

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## A Contrast between Sinai and Zion

Hebrews 12:18-24

18 For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, " I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church 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, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

**Lord, give us the meaning and spirit of Your Word while it lies open before us;  
Apply Your Word with power to our souls, threatening or promise, doctrine or precept,  
whatever it may be; lead us with trembling and with joy into the soul and marrow of Your Word.  
(adapted from C.H. Spurgeon)**

Last week we looked at the first few verses of our text noting that they presented to us the problems of coming to God by means of self-effort, by the keeping of some kind of law, be it God's law or some man-made or self-generated law. Simply put, Romans 3:20 clearly states the universal truth that **"by works of law no flesh will be justified in [God's] sight."** The problem with seeking to come to God by the merits of keeping some law is that doing so means coming to God via Mount Sinai – for that is where God gave law. And as we noted, the purpose and occasion of the giving of the law was not festive; it was not joyful; it was not meant to bring a sense of peace, but rather of guilt and terror at the realization that God's holiness far exceeds man's ability to personally attain to that holiness. The law was given to show man his sinfulness and therefore his need for a Savior. The law was given not for man to attain salvation by it, but by it to attain the knowledge of his need for God's mercy. The problem of coming to God via Mount Sinai then; by the works of the flesh; according to the efforts of our own hands is that at Mount Sinai God showed forth not mercy, but wrath, terror, fire, gloom, storm and judgment.

As we move to the next section of our text, a section I have entitled the promises of coming to God by the Savior's merits, we are offered the most glorious of contrasts between man's religious efforts and Christ's righteousness. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus makes one of the most abrasive statements in the hearing of the people of Israel and the Pharisees. Remember that the Pharisees believed that they did perfectly keep God's law and were therefore deserving of salvation. But, if the keeping of God's law was attainable by man, then why did Jesus say of those who sought to keep it this:

**For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

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For the great multitudes of people who heard this statement there were no others who manifested man-generated righteousness better than the Pharisees. If anyone earned salvation by works, then surely the Pharisees were the most deserving. You know people like this – don't you? Those who think that ultimately salvation is just about being more righteous than unrighteous, by doing more good things than bad things. And what does Jesus say in effect; unless your righteousness is better; of a higher quality; is exceedingly superior to that of these religious people; you will not be saved. I cannot help but think that many instantly thought, "If the Pharisees cannot be saved, then who can?" How does one attain to this exceedingly superior righteousness of which Jesus spoke?

Coming back to our text, we are reminded that righteousness is not attained by our individual efforts. No one is made righteous by what he or she does, for as the prophet Isaiah noted in Isaiah 64:6;

***For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.***

So then, how does one come to God without the fear and terror displayed at Mount Sinai, a place, by the way that was experienced with the senses of sight, sound and feeling? We are told that believers come to God via a different Mount, Mount Zion. And while Mount Zion was as real and physical a place as Mount Sinai, it is clear from our text that the Mount believers are called to is far more than the earthly counterpart – for Hebrews 12:22 tells us that this Mount Zion is "heavenly" - which does not mean it is not real, or tangible, but it is not something anyone as seen with physical eyes as of yet. For never forget that Hebrews 11 and 12 deal with the subject of faith – ***"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** Many had seen and experienced by sight and by their strivings in the flesh after the law the realities of Mount Sinai with its doom and judgment. But how does the believer come to Mount Zion? Not by sight, but by faith. Everything listed about Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:22-24 must be received, believed and acted upon by faith. There is nowhere we can go on this earth to see with our eyes and experience with our other senses the reality of this heavenly Mount. I cannot convince anyone of its existence as only those who have been regenerated, made new, born again by the Holy Spirit are given spiritual eyes to see this Mount by faith.

So then, let us come and see the promises given to those who do not trust in themselves for salvation, but rather trust in the Savior's merits. We will see in this text seven such promises; indeed joyful blessing of coming to God via Jesus and His perfect work. By faith in Jesus we come...

