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Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #39

A Tale of Two Mountains

Hebrews 12:18-24

There are numerous important spiritual lessons for us to learn from this passage, but my focus today is on only one. And as you can see from our reading of this text, it concerns *the obvious and unmistakable contrast between the old covenant, as represented by Mt. Sinai, and the new covenant, as represented by Mt. Zion.*

This contrast is one we have seen throughout Hebrews. From the opening verses of chapter one Jesus was contrasted with and shown to be superior to the prophets of the old covenant. In chapters one and two he was seen as superior to the angels. In chapters three and four our author portrayed him as superior to Moses. Again in chapter four he also was shown to be superior to Joshua. In chapters five through nine it was Aaron, in chapter eight it was the old covenant itself, in chapter nine it was the tabernacle, and in chapter ten the sacrifice of Jesus was demonstrated to be in every way superior to those sacrifices offered during the time of the old covenant. Thus we've seen that Jesus is a better mediator who has provided for us a better covenant enacted upon better promises. As a better high priest he has offered a better sacrifice that assures us of a better hope, a better possession, and a better country, namely the new heavens and new earth.

Now once again, here in Hebrews 12:18-24, our author does it again. But although his aim is the same, his approach is somewhat unusual. *He contrasts for us the old covenant under Moses with the new covenant under Christ by comparing the two mountains that are symbolic or representative of each.* But more important still for our purposes this morning, he vividly contrasts the *experience* of the people as they seek to draw near to God. And that is precisely the point on which I want to land today. I want you to think about *the remarkable differences that exist between the subjective experience of worshipers in the old covenant, under Moses, and that which is our privilege today in the new covenant, under Christ.*

Let me ask you two questions. First what did you bring with you to church today? And second, what did you come expecting to happen? Let's start with the first. I've scanned the audience and to the best of my ability I have determined that no one arrived today with a goat in tow. No one brought a lamb to the service prepared to cut its throat and offer its blood here on the platform.

And I'm very grateful to all of you for that! Neither did anyone enter the auditorium with a turtledove or a grain offering. And why is that the case? Because, as we've seen repeatedly, no such sacrifice or blood offering could do anything to bring us to God in confidence that our sins had been fully and finally forgiven and our consciences wiped clean and set free from the condemning power of sin and guilt.

You came today carrying with you a Bible, I hope, but not an animal sacrifice. You came knowing that the only sacrifice that could ever atone for your sins has already been offered once and for all time. You came confident that the obedience to the Law required of you has already been provided in the sinless life of Jesus. You came confident and assured that the penalty required because of your sin has already been paid by the death of Jesus on the cross. And you came confident that God actually wants you to come boldly to his throne of grace to find mercy and help in time of need. You came knowing that Jesus, as Hebrews 7:25 tells us, stands joyfully at the right hand of the Father to intercede on behalf of all those who come to God through faith in him.

But today I want to move beyond the objective differences between the old covenant under Moses and the new covenant under Christ. In other words, I want you to think with me today about *how those objective differences affect our subjective state of mind and heart; of how the differences between the old covenant and new covenant are expressed in our experience, in our affections and feelings, in the mood and atmosphere of our worship service.* And in thinking about that we will find an answer to our second question, namely, what did you come expecting to experience today?

Let me try to explain more closely what I mean.

We all understand that under the old covenant the blood of bulls and goats and lambs could never take away the guilt of sin. All those sacrifices did was to remind the people that sin remained because they knew they had to come back year after year after year to offer over and over and over again the same blood offerings. But in the new covenant, Christ has offered a single sacrifice of himself and of his own blood, once for all that has forever removed our guilt and shame and condemnation.

Now my question is this: What difference should this make in your heart when you draw near to God? What difference should there be in your affections and your feelings and your emotions and in your thoughts and hopes? Does it make any difference at all? Is your experience today, here at Bridgeway, any different from that of an old covenant believer when he/she approached

God in worship? Absolutely yes, or at least I hope you answered in your heart with a resounding Yes!

That's the primary point I want to explore with you today. I want us to think about what goes on in this auditorium when we gather together to pray and to sing and to celebrate and to say Thank You and to partake of the Lord's Supper and to study God's word. My concern is that far too many Christians come somber and sad and fearful and tearful, almost as if they were attending a funeral service rather than the celebration of a resurrection from the dead!

