



GRACE

Reformed Baptist Church

Soli † Deo † Gloria

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Sermon Notes

The Two Mountains

Hebrews 12:18-24

September 26, 2010

¹⁸For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’ ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

- Throughout the history of the Christian Church, men and women have crept in, often unnoticed, and twisted the foundational teachings of Scripture, often leading others astray. This was the case in the New Testament Church, and it has been the case ever since.
- These individuals, who denied the fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures are known historically as heretics. They were men like Arius, who denied the deity of Jesus Christ, and Pelagius, who denied salvation by grace alone in Jesus Christ.
- Yet, what made such men so deceptive, and potentially harmful to Church was the fact that their message nearly always contained an *element* of truth. In fact, much of what they said often resonated with professing Christians, therefore, leading the weak astray.
- One such man, who is often considered the first heretic of the Church, was Marcion of Sinope. Marcion lived from about 85 A.D. until 160 A.D. What is interesting about Maricon is that he systematized a theological belief that many professing Christians today hold to – without thinking through the implications.

- According to Marcion (like so many professing Christians today) the God of the Old Testament was a God of anger and judgment. On the other hand, the God of the New Testament was loving and merciful.
- The second century bishop, Irenaeus, wrote that Marcion made a distinction – indeed, a separation – between a god [of the New Testament] who was “good and one who was judicial [in the Old Testament]”
- The early Church Father, Tertullian (ca. 160 – 220 A.D.) wrote that Marcion held that “there are two gods, one just and the other good.”
- Tertullian continued, “Marcion’s special and principal work was the separation of the law and the gospel.”

“The problem with which Marcion’s teaching began was that of the relation of the Christian Gospel to Judaism and to the religious teaching of the Jewish Scriptures. From the letters of Paul, which he seems to have read with a fresher mind than many of his contemporaries, he learned that the Christian dispensation was founded on the revelation in Christ of a loving and gracious God. He also inferred from his reading of Paul that between this Gospel of a loving God and the law-religion of Judaism there was opposition and inconsistency. This conviction was, in Marcion’s view, strengthened and confirmed by the contents of the Jewish Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament)...Rather than taking the Law and the Prophets as symbols and foreshadowings of the Christian dispensation, he instead upon reading them literally. His conclusion from this exercise was that the God the Mosaic covenant and the God of Jesus and Paul were two quite different things. The latter was a God of love and mercy. The former was a God of harsh justice – arbitrary, inconsistent, and tyrannical.”

A History of the Christian Church (p. 68),
by Williston Walker, Richard Norris, David Lotz, and Robert Handy

- These words are similar to those of Justin Martyr (c. 100 – 165), who wrote that Marcion was “teaching men to deny that God is the maker of all things in heaven and earth and that the Christ predicted by the prophets is His Son.”
- As a result of his views, Marcion was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated from the Church in 144 A.D.
- Marcion’s ideas are still alive and well today (although certainly not to the heretical extremes that he took them). That is, most professing Christians, if pressed on the issue, would struggle greatly articulating the relationship between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Old Covenant Law.
- Yet, the author of Hebrews **clearly demonstrates that the two (that is, the Gospel and the Law) may be distinct, but they are surely NOT separate.**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That is, apart from the Law of God, there is NO Gospel of Jesus Christ. There cannot be one without the other.
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- And this is, to a large degree, what is at issue in Hebrews 12 – the relationship between the Law and the Gospel.
- Author and commentarian Richard Phillips comments about Hebrews 12:18-24, “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.”

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. The Nature of Mount Sinai and the <i>Inferiority of Judaism</i> |
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¹⁸*For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest* ¹⁹*and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.* ²⁰*For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’* ²¹*Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’*

- The author of Hebrews here paints a picture of Mount Sinai that is anything *but* romantic. He is presenting an accurate view of what life under the Old Covenant Law is like.
- The first century readers of the Book of Hebrews were facing persecution at the hands of fellow Jews, and consequently, the temptation to turn back Old Covenant Judaism.
- This book was specifically written for first century Jewish converts to Christianity, warning them in very explicit ways about the dangers of returning to Judaism.
- The mountain, here, although never mentioned by name is **Mount Sinai** – the mountain where Moses led God’s people after the Exodus from Egypt. It is the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments from God.
- Yet, the picture of Mount Sinai is dreadful:
 - It cannot be touched;
 - It is a blazing fire;
 - It is surrounded by darkness, gloom, and tempest;
 - The terrifying sound of a trumpet and powerful words;
 - Even Moses trembled in fear.
- This description by the author of Hebrews is taken from different accounts in the Old Testament:

¹²And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.’ ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵And he said to the people, ‘Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.’ ¹⁶On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. ²²Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.’

