

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## Coming to Sinai or to Zion? (Part One)

Hebrews 12:18-24

Our text this morning presents us with a contrast, a contrast between two ways of coming to God. In fact, this text offers us the only two ways by which people come to God; one is by means of a religion of attainment, of seeking to keep some code of conduct by which they believe if they can keep it, they will be accepted by God. The problem is that this religion of attainment, of salvation by one's own efforts, is not what the Scriptures teach; in fact the pursuit of such a religion, as we will see, brings only terror and condemnation. In contrast to this religion, one may come to God not in his own merits, but believing and trusting in the merits of Christ, believing He alone has paid the price for all your sins; that He alone has fulfilled all God's requirements; and the He alone imparts to you all His righteousness, by which you now live to the glory of God. Our text offers us this contrast between Judaism and Christianity; between a religion of self-effort and the merits of the Savior's efforts.

Remember that the author is addressing Hebrew Christians – those who had been steeped in Judaism, in the Law of Moses. These were people who had experienced both the Old Covenant of the law as well as the New Covenant of grace. They knew what the law required, that one could only approach God by making the right sacrifices through the Levitical priesthood. They knew that they had been called to put all that aside in favor of a better priest, Jesus Christ, who perfectly fulfilled the requirements of the law for them, becoming for those who believed in Him their perfect representative; becoming both their once for all sacrifice and High Priest who would offer His life to the Father on their behalf. It is this picture of Christ that all who are to be right with God must embrace. We find our text that people really have only two choices concerning how they come to God. Either through their own efforts by means of some good work, or by faith in God and His provision of undeserved grace through His Messiah, Jesus.

And so, we are offered two things in this text, each of which becomes a key point;

- I. The problems of coming to God by self-effort (12:18-21)
- II. The promise of coming to God by the Savior's merits (12:22-24)

This morning we will consider this first point, the problems of coming to God by self-effort and next week we will take up the second point. But before we explore this first point, let me put this text in its broader context. A couple of weeks ago we finished up Hebrews 12:12-17, which was a call for believer to complete the life of faith well. I would have you remember that the closing verses of that passage called believers (and remember these first readers were Jewish), to see to it that no one who claimed to be a follower of Christ was coming to God sensually, that is professing to be a Christian while living like Esau who was immoral and godless person, living for physical pleasure and being profane (meaning unholy).

I can't help but think that many of the first readers of this statement might have well responded, "Well, duh, no good Jew would ever seek to live like Esau, according to what he could see, and smell, and hear and touch and do?" But then I submit to you our first point, the problems of coming to God by self-effort. Anyone generally familiar with the morals and ethics of the Bible would know that Esau's approach to God, based upon sensuality, upon what he could do, would not and did not bring him into favor with God. However, Hebrews 12:18-21

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condemns the more religious Jew for doing the same thing, that is being sensual. They may not have been immoral, that is sexually, but they did believe that they could come to God based upon what they could do, what they could see and hear and touch. Just as Esau had scorned God's way in favor of what he wanted, there are religious folks who also scorn God's way in favor of what they want. Nothing that man can do, either by keeping the Old Testament law or by keeping their own personal version or variation of it, can suffice to meet man's deepest need of being reconciled to God. Let us read our text, Hebrews 12:18-21,

**18 For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 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 be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED" (Exodus 19:12-13). 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling" (Deuteronomy 9:19).**

Lord, give us the meaning and spirit of Your Word while it lies open before us;  
Apply Your Word with power to our souls, threatening or promise, doctrine or precept,  
whatever it may be; lead us with trembling and with joy into the soul and marrow of Your Word.  
(adapted from C.H. Spurgeon)

## I. The problems of coming to God by self-effort (12:18-21)

In these verses, the problems of coming to God by one's own attempting to keep the law are revealed. For the law (which is simply a standard of conduct) was never given to man to save him, but rather to show man his sinfulness. Romans 3:20 reminds us:

***because by the works of ["the" – definite article not in Greek] law [any standard by which man works to be right with God] no flesh will be justified [made right] in His sight***

The author of Hebrews is reminding his readers that they did not come to God in the way which was only given to condemn man – by law. The picture of Mount Sinai here shows that coming to God by law only brings terror and condemnation.

