

Hebrews Study Session 19 - Chapter 12:18-29

In this section of Scripture, the author of Hebrews makes one final appeal for those in the beleaguered church who were still sitting on the fence between boldly embracing Christ and faith in Him OR shamefully returning to the empty hull of Judaism. While tonight's passage is fairly brief and straight forward, it raises some vitally important questions for modern believers and churches. This section can be broken down into 2 parts: 1) Contrast between two mountains - Sinai and Zion, & 2) A final warning against rejecting God's message.

As we get started, I want to point out that the author builds upon previous materials covered. By comparison these points are shorter in length because he has already spent ample time building the supports necessary for his audience to fully understand these points he's about to make and what their significance is. As we read this passage, keep in mind the links to the past chapters.

1. Contrast between two mountains

[Read Hebrews 12:18-24]

Q: What happened at Mount Sinai? *(the law of the old covenant was given through Moses)*

In this case Sinai represents the entire old covenant. In the Greek, the first word of v.18 is "not". In Greek, the first word of the sentence is put there because it is the most important word in the thought. The author of Hebrews is drawing his audience's attention to the fact that they have NOT come to Sinai.

Q: What are the seven "terrors" associated with Mt. Sinai in this passage? *(vv. 18-20 - the mountain could not be touched under penalty of death, blazing fire, darkness, gloom, whirlwind (storm), blast of trumpet, sound of speaking words)*

Q: Why do you think that the sound of a voice speaking words would be included in the list of terrors? *(Because it was God's voice and it was speaking the stark and complete holiness of God to sinful people as well as the harsh and rigid conditions of the Law)*

[Read Exodus 19:10-24; 20:18-20]

Q: Why did God have Moses set boundaries around Sinai? *(to keep the people from being killed by the Lord breaking through against them)*

Q: Based upon our past study of Hebrews, what was the purpose of the author in identifying these terrors from Exodus in relation to the giving of the Law by God? *(It was a reminder of the separation that had to exist between holy God and sinful mankind. These were obstacles that kept man apart from God for his own good - so that he would not take God lightly or end up having to be killed by God for defiling His holiness. These things reminded the people of the boundaries that existed between themselves and God - like the layout of the tabernacle itself.)*

Notice how impersonal these various terrors are. They have no relation to the people other than to serve as notices that all people are unworthy to approach God without His express prior permission.

There is no place in the Exodus text that states that Moses was afraid of God's presence like the other people. This is another instance of the New Testament clarifying and expanding what was written in the Old Testament. We are given a glimpse into Moses' emotional state while standing before the people and God on that day that we did not know before.

Q: Why do you think that the author points out that even Moses was full of fear? (*Because Moses was one of the most important figures for the Jewish faith and it shows that even he was fearful when confronted by the holy, living God. No sinful man can stand before the holy God without being terrified. God is an awesome God and is to be revered by all.*)

Then the sharp contrast is drawn. The first word in v.22 is "but" which describes a major contrast between what was just discussed and what is about to be discussed. In this case, the contrast is between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Notice that believers have not come to Sinai but rather to Zion.

Q: Just as there were seven terrors associated with Sinai, the author mentions seven wonders of Zion. What are those seven "wonders"? (*It is the city of the living God - the heavenly Jerusalem, myriads of angels in joyous assembly, the church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven, God - the judge of all, the spirits of righteous men made perfect, Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and the sprinkled blood which speaks better than Abel's*)

Unlike the seven terrors of Sinai, these seven need a bit of explanation. We know by the description that Zion, which is the city of the living God and heavenly Jerusalem is where God dwells.

Myriads was a word that once meant 10,000. However, over time and by the time of the writing of the New Testament, it came to mean a number too large to be counted. This phrase is best coupled with the word "general assembly" which literally refers to a mass meeting but was used to describe a festal event - the keeping of a religious festival - a joyous event for a multitude is the picture here. It was used also to describe joy, revelry, and delight as well as the festivities that surrounded the original Olympic games. So we have an innumerable number of joyous angels celebrating in God's presence. (There are some who couple the "general assembly" with the church reference that follows but the grammar makes more sense by taking it with the myriad of angels just mentioned.)

The church of the first-born refers to all those who are part of the universal church of Christ, who is the first-born. This encompasses all the redeemed. The names of these saints are enrolled in heaven. The fact that their names are written down in heaven shows that they belong here alongside God.

