

“Marching to Zion (Part 3)” – Hebrews 12:18-24

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 12...

Today, I will really make the same argument as I did last week from the same verses, but we will come at it from a different angle. There are some secondary lessons I would like for us to consider eventually, but the primary lesson is so important that I believe it warrants another week to reinforce it. Remember, the end of chapter 12 really serves as the climax of the argument that the author has been making throughout the book. He will have some closing instructions in the next chapter, but his main argument has been building to what he says at the end of chapter 12. So let's look once more at the first half of his conclusion, beginning in verse 18. I invite you to follow along as I read. This is God's Word...

“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest¹⁹ 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.’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,²³ 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,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (Hebrews 12:18-24)

Last Sunday we considered these verses at length. The first half describes Mount Sinai, the earthly mountain where God manifested His presence before the Israelites He rescued from Egypt in the Exodus. The second half concerns Mount Zion, a literal mountain associated with Jerusalem that comes to take on heavenly associations later in the Old Testament. These are the associations it has here. It's “*the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22).

But we must remember the function of this contrast in the argument. What do these two mountains represent for the author? Two covenants. The Old Covenant (Sinai) and the New Covenant (Zion). The first caused the people to tremble and keep their distance. The second is marked by joy and an invitation to draw near. The first highlights the inability of the Law to fix our sinful condition and the second the power of the Gospel to make us holy. We considered the nature of this contrast last Sunday and the details that the author includes to make their distinction plain.

And do you remember why this is important for the author to impress upon his readers? It had to with their background. Some of them, it seems, were tempted to turn away from Christ—and by extension the New Covenant that He mediates to God's people—to go back to the comforts of their old Judaism, back to the Old Covenant, back to the Law. They were being tempted away from the Christian faith because, evidently, following Jesus was getting more and more difficult in their context. Persecution was increasing. Social pressure was mounting. The authorities were cracking down on them—subjecting them to public shame, the loss of property, and even imprisonment. They never had to deal with that in the synagogue. They never had to face such pressure when they were within mainstream Judaism. So there was this temptation to fall away from Jesus and the author wrote this letter to prevent that from happening.

The contrast between these mountains at the end of chapter 12 has that goal in mind. He is trying to show them how much greater Jesus is than Moses, how much greater the New Covenant is compared to the Old, and how much greater the gracious effects of Christ's sprinkled blood are compared to the burdening effects of the Law. So why would you ever want to turn back to Sinai (Moses, the Law, the Old Covenant), when you have come to Zion (Jesus, grace, the New Covenant)? That's the question the author is forcing his readers to consider by putting before their eyes these two mountains.

God stands behind both, but the experience of God's people is quite different at each of these Mountains. Sinai was terrifying and God's presence was unapproachable there because the Law (and our obedience to it) cannot fix our sinful nature and thereby make us fit to be in the presence of a holy God. But Zion is quite different, isn't it? Zion is inviting. Zion welcomes us to draw near and even to do so boldly! And why? Why the difference? Because between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion is Mount Calvary.

You see, Christ has opened the way for us to enter into God's presence. He tore down the barrier between us and God by offering His body to be torn apart on the cross. He took our punishment. He substituted Himself for sinners. He became the sacrifice that redeems His people fully and finally. He removes their sin. And His resurrection from the dead proves that His sacrifice was acceptable and sufficient. God the Father was pleased to accept it on behalf of every sinner who believes. This is what makes us right before a holy God and fit to dwell in His presence—Christ's work, not ours. When we trust Him as Savior and Lord, His perfect record of righteousness is given to us as though it was our very own. And clothed in His perfection, we are accepted by God. And this drastically changes our experience. I like the way Richard Phillips conveys our new situation:

“We are led to this new mountain, remembering the former one that was covered with darkness and fire and gloom. Now, all of that has been pierced, blown aside by the wind of the gospel, torn open like the veil in the temple before the holy of holies, and what we see is a shining city, the city of the living God....This is the difference made by the coming of Jesus Christ, who has removed all that stood opposed to us with God, who has taken away the darkness and fire and gloom, who transforms the mountain of fear into the mountain of grace. What a magnificent portrayal of the difference it makes that Christ has come to take away our sin.”¹

As the old hymn by John Newton put it, “He has hushed the law's loud thunder, he has quenched Mount Sinai's flame.”² Amen! We don't have to come to Mount Sinai any longer because Jesus “perfectly fulfilled what Sinai represented.” And so, as Al Mohler writes, “God's people no longer identify with the place that God's law was given, but with the place where God's law was fulfilled.”³ And, therefore, as Kent Hughes summarizes the main point of Hebrews, “we must not veer off course toward Sinai, because Jesus has met Sinai's demands for holiness and perfection at Calvary atop Mount Zion.”⁴ Don't you see?

