

Hebrews 12:18-24

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[0 : 00] Amen. Good morning, church. If you will, if you will join me in your copy of God's Word!
Hebrews chapter 12.

Hebrews 12, we'll start in verse 18. This is the Word of God, and it reads, For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

For they could not endure the order that was given. If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear.

But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels and feastal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Join me in prayer. God, as we behold this glorious truth that we have not come to Mount Sinai, the mountain of judgment, but instead this mountain of mercy, the heavenly city where we dwell with you, Lord, would these realities sink deeply into us?

[1 : 50] Would you empower my words? Would you be with us now in the hearing of your word that you would convict us of sin and encourage us towards obedience?

God, give us a high view of you and set our minds on Christ this morning. In your name, amen. In Hebrews so far, we've seen the author exalt Christ by comparing him to different aspects of Jewish belief.

We've seen Christ superior to angels, to Moses, to the high priest, to Abraham, to Melchizedek, issuing in a better covenant with a better sacrifice.

We've noted the temptation these Jewish Christians face to revert back to Judaism for fear of further persecution. We saw that they had been beaten, publicly scorned, and their property plundered for their faith.

Similarly, we have noted that the temptation for us is not towards Judaism, but towards the culturally acceptable version of our faith, a private, unobtrusive, spineless, milquetoast, partial faith which minds its own business and submits to the whims of society.

[3 : 07] Our text this morning includes both warning and encouragement. Warning to those who would choose to stand before God on the basis of their own workspace righteousness and encouragement to those who are running the race to strengthen our weak knees from last week's text because we now relate to God on the basis of Christ's blood, his finished work imputed to us.

John MacArthur writes in his commentary on the text, The fear of those on the verge of accepting Christ should not be of persecution they might receive for believing in him, but the judgment they will inevitably receive for rejecting him.

The fear should not be of coming to Mount Zion, but of turning back to Mount Sinai. The author here speaks of two mountains, Sinai, which is not called by name in our text, and Zion.

And these two mountains are metaphors for how God's people relate to him under the old and new covenants. The journey between these two mountains, moving from a covenant of works to the covenant of grace, gives us a vivid picture of the gospel.

In this journey, we'll find the holiness of God, his just retribution for sin, the hopelessly sinful state of mankind, and the tension of these two coexisting realities.

[4 : 25] We'll see salvation offered through Christ and the necessary response to be saved. As we examine this metaphorical journey, we'll see that you cannot come to the mercy and freedom

offered at Zion until you have stood at the foot of Sinai, quaking with fear at the unapproachable, consuming fire, recognizing the deserved wrath and bondage because of our sin, and surrendering any facade of self-righteousness we might bring as we come to encounter God at his future holy city.

So today, for our text, I have a relatively simple outline. I just want to compare and contrast Sinai and Zion. We'll see four points of contrast, or four differences, and two similarities as we go, and then we'll give some in-depth application.

So for each of these points, I've shortened them into a phrase for you note-takers. We'll see Sinai versus Zion in each of these points, and you'll get the picture as we go along. So firstly, we see Sinai as physical in the past and representing bondage, while Zion is spiritual, future tense, and represents freedom.

So we have physical, past tense, and bondage, versus spiritual, future tense, and freedom. So Sinai, in the Old Testament, is the mountain on which God communicated through Moses the terms of his relationship with his people.

Simply put, if they obeyed his commandments, they would be his treasured possession.

Throughout the scriptures, and certainly here, Mount Zion refers not only to the present Mount Zion in Jerusalem, but the heavenly, future Jerusalem, where God dwells permanently with man.

[6 : 18] Communion with God, or God dwelling with man, is the unifying message of the scripture, and is the pursuit of the Christian life. Zion is the permanent dwelling place of God and man.

We see this in verse 22 of our text. If you'll look back at it with me. It says, But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Similarly, Paul writes in Galatians chapter 4, verses 21 through 26, he says, Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman, and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically. These two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. She is Hagar.

[7 : 18] Now, Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and she corresponds to the present Jerusalem. For she is in slavery with her children, but the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

So Sinai represents present, when this is being written, present Judaism and slavery, while Zion represents heavenly Jerusalem and freedom from fulfilling the law's demands by our own good works.

So that was, it was physical past tense and bondage versus spiritual future tense, and characterized by freedom. Secondly, we see Sinai characterized by dread, gloom, and darkness. While Zion is characterized by celebration, feast, or festival, and the light. So we have gloom and darkness versus feasting and light. The presence of God is pictured throughout the scripture when it's manifested as fire.

