

Hebrews 12:22

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Date: 26 July 1998

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[0:00] Therefore I wish that peace may still within thy walls remain, and ever may thy palaces!

For prosperity retain, now for my friends and brethren's sakes, peace be in thee, I'll say, and for the house of God our Lord, I'll seek thy good away.

Let's turn again to Hebrews chapter 12, and words we find in verse 22.

Hebrews 12 and verse 22. But you have come to Mount Zion. Now in this section of the epistle to the Hebrews, we have two great contrasts.

A contrast between two mountains, Mount Sinai on the one hand, and Mount Zion on the other.

[2:01] Mount Sinai is a terrifying sight. It's a vision of thunder and lightning, of smoke and fire.

There comes from this mountain the voice of the law, the voice of threat, and the voice of warning.

There comes a voice that says, stay away. A voice that says, approach at your peril. It's the mountain of law, the mountain of taboo, and the mountain of curse.

It is, in the extreme sense, a vision that terrifies and intimidates. And then there is Mount Zion.

A very different vision. A vision of God's holy city. A vision of a great festal gathering of angels.

[3:18] A great convocation of the heirs of God. And perhaps above all, a vision of the presence of Jesus.

This one comes as a better mediator, with a better covenant, and better promises.

In Mount Zion, there is festivity, and there is peace, and there is serenity, and there is glad worship.

And, of course, the two mountains. The thunder of Sinai, the festal gathering of Mount Zion. And, of course, those two mountains are symbols of the peace. And, of course, the thunder of Sinai, the festal gathering of Mount Zion.

And, of course, those two mountains are symbols of a fundamentally important spiritual truth.

[4:33] A contrast between the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the faith of Moses, on the other.

A contrast between the age of the New Testament, and the age of Robinism.

A contrast, at last, between our Christian faith, and all other world religions.

A contrast, at last, we have a great and memorable reminder. That Moses, the rabbis, and all other religions are fundamentally terrifying, and fundamentally intimidating.

And we have the indication, the intimation, that the faith of Jesus presents a fundamental and radical contrast to all of that.

[5:54] We are told, you have not come to a mountain that is burning with fire. But you have come to Mount Zion.

And why is the point raised? And why is the message driven home in such a memorable way? It's driven home because here is a lesson that we so easily forget.

It is made so memorable because of our almost invincible tendency to fall away from the genius of Christianity, and to the genius of Mosesism, and the genius of Robinism, and the genius of other world religions.

There is an incorrigible tendency, even in the hearts of those who best know the Christian faith, to turn the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ into an intimidating object of terror under end, from whom we want to flee, from whom we want to run and to hide.

We turn our God into a mountain who smokes with fire, a God invested with all the paraphernalia of intimidation.

[7:41] That is our native tendency. We turn our Lord Jesus Christ into a Saviour who cannot be touched by the feeling of our own weakness, as we mentioned.

that the only way to conserve and protect His greatness is so to focus upon His divine grandeur, that we lose sight of His incarnation and His earthly experiences, and those memorable moments in which in His fragile humanity He went so close to be broken.

Where to Jesus far away, we say, oh, but He's not like us. And we take the great central rites and rituals of the new covenant, and we turn those again into ordinances that can't be touched, or into rituals which are shared only for a special priestly caste, so that only the priests can do this, and only a priest can do that.

And we forget the great proof of the priesthood of all believers, and the great invitation. in contrast to Mount Sinai, that all the people are to come.

Yahweh told Moses on the mound, the people must not break through. But Jesus Christ has told us, we must all come with boldness to the throne of grace.

[9 : 30] We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. And so because we have this compulsion to turn all religion into that of the mound that smokes and thunders and threatens, we turn God into an object of dread.

We turn Christ into one remote, distant, and uncomprehending. We turn our great rituals into mysteries who served only for a particular group within the Christian church.

And we turn the Christian life into a series of petty regulations, and of petty taboos.

We imagine that somehow someone is a better person, because they observe some of the minutiae of our own code.