God is the judge of all and He is there. Those who have come to Zion have come to the judge of all, thus One who can pass a final judgment which cannot be overturned or disputed.

The spirits of righteous men made perfect. This is a reference to those saints who have already died. They are awaiting the rest of the saints arrival in due time. (Recall Hebrews 11:40)

It also stresses the nature of Zion being spiritual rather than the actual physical mountain where Jerusalem was built. These saints were also perfected by the sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus is present in heaven as He mediated the new covenant by which everyone who is in Zion is there due to their faith in Jesus and His finished work to make that new covenant a reality. The author spent great lengths earlier in his sermon to make sure those he was preaching to understood the importance of Jesus.

Lastly, is a puzzler. “The sprinkled blood that speaks better than the blood of Abel”. To unravel this enigma, we need to go back to the authors use of Cain and Abel earlier in this chapter. Cain rose up and killed Abel. Abel’s blood bore witness against Cain indicting him of his guilt. In this respect, Abel’s blood sought to rightfully shut out a wicked man from God’s presence. On the other hand Christ’s blood has won forgiveness of sin, crying out that people of the new covenant are no longer guilty as they have been cleansed completely. Christ’s blood opens up a way into God’s presence for His people whereas Abel’s blood merely pointed out sin and barred Cain from God’s presence. Notice the word “better” is used again. The author hasn’t used this word since 11:40 (or not in this chapter). He uses it primarily to describe the superiority of Christ and the new covenant to that of anyone else and the old covenant.

Notice in contrast to Sinai how personable these “wonders” are. They all show a relationship between the saint and God and His personal dwelling place. Zion is inviting and attractive.

Q: What do you think the author is using these two mountains to represent? (*the two covenants - old and new*)

Q: What do covenants do? What is their purpose? (*The describe how people can related to God. They point to a relationship with God*)

Q: What does this section teach us about our relationship to God? (*It’s Zion, not Sinai*)

[Read Galatians 4:21-31] - Here is the same point being made in only a slightly different manner to a group of people (the Galatian church) who had fallen back into legalism at the hands of the Judaizers.

I want us to do a little exercise together here. Think for a moment. Suppose you were the person responsible to make a sign that was going to be posted in front of each mountain and the sign needed to be very brief and to the point about what each mountain represented or how each mountain was to be viewed.

Q: What would be some proper signs to post at Sinai? (*Stop! Stay Away! any other answer along this line*)

Q: What would be some proper signs to post at Zion? (*Come and belong! Welcome! Enter and enjoy! any other answer in line with these*)

There is an attitude in our culture that says that we are to “live for today”. While it is true we can only live in today our culture’s attitude is to live for today as if there will be no tomorrow.

In this thought, a lost person, a typical person in our culture would say that both mountains are too far away to be relevant to their lives. Sinai is too far in the past. It's an old and outdated idea that God is a vengeful and wrathful God that no one would want a relationship with anyways. Zion on the other hand is too far in the future. It may be nice but it doesn't do anything to help me get through today with the challenges I face. It's a better view of God but He's still too far removed from my life to be of any real importance - today. This passage of Scripture truly gets us to examine our churches and the message we are sending out to our communities. The author of Hebrews isn't really talking about physical mountains as much as he's talking about how we relate to God. The question for our church is what image of a relationship with God do we display to the world? Do they see us with a "Stay Away!" sign, impersonal and that outsiders are unworthy of entry into our community of believers OR do they see us with a "Come and Belong!" sign which is personal and shows that outsiders can enter and receive the same grace we did so that a relationship with God is possible and desirable.

Q: What mountain does your church offer? Why do you say that?

Q: How can we, as a church body, reflect the forgiveness, holiness and grace seen in Zion to those outside our church?

Think on this last phrase in v.24. Jesus' blood speaks a good word for us. The question is, do we allow the blood of Jesus to speak louder than the condemning blood of Abel in our church? Have we in some way elevated condemnation over forgiveness? We have to examine our hearts as those original listeners to this message had to examine their hearts towards the lost (but close to salvation). Remember the eternal fate of some of the congregation had not been settled yet. Their flirtation with apostasy revealed that many were not truly saved yet but the author was doing all he could to convince them and prove to them the greatness of new covenant of Christ over the old covenant and the Law.