We see it in the burning bush, in Exodus, the pillar of fire, leading the Israelites through Exodus, or through the desert. And then tongues of fire in the New Testament, and here in Hebrews 29, later on, if you look down, that our God is a consuming fire.

[8 : 35] So this fire is of white, hot perfection, casting out all sin by its very nature. And those still in their sin or under the old covenant of works relate to God with dread of this perfection and cannot stand in His presence without tremendous dread, guilt, and destruction.

However, those covered by Christ's blood see God's presence as something glorious, as the very source of goodness and light. In Revelation 21, in John's vision, it says that there will be no need of sun to shine in Zion, for God Himself will be our light.

And this is our first point of similarity. It's nestled in here because I couldn't find another way to do it. First point of similarity is that the same holy God is encountered at both mountains, but is done so very differently.

One as a dreadful judge, the other as first a judge, and then a savior. And we'll demonstrate that later. Our third point of comparison, contrast.

Sinai is characterized by distance, guilt, and a desire for cessation or ceasing. Versus at Zion, we see communion, purity, and desire for more.

[9 : 54] The people at Sinai encountered God at a distance with a guilty conscience, desiring this encounter to cease, while the people at Zion experienced communion with God without fear and joyful worship forever.

So again, distance, guilt, desire for cessation or stopping, versus communion, purity, and desire for more. After Moses receives the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he writes their response in Exodus chapter 20.

You can just listen. We'll turn to another account of this later on. So in verse 18, he says, Now 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 and said to Moses, You speak to us and we will listen.

But do not let God speak to us lest we die. Moses 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.

The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. John's account in Revelation provides a stark contrast to Sinai as God's people encounter Him at Zion, God's city and dwelling place with His people.

[11 : 13] So let's slip to Revelation chapter 7 and we'll look at verses 9 through 17. Revelation 7 verse 9.

It says, After this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying, Amen.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

Amen. I can't wait to say that with them. Verse 13. Then one of the elders addressed me saying, Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come?

And I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming out from the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[12 : 44] Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. And they shall hunger no more, neither thirst no more.

The sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb is in the midst of the throne. who is in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and He will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

So here we see God's presence not as something to be dreaded, but instead something that is a shelter. It says He will shelter them with His presence.

Fourthly, back in Hebrews, we have trembling and perfect Moses versus triumphant covenant-fulfilling Christ.

So trembling, imperfect Moses versus triumphant covenant-fulfilling Christ. Sinai's old covenant mediator, Moses trembles with fear, falling short of its standard, while Zion's mediator, Jesus, fulfilled the old covenant and thereby mediates the new covenant.

[13 : 53] The author is here reminding his readers of the points he has already made concerning old versus new covenants and Christ's superiority to Moses. However, it's been a few months for us, so I would like to read this explanation from Hebrews 9 and that'll get us back in Hebrews near our text.

So if you'll turn there with me, just verses 11 through 15. Hebrews 9. Hebrews 9. And it reads, Thus securing an eternal redemption.

If you'd like a greater explanation of the Old and New Covenants and Christ's superiority to Moses, I would encourage you to go back and listen to the message on those texts.

So it would seem as though even Moses' conscience was not purified. He was trembling before God at Sinai, for he knew that he had no right to stand before a holy God.

Now, we've already noted one similarity between these two mountains. So let's note one more together that's significant. At first glance, it may seem that Sinai is the mountain of judgment, while Zion is the mountain of mercy.

[16:03] But that is not the case. The law at Sinai renders all mankind guilty, but at Zion, judgment will be executed. The question is whether we'll be judged based on our works in the Old Covenant or on those of Christ imputed to us by his righteous life, death, and resurrection under the New Covenant.

We see throughout the Scripture that there's a universality of judgment. All mankind will stand before the throne of judgment. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 7-11, Listen to this conclusion. So believer and unbeliever alike, all will be judged. And Paul describes this experience, this knowledge, as knowing the fear of the Lord.

The prophet Joel speaks at the location of this future judgment in chapters 2 and 3 of his word from the Lord. Listen to these words from Joel chapter 2. He says, So notice the same language used of God's presence surrounding Sinai, but it's pictured here at Zion.

We have fire, clouds, darkness, and terror. If we can stand in this judgment, enduring this fire, we will come to a land, Joel says, like the Garden of Eden, dwelling perfectly with God in Zion, his holy city.

