

Hebrews Chapter Twelve (vv.18-29)

Although there is a clear division in the chapter at this point, the **exhortations** from the preceding section to pursue peace and holiness (v.14) and guard against apostasy (vv.15-17) are now given further support. *J Flanigan: These verses are intended as a warning to the potential apostate and an encouragement to the genuine believer. They contain reasons for godly living and a renewed warning about moral laxity on the part of the believer.* The metaphor of the **race** (12.1) is not altogether lost as Zion is presented as the goal of the race. The apostates have turned aside from the race and desire to go back to Sinai, whilst the true believer runs with endurance to Zion following his Captain (12.2). *For genuine believers the goal is presented as already having been reached, but this appreciation is the privilege of faith.*

The Contrast of the Sinai and Zion (vv.18-24)

This section opens with a major contrast between two mountains: **Sinai** (vv.18-21) and **Zion** (vv.22-24). **Sinai** is a symbol of the old covenant, law and death. **Zion** is a symbol of the new covenant, grace and life. To draw the contrast the writer identifies **seven** features of each mountain. *Note the use of the senses (touch, sight, sound) in relation to Sinai.*

- ‘Might be **touched**’ (v.18) - Sinai was a physical mountain. This is a reminder of the material and tangible things associated with the old covenant. In contrast, Zion is associated with that which is spiritual (vv.22-24).
- ‘Burned with **fire**’ (v.18) – the Lord descended on the mount in fire (Exodus 19.18); a sight of the glory of God (Exodus 24.17). The old covenant was glorious (2 Corinthians 3.9) but the fire is a reminder of divine judgment and death associated with it. In contrast, Zion a place of forgiveness and life (Psalm 133.3).
- ‘**Blackness and darkness**’ (v.18) – the gloom of a cloud or storm which descended upon Sinai eventually bringing complete physical darkness (Exodus 19.9, 16, 20.21, Deuteronomy 4.11, 5.22). Darkness is often used in the NT in a moral sense, being emblematic of sin. The old covenant gave no light and exposed the sins of the people. In contrast, Zion is the city of light (Psalm 50.2) and those who dwell there are holy (Isaiah 4.3-4).
- ‘**Tempest**’ (v.18) – a storm or whirlwind with associated thunder and lightning (Exodus 19.16). The old covenant gave no peace. In contrast, Zion is a place of everlasting joy and gladness where sorrow and sighing flee away (Isaiah 35.10, 51.3, 11, Jeremiah 31.12-14).
- ‘Sound of a **trumpet**’ (v.19) – the trumpet commanded the people to approach and heralded the presence of God (Exodus 19.13, cf. Revelation 1.10). It sounded continually and grew louder and louder (Exodus 19.16, 19).
- ‘**Voice** of words’ (v.19) – this was the voice of God Himself who spoke the ten commandments to Moses and the people whilst they were gathered around the mountain (Exodus 19.25, 20.1). The people did not see God, but only heard His words (Deuteronomy 4.12). The old covenant could never bring God’s people into His immediate presence. They were at a distance and He was hidden from sight. Praise God under the new covenant believers draw near into His very presence. It will be our privilege to see the Lord (Hebrews 10.19, 22, 12.14).

Like Zion (cf. v.24), God spoke at Sinai; these were places of revelation. The hearing of God’s voice brought fear upon the people so much so that they begged that God did not speak to them directly again but rather through the mediation of Moses (Exodus 20.19-22). They could not ‘endure’ or ‘go on’ with that which was being commanded (v.20). Some Jewish writers even suggest that after each commandment the people recoiled and had to be brought back again by angelic ministrations (see Exodus 20.18, 21). A boundary was placed around the base of the mountain to protect the people and animals from death (Exodus 19.12-13). Any animal breaking through the boundary must be stoned or shot from a safe distance (v.20). God’s holiness must be recognised and guarded. It is lovely to consider that touching the border of the mount meant **death** whereas to touch the border (or hem) of the Lord’s garment meant **life** (Matthew 9.20, 14.36)! So ‘formidable’ and ‘frightful’ was the ‘spectacle’ that even Moses was exceedingly fearful (in his mind) and trembled (in his body), see Deuteronomy 9.19. The inadequacy of the mediator alludes to the inadequacy of the old covenant to deal with sin. What a sharp contrast to the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 8.6-13, 9.15, 12.24)!