“The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament all find their ‘Yes’ and ‘Amen’ in Jesus and in the New Testament church he is building. In all this great unfolding panorama, therefore, there is one consistent message, namely, that we must hold fast to Christ as Savior, whatever difficulty or trial might befall us.”⁵

Many years ago there was a man by the name of John Bunyan who was imprisoned for illegally preaching the gospel. While in prison he began writing a novel that is now known all over the world as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It's an incredible piece of Christian allegory and the first of its kind in the English language. It has now been translated in over 200 languages and has never been out of print since its first publication. It is consistently listed among the top ten best-selling books of all time and may be *the* most read novel of all time. Perhaps you have had a chance to read it.

In it, Bunyan narrates a dream about a man by the name of Christian, who departs from his hometown, which is dubbed “the City of Destruction,” in order to search for a different city, “the Celestial City.” Along the way, Christian encounters a variety of characters—some helpful, some not so much—while he progresses through a great many adventures on the road. But it’s easy to discern that Christian, the man, is meant to represent the story of *every* Christian in history. His journey to the “Celestial City” is meant to signify our journey to Zion, “*the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (Heb. 12:22).

Those of you familiar with the book know that early on Christian has an encounter with a character by the name of “Mr. Worldly-Wiseman,” who, as his name suggests, gives Christian some advice that at first seems wise but proves to be futile as it leads our pilgrim off the narrow path that leads to Zion (at least for a stretch). But do you recall the tact of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman? He notices immediately that Christian looks weary and disheveled from the difficult journey and he warns him that the path he is on will likely get harder and more regrettable if he stays true, so he suggests a change of course for an easier way.

“Worldly-Wiseman told him, ‘You will find the relief you seek in a nearby village called Morality. In that village resides a gentleman whose name is Legality, a judicious man of very good reputation. He has the skill to help rid men of burdens like the one you have on your shoulders. To my knowledge, he has done a great deal of good in this way...My advice is to go to him immediately so that you can be helped. His house is not quite a mile from here, and if he is not at home, then you will be helped by his son, whose name is Civility.’”⁶

Christian reflects on the advice for a moment and then decides it would be prudent to heed his counsel. “The charm and subtle, seductive manners of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman”, writes C. J. Lovik, “quickly disarm Christian who is too inexperienced and inattentive to realize that he is being prepared to abandon God altogether and replace Him with idols of morality and legality.”⁷ And thus, after asking Worldly-Wiseman for directions to Mr. Legality’s house, we read:

“So Christian left his path to go to Mr. Legality’s house for help. As Christian neared the hill, he was struck by how high and foreboding the hill appeared. One side of the hill hung precariously over the path that wound its way around it, and Christian feared that the overhanging hill would fall on him. Filled with fear, Christian stopped his journey and stood still, wondering what he should do. His burden also now seemed heavier to him than it was just moments before he had taken this detour off the path...Flashes of fire came out of the hill, and Christian was afraid that he would be burned. Christian began to sweat and quake with fear. He was sorry that he had taken Mr. Worldly-Wiseman’s counsel. It was when he was thus filled with regret that he saw Evangelist coming to meet him. At the sight of him, Christian began to blush with shame.”⁸

Well, as you can imagine, it was a good thing that Evangelist showed up when he did. He reasons with Christian and learns of how he got off course. Then he gets him back on track—redirecting his attention from that fearful hill to which he had turned (let’s call it “Sinai”) and back to the way that lead to Zion. It seems clear that Bunyan had this passage of Hebrews in mind when he wrote this scene from Christian’s story. And all doubt is removed when you look closer at how Evangelist redirected Christian’s course. We read,

“‘Then,’ said Evangelist, ‘stand still for a while, so that I may show you the words of God.’ So Christian stood trembling. Then Evangelist said, ‘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.’ He also said, ‘Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draws back, God’s soul shall have no pleasure in him.’”⁹

Two biblical citations are employed there by Evangelist to get Christian back on track and they both come from Hebrews. The second one you should recognize because we have considered it in detail when we looked at the end of chapter 10. There our author, drawing on the Old Testament Scriptures, writes,

“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” (Hebrews 10:35-39)

But do you recognize the Evangelist’s first citation? Do you know where it comes from? The very next verse in our text this morning! Verse 25...