[18:27] Later in chapter 3, Joel gets more specific with this location. There's a couple of fine details which I find interesting and I think will give a little bit of significance to this point.

Chapter 3, he says, This specific location is also mentioned in verse 12 of Joel's prophecy, the valley of Jehoshaphat.

And this lies between the Temple Mount, which is Mount Moriah, where Isaac was sacrificed. Some people believe this to be Zion. Some people say it's a different mountain, as an aside.

So it lies in between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem. So again, judgment, final judgment will take place outside or in, near God's holy city.

Curiously, this word Jehoshaphat means God will judge. And this valley's other name, which is the Kidron Valley, means the valley of darkness. So why does this matter?

[19:37] You may be sitting, thinking to yourself. The writer of Hebrews calls our minds to the feast that will take place in Zion post-judgment. His description in verses 22-23 says that we will encounter God as the judge of all, but we will do so with celebration and with feasting and with rejoicing alongside the angels, rather than as a subject under the angels' trumpet blast rendered at Sinai.

So this author is saying to us, If you run this race, endure to the end, see the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on, place your faith in the future things that cannot be touched, unlike Esau, who chose instead to consume that which gives temporal pleasure, you will be able to stand in the judgment, not by your merit, but by the precious blood of Christ.

Praise the Lord. So then, if we have placed our faith in Christ as our substitute, enduring the wrath of God on our behalf, this author is saying, Do not stay in the mindset of Sinai and upcoming judgment.

Rather, set your mind on the feast and the celebrating that will follow after this judgment takes place, for that is the mountain that you have come to. So, that's our comparing and contrasting these two mountains.

Let's look at some application together. The question that I had when I was reading this text was what role should the picture of God at Sinai play in our minds now?

[21:09] So, what role should the picture of God at Sinai play in our minds now? I have five points of application on this question. Firstly, Sinai destroys self-righteousness.

Sinai destroys self-righteousness. We see Moses himself, the leader of God's people, out from slavery and the book of Exodus, trembling in the sight of a holy God.

In consideration of even one commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, we fall woefully short, and perfect obedience is required to approach a holy God.

In Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 3, a passage which you're likely familiar, we get a picture of our righteousness before God, where we are reminded that none is righteous, no, not one, no one does good, and there is no fear of God before their eyes.

He then comments, Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

[22:19] For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. In other words, we cannot approach God on Sinai's terms, so we should indeed have great fear.

David continues along the same lines in Psalm 130. He says, O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? Certainly, if even the best among us were to stand before the judgment seat of God, on the basis of our merit, we would be justly destroyed in an instant.

So, part of the purpose of Sinai, and God communicating his attributes to us at Sinai, is to destroy our self-righteousness. Any guise that we may have, that our works somehow give us merit before God, that's its purpose, to show us that we are inadequate to fulfill this covenant.

Our next three points, I'll break them down one by one, but it's one thought. Sinai communicates attributes of God, point two, which are essential for salvation, point three, and four, essential for sanctification.

[23 : 40] So, Sinai communicates attributes of God, essential for salvation, and for sanctification. So, I have these as separate points. For knowing God and his attributes, is an end, in and of itself.

The chief end of man is to know God, and enjoy him forever. Additionally, Jesus describes eternal life, in his high priestly prayer, in John 17, 3, as knowing God and Christ, whom he sent.

In Sinai, we see God's holiness, his separation from creation, the fact that he is without flaw, and intolerant of sin. Habakkuk 1, 13, describes God, as having eyes too pure to see evil, unable to look at wrong.

We see his response to sin, wrath, and fiery judgment, which are expressions, of divine justice. So, at Sinai, we see all these attributes, of God.

These communicated qualities, are essential for salvation, point three. These communicated qualities, are essential, for salvation. God's holiness, wrath, and judgment, are just as significant, to the message of the gospel, as his mercy, and his love.

[24 : 56] Many in our Bible Belt culture, desire to only preach, the warm and fuzzy, feeling inducing, partial gospel of love, and eternal life, through Christ. Salvation, cannot be found, in this message.

J.I. Packer writes, in Knowing God, if we would know God, it is vital, that we face the truth, concerning his wrath, however unfashionable, it may be, and however strong, our initial prejudices, against it.

Otherwise, we shall not understand, the gospel of salvation, from wrath, nor the propitiatory, achievement of the cross, nor the redeeming, love of God.

