

Welcome and Intro: theology and exhortation

Good afternoon, ladies!..

I mentioned in my introduction that the book of Hebrews is structured with an alternating pattern of deep theological teaching and practical instruction and exhortation. These alternating elements work together to bring us the major themes of Hebrews: that Jesus Christ is superior to all other beings and all other ways of approaching God and that we as believers in Christ are to persevere in faith and holiness. The beginning of chapter 12, which we looked at this morning, was heavy on the instruction and exhortation. This latter portion will get pretty deep in its theology, but we'll still find plenty of room for practical application here, as well.

Outline

We'll take this passage in two sections:

Verses 18-24, A Better Word

Verses 25-29, Do Not Reject the Better Word

This morning we talked extensively about what yielding to the Lord looks like: accepting the reality of the race, bearing the discipline of the Lord, and continuing to pursue holiness in community.

This second portion of Hebrews 12 deals a lot more with the how and the why of our surrender to God. What I want to show you this afternoon is that **the way** we pursue a life yielded to God is to be shaped by our understanding of the new covenant that God has made with his people through the blood of his son, Jesus. And that **the motivation** for our obedience and actual, lived-out holiness is God's revelation of his character. We are to reverence and adore the Lord, we are to offer him acceptable worship, we are to yield ourselves fully to him because he has always been, and continues to be, a consuming fire.

A Better Word

So let's take a look at these first seven verses, which will describe the "better word," God's new covenant with his people, the means by which we are to pursue a relationship with God now that Jesus Christ has come.

Hebrew 12:18-24

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest **19** and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. **20** For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." **21** Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." **22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, **24** and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Let's pray together... [yield, accept the reality of the race, bear the discipline of the Lord, continue pursuing holiness in community – and come to the Lord the way he has revealed to us to come]

Big Picture: Contrast the New and Old Covenants

So all that may have sounded like a confusing maze of images and references layered on top of one another, right? But let's just get our bearings for a moment. Get the big picture. What the author is doing in these seven verses is setting up a contrast.

Basically he's saying, you have NOT come to THIS mountain, but you have (in verse 22) come to this OTHER mountain. We are coming to the Lord, and there's a new way to do that. Once we have that fundamental idea in our minds, we can dig in deeper.

Mount Sinai

So let's first of all ask ourselves "what are these mountains?" The first mountain is Mount Sinai, where God revealed himself to Moses and the people of Israel and gave them the Law, including the Ten Commandments, and I'll show you that in just a moment. The second mountain is Mount Zion, which we'll see figuratively refers to the new covenant that God has made with his people through the blood of Jesus Christ. So we have here this contrast between two mountains, representing two covenants that God has made with his people, two ways of approaching our holy God.

Essentially, the author of Hebrews continues to do here what he's been doing throughout this book: demonstrating the superiority of Jesus and his new covenant over every other revelation God has given. But what we'll also want to notice is that although the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant, God Himself remains the same. He's still calling us to come to him in worship and reverence, but he's providing for us a better way through this better word.

Exodus 19 and 20: the first mountain

So let's dig into some of the details.

In verses 18-21, all of this language about fire and darkness and gloom refers back to the book of Exodus, specifically to events that are outlined in Exodus 19 and 20. Let's go ahead and flip (or click) back there to see what we're dealing with. You'll recall that the book of Exodus tells the story of how God's people were in slavery in Egypt. God enabled his people to increase and multiply there, even under oppression, and then he raised up a deliverer, Moses, who led God's people out of Egypt toward the land that God had promised would be theirs. After they miraculously crossed the Red Sea and witnessed the destruction of their Egyptian pursuers, they went out into the wilderness, where they would wander for forty years before finally entering the promised land. Just a few months after God delivered them from the Egyptians, though, they came to Mount Sinai, where God told Moses he was about to give him a message for all the people. He commanded Moses to set a boundary around the mountain and to have the people

cleanse themselves in preparation for the message. Let's read together Exodus 19:16-21:

16 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. **17** Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. **18** 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. **19** And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. **20** The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

21 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish.

At this point, God speaks to his people, delivering to them the Ten Commandments. Now let's pick up in Exodus 20:18:

18 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 **19** and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

Let's take a moment to just let that sink in. The presence of God - the word of God - was so AWESOME, so intimidating, that his own people pleaded not to hear any more from him. But after Moses communicated God's law to them - and not just the ten commandments, but a whole series of laws governing life and worship - the people pledged to do everything that God would command them.

And God affirmed their reverence and obedience. When this story is retold in Deuteronomy chapter 5, God tells Moses:

Deut. 5: the people respond in fear

‘I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. **29** Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!’

At this first mountain, Mount Sinai, God himself acknowledges that the Israelites’ fearful and worshipful and obedient response to the revelation of himself was right and good.

