

THE EARTHLY SINAI AND THE HEAVENLY ZION
HEBREWS 12:18-24

SEPTEMBER 2, 2012

If you have ever sought to sell a home, then you know the importance of a comparative market analysis. It's the report that realtors use to determine what homes are worth. That value is based upon a comparison of recent sales of similar homes within the same community. As homeowners, we welcome this kind of comparison because once the house is up for sale, it prepares us to stay the course especially when the market is not faring well.

By way of analogy, the man who wrote the book of Hebrews has done his own comparative study in order to encourage his readers to spiritually stay the course. He knows that because of their ongoing persecution and adversity some are in danger of going back to Moses and Sinai, and of thus deserting the Gospel of grace for the safety of Judaism and the futility of legalism.

Consequently, as he has repeatedly done throughout this epistle, he once again emphasizes the superiority of the new covenant when compared with the one given in the days of the Exodus. It's a rather graphic contrast between the terrors associated with Mt. Sinai, which represents the old covenant (vv. 18-21), and the blessings and joys associated with Mt. Zion, which is representative of the new (vv. 22-24). This will then lead to the solemn admonition of verse 25: "If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth (at Sinai), much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven . . ."

It's important to understand, therefore, that the verses we are looking at this morning (vv. 18-24) are but the prelude to the warning which will follow (vv. 25-29). When viewed together, these two units of thought teach a very simple lesson: the greater the privilege, the greater the accountability for the use or the neglect of this privilege. What then is the best way to appreciate one's privileges? By reflecting on the way things used to be before we had them.

1. The Terrors Associated with Mount Sinai (vv. 18-21) Although Sinai is not mentioned by name, the language that our author is using reproduces the Old Testament account of the Law being given to Moses (Ex. 19:16-19; 20:18-21; Deut. 4:11-12; 5:25-27). Unquestionably fear ruled the day. The people of God stood before a mountain that could be "touched," but anyone who did so would be put to death (Cf. Ex. 19:12); they came to "a blazing fire" (Cf. Deut. 4:11), to "darkness and gloom, and a tempest" (Cf. Deut. 4:11), and to "the sound of a trumpet" (Cf. Ex. 19:16), and a "voice" that was so fearfully awesome as to make "the hearers beg that no further words would be spoken to them" (Cf. Ex. 19:19; 20:19; Deut. 4:12; 5:25-27). Not even a "beast" could touch this mountain without being punished by death (Cf. Ex. 19:12). Even Moses himself said, "I tremble with fear" (Cf. Deut. 9:19).

These terrors of Sinai all pointed to one fundamental truth: *it was because of their sinfulness that God's people were unable to draw near to God's presence.* That's how things used to be – but how very different are the circumstances of Mount Zion!

2. The Blessings and Joys Associated with Mount Zion (vv. 22-24) The comparison now begins with a stark contrast: “But you have come to Mt. Zion . . .” This Mount symbolizes the entry into the eternal rest that is prepared for the people of God, and all of the blessings and joys that await us there. If we follow the translation of the NIV at this point, Mount Zion is synonymous with “the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Here’s the analogy: just as the earthly Zion was the site of Jerusalem and the place where Yahweh would uniquely meet with the old covenant people of God, so the heavenly Zion is the meeting point for the new covenant people of God.

This is the same heavenly city to which Abraham looked forward in faith (Heb. 11:10), as it is “the city which is to come” (Heb. 13:14). It will be the capital city of the new heaven and the new earth, where God will eternally dwell with His people (Rev. 21:1-8). But please note well: this is not our author’s perspective here. His point is that the privileges of its citizenship are already enjoyed by faith.

When he says, “But you have come to Mount Zion. . .” he is affirming his confidence “that a genuine work of the Gospel has been experienced among those to whom he is writing, however much some of them may be falling into apostasy.” (Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, Hebrews). In other words, genuine Christians already have access “to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Those who wholeheartedly believe the Gospel are therefore urged to enter this heavenly sanctuary with “boldness” through the blood of Jesus (10:19), “the mediator of the new covenant.” We therefore have no fear of “God, the Judge of all” as we come before His throne; it’s not one of judgment but one of grace (Heb. 4:16; 10:22). With the eye of faith we can now see ourselves as fellow-citizens with “the assembly of the first-born” (the whole community of saints), and “the spirits of just men made perfect” (the Old Testament saints). We can do so because “the sprinkled blood” of Jesus has cleansed our guilty consciences (10:22).

These then are the blessings and the joys that are associated with having come to Mount Zion. When compared to the terrors associated with Mount Sinai, there simply *is no* comparison. But as we shall see in our study next week, our author will go on to emphasize that the greater the privilege, the greater too is the responsibility. “Those who . . . are blessed with the clear light of God’s day of grace are for that very reason all the more solemnly accountable for their use or neglect of this blessing” (Hughes, Hebrews).

Under the various pressures that are bearing down upon us as Christians today, to withdraw from the community of our fellow believers is to court spiritual defeat; and to abandon the Gospel of Christ will incur a judgment more certain and terrible than that which resulted from a disobedience to the Law. All the more reason to spiritually stay the course!