

# Hebrews 12:18-29

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[ 0 : 01 ] If not, you can just touch the requisite buttons on your iPhone and get there, I'm sure. Hebrews 12, 18 through 29.

Let me read this text for us. Right here to Hebrews says, 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 in festal gathering.

And 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. And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

[ 1 : 11 ] And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

At that time, his voice shook the earth. But now he has promised, yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens. This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken.

That is, things that have been made. In order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

One of the questions you often get asked living in a transient city like New Haven, where people are always coming and going, is invariably the question, where are you from?

[ 2 : 23 ] Now, on the one hand, this is just part of polite conversation, isn't it? But on the other hand, there's a sense in which your place, where you're from, can perhaps reveal something about who you are, your identity, your way of being in the world.

And of course, stereotypes abound, right? People in the Northeast are supposed to be fast-paced, direct, and people from everywhere else in the country would say they're kind of just a little rude. Come on, Texans, you know that's what you thought when you moved here, right? Midwesterners are down-to-earth and generally all-around nice folk. Southerners are incredibly hospitable, but, you know, they know how to hold a grudge.

And those on the West Coast, well, they're just kind of laid back and they love their hobbies and they don't take anything too seriously. And that's just the U.S., right? We can keep going and think about how all the different parts of the world tend to get pigeonholed.

But, you know, stereotypes aside, as humans, I do think we tend to develop strong connections to concrete places.

[ 3 : 31 ] And those connections can have profound, shaping influences on who we are. It seems as if humans were sort of hardwired to be connected to a place.

And in our text this morning, Hebrews wants to show us that as Christians, we've come to belong to a whole new place, spiritually speaking.

He wants us to see that in our conversion, a great geographical shift has occurred, that we no longer live where we once lived. He wants us to see that in our pilgrimage of faith, we have come. As he says in the contrast of verse 18 and verse 22, we have come to a whole new destination. And this place shapes now who we are.

That's what's going on in the first part of our passage, verse 18 through 24. And then in verses 25 through 29, he's going to show us how all of that has deep implications for how we ought to hear God and how we ought to worship God.

[ 4 : 47 ] So that's where we're going this morning. Let's take a look first at where we have come. Now, I've heard it said, I don't know if this is actually true, if you're a history buff afterwards, maybe you can correct me on this.

But I've heard it said that in 1638, when the city of New Haven was founded, that the Puritans who established our city intentionally situated us between those two great rock faces that we now know affectionately as East Rock and West Rock.

Now, whether that was intentional or not, I don't know. But it's true, right, today that no matter where you go in our city, it seems like one of these rocks is almost always visible. One of these great red cliffs is almost always sort of looming.

In the background. Now, much like New Haven is sort of situated between these two rocks, between these two mountains, the landscape of the Old Testament is dominated by two mountains. That is Mount Sinai on the one hand and Mount Zion on the other. It's these two peaks that form the spiritual geography of nearly the whole Old Testament.

[ 5 : 59 ] Mount Sinai, you'll remember, was where God gave the law to Israel through Moses, where God entered into a covenant with Israel. And Mount Zion was where David, 500 years later, established the monarchy and built the city of Jerusalem, and where later Solomon, his son, built the temple.

Sinai, Zion. And in our passage this morning, the writer of Hebrews is picking up this imagery. He's picking up this theological landscape, and he's transforming it for us into a way of thinking about where we've come in Christ.

In verses 18 through 21, it's the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai that becomes a vivid picture of living under the Old Covenant.

Now, of course, in these verses, he doesn't mention Sinai by name, right? But given the description, that's certainly what he's talking about. And Mount Sinai here comes a way, a stand-in for one way of thinking about and living in a relationship with God.

Sinai. But Hebrews says in verse 22, that's not where you've come. No, you've not come to Mount Sinai, but you've come to Mount Zion.

[ 7 : 27 ] And it's clear as we read through, just scanning through verses 22 through 24, that he means clearly not the earthly city of David located in the middle of Israel somewhere. He's talking about the heavenly city, the true dwelling place of God, the city that is to come, that that mere earthly city always just pointed towards.

