

Two Mountains
Hebrews 12:18–24
June 30, 2024



I wonder if you've seen the picture above. It's from roughly a month ago—May 20, 2024—and it's a picture of the traffic jam of folks ascending Mount Everest. To be clear, the most elevated spot on our planet is not *always* like that. Though each year a decent number of people summit, there are only particular windows of time when the weather allows it. This past May was one of those windows.

We could say a lot about Everest, asking *why* people fork out tens of thousands of dollars to be guided up that particular peak, or ask *how* they get the months off work necessary to do so. We could ask any number of questions about that mountain or those that climb it. Yet, for our purposes this morning, it's the juxtaposition of Everest that most fascinates me.

One serious student of Everest wrote *this* about a trend over the past 15–20 years: “When there is a record number of deaths, the next season has more climbers than the previous deadly one.”¹ As an example of that trend—a microcosm—2023 was the deadliest climbing season on record. Does that slow down those streaming to base camp? No, 2024 is on pace to have hundreds more than 2023. Millionaires in green boots don't make it back down. And yet, more continue to climb.

It's the juxtaposition that's fascinating. Because Everest, in one sense, captures *both* emphases of the Scriptures concerning mountains. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* describes that dual emphasis with these words, “Biblical meanings of the mountain are paradoxical and even contradictory . . . At times inaccessible, barren, and uninhabited, mountains are nonetheless places where God's people will dwell in abundance.”²

In the Scriptures, mountains are not *merely* topographical realities—though they are not *less* than that—they are *also* spiritual symbols. In different contexts, they convey different things. We'll talk more about that in a moment.

But, first, we just read Hebrews 12. However, the point Hebrews 12 intends to convey is far from new. It *continues* to be the point of the entire book.³ Though he's made his case multiple times from multiple angles, this time the author of Hebrews chooses the imagery of mountains.

Because the point he intends to make is a point of contrast—of one thing being *better* than the other—he chooses two mountains. And to those reading this book, it's not just any two mountains, it's the two they knew best.

1. Mountains

¹ <https://www.alanarnette.com/blog/2024/01/20/everest-by-the-numbers-2024-edition/>

² Leland Ryken, and others, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 572.

³ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 395, it functions as a summary of that which has come before.

Though I don't want to belabor this, *before* we look at those two mountains it might be helpful to elaborate on the statement that mountains are not *merely* topographical realities but *also* spiritual symbols.

Mountains are mentioned approximately five hundred times in the Scriptures. We might even say that the entire story *began* on one. According to the Prophet Ezekiel, Eden itself was on a mountain. In that passage, it is called the mountain of God (Ez. 28:13–15). Then, not too long after Eden, the vessel delivering Noah and his family landed on a mountain. Then, not too long after Ararat, Abraham and Isaac ascended Moriah. On that mount, blood was shed. On that mount, the Lord provided. Not too long after that, Moses ascended Mount Horeb to see a bush aflame. On that mount, God spoke. On the same site, Elijah encountered God, a mountain *also* called the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8).

Whether we're talking about Eden, Moriah, Horeb, or others, mountains were not *merely* topographical, not merely something majestic to behold. In fact, in many cases mountains were where God met with His people. This was of course heightened after David captured the stronghold of Zion in the book of 2 Samuel (2 Sam. 5:7). David soon called that captured mountain and what it became the city of David. On *that* mount, in *that* city, the ark was brought, and the temple built. God would meet with His people *there*.

With much of that in mind, the Prophets and the Psalms point out the spiritual significance of mountains, often using them in symbolic fashion. On the last Sunday in June *last* summer, I preached from Psalm 125, which begins: **Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever** (Ps. 125:1). As we said *then*, no one climbing Zion and singing the Psalms of Ascent—having that mount's immensity *clarified* with each step—says to themselves, "I think I could move this." No, that mount abides. The people that wrote and sang that song are no longer on the earth. That particular temple may not still stand glistening. But the mountain they sang about thousands and thousands of years ago is the one you'd ascend today.

