**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (43); The Book Of Better Things**

**“The Mountain Of Fear and The Mountain Of Joy”**

**Hebrews 12:18-24**

**May 4, 2025**

As we have seen throughout our studies, the book of Hebrews is a book of contrasts. In the opening verses of chapter one, Jesus was shown to be better than the Old Testament prophets (1:1-3). In the rest of chapter one through chapter two, He was seen as superior to the angels (1:4-2:18). In chapters three and four, our author portrayed Him as better than Moses (3:1-4:8) and better than Joshua (4:9-13).

In Hebrews 4:14-7:28, our author demonstrated that Jesus is a greater High Priest than Aaron, because He comes from a better priestly order. In chapter eight, He mediates a better covenant based on better promises. In chapter nine, He ministers in a better sanctuary, and in chapter ten His sacrifice was demonstrated to be far superior to the sacrifices offered during the time of the Old Covenant. This assures us of a better hope, which is an anchor for our soul. It guarantees our safe arrival in a better country – a heavenly one.

In the verses before us today (12:18-24), our author does the same thing. He presents the stark contrast between the Old Covenant under Moses (vv. 18-21) and the New Covenant under Christ (vv. 22-24). But he does so by comparing the two mountains that are symbolic or representative of each. More importantly he contrasts how the people of Israel approached the living God under the Old Covenant (symbolized by Mount Sinai), and how we are privileged to draw near to Him under the New Covenant (symbolized by Mount Zion). As we shall see, fear was the dominant motif at Sinai (the Old Covenant); joy and confidence are the dominant motifs at Mount Zion (the New Covenant).

As always, it’s important to understand the *context* in which these verses are written. Most commentators view them as part of the final warning passage in Hebrews, which unfolds in three segments: **(1)** the author exhorts his readers not to fall short of God’s grace as Esau did (vv. 14-17); **(2)** he reminds them of the amazing benefits that have resulted because of the change from the Old Covenant to the New (vv. 18-24);

**(3)** he warns them not to refuse God’s gracious word through His Son, but rather “*be thankful*” and worship Him “*in reverence and awe*” (vv. 25-29).

With this understanding, we are now prepared to launch into this second part of the final warning in Hebrews (vv. 18-24). It’s a contrast between the fearful approach to the living God at Mt. Sinai (under the Old Covenant) and the joyful, privileged approach to the living God at Mt. Zion (under the New Covenant). It is a contrast that reinforces the call to not turn away God’s grace, revealed to us in Christ (Cf. vv. 14-17).

**A. The Mountain of Fear (vv. 18-21):** “*You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’*” There are three things that our author is emphasizing about the Israelites’ terrifying experience at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when the Law was given at that time (Ex. 19:16-19; 20:18-21; Deut. 4:11-12; 5:22-26).

**First**, the physical terrors (vv. 18-19): **(a)** a tangible, foreboding mountain; **(b)** a blazing fire; **(c)** darkness; **(d)** gloom; **(e)** a storm, or tempest; **(f)** the loud sound of a trumpet; **(g)** a voice that so utterly terrified the Israelites that they begged the living God not to say another word!

**Second,** the threatening command of God (v. 20): “*If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death*” (quoting from Ex. 19:12-13). Such a detail reflects the Old Covenant’s limited access to God’s presence – something which our author has already emphasized in his exposition of the rituals associated with the earthly tabernacle. As we may recall, only one person could enter the Most Holy Place, only once a year, and only with special preparation (Heb. 9:7-10).

**Third,** the confession of the lawgiver Himself (v. 21): “*The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’*” Even Moses – who was allowed to approach God – was terrified when he descended from God’s presence (see Deut. 9:19).

**Q.** What’s missing from this picture? **A.**  God’s presence. Not withstanding all the sights and sounds the people encountered at Sinai, God remains hidden to Israel. He appears distant and obscured and remote. When He spoke, His voice was so terrifying that they begged Him to be silent – instead of asking Him to continue speaking. **Q.** What’s the point? **A.** This is our author’s way of saying, “*Their sin and guilt remained; and God’s infinite holiness and righteousness made it impossible for them approach* *Him unless a perfect sacrifice is offered to cover that sin and guilt!*”

Mount Sinai is a picture of gloom and doom; everything about this story says: “Stay away! Don’t draw near! You are not worthy to enter God’s presence so don’t even think

about it!” However, our author now turns his attention to the liberating and joyful experience of those who draw near to God under the terms of the New Covenant.

**B. The Mountain of Joy (vv. 22-24):** “*But**you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*.”

It's important to note the way our author begins this next section: “***But*** *you have come to Mount Zion . . .*” (v. 22a). This is one of the “big buts” of Scripture, marking the strong contrast between this mountain of joy and the previous mountain of fear (vv. 18-21).

To “come” or to “draw near” is a recurrent theme in Hebrews. We’ve seen this back in Hebrews 4:16, where we are urged to “draw near” to the throne of grace in prayer. In Hebrews 7:25 we are encouraged to “draw near” to God through faith in Christ because He ever lives to make intercession for us. Then in Hebrews 10:22 our author says; “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings,*” and in Hebrews 11:6 we are described as those “*who come to him*” or “*draw near to God*.”