In other words, without understanding, God's wrath, we don't see Christ, as our substitute. How could we understand, God's love, if we fail to recognize, what this love costs, and fail to understand, the highest expression of it, in Christ?

In his death on the cross, he bore the wrath of God, for those who had placed, their faith in him. If we do not understand, God's wrath, what exactly, would we need, would we need, saving from?

[26 : 01] Indeed, we are saved by God, but we are also saved, from God. To use the terms, of our author in Hebrews, we cannot reach, the summit of Zion, until we have sat, at the foot of Sinai, and begged, for mercy.

I think often times, we focus more on, what we feel, in response to God, rather than focusing on, whether or not, these attributes of God, are true. And, if we believe, that knowing God, is the source of eternal life, then we must consider, the whole truth about God, not just those, which induce, positive feelings, in us.

Point four, God's attributes, at Sinai, are essential, for sanctification. God's attributes, at Sinai, are essential, for sanctification. While we easily, recognize the foolishness, and inadequacy, of a wrathless God, in regard to our, original repentance, unto salvation, we rarely see, its relationship, with our continued, repentance, and victory, over sin.

I'll say that again. While we easily, recognize the foolishness, and inadequacy, of a wrathless God, in regard to our, original repentance, unto salvation, we rarely, see its relationship, with our continued, repentance, and victory, over sin.

I believe, it is the intent, of the writer of Hebrews, and therefore, our Lord, not simply, to ignore, the holiness, wrath, and judgment, of God, expressed at Sinai, but to allow it, to continually push us, to Christ, even in, our ongoing, repentance.

[27 : 35] The most obvious, expression of this reality, is found in verses 28, and 29, later, after our text, in Hebrews, chapter 12. After he has exhorted us, with our fixed position, celebrating in the feast, of Zion, he says, let us offer to God, acceptable worship, with reverence, and awe, for our

God, is a consuming fire.

Not was a consuming fire, back then at Sinai, but is a consuming fire. This reality, is in the present moment, and it's meant to move us, to worship, and awe.

Now this was certainly true, of the Israelites, back then. Moses records, the same post-Sinai scene, in Deuteronomy, chapter 5. So let's turn there together, and see how, these attributes of God, were meant to cause, obedience, in them.

So this is, Deuteronomy, chapter 5. I'll start reading, in verse 24.

Again, this is, after the Ten Commandments, are given, and we see Moses, recording, and reminding his people, of their response, to God, in that moment. So verse 24, says, And you said, Behold, the Lord our God, has shown us, His glory and greatness, and we have heard, His voice, out of the midst, of the fire.

[29 : 19] This day, we have seen God, speak with man, and man still live. Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire, will consume us. If we hear the voice, of the Lord our God, anymore, we shall die.

For who is there, of all flesh, that has heard the voice, of the living God, speaking out of the midst, of the fire, as we have, and has still lived? Go near, and hear all, that the Lord our God, will say, and speak to us.

All that He, the Lord our God, will speak to you, and we will hear it, and do it. And the Lord heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the Lord said to me, I have heard the words, of this people, which they have spoken to you.

They are right, in all that they have spoken. Oh, that they had such a mind, as this always, to fear me, and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well, with them, and with their descendants, forever.

Similarly, we read earlier, in Exodus chapter 20, says that God, has come to test you, that the fear of Him, may be before you, that you may not sin. God responds, to their fear of Him, not with comfort.

[30 : 27] And I find this striking. He doesn't, comfort them, but essentially He says, good, that you're afraid. Good, that you're afraid. He says, literally, they are right, in all that they have spoken.

God then says, in response to Moses, if they would maintain, this same level of fear, of reverence, and of awe, then they would go on, to keep His commandments. A.W. Pink, in his commentary, on Hebrews 12, maintains this same concept, for New Testament believers.

This is a lengthy, but great quote. I'll try to read it well for us. He says, the wrath of God, is a perfection, of the divine character, on which we need, to meditate frequently.

First, that our hearts, may be duly impressed, by God's detestation, of sin. We are ever prone, to regard sin lightly, to gloss over, its hideousness, to make excuses, for sin.

But the more, we study, and ponder, God's abhorrence of sin, and His frightful, vengeance upon it, the more likely, we are, to realize, its heinousness. Secondly, to beget, a true fear, in our souls for God, let us have grace, he's quoting from Hebrews 12, let us have grace, whereby, we may serve God, acceptably, with reverence, and godly fear, for our God, is a consuming fire.