“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.” (Hebrews 12:25)

Bunyan understood the mind of the author of Hebrew quite well. The scene and dialogue between his characters—Christian and Evangelist—consists of the same basic substance of the scene and dialogue in Hebrews—between the audience and the author—especially here in chapter 12. We must remember that the audience consisted, by and large, of Christians who had come out of Judaism. These are men and women who grew up in the Old Covenant and under the Law of God but came to see Jesus as the true and promised Messiah who establishes a New Covenant with His people. And when they began to follow Jesus, their eyes were fixed on Zion. That was the destination they were seeking. The narrow way.

But somewhere along the path they faced burdens and dangers. They *“endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated”* (Heb. 10:32-33). And amid these hardship (and with the prospect of still greater hardship between them and their destination), they began to wonder whether there was a better way. An easier way. Maybe they had made a mistake. Maybe all of this pain and suffering could be avoided. And somehow—perhaps through the enticing counsel of a first-century Worldly-Wiseman—the thought was planted in their mind that there was a better way. They could turn from the path they were on since following Christ. They could go back into their former Judaism, back to the Old Covenant, back under the Law, back to the “nearby village called Morality.” And they began to drift. Some of them seemed to have Sinai in their gaze yet again.

But fortunately for them, their own Evangelist intercepts them. “At the sight of him, [they] began to blush in shame.” And as the writer of Hebrews “drew nearer and nearer...looking at [them] with a severe and dreadful countenance, he began reasoning with [them].” And he asks, “What are you doing here, Christian?”¹⁰ That is the letter of Hebrews, is it not? That is chapter 12 in a nutshell.

He’s saying, “Look at that mountain, Christians, that seemed so wise to turn back to. See it there? See it with all of its terrors? See how it burn with consuming fire? See its darkness and gloom? See how your ancestors—yes, even Moses himself—approached it with fear and could look but not touch, tremble but not draw near? That’s not your mountain! What are you doing here? That mountain will destroy you! Yes, God is on that mountain, but if you draw near—even clothed in the pristine vestments of Mr. Legality himself—you will be incinerated because God is holy, and you are not. You will never be made holy through your moral effort. You will never be made righteous through your Law-keeping. You may be convinced yours is a better way, but, trust me, it’s not. That mountain will destroy you. That’s not your mountain! So let me redirect your gaze back to your mountain. See it there? That’s the one you have come to through faith in Christ. Zion is its name. See the living Judge inviting you to draw near? See the angels in celebration with the saints of old? See the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven? That’s your mountain! That’s where you, by God’s incredible grace, are enrolled.

Why? Because, see there? That's Jesus. He is the mediator of a new and better covenant. His blood has made a way for you to draw near, because it calls out to the Father, not for vengeance and judgment (like Abel's blood), but for mercy and forgiveness. That's your mountain! That's your king! Look to Him and stay on the road of faith because it leads to Zion. Don't turn away in unbelief. Don't refuse Him who speaks. Yes, it is tough now and, yes, it will likely get tougher, but this race leads to glory, to Zion, so don't shrink back from God's grace."

That's basically what the author is doing in Hebrews. That's his objective. He's their Evangelist on the road who tries to bring them to their senses in the wake of their encounter with Worldly-Wiseman. He's redirecting them, so that they do not fall away and into destruction. He is telling them not to fear the trials ahead, because the end will prove that the way was worth it all. And John Bunyan clearly understood that as he wrote from his prison cell—a cell that he never would have been in, if he just had turned back from the Way—but there he was, looking to Zion. Perhaps he was thinking, as John Newton would famously write a century later in his famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*,

Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come.
T'was grace that brought us safe thus far
And grace will lead us home.