And for Hebrews, this heavenly city stands for the realities of the new covenant, of this new relationship with God. So there it is.

Hebrews wants us to see in this contrast between Sinai and Zion, the reality of where we've come spiritually. He wants us to see where we now belong as Christians.

He wants us to see the place now where we are meant to be. And notice at least three contrasts between these two mountains.

There are three ways at least that I think Hebrews is drawing a contrast. First, he says, you've not come to a place of fear, but you've come to a place of joy.

[ 8 : 34 ] Isn't the resounding sense that we get from verses 18 through 21 with the blazing fire and darkness and gloom and the piercing trumpet blast, one of overwhelming fear?

And as we look back at Exodus 19 through 20 and Deuteronomy 4 and 5 where this event is recorded in Scripture, we see that that was indeed the case. That the people assembled at the foot of Sinai trembled with fear.

And Hebrews, perhaps drawing on some Jewish tradition, tells us that even Moses trembled as well. The mountain shook with the awesome holiness of God and the people trembled.

Maybe you've been walking down the street and someone drives by in their car and they're sort of bumping their favorite new rap tune. I don't think they say bumping anymore, but you can tell I went to college in the early 2000s.

And can't you feel sometimes the bass as the car drives by? Also not going to win any awards for beatboxing. But you can feel it just rattle your bones, can't you, sometimes?

[ 9 : 55 ] Now, friends, if that's true of a mere speaker in a car driving down the street, think of what it must have been like to stand at the foot of Sinai and heaven ripping in to a mountain itself in something that the biblical writers can only describe as blazing fire and darkness.

And trumpets ripping through heaven and their bones just quaking in the presence of God. It was a place of fear.

Now compare that to verse 22. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.

You see, on Sinai, the angels gather to blare trumpets of warning. But in Zion, the angels are gathered in festal array. That is, in celebration, in festivity.

They're gathered in joy. The language here is of a civic celebration like the ancient Olympics, or like one of the great annual Jewish festivals. This place where you've come, Hebrews says, is not a place of fear, but a place of festive joy.

[ 11 : 24 ] Joy, C.S. Lewis once said, is the serious business of heaven. Isn't that a beautiful phrase? But friends, I wonder how many people looking at our lives, looking at my life, would be able to guess that our permanent spiritual address, as it were, the place where we belong, the place where we've come by faith, is the place whose serious business is indestructible permanent joy.

Do people see joy in us? Of course, we're not talking about bubbly, outgoing personalities, or being chipper all the time. That's not biblical joy.

We're talking about the kind of resilient satisfaction in God, the kind of current running deep that can rejoice in God's goodness, even when things are hard.

But when things do get hard, how quickly our joy seems to fly away. How quickly we forget where we've come.

You see, friends, we don't live under the dark clouds of Sinai anymore. We don't live in the gloom and in the fear. We live in the light of the hills of Zion, the city that is to come.

[ 12 : 44 ] Not a place of fear, but a place of joy. But let's push ahead to the second contrast. Not a place of fear, but a place of joy.

Second, you've come not to a place of distance from God, but to a place of intimacy with God.

When God gathered the people at Sinai, his instructions were basically, stay away.

God warns the people in Exodus 19, if even a beast touches the mountain, stone him. Now, if that's true for an irrational animal that accidentally strays onto the mountain, how much worse for a rational human being who intentionally decides to go near without God's permission?

At Sinai, the people beg to be kept at a distance. They beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

Sinai's a place where God is inaccessible and unapproachable. Even the images have a sense of impersonalness, don't they? Fire, gloom, darkness, the sound of a trumpet.

[ 13 : 50 ] But you see, friends, if Sinai says, stay away, Zion is a place that says, draw near.

Look at the description in the next verse, in verse 23. You've come 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.

Notice that God is in the center and surrounding him, gathered around him, welcome before him, are his people. And on the one hand, there's the assembly of the firstborn, we're told, gathered to God.

