

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 12:18-29**

To better understand how God's holiness and God's grace work together to shape us.

Read the Text:

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. 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. 26 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." 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. 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. (Heb. 12:18–29, ESV)

Study the Text:**A Greater "Mountain"**

Hebrews 12:18–29 contains a similar argument that we first saw in Hebrews 2:2–4, where the giving of the Law was compared to the giving of the Gospel. The argument essentially goes like this: "If the Law benefitted God's people (which it did), how much more will they be benefitted by the Gospel which is greater than the Law?" Sometimes this kind of argument is stated negatively as well, as seen in Hebrews 10:28–29: "Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of

grace?” Here, in verses 12 through 17, the comparison is between two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Below is a brief breakdown of some of the key details and concepts in this passage.

THE EARTHLY MOUNT SINAI

Verse 18 begins, “For you have not come to what may be touched,” that is, Mount Sinai. It is described similarly to its first description in Exodus 19:16–19, which says:

“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.”

We often don't fully appreciate the severity of God's holiness. The English Puritan pastor, Stephen Charnock, wrote: “His praise ought to be celebrated with a religious fear. Fear is the product of his mercy as well as his justice: ‘There is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared’ (Ps. 130:4).”¹ The people of God certainly held this fear in mind, as they approached the mountain:

“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.’ 20 Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.’ 21 The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

The mountain of God was so holy that the people feared to even come near it. In fact, Hebrews 12:20 even quotes Exodus 19:12: “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” This may seem puzzling, but this command has an operative reason. The beast, having touched the holy mountain, could not be touched by other people, lest they die. God's holiness is so severe in the presence of sinful people that even animals who came into contact with it posed a threat to those around them. The animal would be stoned to death in order to prevent it from touching anyone else. We must never lose sight of God's grace to sinners; it is *central* to the Gospel. But the Christian faith often forces us to hold two things in tension. This passage reminds us what we are to hold in tension with God's grace: the holiness of God. We must remember that God calls us to himself, but we also must remember that apart from the sanctifying work of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, we would quite literally die in his presence because he is holy, and we are not.

MOSES' SPEECH

Verse 21 quotes Moses: “I tremble with fear.” However, Scripture records no exact statement. Similarly, Stephen in Acts 7:32 states that Moses “trembled, and did not dare to look,” which is also not a word-for-word recording in Scripture. Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce reminds us, however, that this practice of restating Scripture is well established: “Our author may have been acquainted with a [rabbinic] account of the Sinai theophany which made explicit mention of Moses' fear and trembling on this occasion too.”² The statement, “I tremble with fear,” accurately reflects what is recorded of Moses. Even the mediator of the old covenant had a healthy fear of God's holiness.

THE HEAVENLY MOUNT ZION

¹ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God: Updated and Unabridged*, ed. Mark Jones, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 2:1045.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 354-355.

“But you have come” is the Greek προσεληλύθατε, the word from which we get our English word “proselyte.” This may be a subtle way of demonstrating conversion to Christianity from the now-defunct Judaism. Verse 18’s statement that “you have not come to what may be touched” indicates that the comparative mountain in mind is heavenly, not earthly. While Sinai could have been touched, though it would result in the death of that person, Zion cannot be touched because it is “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Indeed, it is the home of the “innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb. 12:22), better understood to mean a “joyful gathering.” It is also the home of the “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23), a reference to all believers throughout history. The “firstborn” echoes Hebrews 1:6, which describes Jesus as “the firstborn.” He is called “the firstborn from the dead” in Colossians 1:18, and “the firstborn of the dead” in Revelation 1:5. Jesus is the first to be *truly resurrected*, and all those who follow him in his life and death necessarily follow him in his resurrection as well.

A Greater Warning

In light of the greater “mountain” we ascend in Christianity, there come greater consequences for disobedience as well. Verse 25 warns us: “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.” In the Old Covenant, “his voice shook the earth,” but in the future he will once more “shake not only the earth but also the heavens” (Heb. 12:26; c.f. Hag. 2:6). This, of course, refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ in which the Lord will bring about final judgment, which will “shake” or “remove” the kingdoms of the earth.

What About Now?

The main takeaway of this passage comes in light of everything that has already been said, in the final two verses of chapter 12: “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” (Heb. 12:28–29). God has promised us what cannot be toppled: an inheritance we receive in the heavens, one that will eventually come to the newly made earth (Rev. 21:10–11). Our part is simply to worship God with reverence and awe in light of both his holiness, which is like a consuming fire, and his grace, which brings us into his family as adopted heirs of his kingdom (Rom. 8:17).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Hebrews 12:18–19. What scene is being described here? Where does this come from?

2. Read Hebrews 12:20. Why should animals who touch the mountain be stoned? What was at stake?

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 12:21. Is this a quotation from another book of the Bible? What is the main point?

2. Read Hebrews 12:22–24. Who all is included in Mount Zion? How does this differ from Mount Sinai? Why?

Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 12:25. What is the main point of this argument? Summarize it in your own words.

2. Read Hebrews 12:26. What will God do “once more?” What verse is being quoted here?

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 12:27. What does the “once more” language indicate, according to this verse?

2. Read Hebrews 12:28–29. What is our part in light of both what God has done and will do?

Discuss the Text!

Session 33 Discussion: Holiness

A major theme of this passage is the holiness of God. God “is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). Even the mountain where his presence dwelt was so holy that an animal that touched it had to be put to death. Talk as a group about how God’s holiness ought to shape our worship of him.

1. Icebreaker: If you could own one thing guaranteed never to break, wear out, or stop working, what would you choose? Why?
2. What “shaky” things—popularity, friendships, grades, sports, possessions, or something else—are you sometimes tempted to depend on? How can trusting God’s unshakable kingdom change that?
3. Because God is both gracious and completely holy, how should that affect the way you worship him—not only at church, but throughout the week?
4. How do God’s holiness and grace affect how you deal with your sin?
5. Kid Talk: Show your kid a picture of something, and ask them to draw it. Once they’ve drawn it, ask them if it is “perfectly accurate?” Explain that perfection is God’s standard because he is holy. No one can be in his presence unless they are holy. Now explain that Jesus died to “make us holy.” That’s God’s grace. God’s holiness is the standard and goal; God’s grace is the way we meet the standard and attain the goal.

Takeaways:

1. God’s holiness ought to strike a reverent fear in our hearts as we approach God.
2. God’s grace (and crucially not our works) makes us holy.