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ARE YOU LIVING IN SINAI OR ZION?

Hebrews 12:18-24

By

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Hebrews Lesson 49

Are You Living in Sinai or Zion?
Hebrews 12:18-24; Exodus 19:10-25

In 1986, Texas gem dealer Roy Whetstine was pawing through a Tupperware bowl of cheaply priced rocks at a mineral show in Arizona when he came across a lavender-gray, potato-size stone that looked a bit special. "You want \$15 for this?" Whetstine asked the amateur collector. "Tell you what," replied the collector. "I'll let you have it for \$10. It's not as pretty as the others."

Whetstine walked away with the world's largest star sapphire, later valued at as high as \$2.28 million! He planned to sell his 1,905-carat bargain in its uncut form for \$1.5 million and put the profits in trust for his two sons, each of whom had given Dad \$5 to bring back a little something from the gem show (*Newsweek* [11/24/1986], p. 75).

If you don't know what you possess, you may disregard it or let it go for something worth far less. Esau did that—he didn't appreciate the value of his birthright, which entitled him to the blessings of God's promises to Abraham, and so he traded it for a bowl of stew. He gave away eternal blessings for instant gratification. Bad trade!

But that's what the original readers of Hebrews were in danger of doing! Under the threat of persecution, they were tempted to abandon Christ to return to their Jewish faith. So the author here contrasts the terrors of Mount Sinai, representing Jewish life under the law, with the glories of Mount Zion, picturing the joy of life under the new covenant. He wants us to know that right living flows out of right knowing. If you know the riches that you possess in Christ, you won't want to go back to the empty, fleeting pleasures of the world. John Newton put it this way ("Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," verse 4):

Savior, if of Zion's city, I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity, I will glory in Thy name;
Fading is the world's best pleasure, All its boasted pomp and show;

Solid joys and lasting treasure None but Zion's children know.

So the author does not want us to make Esau's spiritually fatal mistake. He draws a sharp contrast between life under the old covenant and life under the new covenant. The feeling of the old covenant was terror and judgment. The feeling of the new covenant is joyous celebration with the saints and angels in the presence of God. There is still reverence, but the blood of Jesus has taken away the dread of judgment. The old covenant was physical and earthly; the new covenant is spiritual and heavenly. The old covenant put distance between the holy God and the sinful people. The new covenant invites us to dwell in the city of the living God through the blood of Jesus. So his message is:

If you have trusted in Jesus' blood, you have not come to the terrors of the law, but to the joys of the new covenant.

1. If you have trusted in Jesus' blood, you have not come to the terrors of the law (12:18-21).

These verses summarize the story of God's giving the law at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:10-25). You may wonder, "Why would God reveal Himself in such a terrifying manner?" Even Moses, who had seen God in the burning bush, who had performed God's miracles before Pharaoh, was full of fear and trembling. (The quote in v. 21 is not in the original story. The author may have been relying on Jewish oral tradition, or he may have included Moses with the people in their fear.) This doesn't sound like the kind of warm, grandfatherly God that you'd want to cuddle up to!

The answer to that question depends on the answer to another question: "Why did God give the law?" Paul answers that question in Galatians 3:19 ff. He says (Gal. 3:22) that the law was given to "shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." He goes on to explain (Gal. 3:24), "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith."

By nature, we're all blind to the extent of our sin before a holy God. We compare ourselves with terrorists and child molesters and think, "Sure, I've got my faults, but I'm not a terrible sinner!" And, we know that God is holy, but we don't grasp what that means. But then the law comes in and shows us God's absolute holiness. With

Isaiah (6:5), we say, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Isaiah didn’t know that he had a dirty mouth *before* he saw God in His holiness. But the instant he saw God’s holiness, he was aware of his own sinfulness.

The route to Zion goes through Sinai, where we encounter the terrors of God’s law. His law should teach us two things:

- A. God’s law should instill in us a fear of His holiness and judgment.

The scene at Mount Sinai was that of a severe thunderstorm, but it was far more than that. In addition to the darkness, gloom, wind, and flashes of lightning, there was the blast of a trumpet, which was probably a supernatural sound from heaven. The earth quaked violently (Exod. 19:18). Whether the people could understand the exact words of God’s voice from heaven or not, I don’t know. But it was such a terrible sound that they “begged that no further word be spoken to them” (Heb. 12:19). God had commanded that any person or animal that touched the mountain must be killed from a distance, either by stoning or by arrows (Exod. 19:12-13). Like Uzzah who was struck dead for touching the ark, so anyone who touched anything that had touched the mountain where God revealed Himself would die.

John Calvin opens *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. by John McNeill, [Westminster Press], 1:1:1) with this profound sentence: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” He means the knowledge that comes through Scripture. In the same section, he continues (1:1:1),

Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God. Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; and we cannot se-

riously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves.

