

Two Mountains

Intro: As a boy I only knew of two mountain ranges--the Great Smoky Mountains and the Rocky Mountains. But I could not truly appreciate them until I saw them in person for the first time. At the Smokeys one can see that smoky-like fog that gives them their name; and when I first saw the Rockies I immediately could see why they got that name.

Mountains have played a significant role in the story of redemption--maybe in part because mountains elevate us toward the heavens. They just seem to be an appropriate place for humans to meet with the Creator. Tonight we take a look at two mountains that play an important role in the plan of God.

As the Hebrew writer draws his word of exhortation to a close, he wants to instill within his readers the most awesome sense of responsibility in listening to the word of God; and he does so by contrasting two mountains. Let's hear what he had to say:

For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 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 should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:18–29, NASB)

Israel's coming to Mt. Sinai

The Hebrew writer builds his argument on the familiar history of Israel's exodus and journey to Sinai. As I hope you remember from our Wednesday class, God prepared His people for an awesome encounter with Him.

First he proposed His covenant to them in general terms and solicited their response.

Second He indicated that He would come down on Mt. Sinai to make His covenant with them.

Third He urged them to consecrate themselves ceremonially by washing and refraining from sexual relations (presumably to prevent ceremonial defilement.).

On the third day God appeared in an awe-inspiring theophany. The Hebrew writer recalls the fearful physical accompaniments of God's coming. He apparently expresses them in view of Moses' later description of them before Israel in the book of Deuteronomy (4:10-24):

"For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 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 should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling."

God insisted that the mountain was holy space and that it could not be infringed upon either by humans or even animals that might accidentally wander upon it. God commanded that anyone or anything touched that mountain would be punished by death. The whole prospect of preventing such a thing was "unbearable" to the Israelites. Just as Exodus records God's arrival was attended by blazing fire, darkness, gloom, whirlwind, and the blasting of a trumpet, so the Hebrew writer reminds them of these physical miraculous signs of God's presence.

In addition to all these things the ground literally shook from the tremors that accompanied God's descent upon the mountain.

As He spoke to them, they were made so afraid that they later insisted that Moses go up to God and bring the words back down to them instead of having to hear them directly from God.

The Hebrew writer adds that even Moses himself expressed deep fear on this occasion.

All of this was intended to instill the greatest fear and reverence for God. And as Raymond Brown expresses it, "Under the old covenant the emphasis was on the infinite distance between God and man."¹

The Hebrew writer uses this experience to contrast another coming to another mountain.

The New Israel's coming to Mount Zion

Christians have come to Mount Zion.

In a sense the Hebrew writer points out that the new Israel of God has come to another mountain to enter into covenant with God. It is not a

¹ Brown, R. (1988). *The message of Hebrews: Christ above all*. The Bible Speaks Today (243). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

physical one, "a mountain that may be touched;" but rather it is a spiritual one.

God's manifestation to us is not revealed by earthly fearful signs; but rather it is accompanied by the most awesome spiritual realities.

One wonders if the Christians who had left Judaism might have been taunted for leaving what had been to them wonderful things--the city of the Jerusalem as the dwelling of God, the temple in its midst, the rich heritage of angelic revelation and protection, the spirits of righteous men who lived in fellowship with God like Abraham, David, and others.

It is as if the Hebrew writer wants to say, "Those who have come to Jesus have given up nothing, that they have not gained in greater measure in the kingdom of the Lord."

But you have come to Mount Zion

(not the barren mountain of Sinai, but the beautiful mountain of God's house)

and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,

(not barren and dead wilderness of Egypt, but the beautiful city of the living God; not earthly Jerusalem, the symbolic dwelling of God, but the real city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem in all its glorious wonder and beauty.)

and to myriads of angels,

(Yes, angels at times assisted in the revelations of God and the protection of his OT people; but heaven is a place resplendent with the creation of God, with innumerable spirit beings made to serve Him in behalf of the saints)

to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven,

(NT saints are gathered to that great assembly of believers, the church of the first-born ones enrolled in God's heavenly city)

and to God, the Judge of all,

(coming to Mount Zion brings us into the presence of God, judge of all the earth)

and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,

(Those OT saints are now perfected by sacrifice of Christ)

and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,

(not Moses who revealed the law, but the very Son of God who lived among us and who mediates God's covenant to us)

and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

(Abel's blood cries out for vengeance and retribution, but Jesus' blood speaks of grace and forgiveness).