That Psalm goes on to use that immovable, enduring, imagery of the mountains to describe God's care for His people: **As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore** (Ps. 125:2). Some would say that permanence was one of the reasons covenant-making, lawgiving, and covenant renewal occurred on mountains (Ex. 19–20; Deut. 9–10). As those mountains continued to stand, they continued to serve as reminders of that which God revealed about Himself.⁴

Genesis 49 attaches the adjective "everlasting" to its description of the hills (Gen. 49:26). The Psalmist sings that the righteousness of God is like the mighty mountains (Ps. 36:6). We could go on. The paragraphs above merely glance at the hundreds of references to mountains in the Old Testament.

If we turn to the New, we'd see a better Moses—the Son of David—go up into the mountains to be alone (Jn. 6:15). Of course, He wasn't alone. The Gospel of Matthew tells us He went up on the mountain to pray (Mt. 14:23). On the Mount of Olives, in a garden, He would one day pray late on a Thursday night. The night before He ascended a different hill.

That's a smattering of examples from the New Testament. There is so much more. At 9:00 you're studying a sermon He gave on a mountain. These places of elevation are in place after place in the Bible; and they're significant in ways we haven't yet fathomed. Those reading this book would've known that imagery, that significance. And of the ones mentioned, it's doubtful any mountains captured this significance more than the two Hebrews names. Note first,

⁴ Ryken, 573.

2. Mount Sinai (vv. 18–21)

Now that I've elaborated upon the statement I made in the introduction about mountains, let me elaborate upon the statement I made in the introduction about this mountain imagery being part of the overall argument of the book.

Much of Hebrews is about access. In chapter 10, at the conclusion of the central argument of the book, the author wrote, **Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus . . . let us draw near** (Heb. 10:19–22). As we've seen, however, that's *not* to assume access.

Though we live in a day where access is often assumed. On the other hand, however, there *are* doors you don't have keys to. There are gates you can't drive through. There are places you can't go. Maybe you walk into concert hall, or into the arena, and your ticket makes sure you sit near the angels. You couldn't get lower, closer, if you tried.

So, in one sense, our world assumes access. Yet, in another sense you can understand what it means *not* to be able to start any car in the parking lot, drive into whatever neighborhood you want to, park your car in *any* garage, or open the door of *any* house you choose.

If I were to sum up the contrast of these two mountains, and what the author intends to show us, it's about access. We see this in the verb that's in both verse 18 and verse 22. In verse 18, that verb is negated: **For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind.**

What's this describing? It's describing an event the Israelites would've known well, a central event in their people's history. It's not unlike me referencing Pearl Harbor, D-Day, or 9–11. You don't need me to spell out what I'm referring to. These readers knew these words described Sinai. Verse 20 and 21 will make it even more apparent. Yet upon hearing verse 18, these hearers would immediately be transported to Exodus 19, where Moses wrote, **So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently** (Ex. 19:16–17).

Those reading *these* words in Hebrews knew *those* words. This was an event that was talked about from generation to generation. It was a moment at a mountain that produced terror. Because as they're standing at the foot of Sinai, the Lord descended in fire, smoke rose like a furnace, and the ground underneath them—the mountain in front of them, shook. The people in the camp trembled.

Hebrews goes on in verse 19: **and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged no further word be spoken to them.** They were terrified by the storm, among other things. But why did they beg for no further words? Verse 20: **For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned."**

Though the Israelites were at the foot of the mountain the Lord Himself had descended upon, they were *not* to touch it. It—the mountain—was inaccessible to them. And since the Lord had descended upon it, *He* was, in a sense, inaccessible to them.⁵ Verse 20 says not even a beast could touch that mountain without being stoned. Exodus 19 is a bit broader, **whether beast or man, he shall not live** (Ex. 19:13). And if you think I'm pushing the inaccessibility argument too

⁵ The "entire description of Sinai underscores his inaccessibility," Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 384; "free access to God was denied," in Schreiner, 396.

far, hear what the Lord said to Moses in Exodus 19:24: **Come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, or He will break forth upon them.**

As you see, this is another angle on the case Hebrews has been making. The covenant made with Moses was a different covenant. In *that* administration, only one man—the High Priest—could draw near to God. And He could only do so on one day a year. They didn't assume access. Because they didn't *have* that kind of access.

