Later David became convinced that Jerusalem was the place Moses had spoken of, and he determined to build Yahweh a permanent dwelling there.
- David's son Solomon fulfilled that intent, building the temple on the site traditionally associated with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Mount Moriah). Thus Mount Zion as Yahweh's holy mountain – the place of His habitation – came to refer to the entire city of Jerusalem.

If Canaan was Yahweh's sanctuary land (Exodus 15:18), Jerusalem was the city of His habitation. And more narrowly, Mount Zion was the place of His enthronement in His sanctuary; the place where He met with His people. Mount Zion, then, represents the place where the heavenly and earthly realms meet: Yahweh is enthroned in the heavens, but the ark in His earthly sanctuary is the footstool of His throne, so that Israel spoke of Him being enthroned above the wings of the cherubim (ref. Psalm 80:1, 99:1-5, 113:4-5, 123:1, 132:1-8). This imagery expresses the idea of God's throne room encompassing heaven and earth, and so also His *reign*. The God of Israel is the Creator God who rules over all the earth and its inhabitants (cf. 2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 66:1-2; also Psalm 47, 99).

These ideas were woven into Israel's life and understanding, and they are fundamental to the Hebrews writer's statement and its relevance to his readers. When he insisted that they had come to *Mount Zion*, he was speaking of the ultimate reality that that mountain represented: *the realization of Yahweh's presence and rule among His people and in all the earth that the prophets associated with the Messiah and His triumph* (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12; also Hosea 1-3; Zechariah 2-3). The kingdom that Yahweh ruled from Jerusalem was the prototype of a future kingdom that would encompass the whole world – a kingdom that Yahweh would rule in the person of His messianic Son-King.

From the beginning of their history, the Israelite people recognized that Mount Zion had a heavenly counterpart that was remote to them and their relationship with their God. But He had pledged that one day the *symbolic* union of heaven and earth in the physical sanctuary on Mount Zion would become an actual reality; the heavenly and earthly realms would become one. So it was that these Jewish readers understood what the writer was referring to when he reminded them that they had come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem: *That which had been Israel's hope and longing since the frightful and calamitous days at the foot of Mount Sinai had now come to pass.*

- Sinai's *Torah* (Law of Moses) defined and prescribed the intimate communion of Father and sons that the covenant established, but it came to them through a fearful and foreboding display that reminded them of the essential estrangement between God and themselves. Israel was "son of God" by covenant identity and calling, but not in reality.
- Now, at last, the *Torah* had become "yes and amen" in and through the only-begotten Son (Matthew 5:17; Galatians 3:10ff). He has fulfilled the intimacy prescribed by Sinai's covenant, not only as True Israel unto Yahweh, but as Yahweh unto Israel and the world (John 1:1-18, 14:1-11).

These Hebrew Christians had come to the heavenly Jerusalem because they had come to God Himself through living union with His incarnate and resurrected Son. Taken up in His life, they were "seated in the heavenly realm" just as He is (Ephesians 1:18-2:7; Colossians 2:9-13, 3:1-4). Though not accessible to their physical senses, they stood alongside His innumerable angelic hosts who worship in His presence, in contrast to Mount Sinai where the "sons" were separated from the Lord and His angels (Deuteronomy 33:2).

So also they were part of God's "*assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*" (12:23a). (Though some English versions might suggest two entities – "general assembly" and "church of the firstborn," the Greek expression reads as rendered above.) This is an especially pregnant expression given the Jewish audience, for God had historically designated *Israel* this way. Israel was the elect *ecclesia* (assembly of "called out ones") that God identified as His *firstborn* and gathered to Himself in covenant union at Sinai (cf. Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 9:10, 18:15-16). But just as Sinai was non-ultimate, so was the *ecclesia* it formed. Now, the better covenant in Jesus' blood (12:24) gathers an assembly "enrolled in heaven" – covenant children whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (cf. Philippians 4:3 with Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15, 21:27).

These Hebrews had come to God's dwelling, which meant that they had come to *God Himself*, for they, in Christ, were His new sanctuary (Ephesians 2:19-22). The writer noted this, referring to God as the *Judge of all* (12:23b), which highlights His insight, authority and power to hold all things accountable to the truth; He is the Creator-Lord who will see His creation attain its ordained destiny.

Though people (even Christians) tend to associate judgment with condemnation and punishment, thus assigning a *negative* connotation to God as judge, this designation is actually positive and hopeful. Yes, condemnation is an aspect of God's judgment, but as it serves His work of putting all things right. Thus the creation *rejoices* in hope at the prospect of God's judgment (which is in the Messiah), for when the Creator completes His work as Judge, all things will at last be in truth what He created them to be (cf. Psalms 67, 82, 96, 98; Isaiah 11:1-12).

God as "Judge of all" is the promise of creational renewal, which already has its first-fruits in the resurrected Messiah and those who share in Him. Thus, if it's true that these Hebrews had come to this God, they had also come to those who are the beginning of His new creation; they had come to "*the spirits of righteous men made perfect*" (12:23c). This dense phrase reflects back on "the assembly of firstborn who are enrolled in heaven," and likely refers to the pre-Christ faithful who died without receiving what was promised, but have now been made perfect in the resurrected Messiah (ref. 11:39-40). These faithful forefathers have attained the goal of their faith and hope in union with their Christian brethren; together, they form the Father's assembly of sons who are the firstborn of His new creation as sharers in the Son who is the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:15-20).

Lastly, and as the climax of his depiction, the writer reminded his readers that they had come to *Jesus*, the One in whom all that he had described is "yes and amen" (12:24). He is the very substance of God's final, everlasting sanctuary and the renewed humanity that forms it (Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-10; cf. also Revelation 3:7-13), and He is the One in whom God is "judge of all" (John 5; cf. also Acts 10:34-42, 17:30-31; 2 Timothy 4:1-8). He is thus the "*mediator of a new covenant*," but as *embodying* God's covenant relationship with human beings and His entire creation (ref. Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-12, 59:20-21; cf. Galatians 3).

This, then, is the lens for interpreting the writer's assertion that Jesus' blood "speaks better than the blood of Abel." First of all, by referring to it as *sprinkled* blood, he was connecting Jesus' shed blood with the sacrificial blood by which the Sinai Covenant was ratified (ref. Exodus 24:1-8) and then sustained (ref. Leviticus 1-16). His blood, too, is "blood of the covenant," but the *New Covenant* that the prophets pledged as God's renewal of His covenant relationship with Israel, and, through Israel, with the entire cursed creation (ref. 8:1-13; cf. also Isaiah 59:16-60:5, 61:1-11; Jeremiah 31:31-34, 32:36-44; Ezekiel 34, 37; Hosea 1-2; Zechariah 9:1-12; Malachi 3:1-4 with Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 13:20-21).

Second, the writer's reference to Abel brought his treatment of faith full circle. Abel's blood was the first shed under the curse and its sentence of death (11:4), and Jesus' was the last, in that His shed blood conquered the curse and death. Abel's blood cried out for vindication, and Jesus' blood answered that cry. He obtained vindication, not just for Himself, but for Abel and all of Adam's race, becoming a New Adam for man's sake (2:5-18). And finally, both men offered their sacrifice to God *in faith* as they held tightly to His promise in hope (12:2).