

HEBREWS – LEVITICUS
“Two Mountains”
Hebrews 12:18-24
November 26, 2023

Hebrews 12:18-24

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.” 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. ¹

“This is God’s Word.”

Have you ever bought tickets to go to a movie, but due to scheduling issues and traffic, arrived a bit late. Not so late that it is not worth going, but just enough late that you’re walking into the theater after the trailers and advertisements about concessions, the lights are off and you’re doing your best not to disrupt anyone else? You finally sit down and it is clear that a story is going on, but you’re not sure what is happening. So you watch for a few minutes just trying to catch up, trying to figure out who are the protagonists and who are the antagonists. The movie reviews are too good to leave...but you’re lost for a bit.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Heb 12:18–24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

That is how some discover the Bible. It is a big book. It is a big book comprised of sixty-six small books. Whether you grew up going to church or this is fairly new to you, the reality is that there are more people on the planet by far who have never read the Bible in full than those who have. In fact, that may actually be the case for those who attend church regularly as well.

I get it, but here's the challenge. We know this is God's Word. We said it and have trained you to respond "Thanks be to God." Every church has its idiosyncratic recitations. Not bad, but can devolve into rote repetition.

So, we affirm it is good. We affirm it is a gift from God to us as it provides an inerrant, immutable, message of truth that is God speaking to us.

But, let's be honest...sometimes we open the Bible, read a passage taken from a longer narrative and have to work a bit to gain insight regarding the bigger story.

Thus, a passage like today's can feel like we have entered a movie fifteen minutes after the opening credits.

But...we know, really know, that this message from God is needed, is right, is so good and helpful, that we must allow him to reveal the fuller context for us. For if we don't, we run the risk of wasting a God-ordained moment and even worse, miss what he is saying to the church, historically certainly, but today as well.

Just reading these two verses again reveals that this is huge, poetic, beautiful, and epic.

Hebrews 12:18-19

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.²

But...what does this mean?

The writer of Hebrews, led by the Holy Spirit, has taken the early Christians, and in this case the ones who come from an Israelite background, with Jewish heritage, along a journey of correction, clarification, and calling. These early believers were struggling to remain true as the persecution from the pagan world was strong, but added to that was the persecution faced by their own family members who had not come to Christ, their former priests and rabbis who were saw their step into Christianity as a step away from faithful teaching and the law of Moses.

This church of new believers was struggling in their faith. All areas of their lives were impacted as persecution was not limited to being ostracized in their religious gatherings, but in family life, holiday experiences, traditional gatherings, business dealings, and every single aspect of living.

These believers said “I believe in Jesus” and truly surrendered all to him. And that receives an “Amen” in the gathering of the church for it is good. Yet, the ramifications of their newly confessed belief in Jesus Christ left them feeling isolated, alone, and abandoned by those who were previously their closest friends and family members.

I hope you see just a glimpse here why the church is commanded to love one another, serve one another, protect one another, and hold one another accountable. The local church family IS the kingdom family that every Christian needs. Ignoring this command would have left these early Christians as spiritual orphans, alone and confused.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 12:18–19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

As my ninth grade English teacher told us often, “A word to the wise is sufficient.” I think this is something the church today needs to know and reclaim. May we be smart enough to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in the scripture and wise enough to understand what it means practically, tangibly, and eternally.

This section of Hebrews 12 is a continuation of the writer’s illustration centered around running a marathon.

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| Hebrews 12:1-3 | Basics – run the race with perseverance. |
| Hebrews 12:4-11 | Endurance. |
| Hebrews 12:12-17 | Guard against that which keeps you from finishing well. |
| Hebrews 12:18-24 | Listen to the right voice. The starting line is not the goal. ³ |

Today, as we enter this story, we come to this portion beginning in verse 18. The focus is to listen well, hear God’s voice. Hear and know. And...to press on with the unshaken faith that God’s kingdom is secure, the race is worth it, the focus is forward, and the joy of the Lord is our strength.

This section of scripture is about two mountains. It is a contrast and a clarification for the early Hebrew Christians. This unveiling and restating of truth is essential...otherwise the race we run is in vain.

Simply put, two points:

- 1. FROM MOUNT SINAI**
- 2. TO MOUNT ZION**

³ Hughes, R. Kent. *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 415-6.

FROM MOUNT SINAI

This requires some historical explanation. Otherwise, it will be like sitting in a theater watching a movie that has already begun, and just hoping it eventually makes sense.

Mount Sinai is a mountain described in the Old Testament. You will read of his and also of Mount Horeb. Most theologians over the centuries believe these two names to be of the same mountain, so for the sake of simplicity, we will call it Mount Sinai today. It has been depicted in art, in film, in song, and in performances for many years.

Yet, not everyone knows what this mountain represents.

We see it described in a number of passages.

Exodus 19:16-19

¹⁶ On 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. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now 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. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.⁴

Evidently, this mountain is a big deal.

When God instructed his prophet Moses to lead his children from slavery in Egypt toward a land of promise and freedom, he led them to this place by God's instruction. It was here that God provided his people, through

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ex 19:16–19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Moses the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Thus, this is moment where God gifted his law to his children.

This is a seminal moment in the history of God's people. As the event occurred, the day that would be different than any other began with the people preparing. The holiness of God and the holiness of the moment was not lost upon them, at least in the beginning.

The scripture states that the people consecrated themselves. They washed their clothing, abstained from sexual relations, became and remained ceremonially clean, and observed the orders that no man or beast could touch the mountain without facing death by stoning or arrows.⁵

Suffice to say this was series. This was not a casual, come as you are songfest.

For three days the people remained at the foot of the mountain. On the third day a thick cloud appeared at the top of the mountain. Within the cloud were lightning flashes and thunder. This is all in Exodus 19.