Therefore, even when they came close, they were fearful. This was certainly the case at Sinai. Verse 21 continues, **And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am full of fear and trembling."**

So, hear again the verb and its negation in verse 18: **You have not come** to *that* mountain. Now hear the verb in verse 22: **But you have come.**

3. Mount Zion (vv. 22–24)

That verb is worth pondering for a moment. It's the same one used in Hebrews 4:16 imploring us to draw near, to come to, the throne of grace in order that we might receive mercy. That verb—used more than once in Hebrews—is worth considering. It's also worth noting the *tense* of that verb. In verse 22 it's in the perfect tense, meaning, this "having come to" is something that happened in the past, with effects *continuing* into the present.

For these believers, this is a message of assurance. You have *not* come to Sinai, that mount where you *couldn't* draw near. Instead, verse 22: **But you have come to Mount Zion.** This is the mount that, according to the Psalmist, abides. It's the one that cannot be moved (Ps. 125). It's where the ark of the covenant was brought, where the temple was built, where God dwelt among His people. For the Hebrews, Zion was where the throne of God—heaven—met the place of humanity—earth.⁶

In the earlier section, Sinai had seven characteristics named: touched, blazing fire, darkness, gloom, whirlwind, the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. In *this* section, with intentional symmetry, Zion has seven characteristics or descriptions listed as well. The first is that on *this* particular mountain—the one to which they have come—is a city: **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God.**

How might that be so? What does the author mean by saying we *have come* to the city of the living God? The second aspect of this mount listed is that **you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.** One of the verses in the Psalms of Ascent that I grew to appreciate last summer was the description of Jerusalem in Psalm 122:3, where the Psalmist wrote, **Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together.**⁷ In that phrase, the Psalmist makes clear that the city *itself* was designed to enhance an ideal. The location of the temple, the layout of the houses, and the walls around the city all intended to facilitate something.⁸ Those reading Hebrews 12 would've known the layout of *that* city. And they would've known it had been designed.

Why point out the design of Jerusalem? As we've said before, if we're convinced that the point of human history is for God to reveal Himself to His people, and if we *also* are convinced that that God aiming to reveal Himself is all-powerful—sovereign over every second, ruling over every acre—then we should have *little* trouble believing He can—and does—reveal Himself in countless

⁶ It's a holy mountain (Is. 11:9), where the Lord dwells and where the Lord reigns (Is. 24:23).

⁷ ESV

⁸ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 368.

ways. Thus far in Hebrews we've said that revelation of Himself includes priests, laws, land, and tabernacles.

Today we add to that list “a mountain” and a “city.” As he'd done concerning the tabernacle back in Hebrews 8, the author contends that the city itself served as a pattern. It was a copy and a shadow of something to come. The earthly Jerusalem points upward and forward to the heavenly Jerusalem.⁹

What's the significance for us? Beginning in Hebrews 1, continuing through entire sections of the book, the author's wanted us to know *where* Christ is, to see Him seated at the right hand of the Father. He's wanted us to know that the Son of God is—present tense—at the throne interceding for His people.

But he also wants us to know where Christ is because where He sits is a place we have access to. We *have come* to the heavenly Jerusalem. The throne of God has become a throne of grace, a throne we're to draw near to in confidence. You say, “I'm *here*, sitting on some padded seats.” Paul says you've been seated in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6).

As with every other week I stand up here, I don't know the precise burden you're carrying today. You don't know the burdens I'm carrying. But I'd imagine we both know those burdens are heavy. And in the midst of that burden you carry, I hope you know this thing hoped for, that you believe what's unseen. We *will* go where He is. And even now we have access to it. Alongside innumerable angels (v. 22), you *have* come to Mount Zion, **to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.**

This is the *place* prepared. And *in* that place is a *people*. Verse 23 continues to describe what we find on this mount: **to the general assembly and church.** As mentioned above, Jerusalem was designed to enhance an ideal, to facilitate something. And that something it intended to facilitate was thanksgiving to the living God from a united people (Ps. 122:4).