Exodus 19:12-22

¹⁸Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’ ²⁰Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.’ ²¹The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. ²²And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.’”

Exodus 20:18-22

- These descriptions of Mount Sinai, in both the Book of Hebrews and the Torah, demonstrate the truth that the presence of the Righteous and Holy God is utterly terrifying to sinful man.
- The author is, in effect, saying, “**If you turn back to Judaism, this is where you will be going.**”
- In fact, what we see in the Old Covenant at Mount Sinai is the separation between God and sinful man.
 - This truth goes all the way back to the Fall, when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.
 - Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were expelled from the very place on earth where they walked with God. Furthermore, as we read in Genesis 3:24: “²⁴He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”
 - That is, God prevented Adam and Eve from entering back into the Garden by placing Angels at the east of the Garden of Eden.

- Notice, though, that the angels were holding **flaming swords**. Throughout the Scriptures, the “sword” is a symbol of judgment and wrath. All the more, a flaming sword represents the judgment and wrath of a righteous God.
- Consequently, to return back into the Garden of Eden, one would have to endure the wrath of a just and holy God.
- Similar to the flaming sword of the cherubim at the east of the Garden of Eden, Mount Sinai was surrounded by fire, darkness, and gloom. Once again, this represented the separation and insurmountable barrier between God and man.

“Throughout the era of law, separateness had been a feature of God’s dealing with his people, as the holy of holies showed. This build-up of awesomeness was calculated to set out in greater relief the approachableness of God under the gospel...”
Donald Guthrie

- Theologian B.F. Westcott writes, “That which the writer describes is the form of the revelation, fire and darkness and thunder, material signs of the nature of God. Thus every element is one which outwardly moves fear... The mountain is lost in the fire and smoke. It was, so to speak, no longer a mountain. It becomes a manifestation of terrible majesty, a symbol of Divine Presence.”

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- It seems today that many – if not most – professing Christians believe the image of God at Sinai is old, archaic, and irrelevant. But the God of Sinai is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Yahweh – the eternal God who never changes. Therefore, the dreadful revelation of God at Sinai is itself a shadow of what is to come for those who reject the One to whom the Law at Sinai pointed – Jesus Christ.

John Brown comments, “If even an irrational animal was to be put to death in a manner which marked it as unclean – as something not to be touched – what might rational offenders expect as the punishment of their sins? And if the violation of a positive institution of this kind involved consequences so fearful, what must be the result of transgressing the moral requirements of the great Lawgiver?”

- What is important to note here as well is that **the Law has always, and will always lead to death** for those who attempt, apart from Christ, to earn their righteousness through it.

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- F.F. Bruce writes, “And not only were the people terrified; even Moses, privileged as he was to press up into the thick darkness where God was, was filled with numinous awe...”
 - In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of Moses reminding the people of his intercession for them after the scene with the golden calf. Deuteronomy 9:19: “¹⁹For I was afraid of

the anger and hot displeasure that the LORD bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the LORD listened to me that time also.”

- In Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin, he comments about Moses’ fear, stating, “Moses trembled, and did not dare to look.”
- The phrase, “Moses said, ‘I tremble in fear,’” is actually not found in the Old Testament; however, it is certainly consistent with the testimony of the Torah.