Now, I realize that the words and identification of "Mount Sinai" is not in our text, but the picture given clearly makes this inference. Hebrews 12:18 literally says, "For you have not come and are not continuing to come to that which can be touched, to that which is burning with fire and to that which is darkness, gloom and violent storm." This is the picture of Mount Sinai in the Old Testament. Turn with me to Exodus 19. Here we have the events leading up to the giving of the law to the people of Israel and beginning in verse 12 we read:

***12 You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. 13 No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot***

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***through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to [not on] the mountain.***

And continuing in Exodus 19:18-19 we read:

***18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.***

When I read this, I do not see a people who are coming to God with rejoicing. This is not a celebration in which God is inviting His people to come and share in the joy of His presence. Remember that Israel had been called out of Egypt by God. God had heard their cries for deliverance and mercy. He had delivered from the oppressive hand of Egypt and Pharaoh. They had seen God’s presence in the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. But now, for the first time since all this had happened, God is about to speak to His people. He does not descend upon them with the lightness or gentleness of a dove, but rather comes violently upon Mount Sinai demanding not for the people to come near, but rather that they had better stay clear. And why must these people stay clear? Because of the absolute majesty, grandeur, and awesomeness of God’s holiness, purity so brilliant, so intense, that it would kill anyone who was not so pure.

It would be in this place, Mount Sinai, that God would make a covenant with Israel, making them His own people and giving them His code of conduct for them, which was nothing short of His own holiness, they were to be holy even as He was holy. And Israel’s part of this covenant was that they were to agree to obey this law of holiness. Look at Exodus 19:4-6 where the LORD speaks to Moses saying:

***4 You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. 5 Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.***

And when Moses told them this, how did Israel respond? Look at Exodus 19:8 where we read:

***All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!”***

Yes, God was making a covenant with them, but it was a covenant given to reveal their sinfulness, their own inabilities and their great need to depend upon, to plead for the grace and mercy of God. For what most of them did not realize at the time, and what most people fail to see today, is that there is no means by which man may keep the law of God. And so, in an effort to keep law, sinful man alters the law of God and invents new systems and means by which they may be right with whatever God they worship. But with Israel, the commands given by which man may be right with God if he but only kept them, was not a day of gladness.

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Again the picture is that of a mountain burning with fire; of darkness, of gloom and of violent storm.

What I would like you to notice in this description of mountain in verse 18 is that these are all physical senses. While God commanded the mountain not to be touched, the idea behind the phrase **“a mountain that can be touched”** is not necessarily concerning physical contact with the mountain, but rather that the mountain was material and tangible, it could be seen with the eyes. Additionally, they could hear with their ears the sound of the trumpet and smell with their noses the smoke and they could feel the force of the whirlwind as God descended on the mountain. But, as we will come to see, the believer’s experience with Mount Zion is totally different, completely unlike this, it is an experience of faith, not sight. When God descended upon Mount Sinai, He did so to give the people an awe and terror-inspiring vision of the holiness of Himself. It was to cause the people to tremble in light of God’s purity and to reveal to them their sin. It was to cause them to see their sin in light of God’s law and to recognize that God would judge them.

As we read of the manifestations of God on the mountain, we are presented with a vision of God that was to govern the people’s behavior. God was seen on the mountain as a **“blazing fire”** which pictures for us the judgment of God. Fire, in the Scriptures, is a picture of God’s judgment. In Deuteronomy 4:24 and referred to in Hebrews 12:29 we read this:

***For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.***

In his commentary on Hebrews, A.W. Pink notes, “the fire denotes the [formidable] majesty of God as an inflexible Judge, and the terror which His law strikes into the minds of its violators with expectations of fiery indignation.”

The reference to **darkness, and gloom and whirlwind**, represents the hopeless of man in coming to God by means of the law as all his works will be swallowed up in darkness, leaving him lost in the gloom, the fog of death and carried away in winds or tempests of God’s judgment.

This heavy vision of seeking to come to God by means of Mount Sinai, by means of keeping some kind of self-accomplishment is further deflated in 12:19-20 in the description that they have not come,

***“to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, “IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED” (Exodus 19:12-13).***

So far, the descriptions given were simply of God’s presence descending upon the mountain in this spectacular display of power. But now we see that there was something even more terrifying than the display of God’s presence and that was for God to actually speak to the people. Preceding the voice of God was the blast of the trumpet and all this was so terrifying that the people begged for it to stop. We read of this event back again in Exodus 19 – turning there again, remember that the people had been preparing themselves for this meeting with God and beginning in verse 16 we read:

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***So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. [then dropping down to 19:19] 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.***

This reference to the trumpet is important. The Scriptures teach us that when God gave the law to Moses and Israel that angels were present. Listen to Galatians 3:19 which says,

***Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator...***

And how are angels described? With very similar language as what we find in our text. In Hebrews 1:7 (quoting Psalm 104:4) angels are described this way:

***And of the angels He says, “WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE.”***

Angels are associated with the giving of the Law as well as with the judgment of God. Generally speaking, trumpets in the Scriptures are also associated with judgment. In the book of Revelation there are what we call the seven trumpet judgments, each judgment announced with what? The sounding of a trumpet by an angel. In Revelation 8:6-7 we read:

***6 And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them. 7 The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.***