He goes on (1:1:2) to show that the only way we get a clear knowledge of ourselves is to look upon God's face. His holiness reveals our pride, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and sin. Until we have some understanding of God as revealed in Scripture, we flatter ourselves and think that we're not all that bad. Calvin gives many biblical examples (1:1:3) of men who normally were "firm and constant," but when they got a glimpse of God's majesty and glory, they were "overwhelmed by it and almost annihilated."

John Newton expressed the same idea in his well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace": "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Charles Spurgeon went through the same experience. In his autobiography, he spends a chapter describing how the terrors of God's law tormented him before he came to saving faith in Christ. Martin Luther knew the same thing. He hated God's righteousness until he came to understand that God imputes His righteousness to us by faith alone.

In my experience of growing up in a Christian home, I knew very little of God's holiness or my own depravity before I trusted Christ. But the more I have come to understand the holiness of God, the more I have recognized the sinfulness of my own heart. That drives me to the cross as my only refuge. And while the cross removes the dread of judgment, it should never remove our sense of reverence in the presence of the holy God.

B. God's law should instill in us the need for His mediator.

At Mount Sinai, Moses and Aaron were the only ones allowed to go up the mountain into God's presence. But the people could not draw near to God through Moses or Aaron. They were men with sin of their own. But Jesus Christ is our sinless high priest, who offered Himself as our sacrifice (Heb. 7:26-27). As Paul wrote (1 Tim. 2:5), "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

The author's point is that while the law reveals God's holiness and convicts us as deserving of His judgment, Jesus is God's mediator who paid the penalty for all that believe in Him. So, the route to Zion goes through Sinai, where we encounter the terrors

of God's law. But once you've arrived in Zion, why would you want to go back to Sinai? So after describing the place we have left, the author goes on to show the place where we've come:

2. If you have trusted in Christ, you have come to the joys of the new covenant in Jesus' blood (12:22-24).

The overall feel of these verses is in stark contrast to the preceding verses. Instead of fear and separation, we have joy and inclusion. He lists seven joys for new covenant believers in Christ:

- A. You have come to the joy of inclusion in the city of the living God.

The author describes the new place where believers have come with three terms. The first is *Mount Zion*. This was the name for the stronghold in Jerusalem that David conquered (2 Sam. 5:6-8). It became a synonym for Jerusalem (Ps. 147:12; Amos 1:2; Micah 4:2). It represents the place where God, the King, dwells with His people.

Second, you have come to *the city of the living God*. Hebrews mentions the *city* more than any other New Testament book. This is "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10). It's the city that God prepared for the Old Testament saints who died in faith without receiving the promises (11:13, 16). And while we now dwell in it spiritually, there is a sense in which it is yet "to come" (13:14). *City* conveys a sense of orderliness and security against the enemy. It's a place where needs for food and water are met, and where there is fellowship with others.

But this is not any city; it's the *city of the living God*. In Hebrews 3:12, the author warned us, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from *the living God*." In 9:14, he wrote that the blood of Christ would "cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve *the living God*." As opposed to ritualistic, legalistic religion, through Christ we enter into an abiding relationship with the living God.

The third term the author uses to describe the same thing is *the heavenly Jerusalem*. This is the holy city that John saw, "coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). He goes on to say that it represents God dwelling among His people, and promises that when it comes

down, God will wipe away every tear, and there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4). The fulfillment of these promises awaits the second coming of Jesus.

B. You have come to the joy of myriads of angels in festal assembly.

Most scholars understand “general assembly” (NASB) to be connected with the myriads of angels. The Greek word was used of a festival or celebration. It points to the angels joyously worshipping God, and the fact that we join their chorus of praise. This, too, is something to which already we have come, and yet the full experience remains in the future. We have come to it in the sense that when we worship God in the joy of our salvation, the angels join with us (1 Pet. 1:12). But in the future, as John saw (Rev. 5:11-12),

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.”

While we cannot begin to experience anything that glorious on earth, I challenge you to work at your worship. Apathetic, ho-hum, “worship” is sin! It shows that we don’t understand the majesty of our God, and we are not focused on His great salvation that He lavished on us by His grace. Shake off your apathy and ask God to fill your heart with His joy. You’re joining the angels in chorus as you gather with the saints to worship!

C. You have come to the joy of the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.

Of the nine New Testament occurrences of *firstborn*, seven refer to Jesus (Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:7; Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5). Once it refers to the firstborn in Egypt (Heb. 11:28), and here (a plural) it refers to the saints. The term emphasizes our rights of inheritance as God’s children. Natural families have only one firstborn. But in God’s family, as F. F. Bruce puts it (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 377), “All the people of Christ are the ‘firstborn’ children of God, through their union

with Him who is The Firstborn *par excellence*, their birthright is not to be bartered away, as was Esau's."