II. The Nature of Mount Zion and the Superiority of Christ

²²*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,*

- **At Mount Sinai, we see terror, dread, and separation.** From Zion, warmth, encouragement, joy, and invitation.
- Philip Hughes writes, “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 in our stead, we are invited to draw near with boldness into the heavenly holy of holies.”
- Here, the author writes, “**But you have come...**”
 - The author here states, “**you have come**” to the contemporary readers, and this may refer to their conversion to Christianity.
 - In fact, the Greek word translated “you have come” is actually the word where we get *proselyte*.
- The author continues, “You have come to **Mount Zion**.”
 - It was King David who captured Mount Zion and established his home there in the seventh year of his reign, recorded in 2 Samuel 5:6-9. It became the religious center of the entire kingdom and it was there that he placed “the ark of God, which is called by the name of Yahweh of hosts, who sits enthroned on the cherubim” (2 Samule 6:2).
 - Thus, the Davidic Zion became a shadow of God’s eternal abode – the heavenly Zion. This appears to be what the Psalmist is conveying in **Psam 78:68**:

“He chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loves.
He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,

Like the earth, which he has founded for ever.”

Psalm 132:13-14: “For the LORD has chosen Zion;
He has desired it for his dwelling place:
‘This is my resting place forever;
Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.”

Psalm 50:2: “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.’

- Also, according to rabbinical tradition, **Psalm 122:3** is considered a foreshadowing of heaven:

“Jerusalem, built as a city
which is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of Yahweh,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of Yahweh.”

- The Apostle Paul makes a reference to this in Galatians 4:21-26: “²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”
- The author’s intent is certainly to draw a clear contrast between Sinai and Zion.
- Mount Sinai was **never** God’s home, it was simply where God chose to meet His people. However, the heavenly Zion is the dwelling place of God, and therefore, it is full of His everlasting glory.

Psalm 46:4: “⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.”

Ezekiel 48:35: “³⁵The circumference of the city shall be 18,000 cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There.”

- This is the “heavenly Jerusalem” to which Abraham was ultimately looking. Hebrews 11:10: “¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”
- Because it is God’s dwelling place, it contains all the blessings of God, and certainly the greatest blessing of all – God Himself.

- Yet, not only is Zion the dwelling place of God, it is the dwelling place of His angels as well.

“...and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...”

- The reference to innumerable angels here in Hebrews 12 brings to mind the “ten thousands of holy ones” who accompanied the giving of the Law at Sinai in Deuteronomy 33:2.
- Also, in chapter 2, the angels accompanied the giving of the Law – blowing the trumpets and ensuring the burning of the fire.
 - Yet, the image here of the angels is not one like Sinai (or Isaiah 6); rather, the image is one of **joyous celebration** in a **festal gathering**.

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- Next, we see that it is also the home of the “**assembly of the firstborn** who are enrolled in heaven.”
 - This is the Church. There, assembled with the innumerable angels in joyous celebration, are the people of Christ.
 - It is interesting that the author refers to the Christians in heaven as “the assembly of the **firstborn**.”
 - In the Old Covenant, it was the firstborn who held the position of privilege in the family. He stood to receive a double portion of inheritance.
 - Jesus Christ holds such a position with respect to all Creation. He was certainly not the first *created* (for He is eternal in His Divinity); but rather, in His humanity He holds the “**firstborn**” position.

Colossians 1:18: “¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”

- Consequently, all who believe in Him will share in the same inheritance. **In Christ**, we in fact, become “the firstborn” – **all because of Christ!**

John 1:12: “¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,”

Romans 8:28-29: “²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

- F.F. Bruce notes, “They [Christians] have become fellow-citizens with Abraham of that well-founded city for which he looked; it is the city or commonwealth which comprises the whole family of faith, God’s true dwelling-place.”

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- Finally, we see that **God is referred to as “Judge of all.”**

Philip Hughes writes, “This Judge is also the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose perfect sacrifice is...the first ground of our acceptance and justification...To Him the Christian believer comes gladly and with confidence, knowing that what is for others a throne of judgment is for him a throne of Grace” (Hebrews 4:16; 10:22)

- Finally, we see that **God is referred to as “Judge of all.”**
- Yet, God’s judgment is not feared, but praised by “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.”
 - These “spirits of the righteous made perfect” are none other than the spirits of the “assembly of the firstborn.”
 - They are **righteous** and **made perfect** by the work of Jesus Christ alone on their behalf.
 - **He was judged in their place so they fear not God as Judge, but praise Him as such.**

III. The Difference Between the Two

²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

- Finally, the author remarks that we have come “**to Jesus.**”
- This final phrase answers the question, “**Why is Zion so radically different than Sinai?**”
- Here we read that **CHRIST IS THE MEDIATOR OF A NEW COVENANT.**

Richard Philips, “Moses was the mediator who stepped toward the other mountain in fear and trembling. 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 gate to Paradise for all who come in faith.”