## **1. To Divine Presence - To the city of the living God (12:22a)**

To begin with, we are to not that we come by faith to ***"Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..."*** The use of Mount Zion by the author is purposeful here as to the Hebrews, Mount Zion was as picture of the great and benevolent dwelling presence of God in the midst of Israel. In Psalm 76:1-2 we read:

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**1 God is known in Judah; His name is great in Israel. 2 His tabernacle is in Salem; His dwelling place also is in Zion.**

And while God did manifest His presence in Jerusalem and on Mount Zion, there was always the expectation of the Jews that one day a greater and more stunningly superior revelation of God's presence would be realized on Mount Zion – that Mount Zion would in fact be the focal point, the very center of God's rule upon this earth in the future. Turn with me to Psalm 46, the song of Zion, where we read of this glorious depiction of Zion yet to come.

**Psalm 48:1-2; 9-10**

**1 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, in the city of our God, His holy mountain. 2 Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.....9 We have thought on Your lovingkindness, O God, In the midst of Your temple. 10 As is Your name, O God, So is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness.**

Beloved, we read then in 12:22 that by faith, so says our text in context, **“you have come to Mount Zion”**. By faith in the finished work of Christ, not the merits of our own hands, we come not to the foreboding mountain of judgment on Sinai, but rather to the joyous, majestic and inviting mountain of salvation on Zion. **“You have come..”** is a perfect present verb, meaning that you have had an experience of faith that brought you first to Mount Zion and all that it stands for and you continue to come. Do you continue to long for the presence of God in your life? Mount Zion is not only the dwelling place of God, but because of trust in Jesus, it has also become the believer's dwelling place by faith. How do I know this? How can I say this? Look back at Hebrews 11:10 and the faith of Abraham of whom it was said:

**[by faith]...he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

Are you, by faith, looking for the city of the living God? Are you truly looking for the glorious rule and presence of God? This is what Paul reminded the Philippians of in 3:20 saying:

**For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;**

By faith we have come to Zion, the city of the living God. By faith we dwell as citizens of Zion, delighting in the Governor and His rule, seeking to live our lives as those who dwell in the presence of God.

## **2. To Divine Joy - To a joyful assembly of angels (12:22b-23a)**

In addition to coming to Zion, by faith in Jesus Christ believers are also said to come to a joyful assembly of angels. We have an unfortunate break between verses 22 and 23 as it seems better to read this as “we have come...to myriads (that is thousands upon thousands)

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of angels in the general assembly.” Now “the general assembly” is a sadly watered down translation of a Greek word that was used to describe “a festal gathering of celebration.” It was used to describe how the people would gather before and ancient sporting events to celebrate. I realize this is a crude comparison, but we might see this as referring to a sort of tailgate party – a time of joyful anticipation for the games to follow.

And the point is this, for those who come to God by faith in the work of Christ rather than by means of their own efforts; instead of coming to Mount Sinai where the angels mediated law along with its terror and judgment; those who come to Mount Zion come also to a joyful gathering of angels, angels who minister to the saints, angels who celebrate, according to Luke the salvation of the new repentant sinner (Luke 15:10).

***In the same way (that the woman rejoices over finding her lost coin), I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.***

By faith then, we must come to know and live in light that they angels of God find great joy in our salvation as opposed to inflicting upon us the great judgment of God. It dawns on me that if the angels of God are so joyous about concerning the grace of God to save sinful men; if those who themselves who have not personally experienced sin so rejoice in our salvation – how much more ought our rejoicing be? How much higher? How much louder? How much more prominent ought our joyful proclamation of so great a salvation be heard? For by faith we come to know the reality of a heavenly celebration, of which we participate, as we glorify God for saving us from the wrath of Sinai.

### **3. To Divine Fellowship - New Testament saints - the church of the firstborn (12:23b)**

By faith in Jesus we also are said to come to ***“the church of the firstborn [ones] enrolled in heaven...”*** In view here is the blissful thought that rather than standing with those condemned to hell because of their failure to keep the standards of Sinai, those who live by faith in Jesus are surrounded by fellow-believers, baptized, that is made part of the “church of the firstborn.”