This process of an angel sounding a trumpet of judgment continues on through the text of Revelation. Based on all this, what we read in Exodus, Galatians and Revelation, it would appear that this blast of a trumpet on Mount Sinai was a call of judgment sounded forth perhaps by an angel, reminding the people that God judges sin and this, according to both Exodus and our Hebrews text, was more than the people could bear and so they ***“begged that no further word be spoken to them.”*** It is interesting to note that this phrase “sound of words” probably speaks of the Ten Commandments. Look with me at Deuteronomy 4:11-13 where we read:

***11 You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. 12 Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form — only a voice. 13 So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.***

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The sound of words that the people heard was the Ten Commandments and after they heard this, they could stand to hear no more. When the trumpet was sounded, then God was to speak, and when God spoke, everyone listened. And as these listened to the words of God, according to 12:20, they could not bear them; the commands were more than they could handle. The text reads, ***“For they could not bear the command, “IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED.”***

They could not hold up when God revealed His holiness. No creature can. There was one standard of holiness and no man could come to God according to that standard. God made it clear that day that no one could come to Him, that no one come approach His glory and live, for as the Scriptures says, “for all have sinned and ‘come short’ of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). God is without sin and as He descended upon that mountain, He made sure that the people knew that no sin would be tolerated in His presence.

And let us not think that Moses was exempt in this display of God’s holiness and the revelation of God’s standards. For we read in Hebrews 12:21:

***And so terrible was the sight that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”***

The author of Hebrews appeals to Deuteronomy 9:19, in which Moses makes this confession here which reads this way:

***For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the Lord listened to me that time also.***

Now then, I now that I have taken a lot of time with these verses. I know that these are heavy and intense verses. But what is the point? What are to learn from this frightening event of the giving of the law to the people of Israel. I think that far too often we romanticize the event, that it was like some Fourth of July display in which the people oohed and ahed in delight.

I submit to you that Mount Sinai is the last place anyone would want to come to in order to find the pleasure of God. And if Mount Sinai pictures as it does, man’s attempt to please God by his own keeping of a law or standard, be it God’s or man’s, then this is the place you come to – to a place of terror and judgment.

And so the author of Hebrews is clear – if you are a Christian, if you have come to God through Christ, then you “have and are not coming to such a mountain, and earthly mountain and an earthly experience that you accomplish by your own senses. Salvation does not come by Sinai; it does not come by law. Rather salvation is found in something and someone you cannot touch and in whom you have not seen. Salvation is not founded by sight and senses but rather is realized by faith and trust in the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

If you seek salvation by religion, by law, by self-effort, then all you can expect is judgment and condemnation. For again I ask you to recall Romans 3:20 which says:

***because by the works [by religion] of [“the” – definite article not in Greek] law [any standard by which man works to be right with God] no flesh will be justified [made right] in His sight***

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Are you trusting or depending upon a religion, a law, a practice to save you? I came across this contrast between religion and true salvation. Consider:

1. Religion is the improvement of the old nature. Salvation is the imparting of a new nature through receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

2. Religion clothes us with robes of our own righteousness...Salvation clothes us in the perfect righteousness of Christ which along makes us acceptable in the sight of God.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

3. Religion is what man does for God. Salvation is what God does for man.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

4. Religion says, "Something in my hand I bring." Salvation says, "Nothing in my hand I bring."

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

5. Religion depends on our behaving. Salvation depends on our believing.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

6. Religion says we must act our best. Salvation says we must accept God's best.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

7. Religion tries to furnish a sacrifice. Salvation trusts in a finished sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

8. Religion is striving for a better attainment. Salvation is secured through a perfect atonement.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

9. Religion tries to bring us from darkness to light. Salvation does bring us from death to life.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

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10. Religion says we must be found in God's house. Salvation says we must be "found in Him" (Philippians 3:9).

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

Religion will always conclude with a Mount Sinai like experience, with fear and trembling caused by trumpets, judgment and the fiery display of God's wrath and holiness. Whereas, as we will see more intently next week, salvation will always conclude with a Mount Zion like experience whereby we come to the living God in joy, delight and the promise of eternal life.

Religion says that if I do what is right, I will be alright with God. Religion assumes you can do what is right. But salvation begins as one comes to grips with the spiritual diagnosis of your heart apart from Christ. You are utterly sinful, unable to come to God, fully deserving of His wrath and eternal separation from His blissful presence by being condemned to Hell. Salvation comes as one sees himself as being poor, blind and oppressed by sin and is therefore desperate enough to admit your sin to God. Religion refuses to see this, but salvation comes to those who see their need to hand over their meager, wicked lives to Jesus and see what He does with it – to see Him transform you from religion to a relationship, from one who displeases God, to one who now lives for God out of love and gratitude.

*Do you practice religion or enjoy salvation?*

May the Spirit of God make it each heart's desire to enjoy the blessing of salvation.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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