

10,000 Reasons
Hebrews 12:18-29
May 8, 2016

¹⁸ *You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”*

²² *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

²⁵ *See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.*

²⁸ *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”*

Hebrews 12:18-29 (NIV)

As I mentioned last week, we are approaching the end of this series looking at the *Letter to the Hebrews*, rightly entitled “The Supremacy of Christ.” Next week is the last week, where we will be looking at Hebrews 13. Then we will be starting a brief series on prayer, using the Lord’s Prayer as suggested by Jesus as the foundation for our prayer life.

This morning the author of *The Letter to the Hebrews* gives us what could be an appropriate conclusion to his letter. He compares the Old Covenant, the Law which was given to the Israelites through Moses at Mt. Sinai, to the New Covenant, that which is defined by grace through Jesus Christ which culminates at Mt. Zion – often referred to as the heavenly Jerusalem.

The basis for the keeping of the Old Covenant, the Law, was one which was based on fear. The Israelites, God’s people of the Old Covenant, could come to the foot of the mountain, but they could not climb the mountain. Only Moses could climb the mountain and approach God. And even he could not approach God face to face. God’s face was always shrouded. One time God allowed Moses to see his back, as he was going away. That’s as close as he was able to get.

The Old Covenant, that which was based on Law, was a covenant of judgment, punishment and fear. It said, “do this, or do don’t that, or you will be judged and punished.” In many cases it said, “do not do that, or you will die.” As God was preparing to establish the Old Covenant at Mt. Sinai, the people were forbidden to set foot on the mountain under penalty of death.

The author of this *Letter to the Hebrews*, that which was originally written for the earliest Jewish Christians, starts our passage this morning by saying that Mt. Sinai is not the mountain which you come to any more. That is not the mountain that represents the New Covenant. “The mountain that you come to now is not the mountain that is represented by darkness, gloom and death, the one that even had Moses trembling with fear.”

It was at Mt. Sinai where God demonstrated His awesome holiness and no sinner could come near and witness His holiness and live. God demonstrated his power through the physical means of thunder, lightning, thick clouds, fire, smoke and the violent trembling of the earth (Exodus 19). Who wouldn't be afraid? The primary purpose of the signs was to convince the people of the unapproachableness of God. Sinful men and women could not come near Him and live. It was all a result of the original sin of Adam and Eve and them being excluded from the Garden.

God is a God to be feared, especially the God of the Old Covenant. God is so much bigger than us. His holiness, so much greater. Infinitely greater! If God's people of the Old Covenant could only have kept the Law then they would have had no reason to fear God's wrath. But we know how that worked out. It wasn't just the people of that time, we would have done the same. That is our sinful human nature.

To stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai, even without touching it, is to stand under judgment and doom. It demands perfect obedience and it punishes for disobedience. At Mt. Sinai sinful unforgiven men and women stand before an infinite holy and perfect God.

That is what the early Jewish Christians had been under – the Old Covenant, the Law, judgement, fear. Then the writer of this *Letter to the Hebrews* goes on:

²² *But [now] you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.* Hebrews 12:22-24

Standing directly opposite of Mount Sinai is that of Mount Zion. While Mt. Sinai symbolizes law, Mt. Zion symbolizes grace. While Mt. Sinai presents us with commandments, judgment and condemnation, Mt. Zion presents us with forgiveness, atonement, salvation and no condemnation. While Mt. Sinai presents us with darkness, gloom and death, Mt. Zion presents us with light, joy, hope and life everlasting.

Whereas Sinai was forbidding and terrifying, Zion is inviting and gracious. Mt. Sinai is closed to all, because no one is able to please God on Mt. Sinai's terms. Mt. Sinai's terms are the perfect fulfillment of the Law. Zion is open to all because at Mt. Zion we have Jesus Christ who has met those terms and stands in the place of anyone who will come to God through Him. Mt. Sinai symbolized the unapproachable God while Mt. Zion symbolizes the approachable God, spoken about in several of the Psalms:

For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place. "This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it." Psalm 132:13-14

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Psalm 50:2 (ESV)

When we become Christians, when we repent from our sinfulness and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we come to Mt. Zion. When we do so the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* says we inherit seven blessings:

1. We come to a heavenly city – the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

When we come to Mount Zion we come to the city which no one has been able to experience here on earth, at least since Adam & Eve in the Garden. When we come to Mount Zion we come to the city that all the great fathers and mother of our faith looked forward to, *the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God* (Hebrews 11:10).

From the moment of our conversion, heaven becomes our spiritual home – where our heavenly Father and our Savior is, along with the rest of our spiritual family. That is where our treasure, our inheritance, our hope is.

2. We have come to a joyful assembly.

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.

Whereas the NIV says, “thousands upon thousands,” other versions say “innumerable angels.” The standard Greek understanding of the word used there is “10,000,” meant to mean infinite.