Here then we are to see by faith the significance and importance of the body of Christ, the church. Let us not read this statement incorrectly. Generally when we hear “church of the firstborn” we would be inclined, and rightfully so, to think of Jesus, who according to Colossians 1:18, is the ***“firstborn from the dead”*** and ***“head of the body.”*** But here in Hebrews 12:23 the text literally reads, “the firstborn ones...” – it is the plural, and speaks then of those who by faith have become united with the firstborn, who is Christ.

The word ***“firstborn”*** has a very Jewish flavor. It referred to the double portion of the inheritance that the firstborn son received from his father. For those who come to God by faith in Jesus and His completed work on the cross rather than by some vain attempt to keep law in and of themselves, believers in Christ, according to Romans 8:17 are made ***“fellow-heirs with Christ.”*** Therefore, all the privileges and honors that are Christ’s and God’s perfect Son now also belong to those who come by faith – to those who are ***“enrolled – that is registered beforehand – in heaven.”*** To be “enrolled or registered in heaven” means that God Himself chose to write the believer’s name down on a record for salvation, completely apart from anything that person would do. The verb ***“enrolled”*** is a perfect passive – meaning that God

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did this, not the believer, at some point in the past and the benefits of this act continue permanently and continually. Jesus Himself spoke of this God-completed act in Luke 10:18 – turn there please. Remember that Jesus had sent out the seventy disciples to declare that the Kingdom of God was among them in Christ? As they went out, they performed with power great signs and wonders. In other words, they were doing great thing for God. In Luke 10:17, they came back to Jesus with this excited report of the mighty deeds they had done, even seeing demons being subject to them. But the response of Jesus is interesting in Luke 10:18-20. We read:

**18 And He said to them, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. 19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.”**

Beloved, the joy of the believer is not to come though what he has done for God, by what we do in this world, even as glorious and God-glorifying as these may be – rather, our joy is to be derived from knowing that our names are recorded in heaven – that from before the creation of the world, God, in mercy, set the believer apart for salvation – that he would eternally belong to God. Have you by faith in what Jesus has done, come to be a part of the community, the congregation, the assembly of those whose names are recorded as belonging to Jesus? Rather than the fear and dread of Sinai, the believer who by faith comes to God via Zion has confidence that he is part of the body of Christ.

#### **4. To Divine Confidence - God, the Judge of all (12:23c)**

Not only then does the believer come by faith to be part of the church, but he also comes by faith to God as the judge of all. Let us not forget the contrast. In Hebrews 12:18-21 the people were told not to come up to God, but rather to stay clear of His wrath. The people did not rejoice at the vision of God in Exodus 19 but rather trembled in terror. There was no delight for them in coming to God as **“the Judge of all...”**

But now, by faith, we come to Zion, we come to God. And even like those who saw God on the Mount Sinai, we still come to God as Judge of all. The author of Hebrews has already reminded His readers in 4:13,

**“And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”**

God is every bit as much Judge now as He was in Exodus 19. Therefore we must come before Him in awe and reverence, but unlike the people of Israel at Sinai, we do not need to come with a sense of doom and dread, but rather with an sense of utter delight. Why? Because those who come to God through Zion, by faith in what the God of Zion has provided for those who trust in Him, understand that Jesus has borne the full wrath and judgment of God on behalf of those who have faith in Him, who believe truly that Jesus paid it all, that Jesus has done it all. I know that Hebrews 10:11-14 happened several months ago by way of my preaching, but by way of a letter, just a few verses before Hebrews 12:23 we read:

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**11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.**

Or to say it more concisely as did our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross as recorded in John 19:30 – “It is finished!” The work is done! Do you believe this? Have you come by faith in Jesus to believe that He alone, by His work alone, brings you completed to God who judges you not on the basis of your empty works, but rather on the basis of Christ righteous work? Beloved, this is the gospel – this is good news – this is divine confidence.

