

Hebrews 12: Two Mountains

Hebrews 12:18-29 Two Mountains

The author of Hebrews was writing to Jewish Christians in the first century that seemed to be clinging to the Old Covenant that they were raised under. Traditions can be a powerful force in our lives, and are difficult to break free from. The author used the imagery of the well known story in Exodus 19 when God came down on Mt. Sinai to give the conditions of the covenant we call the Ten Commandments. God had instructed the entire nation, who was camped on the plain in front of the mountain, to consecrate themselves, and approach the mountain on the third day. God put boundaries at the foot of the mountain beyond which they could not come. When God came down on the third day, there was an incredible physical display of God's holiness. There was close thunder and lightening flashes that scared them terribly. A thick cloud descended on the mountain with the glory of God in it, and smoke as from a hot furnace, and God descended upon it in fire. The mountain shook and there was an earthquake, and a very loud noise like a trumpet grew louder and louder. The awesome sights, smells, sounds, and feel of the ground shaking, terrified the people of Israel. It was an atmosphere electric with God's presence, and there were no atheists in Israel that day.

The people could not come closer to the mountain because they were sinners, and for sinners, God is unapproachable. In Hebrews 12:18-24, this historical image is used to represent the Old Covenant that Jesus has replaced. Sinai symbolizes the law given to sinful men resulting in condemnation. No one is able to please God on Sinai's terms. To come into God's presence at Sinai was to die, but believers in Christ do not approach God based on the law. We approach God based on the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Therefore we come to a different mountain which is represented by Mt. Zion. In his comparison, Mt. Zion symbolizes the heavenly Jerusalem where God dwells. Zion symbolizes the grace of God giving forgiveness, salvation, and reconciliation with God. No one is able to please God on Sinai's terms, but Zion is open to all because Jesus met the terms of Sinai.

What is Zion ?

The first mention of Zion is found in 2 Samuel 5:7. Seven years after David became King he captured the fortress city of Zion which became the City of David and later Jerusalem. David brought the Tabernacle to this fortress, and it became the religious center of Israel and its capital. Therefore to Jews, Zion was synonymous with God's holy city. When David's son Solomon succeeded him, he built the permanent Temple on nearby Mt. Moriah, and the concept of Zion expanded in meaning to include the Temple and eventually the whole city of Jerusalem. When David wrote Psalm 2:6, he prophesied that God would install His King upon Zion, God's holy mountain. This was a prophecy of the eternal rule of Christ after the second coming.

Being in Christ, we have come to the heavenly counterpart of Zion which in Hebrews 12:22 is the heavenly Jerusalem where "myriads of angels" participate in the worship of God, and the "assembly" of those believers who have died in faith are already in God's presence. We also are citizens of the heavenly city. Without Christ to make us righteous we could never have approached this figurative Mt. Zion. We would be just like the people of Israel in Ex.19, and God would be unapproachable because He is holy and we are sinners; but now Christ has broken down the boundaries and declared us righteous so that we can "come to Mt. Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

The Allegory of Galatians 4:21-31

Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia for much the same reason as the author of Hebrews. The Galatians were wavering on the verge of adding the keeping of the law to the gospel of grace. In Paul's allegory, he used Mt. Sinai to represent the Old Covenant, and compared it to Abraham's son by the bond-servant Hagar. He said Hagar is Mount Sinai, and corresponds to the present earthly Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. What Paul meant was that in the present earthly Jerusalem, the people are in slavery to sin. In contrast to this, the Jerusalem above (heavenly) is free (from sin), and all who are in Christ have her for a mother. Paul used the two sons of Abraham to make his point. Ishmael was a child of the flesh, born out of the plans and selfishness of man, but Isaac was the child of the promise who was God's given grace.

Abraham had two very different sons—Ishmael and Isaac who had different mothers. Ishmael was the son of the slave wife, and Isaac was the son of the real wife. The heritage of Ishmael was lostness and bondage to sin, while the heritage of Isaac was salvation and freedom. Ishmael was the "child of the flesh" because it was in opposition to God's Word. Isaac was the child of the promise because he was the descendant through Sarah which God promised. The conception of Ishmael is analogous to religious self effort and works righteousness, but the conception of Isaac was according to the way of faith in God's plan of righteousness. In Paul's metaphor, Hagar represents law and works, but Sarah represents grace and faith.

Come to Mount Zion

Moving back to the imagery of Hebrews 12:18-24, we learn that if we come to God through His grace provided by the atoning work of Christ, we have come to the spiritually figurative holy Mt. Zion which is the heavenly city of Jerusalem. In verse 23 we read that we are “enrolled” in heaven, and belong in the presence of God and His holy angels. We read in v.23 that we come to “God the Judge of all”. Imagine the ramifications of having come to the heavenly Jerusalem, and into the presence of God who is omniscient and knows everything you have ever done, said, or thought. He knows all your intentions and motivations. Who can stand His searching scrutiny of their lives? The answer is in the next sentence, “righteous men made perfect”. How were these people made perfect? The answer is in verse 24, through “Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.” Not by keeping the law, not by works, and not by any merit of their own, but only through the mediating sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He goes on to say that the blood of Jesus is calling out to us now much better than the blood of Abel. This is an allusion to what he wrote earlier in Heb.11:4 that the death of Abel still speaks to us. His death proved both the sin nature of man, and the necessity of faith to please God. Abel’s blood cries out for justice, but the blood of Christ speaks of salvation. In v.25 he continues this with something all men need to do. You must not ignore God who is speaking to you through the blood of Jesus. If the men of old were held accountable when they were warned at Mt. Sinai, how much more are you accountable when God warns from heaven? For their sin they did not get to enter Canaan, but if you turn away from Jesus, you won’t get to go to heaven. Before at Sinai, God shook the earth, but in the future God will destroy the fallen earth and only heaven will remain. In verse 27, the author wrote that in the future all earthly physical material things that “can be shaken” will be completely removed in order that the heavenly spiritual things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Our Necessary Response

Since all this is true, and since being in Christ we will receive the “kingdom which cannot be shaken”, we should “show our gratitude by offering ourselves to God for acceptable service with reverence and awe”. God originally created us to have a loving relationship with Him, and to serve and glorify Him. Now in Christ we have been reconciled to Him so it is only expected that we should turn our lives over to Him. No longer do we live for ourselves but for Him. No longer do we serve our own interests but the Lord’s. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:15-20, “He died for all that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf...Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come...Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ...” It’s good to know who you are!

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