And this assembly of the firstborn refers inclusively to all those before and after Christ who belong to the people of God through faith. Their names are written and ruled in heaven, we're told.

This is the universal church of all times and all places, Old Testament and new, who belong to Jesus. And we know from Hebrews that Jesus is the firstborn par excellence.

[ 14 : 54 ] He is God's one and only son, the heir of all things. But surprisingly, what do we see here? That those who belong to him, they too are called the firstborn.

That through our union with Christ, the true firstborn, we too become those who are rightful heirs of God's kingdom.

We too become rightful sons and daughters in Christ. Verse 23 goes on to tell of the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

And this points most likely to those who have died in the faith. If the assembly of the firstborn is all believers everywhere, then the spirits of the righteous made perfect refer particularly to those who have died in the faith.

The faithful departed, as it's sometimes put. And what a comfort to know that those who die in Christ, though they are awaiting the final resurrection, they are even now, Hebrews tells us, made perfect in God's presence.

[16:04] That is, they lack nothing in their relationship with God. Now, in contrast to the picture of Sinai, what all this points to at the very least is the incredible intimacy with God that is enjoyed by those who have come to Zion.

Surprisingly, God's character hasn't changed, right? He's still the holy judge of all. But now, instead of distance and exclusion, there's intimacy and fellowship and even a familial relationship with God. Think of the White House. I had the privilege of going to D.C. this spring. You know, and if you ever sort of go by the White House, you'll often see standing across the lawn, outside the fence, crowds of people gawking, taking pictures with their smartphones, trying to catch a glimpse of some dignitaries coming and going.

And in one sense, many people in that crowd do have a certain relationship to the president, right? If they're U.S. citizens, there is a certain bond between them and the president. But we know that that's nothing compared to his actual family, to his wife, and to his children.

They enjoy intimate access. They don't need to stand across the lawn. They don't need to stand outside the fence. They don't need to gawk with a smartphone. They can approach. They can draw near.

[17:43] And of course, how strange it would be for the president's daughters to stand out with that crowd across the lawn, outside the fence. We would think that they were playing some sort of practical joke, wouldn't we?

That they were doing some sort of social experiment. We would think that was very strange. And yet, how many of us Christians, forgetting that we've come to Mount Zion, in our relationship with God, tend to stand across the lawn, outside the fence, worried that we don't belong, living in shame and guilt, when in reality, we can draw near as firstborn sons and daughters whose names are enrolled in heaven, that when we come to the gates of God's presence, he finds our name written there.

You've not come to a place of distance, but of intimacy. But there's a third contrast at work here, and we see it in verse 24, as we work through this description of the heavenly Zion.

In verse 24, Hebrews is telling us that you've come not to a place of law, but to a place of grace. Sinai, of course, it goes without saying, was the place where God issued the law to Israel.

The law revealed not only God's holy character, but it also gave Israel the picture of what holiness would look like for them. And in line with that, the law covenant at Sinai promised God's blessing to Israel if they kept it, if they obeyed it, but warned of his curse if they broke it, if they disobeyed.

[19:25] And as we know from the story of the Old Testament, since Israel could not keep the law, they fell under the curse of condemnation. And before we think that we would do any better, we need to realize that the story of Israel really is the story of all of us.

that because of our sin, this is basically what Mount Sinai becomes. A place of law. A place of condemnation. A place, as Hebrews has said, that cannot make us perfect.

A place that can only show us our deep problem. And at best, can point us to a solution apart from itself.

And it's that solution that Hebrews says we've come to in verse 24. You have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Friends, haven't you been wondering, what is it that makes Zion Zion, a place of joy and inclusivity and intimacy. And now finally, we see why this heavenly city is this place of fear and not joy, and this place of intimacy and not exclusion.

[20:42] It's because of Jesus. You see, we all fall short of God's standard, and under the law, under our own efforts at obedience, we stand condemned.