Their Experience at Mt. Sinai (vv. 18-21)

Our author vividly contrasts the experience of the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai (vv. 18-21) with the experience of Christians at Mt. Zion (vv. 19-24). There are *seven* features that describe the encounter of Israel with God at Sinai, which are in turn contrasted with *seven* characteristics of what we experience under the New Covenant. There can be no doubt but that these two mountains, Sinai and Zion, are designed to represent two covenants: the old covenant under Moses and the new covenant under Jesus. And as we have seen repeatedly in Hebrews, our author wants us to understand that this new covenant and all its attendant blessings are better than what Israel experienced under the old.

The seven things they encountered at Mt. Sinai are found in vv. 18-19. Here our author draws upon Exodus 19:16-19 and 20:18-21; and Deut. 4:11-14; 5:23-27. Let's look at the first two of these texts:

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder” (Exodus 19:16-19).

“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test

you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.’ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:18-21).

As you can see, worship during the time of the old covenant under Moses was not always a pleasant or uplifting or emotionally exhilarating experience. It was terrifying and foreboding and intimidating.

So our author here in Hebrews 12 mentions seven features of what the Israelites encountered: (1) a tangible or touchable mountain; (2) a blazing fire; (3) darkness; (4) gloom; (5) a tempest; (6) the sound of a trumpet; and (7) a voice that so utterly terrified them that they begged God to shut up!

The terms here in vv. 18-19 are designed to evoke an image of the awesome majesty of God who made his presence known at Sinai. And yet somewhat ironically ***God remains hidden to Israel.*** Notwithstanding all the noise and the fearsome sights they encountered at Sinai, ***God is distant and obscured and remote.*** The voice of God was of such a nature that instead of asking him to continue speaking they begged that he be silent. This isn’t because God is evil. It’s because the people are! It is their sin that has evoked God’s anger. It is God’s holiness that keeps them at bay. ***All of these visual and auditory phenomena are simply another way of saying, “You’re sin and guilt remain; and God is infinitely holy and righteous and cannot be approached unless a perfect sacrifice to cover that sin and guilt is offered.”***

Look again at v. 20. In order to reinforce and teach with unmistakable clarity the truth of God’s holiness and the corruption that sin has brought on all of creation, God issued a decree that not only could no human being approach the mountain, not even a cow or dog or cat or goat could come near. If it did, it died! In fact, the sight of that mountain engulfed in fire and smoke and gloom and doom was so foreboding that even Moses declared, “I’m trembling with fear!” (see Deut. 9:19).

I said earlier that these two mountains, Sinai and Zion, represent two covenants. Better still, ***they speak of two ways of viewing our relationship with God.***

At Sinai there is gloom and doom. Everything says: Stay away! Do not draw near! You are not worthy to be close to God.

At Zion there is joy and freedom. Everything says: Come close! Draw near. Christ by his blood and the forgiveness he has brought you has made you worthy to enter God's presence.

Our Experience at Mt. Zion (vv. 22-24)

Beginning with v. 22 our author turns his attention to the liberating and joyful experience of those who draw near to God under the terms of the new covenant.

But let's first take note of the statement in v. 18a, "you have not come" and contrast it with the way v. 22a opens, "but you have come." To "come" or "draw near" to God is a recurrent theme in Hebrews. We've seen this same verb in Hebrews 4:16 where we are invited to "to come" or "draw near" to the throne of grace in prayer. In 7:25 we are encouraged to "draw near" to God through faith in Christ because he lives to make intercession for us. Again in 10:22 we are exhorted to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" and in 11:6 we are described as those who "draw near to God."

I'm taking the time to direct your attention to this recurring emphasis in Hebrews because I want you to understand ***the incredible privilege that is yours as a believer in Jesus***. You can now draw near to God, you can come to God, and you can do so without the slightest tinge of fear or hesitation that you might be rejected. That's what Christianity is all about: drawing near to God even as he draws near to us. It's about relationship, about "nearness" and "dearness" and the unparalleled joy and peace that comes from experiencing that kind of ***relational intimacy*** with our Creator and Redeemer! So, if you ever find yourself in a religious setting or a church service or in any other context that sends the message: Stay away, go back, don't come any closer . . . my advice to you is that you run away! That isn't Christianity. That isn't a NT church. We are here to invite you to draw near to God, to come close to God, to experience his love and acceptance and forgiveness.

