Hebrews 12:18-29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 to 29. For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given. If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear. 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, 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, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 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. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens. 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. 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, for our God is a consuming fire. A recurring pattern in the book of Hebrews is warning followed by reassurance. The intent and the expectation of the new covenant is great blessing, but yet there is considerable danger for any who reject or abandon what Christ has offered. The author of Hebrews wants to be absolutely certain that the recipients of the book grasp hold of what they have been given in

Christ and do not let go. To this end, at the conclusion of Hebrews chapter 12, he presents us with two alternative mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. The contrast between Sinai and Zion is between two relationships between us and God's presence, the terrifying and threatening theophany and the fearful restriction, and the glorious admittance and celebration. He takes his description of Sinai from Exodus, in Exodus chapter 19 verses 17 to 25. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 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.
And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. 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. 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. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them. And Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, Set limits around the mountain, and consecrate it. And the Lord said to him, Go down and come up, bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.
So Moses went down to the people and told them. And then again in Exodus chapter 20 verses 18 to 19, 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 and said to Moses, You speak to us, and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us, lest we die. The author of Hebrews describes all of this in a way that is designed to have a powerful rhetorical effect. He describes the meeting with God at Mount Sinai in a way that draws upon the different senses, touch what may be touched, a blazing fire, sight, darkness, gloom and tempest, and hearing the

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-23 02:40:20

sound of a trumpet and the voice of words. The most terrifying thing on the mountain is God's voice and the fear of his judgment. The people refused to draw near because of fear, and Moses had fear also.
[4:23] Yet his fear comes at a different point in the story. Moses' fear is referred to in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 19. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also. What he describes here is the terrifying anger of God at sin. In that situation there was not any effective way to deal with the people's sin. He had to mediate for the people, but the people could not come close because of their sin.

And if they did come close, the anger of the Lord might break out at them, and they might be destroyed. There is something a bit more subtle than a straightforward contrast between the old and the new covenant being drawn here. God is present, of course, both on Mount Sinai and on Mount Zion, but in very different ways. On one, he is inaccessible to a sinful people that face his judgment.
On the other, he is accessible to a people who are granted access to his presence through Christ. It is also important to remember here the relationship between Sinai and the tabernacle.
The tabernacle was based upon the foundational theophanic event of Sinai. The tabernacle was a sort of a movable mountain. It moved around the pattern of God's appearance to the people at Sinai to different places. The pattern was received on Sinai for the tabernacle, but Sinai itself was part of the pattern for that tabernacle. And much as Sinai was the place of God's awesome and dreadful presence and glory that was inaccessible to sinful human beings, so the tabernacle was something that kept out the people of Israel. They all had to remain outside lest God's holy wrath break out against them. Indeed, not only human beings were kept out, but even if an animal came near, it had to be stoned to death. Mount Zion, by contrast, is a very different sort of place. Mount Zion is an assembly. It's a place of fellowship and festivity. It is associated with Jerusalem. It's a site of dwelling, with God dwelling in the midst of his people. There are innumerable angels. The angels came at Sinai, but the people were kept far off.
The angels had to intermediate between God and the people. Now, however, the people are invited to join the angels' own assembly. This is the church of the firstborn. It is associated with all of God's people in Christ, who is the firstborn. They're enrolled in heaven. Heaven is their true home.
[6:47] God's presence, of course, is at the heart of it all. The spirits of righteous people made perfect are here, those who have died in Christ and been brought into the fullness of his presence. This realm of fellowship and festivity, of access and presence, is possible because we have been granted access and welcome by Christ's blood. And there is the contrast drawn with the blood of Abel.

In Genesis chapter 4 verses 10 to 12 we read, And the Lord said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength.
You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Abel's blood condemned Cain to exile and exclusion. The blood of Christ, by contrast, grants us admission and access.
The forbidding image of Sinai is a picture of a lack of access to God's presence, a place where there is no sacrifice of Christ for a sinful people, and they must be held afar off or subject to God's judgment. Many of the warnings and encouragements of the book to this point might be heard here. Once again, he is comparing the wilderness generation of the Exodus with the first generation of the church to follow Christ. Once again, he is arguing from the lesser to the greater. Learn the lessons from the wilderness generation. Do not turn back. Do not reject what is set before you. If you reject Christ or turn back from him, your judgment will be far more severe than what faced the wilderness generation at Sinai. They heard God's word on earth, but we have the voice of Christ from heaven. There is a new earth-shattering revelation. Christ has warned us from heaven, not just a word spoken by angels, but now by the one who is greater than all of the angels.
Quoting Haggai chapter 2 verses 6 to 7, he speaks of a coming judgment. For thus says the Lord of hosts, Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-23 02:40:20

[9:00] This judgment shakes the heavenly realm also. Christ has entered into the heavenly temple, into God's presence itself, and so the heavenly order has been changed also. Man now has access to God's heavenly throne itself. Yet there still remain things shaken to be removed. The Christians, to which the author of Hebrews writes, are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Yet there are elements from this world that are to be shaken, and even in the heavens themselves. Perhaps we should even hear some reference to the events of AD 70 here. The earthly sanctuary of the temple is about to be removed in a few years' time. Once that has been removed, it will be clearer that there is no rival way of access into God's presence than that that is offered through Jesus Christ. Recognising all of this, we will approach God with reverence, awe, and with a godly fear. The God that we are approaching is the God of Sinai, the same God that provoked terror in Moses and the people. And now we have access to his presence, access that gives us peace with God, that gives us an enjoyment of his admittance and his acceptance.

And yet, if we reject, we are in a far more serious position than the Israelites were. We must not turn back. We must not give up. We must receive what God has given us in Christ, and joining with that heavenly throng, offer God acceptable worship.

A question to consider. How might the vision of the heavenly company described in this chapter change the way that we consider Christian worship?

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-23 02:40:20