Under the menacing hill of Sinai, we stand ruined. But Jesus mediates a new covenant between us and God.

And this covenant is not dependent on our obedience, but on His perfect obedience. And this covenant, we're shown, is ratified and made effective by His own blood, His own sacrificial death that pays the penalty for our sins and gives us a clean conscience with God.

And that's why Jesus' blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. After Abel was murdered by Cain in Genesis 4, God said, the voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. You see, Abel's blood cried out for vengeance. And yet, the blood of Christ cries out for forgiveness and for mercy and for justification.

[ 21 : 53 ] everyone who takes hold of the risen Christ by faith can know that that better word is spoken over them, that their sins are covered, that their conscience is cleansed, and that their hope is secure.

So friend, let me ask you this morning, what voice are you hearing as you draw back from the rush of events that fill your day, as the onslaught of the busyness of everyday life, as you take a step back from that for a second and catch your breath, what voice do you hear?

Is it the voice of the law, the voice telling you that your sins are great and that you stand guilty before God?

Of course, you can try to deny that voice, but it won't go away. You can try to change your ways and become a better person, but you'll never quite be good enough.

You see, there's only one lasting solution. When you finally start to see that the word of the law is true, that we are guilty, that even our best selves aren't acceptable to God, then you must turn from the word of the law to the word of the gospel, to the good news that says there's only one who is innocent and he died for you, taking your penalty for sin and offering you his righteousness and speaking over your life by his own blood a better word, a word of peace.

[ 23 : 38 ] And when you turn to that word, then you'll find that you have come not to Sinai, a place of fear and exclusion, but desire, a place of joy and intimacy.

Friends, this is everything that Hebrews has been trying to tell us for 12 chapters and pretty much everything that we've been preaching for the last year. Can you believe we've been in this book for a whole year?

And this has been the message. The old covenant can never make you perfect, no matter how much you obey, no matter how many sacrifices you offer. but in Christ the new has come, that the door has swung open and light is rushing in, that the path to Zion has been blazed by Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and that there is free entry for all who take hold of him in faith.

Friend, if you're here this morning and you're exploring Christianity, if you're new to spiritual things, realize that Christianity is not an invitation to another Mount Sinai, to law and to fear.

Maybe that's been your experience of religion in the past. Maybe it's been a lot of law and a lot of fear. But let me tell you that that is not true biblical Christianity.

[ 25 : 10 ] Christianity is an invitation to Mount Zion, if you're following the metaphor, to grace and to joy and to intimacy through the finished work of Jesus.

And what this means for those of us who have come to faith in Christ is that we must press on. You see, this vision of Mount Zion is meant to spur us on to run the race with endurance.

For the last three weeks, we've been thinking about this marathon of faith. And now that we see our destination, it's meant to draw us forth.

Of course, it's been clear in Hebrews that this heavenly city is still to come. In chapter 13, Hebrews will say that we seek the city that is to come. It's still ahead of us, but haven't we been seeing in our text today that in a very real sense we're already citizens of that city?

That we already belong there? That it's already our address? It's already our home? And that means our goal is secure. That the finish line is ahead and joyful celebration awaits you.

[ 26 : 21 ] Indeed, it's even now surrounding you as you run. So keep running, Hebrews is saying. Keep running, knowing where you've come to and where you're going.

What's ahead of you is grace and joy and intimacy. Run for the joy set before you. Now, what are the implications of all this?

Well, the rest of our text goes on to point out two in particular. There are two immediate applications that Hebrews makes for us in light of all that he's said so far. And the first is found in verse 25. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

We've seen in our study of Hebrews that some in the original audience were in danger of rejecting Christ, of going back to old covenant Judaism. But Hebrews warns them and us that if rejecting God's law was disastrous, now rejecting God's son is doubly so.

Let us not think that God's grace in the new covenant means that we can be flippant or dismissive or presumptuous. all these things that we've been celebrating, joy, access, grace, are found in

Christ and to reject him and to reject the new covenant and to turn away from him is not to go to a place of neutrality but go back to a place of judgment.