Deut 9: Moses’s fear

But we know how the story goes, right? While Moses was on Mount Sinai, receiving the word of God, the people, wondering why it was taking Moses so long to get back, took matters into their own hands, created a golden calf, and proceeded to worship it! At the foot of the mountain, blazing with God’s presence, God’s people - who have seen his glory! Who have trembled with fear! – turn away from him and worship other gods. And here is where Moses’ fear kicks in, that fear that was referenced in Hebrews 12. Hear what he says in Deuteronomy 9:19:

19 ...I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you.

Moses was rightly afraid that God, in his majestic holiness, would simply wipe out these idolatrous people.

At this first mountain, at Sinai, God revealed himself to his people as a consuming fire, as a holy God who required holiness of his people. That revelation led the people to worship, but it also led them to fear and defeat as they inevitably (and actually pretty quickly!) failed to keep up their end of the covenant. And what was required from then on was an endless cycle of sacrifices to repetitively atone for all of their sins.

Let’s pause and think about what this means for us today. Although God is still holy and awesome, the author of Hebrews says that we have not come to this mountain, Mount Sinai.

Application: not just rules

Some of us here today have lived our lives in the shadow of this mountain. Some of us – or some people that we love – struggle consistently with guilt and shame and defeat. We know the commandments. We want to obey them. And we repeatedly fail to do so. The message of hope in this passage is that we are not merely hearing a litany of commandments from a thundering God. The answer for our spiritual struggle is not simply more rules and more resolutions and more fear. The meditation of our hearts is not “thou shalt not” this or that. We’re not standing in imminent danger of being incinerated by a holy God whom we cannot approach.

But sometimes we act as if we are. We echo the Israelites at the foot of Sinai as we pledge to “do better,” to obey more, to get up earlier to read our Bibles every day. But before the ink of our sermon dries in our journal, we turn around to find a Golden Calf erected right beside us. Another sin - or the same one, probably - clings even more closely. And we wonder if we’re even saved. We get discouraged and we want to give up. That’s one way that we can come to the figurative Mount Sinai.

Or instead of living under the condemnation of the law, some of us actually prefer to believe that we ARE keeping God’s law. Because of a Pharisaical pride or a legalistic upbringing or a type-A orientation toward checklists, we approach God - and we encourage others to approach God - as first and foremost a demanding law-giver. We justify ourselves by all the commandments we’re keeping. We focus on our favorite standards (usually the attainable ones) and think of ourselves as fundamentally okay. When we’re listening to a friend confess her sin, and we genuinely want to help her, we go straight to the logistics of setting up boundaries and accountability and rules to prevent another failure. We agree with her that God is not pleased with her behavior, and we help her resolve to “do better,” to obey more, to get up earlier to read her Bible every day.

Let me be clear, and I’ll get into this more in a moment, it’s not that under the New Covenant we’re off the hook for obedience. But sometimes we can behave as if the

primary way to approach God is through more rules and more promises and resolutions and more guilt and condemnation. We keep on coming back to Mount Sinai.

Deut 18: a future prophet

We're going to jump back into Hebrews 12 in a second, but there's one more passage from Deuteronomy that I want us to look at. Open with me to Deuteronomy chapter 18. After the incident with the golden calf, Moses breaks the original copy of the commandments he had received from God on the mountain. The people repent of their idolatry, Moses delivers to them a new copy of the law. But then he says something remarkable:

Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses speaking to God's people

15 "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— **16** just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' **17** And the Lord said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. **18** I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. **19** And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

Another prophet would come! A prophet like Moses. But greater than Moses, as we read in Hebrews 3, Moses was sent to testify to the things that were to be SPOKEN LATER. And now, that other prophet has come! This new Word has come! And we can come to HIM, to hear HIS words, to hear the voice of God through the Word made flesh: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, [Hebrews 1 says] God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us BY HIS SON!"

The same God who spoke to his people at Sinai has spoken to us again! His message isn't dramatically different. He's still calling us to worship and reverence, as we'll see in

a moment. But he does tell us that we are to yield to God in a new and better way. We are to hear a better word.

We've not come to Mount Sinai, but rather to Mount Zion. As we jump back into Hebrews 12, what we're going to see is that the New Covenant God has instituted is far superior to the Old. Nevertheless, God Himself remains the same. Hebrews 8 describes the former things as "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things." We are coming here to the SUBSTANCE that created those copies and shadows. So what we'll expect to find is something better, more real, more enduring, but it won't be something altogether new and different from what came before.

Mount Zion

As we come to this list in verses 22-24, then, let's explore how some of these elements illustrate the better nature of the new covenant, and let's also notice what hasn't actually changed since God spoke to Moses at Sinai.

