



# GRACE CHURCH

## Coming To God

Hebrews 12:18-29

Grace Church | 3.19.23

If you have been with us for a while in our time in the book of Hebrews, you'll remember that we have said before that this book is not really an epistle, or a letter, like most of the other New Testament books. Although it appears to be written to a church or gathering of some kind, it doesn't have the normal structure, introductions, or conclusions of an ancient letter. Instead, it's a sermon—really the earliest complete Christian sermon we have.

And in any good sermon or piece of rhetoric, you've got a central thesis. All along we have said that the main point of this sermon we call Hebrews is that Jesus, The Son of God, is the final word of reality. Being eternal, there is nothing better that has ever come before him, and upon entering into time as the man Jesus, there will never be anything better after him. So if that is all true, it would be really foolish to turn your back on him, paramount to being offered an eternal inheritance from God and trading it, like Esau, for some stew or a couple of moments of earthly satisfaction.

So the author is about to launch in chapter 13 to the practical takeaways, so he has one last chance, through one last image, to wrap up his argument, which is this: "If Jesus is the final word of all reality, don't give up on him, but keep going". And how I want to set that up for you is by using a textual example, a word/phrase we find in **verse 18** and **verse 22**, which is translated as "you have not/have come".

In English, when we use "come", it's primarily a geographical statement, like "come over to my house" or "welcome to church". But if we have been paying attention to Hebrews so far, we notice that geography or place is an invitation to something much deeper: not just approaching a destination, but approaching God himself. In Hebrews 4 this word is used to commend that we "come near" to God's throne of Grace. In chapter 7, we are told that Jesus will completely save those "coming to God through him". In contrast in chapter 10, we learned that our best sacrifices and religious rituals can never perfect those who "come to God", and instead we should "come to God" in faith knowing that, as chapter 11 says, he exists and rewards those who "come to him".

So you might say that Hebrews is all about where we are going, all about coming to God. And in this way it echoes the whole Christian life told in the Bible: we started out in Eden, with God, but because of sin we are now strangers and aliens in a difficult and painful world, striving forward to come to God again.



All throughout this sermon called Hebrews, there have been two contrasting ways to come to God, and they couldn't be more different: the old way, the new way, the dead way, the living way, the law way, the gospel way, the obsolete way, the eternal way, the burdensome way, the restful way, the fearful way, the faithful way. And today again we are met with this contrast through the comparisons of two mountains: Sinai and Zion. Let's compare both, then look at why it matters. Sinai Way, Zion Way, and Why It Matters. I'm going to be upfront in telling you that I will spend nearly 80-90 percent of my time in **verses 18-24**, and will close by touching on **verses 25-29**.

## **The Sinai Way** (The Shakable Way)

We start with the negative way of coming to God, and notice in **verse 18** the author says we *haven't* come this way. So as we describe what it would be like to approach God as if he dwelt on Sinai, I want you to remember that if you are in Christ, this is not your reality. As Hebrews has already said: "We are not those who shrink back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and preserve our souls". So know who you are—but I want you to see this contrast as a way of asking the question, if you are in Christ today: "how do I think, act, or believe like the final destination is Sinai, even if it isn't"?

So what is Sinai? Well we never actually have it named in this passage, but it's very clear this is what the author is referring to, recorded for us in Exodus 19. For his Jewish audience, this would have hit like a ton of bricks. God brings them out of Egypt miraculously, and leads them to the foot of this great mountain, where he calls up his servant Moses so that he can meet with him and give him the Law. And as they all gather around to watch Moses go up, it starts getting really scary. Moses comes down from the mountain and gathers all the people so they can *meet* God.

Now, anytime someone is slated to meet God, it usually is a crazy experience. The reason is simple: God is holy. He is literally too beautiful to look at without some sort of cover or some sort of cleansing. The angels in Heaven are sometimes described as covering their eyes with their wings. When God meets Abraham, he puts him in a deep sleep. When God meets Moses, Moses has to hide behind a rock. When God meets Isaiah in a dream, he had to have his lips scorched with a coal to clean them. We are not glorious enough to take in a sight of God without exploding, our bodies literally can't contain it. And so when God comes to meet with Israel at the base of Sinai, he comes in this giant cloud to the top of the mountain, like a huge storm: **verse 18-19**, there is fire, darkness, gloom, a tempest, some sort of piercing trumpeting sound and a voice so powerful and terrifying that they beg not to hear it again.

Not only that, they are told to stay far away, and that if anything or anyone gets close enough to the mountain to touch it while God's presence is dwelling around it, they must be stoned. And all of this is far too much for the people to bear—basically Moses comes back up and tells God: "they can't do it. They can't handle it." So Moses has to go back up himself— but as our text reminds us in **verse 21**, he did so trembling with fear and with no confidence at all.