## **5. To Divine Glorification - Old Testament saints – spirits made perfect (12:23d)**

By faith then, not only do we come to participate in the church, the firstborn ones; and not only do we come to rejoice that God judges us on the basis of Christ’s work for us rather than on our own; but we also come to see by faith that we are to be united to Old Testament saints as well, to those who have gone before us – those saints, who according to Hebrews 11:40, “would not be made perfect” until Jesus came, lived, died, rose again and established His church. The same faith that caused Abraham, Moses and David to look forward to the provision of salvation in Jesus Christ by which they were completed, finished and made perfect; is the same faith that causes us to look back to the provision of Jesus Christ on the cross. They are called “spirits” here because their physical bodies are not yet united with their spirits. But the point is, have you come by faith to believe that you have in common the same hope of salvation as those faithful Old Testament saints? Do you long for salvation to be completed in you at the consummation of Christ even as these longed for salvation to be initiated by the first coming of Christ? O Lord, increase our faith!

## **6. To Divine Provision - Jesus – the mediator of a new covenant (12:24a)**

Next, in 12:24, by faith we come not to Moses, or angels and the old covenant, but rather we come to **Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**. As one grasps the terrors of Mount Sinai, that awesome display and violence of God – one might rightly wonder how anyone could ever come to God. With the giving of the law came symbols, types and pictures of Jesus Christ, but all of these centered around blood and death. No one could come to God without blood being shed, or without a substitutionary death. Every approach to God by Sinai was accompanied with terror and the grim realization that ultimately all such animal sacrifices would never allow anyone the right to joyfully come to God.

But Jesus came as the mediator of a new covenant, the one final and sure sacrifice for sin and one who truly reconciled, atoned, made peace between God and man for those who by faith believed Jesus did as such. As the little saying goes, “No Jesus, No Peace; Know Jesus; Know Peace.” For as we noted from our study of Hebrews 8 and the new covenant; the blessings of coming via this covenant include having the righteousness of God in our hearts and minds (as opposed to doing things externally to look right, we are made right internally); and our sins are completely forgiven and removed. By faith then we must understand that Jesus alone is the one who brings us into the presence of God.

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## 7. To Divine Atonement – the sprinkled blood (12:24b)

Finally then, we see that that by faith in Jesus we come to **“the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.”** This is an interesting statement. What does the author mean by coming to this sprinkled blood that **“speaks better than the blood of Abel?”** Some say it means that while Abel’s blood cried out from the ground for vengeance and judgment against Cain, the blood of Jesus declares forgiveness and peace with God. And while I surely see an element of this – let us remember the context of faith versus self-merit. For the blood of Abel may well refer to his animal sacrifice in Genesis 4 through which he found the regard of the Lord. This was the work of Abel’s hand. Yes, Abel did it by faith with a view to a better sacrifice to come – but then, that’s the point is it not – that the blood of Jesus, sprinkled on those who believe He shed it for them, is better than the blood shed by Abel’s work.

No doubt, Abel was obedient and God rewards obedience. But no amount of man’s obedience to God can make him right in view of all his disobedience. Even Abel sought a better sacrifice and Hebrews 12:24 tells us the better blood shed was that of Jesus. We come then not to the blood we shed with our own hands, for truly that amounts to nothing more than violence. We come by faith to the shed blood of Jesus – it is better; it is perfect; it is alone able to make us right before God, enabling us to come to or draw near to God through Jesus.

Beloved, the heritage of believers is that they come to all these promises and blessing that start at Mount Zion; divine presence; divine joy; divine fellowship; divine confidence; divine glorification; divine provision and divine atonement (peace with God).

And now the choice is before us – shall we seek salvation, atonement and peace with God by law or by grace? Would we even entertain for a moment that we must be saved by grace but then kept by the work of our own hands? To say such is to move from the liberty of Zion into the legality of Sinai; to move from the blessings of grace and the Savior’s merits to the bondage of law and self-merit. While I am sure that most everyone would prefer to say they are saved by grace alone; I fear that some here might yet be clinging to the hope that something they do merits or keeps them in God’s favor. May such thoughts vanish from our minds – may Christ alone receive all praise for our salvation and may we know that any good works we see in our lives are not the root, but the fruit of salvation. May we agree with Paul in both heart and practice:

***I have been crucified with Christ; and it is not longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by...faith...in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through law, then Christ died needlessly.***

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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