Heavenly Jerusalem

Hebrews 12:22

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,

Zion is an Old Testament name for Jerusalem. It's the city of God. So when we read in this passage that we have come to "Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem," I think that's all referring to one thing, although there is a whole lot of richness that can be explored there.

Jerusalem in the Old Testament was the City of David and the site of Solomon's Temple, the place where God ruled and where God was worshiped. Now we have come to a *heavenly* Jerusalem! God still rules! And he is still to be worshiped! But now we are not coming to a physical city, we are coming to a heavenly city.

In Christ, we are not coming to a physical, flaming mountain of law and wrath, but to a beautiful, spiritual, heavenly place of salvation.

Why is this better?

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the earthly and the spiritual are being contrasted, especially in regard to salvation. Turn with me to Hebrews 9. In verse 11, we read “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”

When the people of Israel came to the physical tabernacle or the temple to offer sacrifices to God, they came to something made with human hands. But then Jesus appeared from outside of human creation! He came from HEAVEN! And because of this, he could offer a heavenly and *eternal* salvation, not one that had to be renewed year by year, sacrifice by sacrifice.

Not only is the heavenly Jerusalem superior because it is secure and eternal, but the salvation that we find there through Christ doesn't merely cover our sins like the blood of the goats and bulls did for the people of Israel.

Let's continue in Hebrews 9:13: “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of **the flesh**, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our **conscience** from dead works **to serve the living God**.”

The salvation we find in Christ isn't simply an external covering for sin, it's an internal cleansing of our conscience, a writing of God's law on our minds and hearts, as it says in Hebrews 8.

Note again, though, that Hebrews 9 says that we've been cleansed in order “to serve the living God.” We are still called to yield ourselves to God's will, but the means of our yielding is through the work of Christ on our behalf.

Angels and the assembly of the firstborn

Back to Hebrews 12:22: But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.

Because we now have access to the heavenly realm, we have come to a place where angels celebrate! In Christ, we participate in worship with the angels, we participate in fellowship with believers who have gone before, the firstborn enrolled in heaven, who have already been perfected by the work of Christ. We don't just join the church here on earth when we come to Christ; we are enrolled in the heavenly kingdom, where we are a part of something much greater and grander and more secure and eternal than anything we can see and touch in the here and now.

God the Judge

But the author of Hebrews isn't finished. He goes on in the middle of verse 23 this way:

2 and [you have come] to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, **24** and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,

We've come to God the judge and to Jesus the mediator .

And those designations of God should give us pause. The original readers of this letter were familiar with the notion of being constantly in the shadow of God's judgment. And they would have also immediately appreciated the need for a mediator between them and God the Judge.

But what about us today? I'm old enough to remember a time when my peers, particularly those in the church, but probably even those outside the faith, struggled considerably with a fear of God's judgment. And as we just got done talking about, I'm sure there are still people in this room and in our lives who deal with those notions of God as a harsh and impersonal judge.

But I think most of us would agree that today's society as a whole spends a lot less time worrying about what God thinks of us than previous generations did. Many of you have grown up under the gospel of unconditional acceptance and constant affirmation. We are endlessly exhorted toward doing whatever seems right to us. We are expected to accept any and all behavior that flows from someone's heart or their personal sense of identity and to cast off any notion of judgment. Our culture tattoos on their arms and on their hearts the saying "Only God can judge me," but we have, perhaps willfully, forgotten that, in fact, God WILL judge us. He is, according to verse 23, according to the New Covenant, God, the judge of ALL.

Jesus the Mediator

And Jesus is the mediator of a NEW covenant, but in fact, there is still a need for a covenant! There's still a need for a mediator! We don't "come boldly before the throne of grace" just because God loves and accepts everyone just as they are, but because Jesus, our great high priest, has shed his BLOOD to make it possible for us to come into God's holy presence. Because God will ultimately judge everyone, we need a mediator. But praise God! We HAVE a mediator!

Sprinkled Blood

You haven't come, says the author of Hebrews, to Mount Sinai and the law of Moses. You have come to Jesus' heavenly kingdom, and, as he finishes out verse 24 "to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

The sprinkled blood calls to mind Hebrews 10:19 and following:

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, **20** by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The covenant that God instituted through MOSES involved creating the tabernacle, where only the priests could minister, and then only after their sin had been atoned for by the blood of a sacrificial animal. But the covenant that we have been invited to allows us to enter the holy places - enter the presence of God! - through the blood of Jesus! It allows us to draw near to the same God who formerly revealed himself through fire and smoke and darkness. The blood of Jesus has once for all been sprinkled over us!

