

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS

Message #35

Hebrews 12:18-24

Whenever any runner competes in a race, whether 3.1 miles (5k), 6.2 miles (10k), or 26.2 miles (marathon), the course is usually well-marked so you know where you are supposed to run. Many years ago, Mary and I and our boys were visiting my brother Tim and his family, who at the time lived near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Back then I was a very serious runner (now I am a very serious eater) and Tim said they were going to have a 5K race in a couple of days, so I decided to enter it. I was used to competing in the Chicago area and felt if I could run the race in 18 plus minutes, I would have a good chance of winning a trophy. After the gun sounded, we took off and I knew by the place I was in that I was doing pretty well. The course wasn't marked well and we were coming to a split in the road and because I was running ahead of many people, I looked ahead and started yelling, which way do I go? Fortunately someone pointed me in the proper direction and I was able to finish with a good time.

When you come to this portion of the book of Hebrews, the writer wants to point us to the right course. We come to a clear course direction fork in the road and we come to a time when a decision must be made by every believing participant. **We either move toward the law and away from grace or we move toward grace away from the law. We must make a decision to either run toward the Old Covenant or run toward the New Covenant.** One direction will take us to losing our race and the other will take us to victory in our race. The point that the writer of Hebrews wants to make is this:

BELIEVERS WHO RUN WELL REALIZE THEY MUST RUN AWAY FROM THE OLD LAW COVENANT OF SINAI AND RUN TOWARD THE NEW GRACE COVENANT OF ZION.

This passage makes it clear that we are not to run toward Old Testament law, but we are to run straight to New Testament grace. This section of Hebrews cries out and says make sure you are running on the right course. We are not running toward Mount Sinai; we are running toward Mount Zion.

In this portion of God's inspired Word we get a contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, a contrast between the Old Covenant of the Law and the New Covenant of Grace, a contrast between terror and joy, distance and closeness.

You will observe that this is a clear contrast between "you have not come" (**verse 18**) to Sinai, but "you have come" (**verse 22**) to Mount Zion.

DESCRIPTION #1 – The description of what existed at Mount Sinai to which you have not come. **12:18-21**

Now the writer of Hebrews is trying to convince the believers not to be drawn again back under the O.T. law system. Apparently, the threat was that some of these believers were listening to their old associates who were trying to convince them that they needed to be back under the law.

So the writer of Hebrews says, look, God has not called us into a Mount Sinai type of relationship with Himself.

If we would have been alive back in the days of Moses when God was dealing with people on the basis of His O.T. law, we would have been scared out of our minds. Every day would have been lived with a terrifying gloom that if I make one wrong move, I'll be dead. Never was that point more evident than at Mount Sinai where God gave His law.

There are four main features that the writer develops here about Sinai:

Feature #1 - Sinai was not a mountain you could touch . **12:18**

I want you also to observe how **verse 18** begins with a conjunction “for.” This conjunction immediately gives us a connection between this text and the preceding context. The preceding context stresses that we are not to come short “of the grace of God” (12:14). One way you can really pull up short in the grace of God is to start tampering again with the O.T. law.

I want us to turn back to **Exodus 19:12-22**. This is one very serious and threatening O.T. passage. Under the O.T. law at Sinai, the relationship with God was such that you didn't dare touch the mountain where God was giving His law. In fact, according to verse 21, you didn't even dare gaze at the LORD on that mountain or you would be dead.

Now compare this to the grace relationship Jesus Christ offers under grace. He lets His people literally physically touch Him (John 20:27) and gaze at Him (Acts 1:9-10). Now here is the question; which kind of relationship with God do you want? O.T. Sinai or N.T. Zion?

Feature #2 - Sinai did not give sounds you even wanted to hear . **12:19**

Let us look at **Deuteronomy 4:11-12**. People could not see any form but they heard this voice. Now turn to **Deuteronomy 5:23-27**. The people were so petrified and so afraid they would be consumed by fire that they did not want to continue to even listen to the voice of God. Mount Sinai was a place where God revealed His Word, but not in a way in which you wanted to hear it. As Peter O'Brien said, “The noise evoked great fear rather than understanding” (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 480).