We want to go back to that mosaicism, with its specific injunctions, to go back to those rabbis with their detailed regulations.

[10 : 53] And I know it's an amazing thing. Because this epistle is by no means one of the later New Testament documents.

It is relatively early. And yet already, we were turning the Christian faith into Mount Sinai.

We were turning it into this great intimidating entity that breathes fire and smoke and brimstone.

We were reducing it to a system of regulations, of minute prescriptions, of detailed taboos. And that's what this month's protest, expressed so memorably, is all about.

A reminder of what we have not come to. Now, I don't regard this as particularly interesting or perhaps even easy to preach.

[11 : 55] But I would hope that at least tonight we might grasp this great picture of the two mountains. The mountain we have not come to.

And the mountain we have come to. That we will come to terms with this inventory compulsion we have. To change your faith into something that resembles Mount Sinai more than it resembles Mount Zion.

To turn Christianity into simply another religion. What then for a moment are the great contrasts?

Well, the first contrast is this. That in the Christian faith, there is no great list of specific regulations.

You remember that when Moses came down to the mountain, he brought with him not only the two tablets of the law, the Ten Commandments, but he brought also what seemed to us endless regulations indicating the detailed applications of those commandments to every area of human life.

[13 : 20] And for the whole duration of the Old Testament, those Mosaic ordinances were binding upon the people of God.

Now, you must be very clear about this, of course. The Ten Commandments were, and are, and always will be absolutely binding upon the Christian Church.

But in addition to those, there were all those other detailed enactments that governed civic life. And that governed the way that men and women had to worship God.

They governed agriculture and commerce. They governed even the way the army was run. There were rules and regulations for everything.

And along with that, or on top of that, there came the great burden of rabbinic enactments. And what happened there was that not only had you got all those detailed applications of the Ten Commandments, that you had detailed commentary and detailed application of the commentary itself.

[14 : 42] And so you ended up with the Ten Commandments. And then with the detailed breakdown. And then with the detailed breakdown of the details.

And no matter, Jesus said to the weary Jews of his own day, Come to me, all labour and heaven laden, and I will give you rest. He spoke of the Pharisees imposing burdens that neither they nor

We don't worship God by proxy or delegation through some professional priestly caste. But we have this access.

We are all in the city of God. We've arrived. We're here. We have access to God. We are near. We come with boldness to the throne of grace. We go and we say, Abba, Father. Do you have that? Do we have that? Or are we so locked into the native religious impulse of our hearts that we stay away from God in fear and in dread? Or do we say, have we have that? Have we have that? Have we broken through? Have we this face to face, spontaneous, bold relationship with God so that we say, Abba, Father, the mountain said, stay away.

But the city said, come. Remember her revelation, this city. It has gates on the north, the south, the east, and the west, so that folk could pour into it. And so Mount Sinai is about access. Mount Sinai was about staying away and not breaking through. But Mount Sinai is about access and breaking through. And then again, there is this to it. There is the great fact of arrival. We've actually reached Mount Zion. We've reached this heavenly Jerusalem. We've reached the city of the living God. And I think we have great difficulty coming to grips with that as Christians today because we are in a way so futuristic that somehow all this lies in the future. But according to this perspective, we have already reached Mount Zion.

[29 : 15] We have reached God. We've broken through to God. It's partly about the fact of the New Testament being the fulfillment of the old, that already we live in the last days. We have God's spirit even now in our hearts.

We have even now God as our inheritance. We already have the inheritance. We already enjoy the promises of God.

So on the one hand, there is access. And on the other hand, there is this fact of having arrived. As the Old Testament church cowered at the foot of Mount Sinai, they probably felt, we've never reached the promised land. That journey stretched impossibly before them.

But this man is saying that in a very important sense, that in a very important way, it is not the way of the truth and the life. Those who have faith in Jesus have already reached the promised land.

Their lives are hid with Christ in God. They have, in a great sense, already reached home. It's not some kind of quest, this Christian life. It is an arrival. I am the way and the truth and the life.

