



First Baptist Church Selmer

JESUS IS BETTER • JESUS, OUR ETERNAL PEACE • HEBREWS 12:18-24 • 7/23/2023

MAIN POINT

The new covenant in Christ allows believers to relate to both God and others in peace and freedom.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the strangest thing you have ever seen?

Has there ever been anything that you once were fearful of but now are not?

What changed?

We have lots of fears and things that tend to cause us to lose sleep but one thing that we no longer have to fear is whether we can offer a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins that will be acceptable to Him.

The Old Testament system of worship and sacrifice was a time of great fear. The fear came with doubt of whether a sacrifice would be found acceptable or not. Today's study contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant when believers can joyfully approach God and relate to each other in community.

As believers in the new covenant, you can have peace that a relationship with Jesus is all you will ever need.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO HEBREWS 12:18-21.

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.'" (ESV)

How does this passage communicate the Israelites' terrifying encounter with God?

Which words or phrases from this passage best describe how you would feel if God still continued to require an animal sacrifice to forgive your sins? What other descriptions might you have added?

These verses describe what happened as the Israelites approached God when Moses received the Law at Mount Sinai. Fire, darkness, gloom, and storm inspired fear as well as reverence. The Israelites also heard a trumpet blast that signaled an authoritative command which was not to be ignored and a terrifying voice.

Fear knows no boundaries. Even though the Israelites remained a distance from the mountain, they feared for their lives. Humans or animals who touched Mount Sinai would die.

What does this passage convey about the people's relationship with God?

Is fearing God wrong? What do you think the Bible means when it tells us to fear the Lord?

Is there a difference between fearing God and being afraid of God? What is it?

The people were separated from God. Moses received the Law on their behalf, a revelation from God the people did not receive. The people were unworthy. God did not allow them to approach the mountain to remind them of their unworthiness. Both Moses and the people feared God.

Read Deuteronomy 9:19. How did Moses respond to what happened on the mountain? Why is that significant?

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ HEBREWS 12:22-24.

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, 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." (ESV)

Which words or phrases from this passage best dispel the terror described in the previous passage? What about this passage most greatly changes your previous conceptions?

Since God's nature and character haven't changed, what has changed? Why are these two mountains (in spiritual terms) so different?

This passage reveals how people can now approach God without dread and fear which have given way to fellowship and joy. The acceptance found in Christ is celebrated by all of creation. "Festive gathering" (v. 22) contrasts with "blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm" (12:18). Unlike Mount Sinai, God is approachable on Mount Zion as shown by "myriads of angels." He lives among followers who worship Him.

How does the new covenant change the believer's relationship with God?

People can now approach God with fellowship and joy rather than dread and fear. As Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus stands between sinners and God. Believers now can approach God directly through Jesus Christ and fellowship with other Christians.

How does this passage stress the importance of Christian community?

How are you currently experiencing Christian community in your life?

Not only does the new covenant in Jesus give us access to God, but it also removes our barriers from each other. We can freely share and relate to other believers in a way we never could before because we know that we have been brought together under the banner of Jesus Christ.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Have you ever felt that God was leading you, but you weren't sure where you were going? How did you keep going in faith?

What are some ways you need to more fully give yourself to your relationship to God? What are some ways you need to more fully give yourself to relationships with others?

How can you take an active role in developing a sense of community at our church?

PRAYER

Thank God for the chance to relate to Him without hindrance and fear. Pray that your relationship with Him and with each other would reflect the lengths He went to in order to give us that access.

COMMENTARY

| HEBREWS 12:18-24

12:18-19. Verse 18 takes the reader back to the time of Moses and to the inauguration of God's covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. After the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, after their divinely sent rescue at the Red Sea, including the drowning of Pharaoh's army as he attempted to recapture God's people, God told Moses to lead the people to Mount Sinai. There, He called Moses up onto the mountain, where He gave Moses the Ten Commandments for the people. Exodus 19-20 (see also Deut. 4-5) reports the events at Mount Sinai and what occurred when God descended onto the mountain. It is both a terrifying and powerful description!

Drawing from that history, the writer of Hebrews highlighted a number of features that marked the giving of the law and establishment of the covenant at Mount Sinai. (The text follows up in Heb. 12:22-24 with contrasting features that describe Mount Zion.) He wanted his readers to see a contrast between the "shadow" that was the old covenant and the fulfillment that is God's redemptive plan in the new covenant, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

First, Mount Sinai was restricted in access. Because the Lord God's presence came down onto the mountain, the people (other than Moses and Aaron) were forbidden to even

touch the base of it, lest they die (see Ex. 19:12,21-24). Next, the descent of God's presence was marked by powerful and terrifying visual phenomena: a blazing fire (lightning strikes), thick darkness, and a heavy, smoky gloom (see Ex. 19:16-18). Then there were awesome sounds that proceeded from the mountain, including the increasing decibels from blasts of a trumpet as well as the thunderous voice of God as He spoke (see Ex. 16:19). The writer of Hebrews recounted these features of the old covenant's inauguration to emphasize the impact the event had on the people. The people of Israel responded with great fear at what they saw and heard. They were afraid to continue hearing from God directly. They pleaded with Moses to be their mediator, or go-between (see Ex. 20:18-19).