So let's look now at that to which or those to whom we "have come". Notice the past tense. It's already a reality, an accomplished truth. This is an experience of the ***present***, not just a future hope. ***He is describing what is true of us as the church now. This is a reality that we encounter from the day of our conversion and all through our Christian lives, all the way up until the time of the end.***

Rather than experiencing fear and dread and a sense of being distant from God, Christians have come into an experience of unparalleled joy and festive celebration! And the reason is simple: through the blood of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant, we now live in God's presence fearlessly and boldly and confidently.

Notice the seven features of our experience:

(1) We “have come to Mt. Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (v. 22a).

These three designations are synonymous and all refer to one thing. Mt. Zion was the site of the Jebusite stronghold that David captured and made his royal residence some seven years after he became king. The name “Zion” eventually was the standard way of referring to the site of the temple and for the city of Jerusalem as a whole.

Of course, he's not talking about the literal or physical mountain of Zion or the earthly city of Jerusalem, for he's contrasting it with the literal, physical Mt. Sinai. Unlike Sinai, the mountain to which we “have come” cannot “be touched.” The mountain to which we have come is the ***heavenly*** Jerusalem. Our identity as citizens of the kingdom of God is not tied to any earthly city, whether Oklahoma City or Jerusalem or Washington, D.C. We are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. Although the heavenly Jerusalem in its fullness has not yet been revealed to us, as it will come only when the new earth is established as our eternal dwelling, we are already its citizens and may even now enjoy its blessings.

Describing it as the city of the “living” God points to the fact that God is alive and active and very much present there. You and I don't draw near to an idea of God or an image of God or to some statue but to ***the God who himself is life.***

(2) We have come “to innumerable angels in festal gathering” (v. 22b).

Literally it is “myriads” of angels, that is to say, thousands upon thousands of them. The fervent joy implied by this gathering is in stark contrast to the doom and gloom atmosphere experienced by the Israelites at Sinai.

This multitude of angels is assembled in “festal gathering” (a word found only here in the NT but used in extra-biblical literature of parties and celebratory festivities). This word connotes excitement, revelry, and well-being.

God is often described in Scripture as being surrounded by tens of thousands of angels. Take this one example from Deuteronomy 33:2 where God is portrayed in these terms:

“The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.”

Or consider what we see in Revelation 5:11-12,

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Rev. 5:11-12).

Do you realize what is happening here at Bridgeway in this somewhat plain auditorium, every time we lift our hearts and voices in song and in praise of God? Do you realize that we are quite literally joining in with the myriads of angels surrounding the throne of the Lamb in heaven? We do not draw near to worship the angels but to join with them in corporate worship of God!

I can’t help but wonder what the angels must be thinking as they observe us make such feeble efforts to join them in praising God: “Look at those humans. Don’t they realize their sins have been forgiven? Don’t they realize they have been freely given eternal life when they deserved only eternal death? Don’t they realize they are praising the God of heaven and earth? Can’t they see the beauty and majesty and glory of this great God of ours? Don’t they have any idea of what joy and exuberance and festive celebration is called for? What’s the matter with those people, anyway?”

I can only hope that the myriads of angels in heaven will never think or say that of Bridgeway!

(3) We have come “to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (v. 23a).

These are definitely human beings redeemed by the blood of the Lamb as they are the only ones described in Scripture as having their names written down or enrolled in a book in heaven. See Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 21:27.

The point is that we don't just worship as Bridgeway Church, but we who are members of this local spiritual family on earth join together with the universal Church in heaven to adore and exalt God and his Christ! This, then, is *the entire communion of saints*, believers from both Israel and the Church, the one people of God. Think about it: those who are described in vv. 18-21 as fearing the presence of God are now celebrating in his very presence in heaven with all the other redeemed of every age! And we are one with them in this exalted worship of God!

(4) We have come "to God, the judge of all" (v. 23b).

The reason for referring to God as "judge" is to reassure us that the judgment passed on us is one of acceptance and reconciliation and forgiveness. That is why Paul so loudly declared that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). But this reference to God as the "judge" also reminds us that the one we adore and honor and praise will ultimately bring evil-doers and unbelievers to account at his throne.

(5) We have come "to the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (v. 23c).