[30 : 52] And if we have found him, then we have found the truth. We have arrived at the truth.

We've arrived at the life. We've reached the way to God. We've reached God himself. Have we got a sense of arrival?

We Christians are not engaged in some search or in some quest. Once we were seekers, but now we're finders. We have reached the truth. We have reached the truth. We have it in Christ. And so there is this axis.

There is this fact of arrival. But you know, the amazing thing here is a tremendous emphasis on the company once we get to Mount Zion. We saw that with regard to Mount Zion. It was all about the mountain itself, what a dreadful mountain it was.

But as far as Mount Zion goes, we're told nothing about it in terms of geography or physical characteristics. We know nothing about its appearance or its physical features. But we have this tremendous description of the residents of this particular business place.

We have come, we have come, we have told you, we have come to myriads of angels in joyful assembly.

[32 : 19] And what a great contest that is with Mount Zion. Myriads of angels under there in joyful and indeed in festival assembly.

The angels having a great festival. Now, I think what it means is this. That every time you and I come to worship, especially in public, and gather together, the angels are worshipping with us.

It is saying to us that, although they are in heaven and we are on earth, the angels are in heaven and we are on earth, yet we both worship the same Savior and the same Lord.

That's what we come to. This great festival gathering. Could there be a more marked contrast with Mount Sinai?

That was anything but a festival gathering. You wouldn't have called that a great festival of joy and celebration. But when you come to Mount Zion, what you find is they're having a festival.

[33 : 38] It's a festival day. And you find that the very angels are singing for joy because of the glory of the church's Savior and of creation's Lord.

So, here you come to Mount Zion. What's the mood in Mount Zion today? The mood in Mount Zion is it's festival. They're having this great celebration and there are millions and millions of angels here.

And we should remind ourselves, perhaps, of that fact. Not only of this emphasis on the tone, this joyful, festal assembly, this joyful Eucharist, but also the fact that the very angels adore and that they're celebrating with us the glory of our Savior.

So on Mount Zion. Who lives in Mount Zion? What's the population? What's this distribution? Well, there are angels there.

How many? There's a thousand angels. There are, in fact, myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands of angels live there. And they're there for the festival, you see.

[34 : 59] And how long does this festival last? Well, this festival lasts for the whole Christian age. It began at Pentecost where men and women were singing the wonderful works of God.

And it goes on right through the duration of the church's earthly history into the glory beyond. To him be glory in the church through Christ Jesus.

World without end. So that's the population. Who are there? There are thousands of angels gathered there for the festival. Myriads upon myriads.

Couldn't be further away from Mount Zion here. And it's joyful. Oh, what's the mood in Mount Zion? Oh, the mood in Mount Zion is one of joy. It's praise.

I joyed when to the house of God. Go up. They said to me, that's what it is, you see. They're having a festival. And all the angels are there. Every single one left after the fall.

[36 : 03] That dreadful fall in heaven. But all the others are there in myriads. Thousands upon thousands and billions of angels. And they're there for the festival. And who else are there?

Well, there's the church of the firstborn. And there are indications, again, that the idea of the joyful assembly is linked to this assembly of the firstborn.

This church of the firstborn. And in some ways, the key to that is the word the firstborn. Because the firstborn, at least in that culture in our own until recently as well, the firstborn had the rights of primogeniture.

They were the heirs, you see. So who are they? Well, the angels are there. And all of God's firstborn are there.

That is, all the heirs of God. All those who have been told that the inheritance is theirs. They're there at the festival. Of this joyful assembly, the whole of the church of the firstborn is there.

[37 : 13] And who else is there? Well, he says, you have come to the spirits of righteous man made perfect.

Those who have gone before us in the Christian way. The spirits of the justified. Now perfectly sanctified and perfectly glorified.

They're there as well. Well, what can that mean? It doesn't mean that we, in some spiritist sense, have communion with the dead who have gone before us.