And that is that: Israel, by way of observation, and fear, and through a representative, “comes to God”. They never get that close, and what they receive is second hand. And yet, that encounter at Sinai is the golden standard for the Jewish understanding of coming to God. That “meeting” where they saw the smoke and fire and thunder and were afraid was the only means of salvation that they knew. So how did they get close to God? Well, by trying their best to obey the law of God, and maybe, sacrifice after sacrifice, inch closer to the base of Sinai for a better look. Pretty sad, huh?

But let me posture to you that we are content with much of the same thing. In fact, your relationship with God may look or feel like that, sometimes or even all the time. It’s an unstable, shaky feeling. How do you know that you might be trying to come to God the Sinai way? Let me give you three diagnostics.

### **You feel disenchanting by the Glory of God.**

You want to know one of the best things about living in Texas? Have you ever sat outside on the porch during a really, really, big thunderstorm? How about one of those ranch style wraparound porches, on at least a few acres of land? The sky lights up, the earth shakes. It’s marvelous—and perhaps scary. Now, magnify that by say, 4 or 5 times. Now you’ve got that picture, imagine if I told you that the feeling you have in that moment—fear, awe, whatever it might be—is as close as you will get to understanding the glory of God.

Well, the first time, you would be shaken up. You would be rightfully humbled, as human beings have been for centuries when they witness the physical shakings of the earth. But eventually, you would get used to it. You’d find ways to cope, stay safe, minimize risk. You’d mythologize it, you’d scientifically explain it away. God’s glory would become to you not much different than the glory of Zeus was for the Greeks, or the glory of the weather channel for the meteorologist.

The reason is, because when all we have is the physical manifestation of something that is spiritual, something that can be touched, even if touching it would kill us, we are always eventually left disenchanting. Because we know we aren't getting the real thing. Remember a few weeks ago, Dave said that what we know by faith is actually *more real* than what we see? Well, what he meant is that this world, everything we can touch, is not that secure. We can’t take it with us, it’s not eternal. And when we treat it like it is, we get disenchanting, disinterested, bored, more and more secular, more and more boring.

Why does agnosticism exist? Because there are millions of people in the world who know that atheism is boring, is not the real thing, and that this earth, this life, couldn’t be all there is, but they are too scared of losing what they can touch to be willing to believe that something better is out there. And so if you feel disenchanting... if you feel “ho hum” about me saying something like: “you can come to God”? Well, it may be a sign that your image of God is Sinai like. You think that Sinai is the real deal, that God is smoke and mirrors, approached only from a distance. But that is not what you’ve come to.



## **You feel distant from the welcome of God.**

The Israelites were invited to come up to the mountain, but they couldn't because of their unholiness. They had to watch. And I think it's easy for us to assume that is also as close to God as we can get. We aren't that holy, we aren't that good. So we just get to watch. We can slip in and out of church, we will do our best to live holier and more Christianly than most other people, but when God says "come in close" we just kind of keep our distance.

And ultimately what this looks like is dead religion. It's the appearance of closeness to God, without real closeness. It's half-way ascent to God, and there is a spectrum here. Perhaps you legitimately believe that you are not welcome at the table of the Lord, in the house of God. Or perhaps you sometimes just live like it. But if you are in any way living like the welcome of God need not apply to you, I just want to say this simply: that is not the Christian Faith. It doesn't have to be that way. But for now just hold that thought, realize that is a marker that you may be trying to come to God the way of Sinai.

## **You feel afraid of the judgment of God.**

Or, you've built your whole life trying to be good enough, and all of a sudden you realize you aren't. Maybe your straight A's have fallen to straight B's. Maybe the wealth you've been working to build has taken a hit. Maybe you feel shame and guilt for a decision that has sent shockwaves into your relationships. And what happens, when you realize you can't cut it? You melt, you tremble, you shake, you beg for it to stop, like the Israelies begged for God to stop speaking.

If you try to come into the presence of God based on *doing your best*, it won't be long until your only thought is fear of God's judgment. Because your best will never be good enough. Fear, trembling, inability to endure the excruciating standard of God's laws which demand perfect, just like the Israelites. If you always live in fear of the judgment of God, you are coming to him by the way of Sinai.

## **The Zion Way** (The Unshakable Way)

But it doesn't have to be that way. It's not meant to be that way. So let me unburden you—by showing you the other way. See, the text is very explicit in **verse 22**. You have come to Mount Zion. What is Mount Zion? The city of the living God. Mount Zion is the Biblical image of the temple mount—but not just the physical one, the new one, the eternal one. It's the mountain where God is—it's his city—but heavenly, not physical. Let's do this comparison then: what makes Zion so much better than Sinai?



## **It is the fullness of the glory of God.**

Look again where we are going in **verse 23**, we have come to his city, but most of all, to God himself. The closest Sinai the Israelites got to God was hundreds of feet away from the base of the mountain that he shielded himself on with smoke and fire. But there is no hiding here: to come to Zion is to come to God, full stop. To look onto his face, to see him in all his glory, and live.