In any case, Bunyan understood that what the author of Hebrews was doing at the end of Hebrews 12 had enduring relevance. It's not just something for Christians saved out of Judaism. We dare not think that because we were not formerly Jews—framing our lives and conduct by the measure of God's Law—that this passage is not about us. It is about us. It is a struggle that all Christians face at some point and to varying degrees. Remember, for Bunyan, his protagonist, Christian, represents the experiences of *the* Christian, all of them, you and me. And so, as the editorial remark in my favorite edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* puts it,

“Mr. Worldly-Wiseman is not an ancient relic of the past. He is everywhere today, disguising his heresy and error by proclaiming the gospel of contentment and peace achieved by self-satisfaction and works. If he mentions Christ, it is not as the Savior who took our place, but as a good example of an exemplary life. Do we need a good example to rescue us, or do we need a Savior? If Christian had considered the question carefully earlier, he might have avoided the nearly deadly detour that Mr. Worldly Wiseman so confidently and cunningly recommended.”¹¹

And, I pray, you too will consider this passage well enough to guard against this error in our day. It is no less present, and it is no less cunning. You must not assume that since you are not of Jewish decent and feel no draw to turn from Jesus to the Law of Moses that you are not similarly enticed by the promising reputation of the hill of Morality. That's not your mountain. You may think that you would not be drawn to Mt. Sinai, but are you discerning and humble enough to admit that we all have our own little Sinais? And here, Kent Hughes so wonderfully and painfully alerts us to our tendency, when he writes the following:

“Today, few Christians, especially Gentiles, are in danger of turning back to Sinai per se and embracing the Levitical corpus of the Old Testament. Sinai, with its fiery mountain and its code, is simply too daunting. Instead, we fabricate our own mini-Sinai with a series of mini-laws which reflect nothing of the fiery presence and which are, we think, well within the reach of our unaided powers. If one is an evangelical, one's little legalisms reflect something of Biblical ethics, however faintly. If one is liberal, the little legalisms will simply reflect cultural consensus about popular causes.

But whether evangelical or liberal, our legalisms—our mini-Sinai are always *reductionist*, shrinking spirituality to a series of wooden laws which say, ‘If you will do those six or sixty or six hundred things, you will be godly.’ And, of course, legalism is always *judgmental*. How easily our hearts imagine that our lists elevate us, while at the same time providing us with a convenient rack on which to stretch others in merciless judgment.”¹²

What an insight! Or was it an insult? No, it was a kindness, if it removes our ignorance to our own idiosyncrasies. You may never have met a Worldly-Wiseman in your life, but don't deceive yourself into thinking they are not all around you. They are. And they are shrewd enough to know that's not how they should introduce themselves. But that's the map they offer. It leads to Morality (or at least the town of "Good Enough"). But these are not cities that can provide refuge for the Day that's coming. They cannot shield you from the judgment of God. Their gates will not keep His holy wrath at bay. Those filthy rags they call righteousness are nothing more than manmade kindling. Why would you wear that when there is the perfect righteousness of Christ offered to you as a free gift? Clothe yourself in Him through faith. That's the way of Zion—the way of faith, not works, not Law. If we draw near to God through any other means, we will be consumed. "Christ is the asbestos righteousness that wraps us up in love so we can enjoy the blazing brightness of God's holiness and not be consumed by it."¹³ Indeed, our author has said,

"Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 7:25)

And again,

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:19-22)

So don't turn away from Christ, who sits enthroned in the heavenly Zion, and go instead back to Sinai—or your own Sinai in miniature—because that is not the mountain you want. You want Zion. "Sure, the fiery presence is there, but we have the requisite holiness and access of Christ."¹⁴ That is why we can go to Zion. That is why, brothers and sisters, we have in some sense already "come to Mount Zion" through faith in Christ (Heb. 12:22). That is our Mountain! You must not seek refuge on any other. They will be shaken and crumble to bits, but Mount Zion is unshakable. And that's really the way he concludes the chapter. Look again at the warning that starts in verse 25 and this time we will read the rest of it.

"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.²⁶ 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.'²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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,²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:25-29; cf. Haggai 2:6-7)

Obviously, the main point of this warning is, like the others in Hebrews, to keep them from turning away from Christ in unbelief. But there are a few secondary points that are worth highlighting. For example, I think these verses have much to teach us about acceptable worship. But this thought (and a few others) will have to wait one more week...

Let us pray...

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ; P&R Publishing, 2006), 567-568.

² John Newton, "Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder," from *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), selection 172.

³ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 209.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 193.

⁵ Phillips, 565.

⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which Is to Come*, ed. C. J. Lovik (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 227n.5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ These are the remarks of C. J. Lovik in *Ibid.*, 227n.8.

¹² Hughes, 190.

¹³ John Piper, "Pilgrim Worship," a sermon preached on February 15, 2014, at the Linger Conference, and accessed online at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/pilgrim-worship>.

¹⁴ Hughes, 191.