3. We become a member of the church of the first-born.

The true “body of Christ.” As believers we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,” who is “the first-born among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:17, 29).

4. We come into the presence of God

That was an incomprehensible concept to the Jewish people who knew only of the God of Mt. Sinai. But it tells us in the gospels, that which was highlighted earlier in this *Letter to the Hebrews*, that at Jesus’ crucifixion, “the veil of the temple was torn in two,” and the way into the presence of God was made open for all those who trust in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

5. We are declared righteous and our spirits are made perfect.

The ones that are being talked about there are all those who are listed in chapter 11 – all those who were credited with great faith. // While they were all credited as being righteous because of their faith, when were they made perfect? They were only made

perfect through Jesus' death on the cross. Just like us today who are made perfect only through Jesus' death on the cross. They were looking forward to Jesus' death on the cross while we look back on it.

6. We come into the presence of Jesus and He becomes our mediator.

When we come to Mt. Zion we come to Jesus. Jesus is the only ticket to Mt. Zion. We come to Jesus who is the fulfillment of God's beauty and glory (as it tells us in Psalm 50) and "the mediator of the new covenant."

7. All our sin is atoned for through the sprinkling of Jesus' blood.

Jesus' sacrifice was so much better than Abel's. While Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God because it was offered in faith, it did not have the power to save anyone, even Abel himself. Jesus' blood has the power to cleanse the sins of all men and women, for all time, for whoever trusts in his sacrifice.

Seven blessings listed there when one comes to the foot of Mt. Zion through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Of course the blessings are so much more than seven. They are innumerable. 10,000 reasons!

But here is the problem or the conflict in our passage this morning. Many of the early Jewish Christians were about to walk away from them all. They were about to go back to the old way. Back to the Old Covenant, the Law. Back to where one is judged by his or her own works and not by grace and faith.

Why? It doesn't really say. Perhaps it was the persecution which the early Christians were facing. Maybe it was the pull to go back to that which they were most familiar with – their Jewish families, friends and faith. Maybe it was the testing/discipline which God was allowing them to undergo, that which Alex talked about last week. Most likely it was a combination of many if not all of them. But they had arrived at the foot of Mt. Zion, the entrance to their Christian faith, and they were afraid to go up or in.

The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* warns them that there really is no going back.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

While God did shake the earth once before he has also promised through His word that He will shake it once more. Both the prophets Isaiah and Haggai (2:6) spoke about a time to come when God would shake the earth once again:

Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. Isaiah 13:13 (NIV)

For those in the missional discipleship groups that might be following along with the Scripture readings, in 2 Peter 3 the disciple, who Jesus said he would build his church upon, wrote this to the early Christians:

² I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

³ Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴ They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶ By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷ By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

2 Peter 3:2-13 (NIV)

The Bible tells us about a final day of judgement when God will shake the heavens and the earth one final time, removing all that can be shaken, and the establishing of a new heaven and a new earth. All human beings will be judged at that time, those that are still living and those who have gone before. To those who put faith and hope in the law and their own works, they will be judged by the Law, remembering that God's standard is 100 % perfect obedience. To those who have repented from their own sinfulness and put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, they will be judged by Jesus' righteousness. When it is all shaken out, it is only those who will remain.

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief: Illustration

The author of this *Letter to the Hebrews* is pleading to the Jewish Christians, “don't go back!” And while we might think that this only applies, back then, to those early Christians who were Jewish, may we be warned that it still applies to us today. Our natural human tendency is to want to be judged by our own works, our own righteousness, our own ability to keep the law, our own faith.

Trust me, I know. As someone who was raised in the Catholic Church, to fear the Lord, and a strong emphasis on right and wrong, on keeping the law, there is always the tendency to want to go back. And I have discovered, now being in the Mennonite Church for almost 20 years, with its strong emphasis on discipleship and service, when it comes to the fatal trap of works righteousness, Catholics and Mennonites are not that different.

As the prophet Isaiah said, *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away* (Isaiah 64:6).

While at the memorial service this week, and all the people were reading off one accolade after another, I couldn't help but think God was there saying "all those things don't mean anything to me, they're like filthy rags." "The only thing that matters is what you have done with my son, Jesus Christ. Have you confessed with your lips that he is Lord of your life and have you put all your trust in him for salvation?"

Only when we come to realize that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. When we come to realize that there is no way that we can even come close to keeping the law perfectly. When we come to realize that there is no way we can save ourselves and that the only way we can be saved is through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and that even our faith in Jesus is a gift from God, then we really have only one response:

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

Worship of God with reverence and awe is our only acceptable response. Our response song this morning is one which has become one of the most popular Christian praise songs over the past several years and rightfully so. It is based partially on our passage this morning, 10,000 reasons!