Oh, in addition to the cloud, lightning, and thunder, there was a very loud trumpet blast.

Exodus 19:16

¹⁶ On 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. ⁶

Moses led the people from their tents to the foot of the mountain on this day. Here's what happened.

⁵ Hughes, 416.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 19:16.

Exodus 19:18-19

¹⁸ Now 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. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.⁷

Fear enveloped the people. God was speaking. It sounded like thunder. It sounded like trumpets. The special effects were incredible. This is a fireworks show unlike any other.

And it really happened.

This was the gift of God to his people. His law. His commands. His instruction.

While the author of Hebrews never says “Mount Sinai” it is clear this is the story he is referencing. The Hebrews would know this. They understood the connection. They had grown up hearing this over and over again. Thus, they got it.

And we must as well...though it may be a little more challenging for us, seeing as most of us did not grow up Jewish, going to synagogue and memorizing the Torah. Yet, it remains the church’s story.

And it is vital.

For this passage, in all the amazing effects, reminds us that the old mountain (Mount Sinai) was symbolic of the old covenant and in such the Lord was not accessible, as stated in Hebrews 9:8.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 19:18–19.

Hebrews 9:8

⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing⁸

Only the high priest could enter God's presence and then only once a year.⁹ This was set up in this Mount Sinai passage and completed as the law was defined and described in the Old Covenant.

So, even in this case, while the men and women of Israel could see the mountain and all happening upon it, the law that was given provided no power to overcome sin.¹⁰

Thus the author is reminding his readers to run the race, but to stop listening the voices that keep confusing them and calling them to run back toward Mount Sinai.

This is like running a race and stopping mid-way to the finish line and turning around to run back to the starting line.

There are two lines in a race. One is the goal. The other is the start. You cannot finish if you live at the start.

Thus, two lines. Revealed as two mountains. So, mountain number two:

TO MOUNT ZION

Hebrews 12:24

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,¹¹

The contrast between Sinai and Zion is stunning.¹²

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 9:8.

⁹ Schriener, Thomas R. *Hebrews: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 397.

¹⁰ Hughes, 417.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 12:22.

¹² Schriener, 398.

Zion is the historic location within Jerusalem that was captured by David as referenced in 2 Samuel 5 and 1 Kings 8. Eventually the Jews began referring to the entirety of Jerusalem as Mount Zion. Yet, the Hebrew writer is not referring to the city of old. Zion is the kingdom of God.

A proper reading of this passage requires see them through what is called the “already, but not yet” lens of scripture. The kingdom of God is inaugurated (already) though not consummated (not yet.) Thus, Christians can experience, in part, the fulfillment of God’s promises even as we await the completion of these promises in the new creation.¹³

Zion is about the eternal – the new Jerusalem – the heavenly city of God. The promise in the psalms to rebuild Zion is not about brick and mortar in modern-day Israel, but about the ultimate fulfilment in the heavenly Zion as described in Psalm 110:2...

Psalm 110:2

**² The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies! ¹⁴**

...where we see the Lord and his Messiah (our Savior Jesus Christ) reigning from Zion. Zion will not be shaken. It will endure forever.¹⁵

Christians – those hearing this message in Hebrews originally, and those here today – must know that we are citizens of the heavenly city and thus, enjoy all privileges of living in Christ.¹⁶

Do you know this line?

¹³ Mohler, R. Albert, Jr. *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Christ in Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2017), 209-10.

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 110:2.

¹⁵ Schriener, 398.

¹⁶ Hughes, 419.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”¹⁷

Charles Dickens famed opening line in his book *A Tale of Two Cities*.

May I submit that today we should understand this as reality...

“It was the best of times...and today and tomorrow, it will even be better than what we used to call the best of times.”

That is a summary of this portion of Hebrews – “A Tale of Two Mountains.”

Christian – you cannot live faithfully for Christ in this long race that requires perseverance if you are perpetually stopping, turning around and running back toward the starting line.

You cannot live faithfully for Christ if you just decide to stop and not move forward at all. You’ll never finish well.

You cannot live faithfully for Christ if you are not discerning the voice of God. Do you know the voice of God? He’s speaking in that still, small voice through his Word. He has spoken and is speaking, but if you’re listening in the wind, you’re hearing other voices.

Sinai was vital...but that was just the starting line. We are moving forward, marching upward to Zion...that beautiful city of God. And...we don’t want to march there alone, so keep moving and bring others along.

What practically does this mean? Live with the end in mind. Faithful, godly legacies are gifts from God and his voice will lead us forward, onward, upward.

¹⁷ Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*

Come, ye that love the Lord
And let your joys be known
Join in a song with sweet accord
Join in a song with sweet accord
And thus surround the throne
And thus surround the throne

*We're marching to Zion
Beautiful, beautiful Zion
We're marching upward to Zion
The beautiful city of God.*

Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God
But children of the heavenly king
But children of the heavenly king
Shall speak their joys abroad
Shall speak their joys abroad.

*We're marching to Zion
Beautiful, beautiful Zion
We're marching upward to Zion
The beautiful city of God.*

The hill of Zion yields
A thousand sacred sweets
Before we reach the heavenly fields
Before we reach the heavenly fields
Or walk the golden streets
Or walk the golden streets

*We're marching to Zion
Beautiful, beautiful Zion
We're marching upward to Zion
The beautiful city of God.*

Then let our songs abound
And every tear be dry
We're marching through Immanuel's ground
We're marching through Immanuel's ground
To fairer worlds on high
To fairer worlds on high

*We're marching to Zion
Beautiful, beautiful Zion
We're marching upward to Zion
The beautiful city of God.*