And I want you to see that present verb: we “have come”. See, what this is saying is that although there is a day coming where Mount Zion, the new heavens and the new earth, will be physical and we can touch them, just because we cannot touch them now does not mean that we do not possess them. Even now, we can receive a taste of heaven on earth, we can live entirely caught up in and in awe of the goodness and glory of God. We do not need to be lifeless, disenchanted people waiting around for the real thing—God in his kindness has brought it to us now. He did it in the person of Jesus, who was real flesh and bones, who really spoke, and through his Spirit, who was sent by Jesus and really works and moves to show us God and lift our hearts towards him even now by faith.

We *have come* to the fullness of the glory of God. No lightning storm could ever compare to the glory of God that is available to you right now. To be a Christian is to live a life that is radiating God’s glory, to see and taste his glory in every sunset, every meal, every smile, every laugh, every gift from the giver of lights.

Sinai does not offer us too much, with its drama and physicality, it offers too little. What happens when you get all you ever dreamed of and all you ever wanted? Were you to have all the riches and power you could ask for overnight, how long would it last? All of that is like a flash in the pan, the difference between gazing at Everest from the base camp and ascending the very top of the world. In Christ, you are offered the fullness of the glory of God, unhindered.

## **It is the fullness of the welcome of God.**

Look at what is going on in Zion in **verse 22**, “angels in festive gathering.” It’s a joyful celebration. Remember the last two weeks, the picture of the greek race? Often those races or athletic events coincide with great joyous festivals. The text is saying that when we finish the race and make it to Zion, it will be a party. We won’t tiptoe up to the throne of God, we will dance and drink and be merry with joy.

The welcome will be not just from the angels, but by, **verse 23**, the “assembly of the firstborn”, which is speaking of the church, those who are enrolled in Heaven. Even now we get to taste that welcome when we are welcomed through faith and baptism into Jesus’ Church, but we are coming into a full embrace.



John Newton, when he was asked how to prepare for a disagreement with another Christian, said that we should first consider that: “In a little while you will meet [the one with whom you disagree] heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now.” What the real welcome of God feels like is not a half-hearted, arms length, welcome, but an embrace by all the saints as you might embrace your dearest friend on earth.

### **It is the fullness of the grace of God.**

And not only angels and saints, but also it is God, the judge of all, who welcomes us. But now, here is where I want to punctuate this. Were this Sinai, we would find no comfort in God being judge. But this is Zion. How is it that we can see God as judge and still feel his total and complete welcome? Because, **verse 24**, Jesus is also there. He is to us the very grace of God that turns fear of judgment into comfort and faith. He is our great older brother who went before, endured the cross, despised all shame, and perfects our weak faith. He is the mediator of a new covenant, meaning a whole new way to relate to God, and a better one, and he does it how?

By his blood. Remember when the Old Covenant was ratified near Sinai the people of Israel were sprinkled with the blood of an animal sacrifice. But we enter Zion holy by being sprinkled with the better, eternal, pure, blood of Jesus. The blood of Abel, the one who was murdered, speaks of condemnation and sin, it cries out for vengeance.. It’s like the blood of Sinai—spilt by man because of their sin. But the blood of Jesus is split by God, he lays his own life down on his own accord, and the word that it speaks is that of *grace*. Our approach to God is not in fear of judgment, but in confident boldness because of the blood of Jesus.

### **Why It matters** (The Shaking of Heaven and Earth)

I could spend a long time preaching the goodness of Zion over that of Sinai, because it’s really just the gospel, friends. And it’s what Hebrews has been all about. Jesus, and his way, is far better than any other way. He’s the final word. So let’s consider why it matters whether we go the way of Sinai or Zion.

Put very simply: it matters because a great shaking is coming. **Verse 25** warns us that Israel was warned from Erath by Moses and the Law. But we are warned by Jesus himself, who speaks in his incarnation and now to us through his Word. Quoting from Haggai 2, the author reminds us in **verse 26** that just as Sinai was shaken, so everything will be shaken—that what we can see, and that what we cannot see. This shaking is a judgment—God wants to see what “shakes out”. The only thing that will remain in that great shaking is the unshakable kingdom, the kingdom we come to by way of Zion, by way of Jesus.



It matters because you can't escape this. Eventually everything you do, the stuff you said of "I tried my best", or "that is good enough" will be exposed, will be shaken. How will you stand in that day? Only if you have faith in Jesus, the one who endured the judgment of God, who was shaken for us, and who was perfect and holy and therefore remained, and who gives to those who trust him the keys of the unshakable kingdom.

Notice how this passage ends, with a call to come to God in worship in **verse 28**. God, says **verse 29**, is a consuming fire. But if you are in Christ, if you come by way of Zion, he is *our* consuming fire. But we do not fear his judgment—we worship his glory, his fire, grateful that we are the receivers of the unshakable kingdom by way of our unshakable savior. We come to God, knowing that we are coming to Zion and all its joy—and so in Christ we come boldly.