And how does the blood of Jesus speak a better word than the blood of Abel? Back in Genesis, after Abel's brother murdered him, God spoke to the murderer and said, "Your brother [Abel's] blood is crying to me from the ground." Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance. But Jesus' blood cries out to God for forgiveness, for cleansing, for atonement, for redemption! This is a better word!

Application: the foot of the mountain or the foot of the cross?

So how does this affect the way that we deal with ourselves and others when it comes to sin?

Instead of standing in the shadow of Sinai, we stand at the foot of the cross. This doesn't minimize our awareness of our own sin; in fact, it should make us increasingly aware that we are sinners, through and through. Our hope can never be in fulfilling any list of commands, even if there were only ten of them! We have a high priest who is interceding for us. We have a sinless Savior who endured suffering and persecution and death on our behalf. We have a heavenly and eternal salvation, an internal purification from dead works. We have a high and holy calling to yield our lives to our Father's will and participate with him in the building of his eternal kingdom. If we are seeing Jesus rightly, we will be increasingly motivated away from sin and toward holiness. We will be quick to confess to our gracious Savior, we will embrace his forgiveness and seek his grace to enable us to press on in this race of faith. And when our sisters similarly fall short of the glory of God, we can be used of him to point them back to their savior and ours.

So we hear this better word, this word of eternal salvation and forgiveness, this word that calls us into the presence of God through the blood of Christ. This is HOW we are to yield ourselves to God, on the basis of Christ's work on our behalf. And we'll wrap up with the WHY for yielding in this final section. The writer of Hebrews repeats his urgent exhortation as we move into verse 25. Let's read it:

Do Not Reject the Better Word

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

God, through Moses, warned the people from Mount Sinai. But the people did not listen, and the Old Testament is full of stories of God's judgment on his wayward people.

And the author of Hebrews doesn't say, "But don't worry; God doesn't judge people anymore." No. He says don't refuse THIS warning, this exhortation. Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart! Do not reject so GREAT A SALVATION!

Why are we to yield ourselves to the Lord? Because he has offered us a great salvation, and if we refuse that salvation, there is no other way for us to come to God.

Call to faith

I'm pretty confident that most of us in this room have trusted in the blood of Jesus for our salvation. But I would be remiss to assume that this is the case. We are about to consider the final verses of Hebrews 12 that speak of the future judgment that is to come when Jesus returns. So I want to ask you this afternoon: what are you trusting for your salvation? Jesus, the sinless son of God, shed his blood for you. Won't you trust his work on your behalf?

Call to evangelism

And for the rest of us who call Jesus our Savior, let's consider the privilege we have of sharing this good news with others. Let's pause right now and lift before the Lord our

neighbors, our coworkers, our children... Let's ask God to help us to point them to the one who speaks from heaven, the one who offers such a great salvation. We're not here to just show people how to live a good and moral life, how to follow the ten commandments, how to be a faithful church member. We are God's ambassadors on earth, pleading with men to be reconciled to God through a better mediator, his son, Jesus...

Future "shaking"

"At that time" verse 26, "his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." **27** This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain."

There will be a final "shaking" of all things, a final judgment, when Jesus returns to fully establish his kingdom. Everything that can be shaken will be removed. And everything that can't be shaken will remain. He "will appear a second time," according to Hebrews 9:28, "not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Verse 28:

28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, **29** for our God is a consuming fire.

God has not changed. The same God who appeared to Moses and the people of Israel at Sinai is still a consuming fire. He is still absolutely holy and righteous. He is still worthy of reverence and awe and worship.

So how do we respond to this consuming fire?

Response: Gratitude

"Let us be grateful," says verse 28. And although in this world we do not have a lasting city, we have the promise of the kingdom to come. Although here we don't have the

assurance of constant comfort and security, we have received and are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Hebrews 1 says, “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,

and the heavens are the work of your hands;

11 they will perish, but you remain;

they will all wear out like a garment,

12 like a robe you will roll them up,

like a garment they will be changed.

But you are the same,

and your years will have no end.”

Response: Acceptable worship

So we respond with gratitude and also with acceptable worship. Not by offering the blood of bulls and goats, but by yielding our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. And if we’re wondering what that means in practicality, all we need to do is keep reading! Chapter 13 gives us a lot of guidance on what a yielded life looks like.

We have heard the better word. We have been saved by the better word! Hebrews 12 asks, will you receive that better word? Will you come before our holy God in reverence and awe? Will you come the way he has provided for you to come: through the precious blood of Jesus? Great blessing awaits, both now and in eternity.

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, we are following the example of Christ himself, we are encouraged by our brothers and sisters running next to us. Let us yield our lives to the purposes of God that our lives might bear the peaceful fruit of righteousness and bring glory to our great Savior, Jesus Christ.