That they are "spirits" means these are the saved of all ages who after physical death entered the presence of God in a disembodied state. It isn't their final condition, as they will be physically raised and glorified at the time of Christ's second coming. But *here we have explicit evidence for the intermediate state*, that time between one's physical death and the time of one's bodily resurrection. All the redeemed of every age are at this very moment together with angels celebrating the Lamb of God. And we "have come" to them in the sense that every time we worship or gather as the body of Christ on earth we are one body, one people with them. Our voices and hearts are united with theirs in the praise of God.

So don't ever think that when a Christian man or woman dies he or she falls into some sort of soul sleep or condition of perpetual unconsciousness. This passage (Heb. 12:23) clearly reminds us that when a Christian dies he/she enters into a state of conscious joy and happiness and glad celebration of the Lord Jesus Christ! Your friends and family members who knew Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and have died physically, are among those described here. They are very much

alive and thinking and feeling and shouting and dancing and celebrating in the presence of God, and we join with them in this worship each time we gather as the people of God on earth.

(6) We “have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (v. 24a).

We do not come to any mere mortal or to yet another fallen and corrupt man whose own sin must be atoned for. We do not come to Moses or Mary or Aaron or Sarah or Joshua or Daniel or Isaiah or Paul or Peter, as great as such men and women were. We come to Jesus because he has established a new covenant in his blood by which we may draw near to God by faith.

(7) We “have come to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (v. 24b).

Why is the shed blood of Abel mentioned here and why is it contrasted with the blood of Christ? Abel was the first man to have his blood shed. His brother Cain killed him. And his shed blood cries out for vengeance and justice. But when Jesus shed his blood it spoke a word or delivered a message far better than that which Abel’s blood made known. Whereas the blood of Abel spoke of vengeance and judgment, Christ’s blood speaks of forgiveness and pardon. Christ’s blood speaks of grace and mercy and freedom.

What Difference does all this make in how we Worship?

Thus, we’ve seen that in the description of the old covenant and Sinai there is an overwhelming portrait of the unapproachability of God as over against the experience of full and unhindered access to God and Christ in the new covenant. The portrayal of the gathered assembly at Zion speaks of joy and exultation and warmth and openness and acceptance, as over against the dismal portrayal of Sinai and its unmistakable message: Stay away!

I’m asking you this morning to embrace a new way of thinking about what we, the local church, are called upon to provide for those we invite to join us. I’m calling on Bridgeway to change its way of thinking about what is happening when we gather corporately to sing and pray and speak God’s Word. When we read this passage there is no escaping the fact that the celebration of the New Covenant resembles the revelry of a national holiday.

So, to what are we calling and inviting people when we ask them to come to Bridgeway? Is it a place of dread where God is remote and distant and unapproachable? Or are we calling people to join us in the experience of unparalleled joy? We are not to be unduly raucous or rowdy, but we who are Christians, of all the people on the earth, have reason to celebrate and sing with joy and exultation.

I'm not saying that there isn't a time for quiet reflection. I'm not saying that we shouldn't tremble in awe of God's majesty and holiness. I'm not saying that we should never talk about God's wrath or the reality of judgment. What I'm saying, instead, is that even when we spend time reflecting on such truths and feeling the weight of God's holiness we should very soon thereafter rejoice in gratitude and glad celebration that his holiness does not keep us at arm's length and that his wrath has been poured out upon and absorbed by Jesus. Yes, we must talk about the reality of sin, but never in such a way that we fail to speak of forgiveness. Yes, we must sing about God's infinite righteousness, but never without reminding ourselves that he has drawn near to us in saving grace and mercy through Jesus Christ.

Perhaps no one put it better than John Piper who said that all Christian worship is an experience of ***serious joy!***

I long for the atmosphere at Bridgeway to be unmistakably relational and personal, not dry and imposing. Everything about the life of the church in the new covenant says: Come! Find acceptance here! Be a part of this community, this family. May we never create an atmosphere or send a message that says: be afraid, be hesitant, perform in this way and act in that way so that you will prove acceptable to God.

When God spoke from Sinai the people trembled in fear and begged him to be silent. But when God speaks to us through his Word we hear grace and redemption and freedom and we should long to hear more. God's word need not frighten us as it did them. Because our sin has been forgiven. God's wrath has been satisfied. The breach between heaven and earth has been healed.

Do our sermons and songs and prayers and rituals flash with the doom and gloom of Sinai or do they reverberate with the light and love and forgiveness of Zion? I pray that it would always and forever be the latter.