But it means, just as with regard to the angels, that when in the public worship of the gathered church of God, we make melody in our hearts to the Lord, then we're doing exactly the same thing as the spirits of just man made perfect.

And as we worship him, as we express our concern for his glory, at this very moment, the spirits of the righteous in heaven are doing exactly the same thing.

[38 : 34] You see, part of the glory of this passage is this. The writer does not distinguish between Mount Sinai on earth and Mount Sinai in heaven.

It's one and the same city. We are in the city. We are in the city. As we gather to worship God tonight, so are the angels.

And so are all the heirs of God. And so are the spirits of all the righteous who have gone before. And they, at this moment, are expressing to each other the glory and wonder of Christ.

In a way that our words can't begin to approximate to. We feel so frustrated. But we know that just as those angels are rejoicing in the Lord, so the spirits of the just made perfect are also worshipping our very Savior.

And part of the glory of our worship really is this, that we are associating ourselves tonight with the worship offered to Jesus. By the myriads of angels, by the church of the firstborn, and by the spirits of just men made perfect.

[39 : 59] And then you see this marvelous thing here, which is so complicated for our logic and our theology. You've come to God, the judge of all men.

God is there. And this is quite a wonderful thing, you know, the way you have God in this list. You don't have him at the head of the list as number one.

You don't have him at the end of the list as its climax. But you have him tucked innocuously and out of the way, in a sense, in the middle.

Well, who's there in that city? Who's in Mount Zion? Well, there are myriads of angels. There's the church of the firstborn.

There is God, the judge of all. And the spirits of just men made perfect. No great lodging to it, you see. But reminding us just how natural and how self-evident almost it is, that God is there too.

[41 : 05] God is in Mount Sinai. God was on Mount Sinai. But God said, stay away. But God is in Mount Sinai. And he's near us and with us and beside us.

He is actually there among his own people. It is difficult to be sure what the tradition should be here. But it could be you have come to the judge, the God of all men.

Or there's a judge in that city. Who is the judge in that city? The God of all men. And you mean that he's there mingling with the angels and the church and the firstborn and the spirits of just men made perfect.

Yes, God is there. Well, you see, you might say, well, this is getting very close to blasphemy and to irreverence. But of course, you see, God is in this place at this very moment.

God is in your heart. Where two or three gathered in my name, I am there. God is in Mount Sinai.

[42 : 12] So who's there? There are the angels, the church of the firstborn, and God. And then the spirits of just men made perfect. But you know, there is a climax here, all right, but it's this.

The climax is, and Jesus. The whole passage from verse 18 has built up to this. You have come to Jesus.

You have not come. You have not come. You really have not come, although you will not believe me on this for a long, long time yet. But you have not come to Mount Sinai.

You have come to Jesus. Jesus. And Jesus is not Mount Sinai. Jesus is not thunder and lightning and smoke and fire.

And through doom and dread and terror and curse and intimidation. He is not that. You have not come to Mount Sinai. You have come to Mount Sinai. You have come to Jesus.

[43 : 12] You have come to Jesus. And that is not simply some slight improvement upon the past or some slight modification of the past. This is absolutely and utterly discontinuous and revolutionary.

This is the exact opposite of Mount Sinai. It is the exact opposite of thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and law and regulation and doom and gloom and fear.

You have not come to that. You have come to Jesus. And that is what our faith has to rise. You have come to Jesus. And what about this Jesus? Well, it is this.

The mediator of a new covenant. Moses too was a mediator. But he was a created servant.

That in that Mount Sinai, there is another kind of mediator. Jesus, God's own son. He was taking our nature and shared our experiences.

[44 : 23] And in that Mount Sinai, you know, there is a better covenant with better promises. And with better conditions. And terms within our human capability.

So on Mount Sinai, there is Jesus. And in Mount Sinai, there is a better mediator. And there is a better covenant. And above all, in Mount Sinai, there is a better sacrifice.

Not the sacrifice. Not the sacrifice that we ourselves offer in terms of some detailed cultic and detestable ritualistic apparatus.