I know it's possible from time to time that we tire of humanity. An assembly—the gathering of a crowd—might *not* thrill us. But it's important to be regularly reminded that we've actually been wearied by a *sinful* humanity. In Augustine's *The City of God*, he writes that though we now sometimes delight in sinning, one day we'll be set free so that we'll take unfailing delight in *not* sinning.¹⁰ So we might ask: what would relationships with other people be like if *their* actions, and *your* affections—and *your* actions, and *their* affections—were *always* righteous?

Recall what we said about living by faith in things hoped for, in things unseen. How might we imagine this? Matt McCullough wrote, “You want to see what is not visible? Look at what is visible. Pay attention to where it stops short, runs out, dries up. Trace the limits of what you can see, the transient things always passing away, and there you will start to see the shape of the invisible glory still to come.”¹¹ Do that with relationships. Consider the *best* one, the one that's gracious, others-focused, Christ-centered, forgiving, and encouraging. It's not perfect, of course, so consider where even that best relationship falls short. And then consider it *not* stopping short, running out, or drying up. And then, finally, think about *that* being what *every* relationship is like. God's grace *will* do this in fullness. And He's doing it *in part* even now.

We have come, verse 23 continues, **to the general assembly and church of the firstborn.** What's the significance of being called the church of the firstborn? It's the antithesis of Esau. We await an inheritance. In the person of the Spirit, we've received the down payment (Eph. 1:14). And one day we'll receive it in full.

⁹ Schreiner 399.

¹⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, 865

¹¹ Matt McCullough, *Remember Death*, 154.

How can we know that with certainty? Because this passage says we've come, **to the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven**. Hebrews 3 already told us that those who've believed are **partakers of a heavenly calling** (Heb. 3:1). The word for "enrolled" here is the same word Jesus used when He told the disciples in Luke 10: **rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven** (Lk. 10:20).

So, we've come to a *place*—Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. And we've come to a *people*—to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. Maybe you recall the definition of the Kingdom of God I've recently referenced, "God's people in God's place under God's rule."¹²

That's the next aspect of this Mount we've come to. We've come, verse 23, **to God, the Judge of all**. This would be terrifying, of course, *if* this judge declared us guilty. But verse 23 goes on to say that we've come, not only **to God, the Judge of all**, but also to **the spirits of the righteous made perfect**.

This picks up on, and summarizes, some of the argument already made. Hebrews 10 quoted from Habakkuk 2 about the righteous one living by faith (10:38). A few verses later, Hebrews 11 made clear that those who lived by faith gained God's approval (11:2). Further, it showed us that those who lived by faith pleased God (11:6). And, finally, that they were made perfect (11:39). That's what verse 23 describes as well.

We've come to God's place, to God's people, and to God Himself.

God's people couldn't approach Sinai and live. How do we have access to *this* place? Because we have come, verse 24, **to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel**. We've come to a better mountain because of a better covenant. And we've come because Jesus is the mediator of it. His blood inaugurated this covenant. His blood speaks on our behalf. Better than the blood of vengeance,¹³ in this better covenant, His blood assures forgiveness. John Newton glories in this truth, "Let us love and sing and wonder; let us praise the Savior's name. He has hushed the Law's loud thunder; He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame. He has washed us with His blood; He has brought us nigh to God."¹⁴

Conclusion

Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. In other words, none of us.¹⁵

But *He* could. And He did. He climbed a mountain we've yet to name, a holy mount. On it, He absorbed His Father's wrath. Having done so, He then ascended to the Father. So that we—have been granted access—might come to His place, to His people, to His rule, and find grace.

¹² Vaughn Roberts, *God's Big Picture*, 22.

¹³ Harris, 390.

¹⁴ John Newton, "Let us Love and Sing and Wonder"

¹⁵ There is a holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).