D. You have come to the joy of a Judge, who is God of all.

Most Greek scholars translate the phrase in that manner. But you may wonder, "How is it a *joy* to come before an all-powerful *Judge* who knows your every thought and motive?" There are three answers to that question. First, the author was writing to a persecuted church. They could rest in the fact that one day God will judge all their enemies who do not repent. No one will get away with anything. When God judges wicked Babylon, the saints are encouraged, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her" (Rev. 18:20).

Second, we can rejoice that God will reward everything that we have done for the name of Christ. Even a cup of cold water given in His name will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42). And so, "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal. 6:9).

Third, we can rejoice that we have come to the Judge, who is God of all, because living with that awareness will cure us of the sin that damages us and others. Who would commit a crime while standing before the judge in court? While God will not revoke our salvation because of our sin, He will discipline us severely (Heb. 12:4-11). At His judgment seat, all our wood, hay, and straw will be burned. We "will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:15). We can rejoice to serve such a Judge, who disciplines us for our good!

E. You have come to the joy of the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

This refers to all of the saints who have died and gone to heaven. They have not yet received their new resurrection bodies, which awaits the second coming of Christ, but their spirits are made perfect. They are absent from the body, but present with the Lord. For them, all temptation and sin is over. They are completely righteous in Christ, and will be throughout all eternity. Although we are still in the body, fighting against sin, we are one with these saints, and one day soon we will be with them in heaven.

F. You have come to the joy of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

Although I must be brief, this is the best of all. We have already considered this in previous studies. The author uses His human name, Jesus, because it is as a man that Jesus shed His blood for our sins. As God, He is the only one who can mediate between the Holy Father and us as sinful creatures.

Note one other nuance here. In Greek, there are two words for “new.” One means “new in quality;” the other means “recent.” (Some Greek scholars doubt that the words had this difference in the NT, but others see a distinction.) This is the word meaning “recent,” and it’s the only time that this word is connected with the new covenant. Perhaps the Hebrews, as with most of us, were resistant to anything new. Change is difficult. You can almost hear some of the old guard saying, “Why do we need this *new* covenant? The old one is good enough for us!” But the author is saying that the new is better (8:6). The old is obsolete. Finally,

G. You have come to the joy of the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

Some understand this to refer to Abel’s sacrifice, but in Genesis 4:10, God tells Cain that Abel’s blood “is crying to Me from the ground.” So I understand it here to mean that whereas Abel’s blood cried out for vengeance and justice, Jesus’ blood, sprinkled on the believer, speaks God’s word of forgiveness and mercy to the guilty sinner. This is the last of 12 uses of the word “better” in Hebrews. Jesus’ blood is better than our blood, which God demands as the penalty for our sin. It is better than the blood of bulls and goats, which never could atone for sin (Heb. 10:4). If by faith, you are sprinkled with His blood, you have the joy of knowing that God has forgiven all your sins!

Conclusion

So the question is, “Where are you living?” Are you living on Mount Sinai, trying to earn acceptance with a holy God by keeping His law? If so, you should be in terror, because it is impossible to meet the demands of His holiness. If you have trusted Christ, you are living on Mount Zion. Two applications:

First, *stay focused on what Christ has done for you*. In a similar context where Paul is warning about the dangers of legalism, he wrote, “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). That’s where all of our treasures lie! Don’t forget it! “Keep seeking” implies a lifelong quest. If you lose sight of the benefits of Zion, you may be tempted, like Esau, to trade your treasures in Christ for the world’s empty pleasures.

Second, *maintain the biblical balance between familiar fellowship with the Father and reverential awe of His holiness*. We are to draw near to His throne to receive grace for our every need (Heb. 4:16), but we also need to remember that “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

Several years ago, Marla and I, along with our son Daniel and one of his friends, attempted to climb Mount Windom, one of Colorado’s 14ers. We were within sight of the top when a thunderstorm moved in on us. The only place we could go was to lie between some of the boulders and pray that we wouldn’t be struck by lightning. We knew that many people have died that way, so it was a scary experience.

A couple of years ago, Marla and I were in another thunderstorm on top of Bill Williams Mountain, west of Flagstaff. But this time, we weren’t afraid. Instead, we were reveling in the awesome display of God’s power. The difference was, we were inside the lookout tower, which is grounded with lightning rods. Although the lightning was crackling around us and the thunder was booming, we thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

If you are at Mount Sinai, you are in grave danger before the holy God, because you’re exposed to His judgment. But if you are on Mount Zion, you are secure because the blood of Jesus has covered your sins. You can revel in God’s holy presence without fear of His judgment! Live on Mount Zion!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know if we are balanced between the fear of God and the love of God?
2. Why is legalism more comfortable in some ways than living in the presence of the holy, living God?
3. What are some practical ways to shake off apathy in worship?
4. How, practically, does one “keep seeking the things above”?

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