12:20. The writer further explained that the Israelites were unable to endure the divine prohibition against touching the mountain. Here he quoted that part of the command specifying even an animal must be put to death if it wandered onto Mount Sinai (see Ex. 19:13). The implication was that if an animal could not approach the mountain on penalty of death, then no sinful human being, having been warned, would be excused for disobeying the command.

The Israelites' inability to endure God's command and their urgent request to no longer hear God's voice were significant features for the writer of Hebrews. He returned to this matter in 12:25 to use it as an exhortation for his readers. The exhortation was that God's people in every generation must never ignore or carelessly disregard a divine warning. If the Israelites at Mount Sinai were not exempt from punishment for disobedience when warned by Moses (an earthly spokesman for God), how much less will people escape punishment who have been warned by the Son of God from heaven and have turned away from Him!

12:21. In reading the account of Mount Sinai in the Book of Exodus, we do not get a clear idea of what Moses felt during the experience. Indeed, Moses is pictured in Exodus 20:20 as comforting the Israelites and assuring them that God was testing them so they would revere Him and avoid sin. However, in Deuteronomy 9:19 Moses revealed that he, too, had been filled with fear at one point. That point was after having learned the people had made a calf-idol for themselves while they waited for him to return from the mountain. Moses was fearful that God in His righteous wrath was about to destroy the Israelites on the spot!

All of the writer's descriptions of the features of Mount Sinai were in preparation to describe the experience of believers in the new covenant. The people at Mount Sinai were kept at a distance to demonstrate God's holiness and to show the separation between

Holy God and sinful people. In the new covenant, God would bridge that distance Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

12:22. The name Zion appears in 2 Samuel 5:7 as a reference to the mountain on which Jerusalem later stood. It referred at that earlier time to a stronghold King David captured from the Jebusites. David made the city his capital, and his son, Solomon, later built the Lord's temple there (see 1 Kings 8:1). In time, Mount Zion became associated with the coming of the Messiah. In Psalm 110:2, the psalmist declared that the Messiah would come and reign from Mount Zion (see also Isa. 59:20; Micah 4:7; Zech. 9:9). The readers of Hebrews were quite aware of the theological connection between Mount Zion and the new covenant in Christ.

The phrase instead, you have come marks the writer's pivot to describe a very different experience for those who come to God in the new covenant. Mount Zion is the destination of God's people. The contrast between the frightening picture in Hebrews 12:18-21 and the delightful description in 12:22-24 could hardly be more stark. Yet we need to remind ourselves that there is only one God. The God who manifested His presence to the Israelites on Mount Sinai is the same God who leads us as Christians toward Mount Zion. We do not need to return to Mount Sinai if we have come to faith in Christ. Given the contrasting pictures of the two experiences, why would any believer even consider such a return?

Mount Zion will be a place of everlasting rest in the abiding presence of our Redeemer and God (see Heb. 4). When Hebrews 12:22 says that believers have come to Mount Zion, it means their arrival is as good as done. As Christians, our names are already enrolled there (see 12:23)! It is a present reality that is guaranteed to reach its fullness when the Lord calls us to our eternal home. This is the finish line for the faithful, the better country and true homeland that the heroes in chapter 11 sought by faith (see 11:13-16).

We need to be clear in our study of these verses that God has always dealt with His people with grace. God always acts in accordance with His nature and character. Consider the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. They knew God to be the God of grace and mercy. God had graciously given His presence to them in the tabernacle and temple, had made a way for them to have a relationship with Him, and had given them His Word. In the new covenant, we have received in Christ all that the old covenant foreshadowed and promised. The point is that now God's grace and truth have found their ultimate fulfillment and expression in Jesus Christ.

12:23. This verse states that in Christ believers have become part of the great assembly of the firstborn. In ancient Israelite culture, the firstborn son was entitled to receive a greater inheritance at the patriarch's death. In the description of the vast community of the new covenant, all are firstborn children! All receive the full amount of family blessings in Christ (see Eph. 1:3). We are enrolled in heaven—our names have already been written there (see Luke 10:20; Rev. 21:22-27).

Another feature of Mount Zion is that we come before God as our Righteous Judge. For those whose names are enrolled in heaven, there is no fear of condemnation, since Christ has removed all condemnation (see Rom. 8:1). For the believer, the throne of judgment and fear has become the throne of grace and confidence to draw near (see Heb. 4:14-16).

Yet another feature of Mount Zion is that we come into the fellowship of all those who by faith in Jesus have been made righteous and complete. Believers are righteous because of what Christ has accomplished in His once-for-all sacrifice. We will spend eternity together as one family in one place because of the one sacrifice of the one Savior of all.

12:24. In Mount Zion we who are believers will come at long last to see Jesus, our Savior and the Mediator of the new covenant. The Book of Hebrews so abounds with this theme that it cannot be understood apart from it. We will understand and appreciate as never before the everlasting cleansing from sin that we have received by His shed blood.

The first readers of Hebrews were aware of the Old Testament account of the murder of Abel by his brother, Cain (see Gen. 4:8). When God confronted Cain about his wicked act, God told him that his brother Abel's blood cried out to the Lord (see Gen. 4:10). The writer of Hebrews alluded to that Scripture in declaring that Jesus' shed blood spoke a much better word than Abel's blood. While Abel's blood cried out for justice, Jesus' blood spoke an all-powerful word of forgiveness and the end of the curse.