This is the incredible privilege that is ours as born-again, Bible believing *Christians*. We can now draw near to God even as He draws near to us (James 4:8). This is what it means to be a Christian, as opposed to being a good Protestant, or a good Roman Catholic, or a good member of the Eastern Orthodox church. A Christian has the unspeakable joy and peace that comes from experiencing that kind of “nearness” to our Creator and Redeemer; one in which we can draw near to God and experience His love and acceptance and forgiveness.

In these verses, our author is emphasizing those to whom we “have come,” or that to which we “have come.” It’s important to note the past tense. What he is describing is a *present reality*, not just a *future hope*. It’s what we experience from the moment of our conversion – and all through our Christian lives – until the time when we enter heaven.

**First,** we “*have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (v. 22a). In the days of King David, Mt. Zion was the site of the Jebusite stronghold that he captured, and which became his royal palace (2 Samuel 5:6-10). Today, “Mount Zion” represents “the city of the heavenly God,” the “heavenly Jerusalem,” which already exists in heaven. One day it will be established on earth, as part of the new heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17-18; 66:22; Rev. 21:1-2, 10). Through our heavenly High Priest, we *now* have access into God’s presence there (Heb. 4:14-16; 6:9-20; 10:19-22). Unlike the earthly Mt. Sinai, the heavenly Mt. Zion cannot be touched. We are citizens of an eternal, unshakeable kingdom that will one day be our eternal dwelling.

**Second,** we “*have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly . . .*” (v. 22b). When we lift our hearts and voices in praise of the living God, we are literally joining the tens of thousands of angels surrounding the throne of the Lamb in heaven at this very moment (Cf. Rev. 5:11-12). This “joyful assembly” is in stark contrast to the gloom and doom which the Israelites experienced at Sinai, as it should. Why? Because our sins have been forgiven once for all time, *and* we have been freely given eternal life – when we’ve only deserved eternal death!

**Third,** we have come “*to the church of the firstborn,*” whose names are written in heaven (v. 23a). This is the entire community of saints, who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and whose names are written down in a book in heaven (see Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 13:8). In this heavenly assembly, all true believers are “firstborn.” Unlike Esau, who scorned his inheritance rights as the “firstborn” (11:16), they and we share in our inheritance with Jesus, “*The Firstborn*” par excellence (1:6, 14; 2:11-12). When we assemble for worship here on earth, we join this joyful assembly of worshippers in heaven. We are one with them in this joyful praise of our great God and Savior!

**Fourth,** we have come “*to God, the Judge of all men*” (vv. 23-24). The reason our author refers to God as “judge” is to reassure us that the “judgment” that’s been announced to us is one of acceptance and forgiveness; “*Therefore, there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus . . .*” (Rom. 8:1). That’s why we are able to enter His presence freely and boldly; we’ve been declared righteous through our faith in Christ *alone* (Rom. 3:21-26; Gal. 2:15-16).

**Fifth,** we have come “*to the spirits of righteous men made perfect*” (v. 23c) These are the spirits of those who have died in the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8-10; Rev. 14:13), who are now in the presence of God in a disembodied state. All the redeemed of every age at this very moment in time are with the angels, worshipping the Lamb of God. We “*have come*” to them in the sense that every time we worship as the body of Christ on earth, we do so as one body. Our voices and hearts are united with theirs in our praise of God.

**Sixth,** we have come “*to Jesus the mediator of the covenant*” (v. 24a). We do not come to *any* mediator whose sin must be atoned for, no matter how great they may have been. We do not come to Peter, Paul, or Mary, or any “saint” who may have been canonized by any “church.” We come to Jesus – and only Jesus – because He has inaugurated a new covenant by His blood (Heb. 10:19-25), so that we may draw near to God by faith!

**Seventh,** we have come “*to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*” (v. 24b). The blood of Jesus “*speaks*” a better word than the blood of Abel because it is an invitation to forgiveness – not a cry for vengeance. When Cain killed his brother Abel, Abel’s blood cried out from the ground for vengeance on his killer. But Jesus’ blood opens the way for us to gain access into the Most Holy Place – so that we may draw near to God (Heb. 10:19-25)!

What a contrast! Darkness covered Mount Sinai, and God’s revealed word was shrouded in dark types and shadows. Mount Zion, the heavenly city, shines with brightness and joy. Mt. Sinai was approached with fear; joy resounds at Mt. Zion. Mt. Sinai was a dangerous place where a thundering, distant God all but hid from everyone except Moses. At Mt. Zion, He is a welcoming, loving Father in heaven who invites us to commune with Him in His kingdom of love, joy, and peace. Mt. Sinai represents a formal “religion;” Mt. Zion symbolizes a personal relationship with Him. It’s an incomparable treasure! Why would any of us choose to give up such a treasure, once we have found it?

“I’ve found a treasure, that can’t be taken,

Found a well that won’t run dry.

O worldly pleasure, be now forsaken;

Behold, what love, what life is mine.”