- **MOUNT ZION IS GLORIOUS [VERSUS THE TERROR OF SINAI] BECAUSE OF THE WORK OF CHRIST, THE MEDIATOR.**

- This is precisely why Christ was superior to Moses. Moses could do nothing to appease the wrath of God. In fact, he was terrified himself. But Christ satisfied the wrath of God.
- Christ, however, has **satisfied the wrath of God and has changed us so that we do not fear the presence of God, but we long for it.**
- Further, it is the “sprinkled blood” of Christ “that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”
- In the Genesis account, the blood of Abel “speaks” to God.

Genesis 4:10: “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.”

- However, the blood of Christ “speaks a better word” for it speaks forgiveness and peace to man.

Westcott states, “The blood of Christ pleads with God for forgiveness and speaks peace to man. The blood, that is, the abiding virtue of Christ’s offered life, is in heaven; inseparable from the glorified King and Priest.”

- It is interesting that Abel and Jesus Christ were both killed by their brothers. Yet, the blood of Abel did nothing to atone for the sins of his murderers, let alone his sins. The blood of Abel, foreshadowing the blood of Christ, did nothing to get him back into the Garden, into fellowship with God.

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- Yet, again, we see that this is why Christ is so highly exalted.
 - In a very real sense, it is the blood of Christ that makes the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion.
 - The difference between the two mountains is not because God Himself changed (for God cannot change). Rather through Christ we are changed and brought into the glorious presence of God, covered by the blood of Christ.

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- Furthermore it is the **blood of Christ that “speaks a better word” that provides us with the key to understanding the relationship between the LAW and GOSPEL.**
 - A.W. Pink actually refers to the Law as “the Church’s kindergarten” teaching them the basic truths about God and leading them to the One who would save them – Jesus Christ.

“The law and the gospel are set before us in the Bible as one undivided system of truth, yet an unchangeable line of distinction is drawn between them. There is also an inseparable connection

and relationship. Unfortunately, some see the difference between them but not the relationship; however, the man who knows the relative position of the law and the gospel has the keys of the situation in understanding the Bible and its doctrine.”
Ernest Reisinger

- I recently heard the late preacher Adrian Rogers give an analogy that I found quite helpful when seeking to describe the relationship between the Old Covenant Law and the New Testament Gospel of Christ.
 - Dr. Rogers spoke of two expert doctors that a sick man must go to to get well. The first doctor was “Doctor Law.” Doctor Law was an expert in diagnosing the greatest of life-threatening illnesses – sin. So everytime a man went to Doctor Law, he would tell the man – your are ill, very ill, and you will die. Then the patient responds, “Then, Doctor Law, please heal me for this most dreadful disease.” Dr. Law simply replies, “Oh, I cannot heal you, I only diagnose the problem. If you want to be healed, you must go across the hall to the office of Dr. Grace. It is only when the patient goes to the office of Dr. Grace that he learns from the great Physician that it is through faith alone in Christ alone that he will be healed and lived.
 - As I said, I found the analogy helpful, but it is quite wrong on one point – apart from Christ, man is not dying and in need of a physician (or two physicians). Man is dead in need of resurrection.
 - And this is precisely why God gave the Law, for a man is converted and supernaturally saved through the sovereign regenerative work of the Holy Spirit and the instrument of the Law, whereby he is not only made alive in Christ but is also convicted of his sin through the working of the perfect Law of God. It is this working of the Law that leads to **repentance from sin and belief in Jesus Christ.**

- I am personally convinced that the reason there are so many false converts today and professing Christians who do not understand the Gospel is because they have never been brought to Mount Sinai. Consequently, they do not understand who God truly is, nor do they understand what their sins justly deserve. Tragically, someone likely brought them to Zion while bypassing Sinai. Yet both are necessary for Christians even today, and both are central to the Gospel message. For, without Sinai, there would have been no Calvary, and without Calvary, there would be no Zion.