[ 27 : 44 ] In verses 26 and 27, Hebrews goes on to speak of the great day of God's justice. He quotes a verse from the prophet Haggai that speaks of a great shaking that is to come.

It's not just the earth that will shake like what happened at Sinai but the heavens, he says, will be shaken as well. That is, the whole created order will come under God's holy scrutiny.

And like an earthquake that lays bare the foundations of a building, shaking it to the ground, so God's day of judgment will strip away all the pretensions and all the pride and all the excuses and leave everything and everyone exposed to his holy gaze.

And there will be no hiding on that day. And there will be no excuses on that day. And we'll stand before our sovereign creator and sustainer, the one upon whom our entire lives have depended and render an account for what we've done with the life he's given us to live.

Does it seem implausible to you that God would shake his creation in this way?

[ 29 : 03 ] Perhaps it's more comfortable to retreat to a position of a deist, you know, to believe in a God who's sort of far away, unable, or too uncaring to bring his creation to account.

Or maybe we shrink away and back into a more seemingly comfortable position of the pantheist who thinks that all simply sort of is God and that whatever is, is, and we all sort of are accepted in the end and return to the one being.

You see, the reason why neither of those retreats, neither of those options will work for you at the end of the day is because everyone deep down wants a world to be put right.

all of us deep down want evil and injustice to not have the last word. And that's something that only the biblical view of God and his justice can give you.

In fact, the Psalms celebrate the fact that God is a just judge because that means that there's hope for a broken world to be put right again.

[ 30 : 16 ] that our dreams of justice, that our dreams of a world made whole aren't just fantasies, but the coming result of God speaking his judgment into creation and making things right again.

But this drives us to a great dilemma, does it not? Because you see, if on the one hand, on the one hand, if there is no divine judgment, no final shaking, what hope is there for the world that's so weighed down with injustice and evil?

What hope is there for our world wracked with pain and suffering if there is no judgment, if there is no putting to rights? But on the other hand, if there is divine judgment, if there is a final shaking to come, what hope is there for me weighed down as I am with sin and rebellion against God?

And that is why Hebrews is so adamant here that we do not refuse him who is speaking. From heaven comes a word of forgiveness and peace with rebels.

From heaven comes the better word of Jesus' own blood shed for you. for what would you trade in this world for such a better word?

[ 31 : 44 ] What good is it, Jesus says, to gain the whole world and to lose your soul? What is it that tempts you to grow slack in your confession of Christ? What is it that tempts you to abandon him and his better word?

Is it the pleasure of a relationship? Is it the desire for peer approval? Is it the prospect of increased wealth and the security and power that it may bring?

Is it the dream of building your own kingdom and making a name for yourself? What good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul?

Why abandon Christ even for a kingdom if the kingdoms of this world will be shaken to the ground and all that will remain is the kingdom of God? Why not live for his kingdom instead?

And rather than refusing or rejecting him, rather let us worship him. That's where the text ends in verse 28 and 29 and that's the second application that Hebrews wants us to make.

[ 32 : 56 ] When God shakes the created order, it will mean the removal of things that are shaken. All that is opposed to God will be swept away but all that is done in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

It's like a great sieve scooping down into the sand from a bed of a river and shaking and shaking and shaking away the sand and the sticks and the stones and after all that falls away, what's left is the gold.

After all our sin and pride and our self-centered pursuits are shaken down and fall away, it's the work of God's kingdom that will endure.

It's the work of God's new creation that will last. And in light of that, Hebrews says, therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Though everything around us crumbles and falls, what God is giving to us will endure forever. And thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire.

[ 34 : 10 ] It's perhaps one of the most beautiful pictures of biblical worship in all of Sertre. Glad gratitude and reverent awe.

That's worship. Reverent awe before our God who is the... .. na ...

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first disturbing to a ... .. espe ... Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 35 : 52 ] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 38 : 22 ] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 40 : 52 ] Thank you.

Thank you.