[31 : 48] We cannot serve Him, acceptably, unless there is due reverence, for His awful majesty, and godly fear, of His righteous anger, and these are best promoted, by frequently calling, to mind, that our God, is a consuming fire.

Our readiness, or our reluctance, to meditate, upon the wrath of God, becomes a sure test, of how our hearts, really stand, affected, towards Him. End quote.

So as we consider, the wrath of God, due our sin, then, and only then, do we turn our eyes, from Sinai, to Zion, where Christ, has satisfied this wrath, and given us, His perfect obedience.

We cannot help then, but to respond, in loving, and willing, obedience, to the King. Now, some of you, who have struggled, with habitual sin, at this point, are likely thinking, something along the lines of, I already know, how bad my sin is, so I do not need, the further negativity, of the wrath of God, to be heaped, upon my conscience.

Allow me, a moment more, to convince you otherwise. Beyond what has already, been established, in the fear of the Lord, leading to obedience, I believe this mindset, in some ways, is missing the point, of this journey.

[33 : 00] I'd like to read, a paragraph, from John Piper's, forward, to Owen's, mortification of sin, to prove this point. I lost room, on my podium. So John Piper, wrote forward, again, to John Owen's,

mortification of sin.

He says, the depth, and complexity, the ugliness, and the danger of sin, professing Christians, is often, either minimized, since we are already, justified, or, psychologized, as a symptom, of woundedness, rather than, corruption.

This is, tragically, light healing. I call it, a tragedy, because by making, life easier, for ourselves, and minimizing, the nature, and seriousness, of our sin, we become, greater victims of it.

We are, in fact, not healing ourselves. Those who say, that they already, feel bad enough, without being told, of the corruptions, of indwelling sin, misread, the path, to peace.

When our people, have not been taught, well, about the real nature, of sin, how it works, and how to put it, to death, most of the miseries, people report, are not owing, to the disease, but its symptoms. [34 : 13] They feel, a general malaise, and don't know why. Their marriages, are at a breaking point. They feel weak, in their spiritual witness, and devotion. Their workplace, is in battle. Their church, is tense with unrest.

Their fuse, is short with their children, etc. They report, these miseries, as if they were the disease, and they want, the symptoms, removed. We are so quick, to flee, the negative feelings, of a guilty conscience, that we often, never seek, to uproot, the source of this guilt.

Never stopping, to consider, that the negative feelings, are meant to lead us, on this journey, from Sinai, to Zion. Owen goes on, later in his work, to give instructions, to the sin, in order to mortify, or kill our sin.

He says, that we should firstly, load our consciences, with the guilt, of sin, with the very law, given on Sinai. He says, oh, if your ears be open, it will speak, with a voice, that will make you tremble, that shall cast you, to the ground, and fill you, with astonishment.

You must tie up, your conscience, to the law. Later, he goes on, to instruct readers, to bring our sin, to the gospel, not yet for relief, but for further conviction, as we look on him, whom we have pierced. [35 : 31] Then, and only then, once our sense, of self-righteousness, has been decimated, shall we allow our minds, to celebrate, as partakers, of the marriage supper, of the Lamb, at Zion.

Many of us, dealing with continual sin, have been fleeing, these feelings of inadequacy, rendering us, unable to see, our inadequacy, as the central point, of the gospel. We must consider Sinai, lastly.

We must consider Sinai, because it pushes us, to see, our daily need, of Jesus. This portion of Hebrews, is actually meant, to be an encouragement, to us.

The beauty of our faith, is Christ's power, made perfect, in our weakness. Why do we fear, so much our weaknesses, to be exposed? The larger our sin, becomes in our mind, the better.

For as our sin, is laid ever before us, so Christ's abundant grace, shows itself, even greater.

Preaching the gospel, to ourselves, and one another, must include, a consideration, of the depths of our sin.

[36 : 37] We must regularly, take our hope, off of the desires, of this world, off of our own good works, off of our friends, and our spouses, and see our only hope, in this journey, from Sinai to Zion.

From the law broken, which deserves, permanent separation, from God, to the law fulfilled, and the lamb slain, on our behalf, that we might again, dwell with God.

The journey, to our heavenly home, through this life, is a difficult one. But as we lay down, our burden, of having to appear, righteous before God, Christ offers us, his easy yoke, of daily surrender, as we seek, the city of Zion, that is to come.

Y'all pray with me.