Things were so scary as you stood around that mountain, that you were afraid to the point that you did not even want to hear what God said. The attitude of Israel was let God speak to Moses alone; it is too scary for us to hear.

Is that the kind of relationship you want with God? Do you want an O.T. law relationship with God that leaves you completely afraid to even hear the Word of God? Any who go back under the O.T. law put themselves into this type of relationship.

Feature #3 - Sinai was a mountain where you could be stoned . **12:20**

According to **Exodus 19:12**, there was a real threat of physically dying at Mount Sinai. If you even touched the mountain you were to be put to death. According to **Exodus 19:13** you would either be stoned or shot and this was true both of beast and man. You certainly did not want to make a wrong move at Sinai or you would die.

The O.T. law of Sinai says to God's people you do not want to ever get close to God. The law will not ever bring you close to God. To get close to God we need grace.

Feature #4 - Sinai was a mountain that left you afraid and trembling . **12:21**

I want us to look at **Exodus 20:18-19**. I want you to observe that the context of this is the famous Ten Commandments. When the people heard these commandments, they did not say, let's make a bookmark or plaque or monument and list these things; they literally trembled and asked Moses to speak to them, but stop God from speaking to them. The effect of God's presence at Mount Sinai left the people trembling. People stood at a distance and they literally shook in fear.

Sinai clearly communicates to us that the Old Testament law covenant presents an inaccessible demonstration of the majesty and presence of God. You do not approach God; you do not have access to God. The Old Testament law will kill you, which is exactly what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 3:19-20. It is a deadly serious violation of grace to go back under the O.T. law at Sinai.

You have not come to a relationship to God in grace that is like the one at Sinai. **At Sinai there was a display of the majesty of God that said to everyone God is not approachable.** You need to stand back and you need to be afraid.

If you want to run an award winning race that gets you your full inheritance, run away from the O.T. law and run after N.T. grace.

DESCRIPTION #2 – The description of what exists at Mount Zion , to which you have come. **12:22-24**

What we have here is an amazing contrast between O.T. law and N.T. grace in a relationship with God. Now before we look at the features of our relationship with God, let us pause a moment to reflect on how both of these descriptions begin, “you have not come” (**verse 18**) versus “you have come” (**verse 22**). Instead of coming to the terror at Mount Sinai, we have come to the glory of Mount Zion. Mount Zion is theologically used three ways in the Scripture:

- 1) It is used to refer to David's city which is Jerusalem, which he made the capital of Israel.
I Chronicles 11:5; Psalm 2:6
- 2) It is used to refer to the Millennial city of Jerusalem from which Jesus Christ will reign.
Joel 3:16
- 3) It is used to refer to the New Jerusalem which will ultimately be the eternal city.
Revelation 21-22

Now the writer of Hebrews is referring to the third reference, the eternal city of Mount Zion.

Now since we live here in Michigan, I do not recall since trusting Jesus Christ as ever having actually gone to the western ridge of Jerusalem and gazing at Mount Zion, much less visiting the eternal city. I know there are some cemeteries named Mount Zion, but I am really not interested in going there at this point. But I want you to notice what is stated here in **Hebrews 12:22**, “you have come to Mount Zion.” What makes this even more intriguing is that the verb tense “you have come” (προσεληλυθησεται) is perfect tense which means God is telling every believer that there is a point of time in the past when you came to Mount Zion and you are continually and forever there.

The question is, “when did we get there and how did we get there?” The answer is we got there the moment we believed in Jesus Christ, and we are there because of our position in Jesus Christ. We have not come to Mount Zion in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense.

Do you grasp this point? In the mind of the living God, the moment we come to faith in Jesus Christ, God sees us as already there in His eternity. Because of our position in Jesus Christ, God takes us all the way to Zion.

Now keep the context in mind. If we compare this statement, “you have come,” to the previous one, “you have not come,” we know that **God does not see us at Sinai but at Zion and we got there via Calvary**.

The writer of Hebrews is saying, why in the world would you want to go back to Sinai and the law, when after you have been to Calvary God has taken you by grace to Mount Zion? It does not make any rational or theological sense.