2. Final warning against rejecting God's message

[Read Hebrews 12: 25-29]

Both sections of this passage deal with God speaking. The central thought of both is "*see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking...*" Both covenants involve God speaking and thus it is imperative to listen to what God says. The author is going to use his familiar pattern of "lesser to greater" to make this final warning.

Q: What is the "lesser" example the author brings up? What happened in the Old Testament which should have grabbed our attention as to the importance of listening to God's words? (*v. 26 - the people at Sinai with the mountain/earth shaking - no one escaped the experience and the effects of the Law*)

Q: What was the "greater" example the author brings up? (*vv. 27-28 - the final shaking of everything on earth and the heavens, too.*)

[Read Haggai 2:6] - This is where the “shaking” idea came from in the Old Testament and it is a prediction of a day coming when both heaven and earth would be shaken (destroyed). These people being addressed in Hebrews needed an Old Testament example, something they would recognize as Scriptural and authoritative, to make this point valid in their minds.

If the people of the Old Testament didn’t escape the judgments of the Law, it was even more certain that no one will escape God’s final judgment in which he shakes both heaven and earth. No one will escape under the new covenant.

Shaking means to “agitate, to move violently, cause to tremble, or quake. When used in Scripture it often means to test something by destruction. Imagine that you have a marble. You go outside and form a fist-sized ball of mud and then put the marble in the middle of that ball of mud. Let it dry completely. Then pick up the ball of dirt and begin shaking it in your fist violently until it begins to disintegrate. In time all the dirt will shake off leaving only the marble remaining. When God shakes the universe the next time on judgment day, all of heaven and earth will be destroyed completely and all that will be left are those who share in the eternal nature of Jesus Christ.

Q: What is the nature of the kingdom we are going to receive? (*v.28 - eternal since it cannot be shaken*)

[Read II Peter 3:10-13, Revelation 21:1]

Q: What is the appropriate response or attitude toward God for giving us this kingdom? (*v. 28 - gratitude/thankfulness*)

Notice that gratitude is the way in which believers offer acceptable service/worship to God. We do so out of awe and reverence for Him. This shows a right relationship to God. The new covenant allows us bold access to God and the gratitude for being able to approach God directly leads to us serving Him and worshiping Him with right spirit - that of awe of Him and a holy respect for Him. This is because we know who God is - not just a made up figment of our imagination but the true living God.

Q: What is the reason for our awe and reverence of God? (*v. 29 - God is a consuming fire - this is a present active participle which means that God is always a consuming fire - constantly blazing and utterly destroying all things opposed to Him. He is not to be trifled with.*)

Remember that the big picture message that the author is trying to get across to this early church is to inspire them to persevere under their current conditions. He wants them to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus and not turn back to Judaism.

Q: How do you think that this last portion of this passage helps make the point that the believers need to persevere? (*There are only two final options for people - to be destroyed when shaken or be revealed as heir of the kingdom when shaken. There is no middle ground or third option available from God. It’s important that they persevere in order to receive the kingdom from God - other answers possible*)

One of the truths this passage brings out is the essential nature of grace. It has to be received and enjoyed in the context of the covenant relationship with God. There is no “cheap grace” that grants forgiveness to everyone without any repentance or the establishment of a relationship with God, who gives the grace freely. Yet, with the acceptance of grace comes the redemption, adoption, salvation, and eternal life that all come from the covenant relationship with God Himself.

One of the toughest balancing acts for modern churches is that between the moral decay we see in society and the slide away from God’s holiness AND the call for people to accept God’s grace. When we focus on the moral decay we tend to focus our holiness. While God is holy and must be presented as such, when we focus on holiness our churches begin to resemble Sinai - terrors for the lost. When we focus purely on the love of God, we show a picture of Zion but can often forget to share the road to getting there as some churches proclaim universal salvation for all. One of the keys to portraying Zion and its wonders accurately is to make sure we call people to a relationship with God rather than just to an outcome God can bring. Also, we need to call people to joy by expressing joy in our lives and times of worship.

Going back to the idea of shaking, we need to know that those things which cannot be shaken are eternal and will last. Thus, the orientation of our lives needs to be on those things which are eternal as opposed to temporary and linked solely to this world. The message of the book of Hebrews is that it challenges us to live in light of what cannot be lost.

Q: What adjustments do we need to make in order to live more in line with eternity?

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?