Not the sacrifice of my deed to compliance with any taboo regulations. But the sacrifice of Jesus, the blood of the Son of God.

It seems that that city is protected by an incomparable once for all definitive sacrifice. God's own son.

[45 : 28] You have come to a place. A place which, in a very important sense, has no need of a temple. No need of an altar. No need of a priesthood.

Because you have come to the blood of Jesus that speaks better things than the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel said, condemn the men who shed my blood.

The blood of Christ says, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. It bespicks peace and forgiveness, reconciliation, justification.

What have you come to? You haven't come to a city where every day and every week and every month and every year you must go and pacify your God by some terrible and terrifying sacrifice. You haven't come to a city where your destiny hangs suspended upon your meticulous compliance with a whole set of taboos and regulations.

[46 : 35] And where you can go to hell if you drink tea or wear jeans. But you have come to Mount Zion. You have come not to Sinai but to Jesus, to a better mediator and a better covenant and a better sacrifice.

Did you know that's where you were? Did you realize that you left Mount Sinai far behind? That you've come to something so utterly different?

But I want to close on this because, you know, what comes after this is so extraordinary because it was on to speak of the need for reverence and holiness.

And you see, you would think perhaps again with human logic, well, if it's not Mount Sinai, we can just be flippant and be kind of fun.

And we can turn the church into vanity fair. But you know what follows from this great conference of the two mountains, Sinai and Zion, what follows is a tremendous plea for seriousness.

[47 : 47] Don't refuse him who speaks. Let us worship God acceptably with reverence and all. You see, you cannot say, ah, because it's not Mount Sinai, we don't need seriousness.

And I would be so upset for you to walk away tonight from here under the illusion or delusion that I was arguing for a loss, a lack of seriousness, or the abdication from awe and reverence.

You know, I'm saying this, you see, that just because you're in Mount Sinai, you must take it with the utmost seriousness. But I'm saying this, you see, in Mount Sinai, it's not enough to say, I don't eat pork, or I've got especially big phylacteries, or I tithe parsley.

Because that's not what the world says. But in Mount Sinai, there is the great demand for love of God and neighbor.

There is demand for turning the other cheek. There is this tremendous demand. Let this mind be in you, which also in Christ Jesus think the way Jesus thought.

[49 : 26] You cannot say, oh, it's all right. So long as we do what the rabbis say and avoid what the rabbis tell us we must avoid.

No, here, here, here. You must have the mind of Christ. There's tremendous seriousness of the Christian demand, the response to Mount Sinai.

You have to have reverence and awe. We worship in spirit and in truth. And you stand here at the cross of Calvary, where God most, most, most solemnly sacrifices his own son.

And I assure you, it's no place for flippancy. You remember how at that moment, on earth, Saul and Mount Zion beside Jesus, the slaughtered lamb.

There there is all. And there there is reverence. But I tell you this, too. You have to take the festival dimension, too, with seriousness. You know you are wrong.

[50 : 53] You are lacking gravity. You're lacking awe. You're lacking reverence. If you're at the festival, and yet your demeanor is a contradiction of the spirit of the festival, remember that marvelous picture of the prodigal and the prodigal son parable of the elder brother.

There they were having this great feast because he had returned the poor prodigal. And the elder brother is sulking. I was told, There's your feast.

There's your festival. There's your feast because the brother has come back. So he goes and he sulks. That is a failure of seriousness.

If we tonight are in Mount Zion, that through this Mount Zion is a place where there is a festival. And there's your festival there, not simply for a fort at a year or once every seven years, but it seems that always there's a festival in Mount Zion.

And if you're serious about being a citizen of Mount Zion, then you, too, are sharing in the festivities in joyful Uchrist.

[52 : 16] And you cannot be around and say, to some spiritual guards in Mount Zion, Oh, but I think we're at Mount Sinai.

You're not at Mount Sinai. You've come to Jesus. You've come to Zion. You're at a festival where people are thanking God and praising God and celebrate in the glory of Jesus.

[57:31] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.