Now the features that are presented here about Zion are presented as antithetical to the previous section. However, the main thrust of these features is not so much about the approachability versus unapproachability, but the focus is on the objects who have been made approachable. There are six antithetical features:

Antithetic Feature #1 - We are already residents of the city of the living God. **12:22a**

We are already part of the New Heavenly Jerusalem which is the city of the living God. We live in a city not run by a politician, but a city run by the living God. In the mind of God, we are already there with Him in His city. The Apostle Paul said “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20) and he also said we are already sitting with Jesus Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6).

Antithetic Feature #2 - We are already connected to the heavenly angels. **12:22b**

We have already seen in chapter 1 of Hebrews that as believers we are in the presence of the angels. In Zion we will be surrounded by them and see them. We know that the throne of God and the heaven is filled with angels, and what our position guarantees us is that we are part of that great heavenly contingency.

Now I know that your mate at times actually thinks you are an angel. Of course, we know the real truth about such delusional thinking. Sometimes you will look at your children and think they are angels and there are other times you will probably think they are demons. But what is stated here is that there will be a day when you will be in this wonderful eternal city surrounded by an assembly of myriads of angels. Grace gives this to you.

Antithetic Feature #3 - We are already part of the enrolled Church of heaven. **12:23a**

Here is what grace has done for us, it has guaranteed us that we have not lost our first-born rights like Esau did. The moment you believe, you have eternal rights that you cannot lose and you become part of the Church and you are registered in heaven.

Jesus said in Luke 10:20 that people could “rejoice” because their names were recorded or written in heaven. It is very clear from these statements that there literally is a written record of the names of those who belong to God, and if you are a believer your name is written there. It is interesting to note that tense and voice of the verb “are enrolled” or “are written” (*απογεγραμμενων*) is perfect passive. What this means is that we were the recipients of the action, not the source of it, and our names were written there from time past and continue to be there at the present and on into the future. Our names have been in the Lamb’s book of life from before the foundation of the world, and we came to realize it the moment we believed. You do not get your name in this registry book under law but through grace.

Now when you read **verse 23**, we must conclude that we do not dare to minimize the Church in the Church Age because, based on the authority of the Word of God, there is a Church in heaven and your name is on the roll book if you are a believer. We get a glimpse here as to the fact that having a roll book which lists its members is a very Biblical point. There is a membership roll book in heaven.

Some people don’t care if they ever join a church. I think they are making a big mistake. The church on earth is not the Church in heaven; however, it is registered in heaven and its job is to try to govern itself in a heavenly way. Being a member of a church with your name listed as being a member is a very heavenly concept. Church membership is serious business in heaven and ought to be on earth.

Antithetic Feature #4 - We have already come to God and have been judged as righteous by God. **12:23b**

Under the O.T. economy, no one got near to God. But under grace we have come to God, and by faith in Jesus Christ we are justified, and we are made perfect in our standing with the Holy God. By one sacrifice Jesus Christ has given us a perfect standing with God forever (Hebrews 10:14).

Antithetic Feature #5 - We have a new covenant relationship with God through Jesus.
12:24a

In order to get into heaven we need a mediator who can make it possible for us as sinners to have a relationship with a God who is Holy. Sinai offers us nothing, but grace offers us a mediator and that mediator is Jesus Christ.

Antithetic Feature #6 - We have complete forgiveness through Christ's shed blood. **12:24b**

S. Lewis Johnson said when you look down through this text you have three major mountains: 1) Mount Sinai; 2) Mount Zion; 3) Mount Golgotha (*Hebrews 12:18-24*, p. 8). It is Christ's work at Golgotha that takes us from Sinai to Zion.

Grace gives all of this to us, so one would have to be out of his or her mind to go back under O.T. law.

You are running to your finish line. It is your race to run. You have a choice to make - you either run away from law and run toward grace, or you run away from grace and run toward law.

One of the great preachers of the 1600s was Richard Baxter. He was a powerful preacher who in 1691 became very ill. As he lay in his bed dying, a dear friend came to see him and said "Richard, how are you doing?" The great preacher said, "I am almost well," and with that he died.

I want you to think what you have in grace. One day you will step out of this world and you will step into heaven. You will fall asleep from this life and you will wake up and find heaven your home.

You don't get there by law; you get there by grace.