Each of these accompaniments should instill within us the great sense of awe that we should be at a mountain where such great realities exist; but at the same time a great sense of joy in knowing we are participants in things that are not only spiritual but eternal in nature.

As Lane suggests, "The terrifying atmosphere that characterized the theophany at Sinai (vv 18–21) throws into bold relief the festive joy of Zion (vv 22–24)."²

At this mountain God speaks to us in revealing His new covenant.

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.

Clearly the Hebrew writer does not imagine that God is speaking directly to man in a voice like at Mt. Sinai; but in a sense He has come and spoken to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Hebrew writer begins with this awesome truth:

"GOD, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." (Hebrews 1:1–2, NASB)

And just as there was no escape to those refused his word then, so there shall be no escape to those who refuse it now!

For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

The Hebrew writer insists that we not think that, because the new covenant is a covenant of grace, that it makes disobedience to God any less serious. In fact, it makes it more serious!

"FOR this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard," (Hebrews 2:1–3, NASB)

There will be another great earthquake!

Just as the Lord's descent upon Mt. Sinai shook the earth, so God has purposed yet one other earthquake! It is that earthquake mentioned by the prophet Habbakuk.

And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing

² Lane, W. L. (1998). Vol. 47B: Hebrews 9–13. Word Biblical Commentary (459). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

In God's purpose there will be one final shaking of the entire cosmos. It will be the mother of all earthquakes; but more than that, it will be a shaking of the entire created order including the heavens themselves. The reference is of course to the dissolution of the created order as described also by the apostle Peter:

"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up." (2 Peter 3:10, NASB)

This last great shaking will fully separate the shakable from the unshakable; and the Hebrew writer tells us what that one unshakable thing is--the kingdom of God.

Here we could remember the prophecy of Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar: *And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. (Daniel 2:44, NASB)*

We must consecrate ourselves and serve Him with fear.

Here it may be helpful to consider the exhortation that may have prompted the analogy of Mt. Sinai:

"Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14, NASB)

Before coming into God's presence, Israel was required to "consecrate themselves." So likewise we are commanded to do--to pursue sanctification or holiness.

Unlike Israel, this does not depend upon refraining from physical contamination through unclean things, but rather from spiritual contamination through spiritual uncleanness or sin.

But in addition the Hebrew writer gives one final exhortation:

Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."

Just as Israel was redeemed from Egypt to serve the Lord, so we have been redeemed to offer an acceptable service.

The word "service" here is not the word for what a slave does, or for what a deacon does, but rather it is the word for what priests do. As BDAG suggests: "In our lit. only of the carrying out of relig. duties, esp. of a cultic nature, by human beings³"

³ Arndt, W., Gingrich, F. W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (1979). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature : A translation and adaption of the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schrift en des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (467). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

And so our whole life is a life of priestly service to God as we offer up sacrifices to him continually.

The present subjective commands ongoing service.

Note the dual motivation of this service.

Gratitude for all that He has done for us

To think of all that surrounds this mountain is to be eternally grateful to God for all that he has done.

Reverence and awe of His person and His judgment

and if there is any question about whether God has changed in His wrath toward sin, the Hebrew writer remind us, "Our God is a consuming fire."

Lessons for us

Israel soon forgot the awesome displays of God's power. Let us not make that mistake. But let us also remember the additional motivation God has provided through the joyous realities of the new covenant.

No matter what happens in this world, we have the confidence of knowing that we are part of the eternal kingdom of God.

Christians are alert to what is happening in the world, but the news does not fill them with fear. Conscious as they are of political instability, social pressures, economic hazards, religious apostasy, physical hardship and moral decay, they do not despair. Their trust is in God and they are safe.⁴

Conclusion: Have you come to God's mountain to hear Him and enter into His covenant of forgiveness?

⁴ Brown, R. (1988). *The message of Hebrews: Christ above all*. The Bible Speaks Today (246). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.