Verses 22-24: The true believers amongst the Hebrews had ‘not come’ to Sinai, the symbol of **law** and **death** (v.18), but ‘unto mount Zion’, that which represents **grace** and **life**. This is the glorious and eternal goal of the Christian’s life and is something which has been attained already in *spirit* and *faith* and will yet be attained in *person*. We have ‘entered into the membership of’ and ‘live’ in an altogether different reality; we have come to Zion! **Seven** features of Zion follow:

- ‘Mount Zion’ which is the ‘city of the living God’ and the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ (v.22). There are two mountains connected with Jerusalem; **Zion** and **Moriah**. Zion was a Jebusite stronghold which was captured by David and made his royal residence (2 Samuel 5.6-9). He installed the ark here in a tent (2 Samuel 6.2, 16-17, 1 Chronicles 15.1) and thus Zion became the earthy dwelling place of God (Psalm 78.68, 132.13-14). Later, Solomon’s temple was built on Moriah to the north of Zion (2 Chronicles 3.1) and the name of Zion was extended to include it. Zion eventually became synonymous with Jerusalem (Isaiah 4.3-4, Zechariah 8.3, 9.9). **Moriah** speaks of the *temple*, worship and sacrifice. **Zion** speaks of the *palace*, rule and sovereignty. **Moriah** is the mount of *vision* (Genesis

22.14); specifically the vision of the temple. **Zion** is the mount of *blessing* (Psalm 133); specifically the blessing of the kingdom. Thus, in Zion the future coming kingdom and its administration is in view. **Zion** also speaks of the ascension position of the Lord Jesus at the right hand of God (see Psalm 68.1, 18). The spiritual mount Zion is 'the city of the living God' and the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (v.22). This is the same city for which Abraham looked (11.10). It is already built and prepared by God (11.10, 16), populated by the redeemed of all ages (12.22-23) and is heavenly and permanent in character (13.14). It is also called 'Jerusalem which is above' (Galatians 4.26), 'the city of my (Christ's) God' (Revelation 3.12), the 'holy city, new Jerusalem' (Revelation 21.2) and 'that great city, the holy Jerusalem' (Revelation 21.10). **Mount Zion** = *foundation*. **City** = *security, society and administration*. **Heavenly Jerusalem** = *character*. See Revelation 21.10.

- 'An innumerable company' and 'general assembly' of angels (vv.22-23) – this is a joyous 'festive gathering' (note the contrast with Sinai) of the whole host of holy angels (cf. Deuteronomy 33.2, Galatians 3.19, Revelation 5.11). *The angels are now in the holy festal joy of a new dispensation.* See Revelation 21.12.
- 'The church (*assembly*) of the firstborn' (v.23) – the word 'church' is *ekklesia*, a 'called out company' (2.12). The word 'firstborn' is often used in the *singular* of the Lord Jesus but here it is in the *plural*, i.e. 'firstborn ones'. This assembly of the 'firstborn ones' is the Church of the NT whose names are 'enrolled' or 'written' in heaven (Luke 10.20, Philippians 4.3, Revelation 17.8). What **security!** See Revelation 21.14, 27.
- 'God the judge of all' (v.23) – God is the centre of this gathering (Revelation 21.3) and it is His presence in which we dwell. The entire inhabitants of this city have been scrutinized by the Judge and found to be righteous (v.24). God is no less holy than He was at Sinai, but now His people have access into His very presence.
- 'Spirits of just men made perfect' (v.23) – this describes those of Hebrews 11 and OT saints in general. They are 'spirits' because they have died and await resurrection. They are 'just' or 'righteous' because they lived lives of faith (10.38, 11.4). They are 'made perfect' in the sense that they have been cleansed from sin and brought into the presence of God through the work of Christ (10.14, 11.40). See Revelation 21.12.
- 'Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant' (v.24) – we have come into relationship with the One who, being fully man and fully God, is perfectly qualified to establish and guarantee the blessings of the new covenant (9.15).
- 'Blood of sprinkling' (v.24) – the **shed** blood of the Lord Jesus is the ground upon which the new covenant and its blessings have been established. The **sprinkled** blood is the means by which these blessings are applied to believers. This blood speaks 'better than Abel' meaning the effect of the sprinkled blood of Christ is far greater than the effect of the sprinkled blood of Abel's sacrifice, i.e. the firstlings of his flock. The writer is again reminding us of the efficacy of the blood of the Lord Jesus in comparison to that of animal sacrifice (9.13-14).

The Challenge of the Epistle (vv.25-27)

There now follows a stark warning. Given the superior character of the gospel and new covenant they were to 'constantly see to it' and be 'watchful' that they did not 'deliberately refuse to listen and obey' the word of God. He had formerly spoken on earth from Sinai, now He speaks in and through His Son from heaven. God's people of old rebelled against the word of God from Sinai and all died in the wilderness (2.2-3, 3.15-19); how much greater the inescapable judgment if they 'turned away' from Christ. At Sinai, God's voice shook the earth *locally* (Exodus 19.18, Psalm 68.8). In a coming day God has promised (Haggai 2.6-7) to shake not only the earth, but also the heavens *universally*. This will result in the removal of all that opposes God and His purposes at the end of the tribulation (see Haggai 2.21-23) and ultimately all of creation at the end of the millennium (1.12, 2 Peter 3.10-13). Then, only those things which are 'unshakeable', i.e. *spiritual* and therefore *eternal* will remain (see Isaiah 65.17). *Isaiah 66.22: For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain.* What folly then to cling to the tangible, visible things of earth, including Judaism. All will be **gone** and pass away.

Now what about genuine believers? Since we (the writer clearly had confidence in the genuine faith of most) are presently receiving this kingdom in a spiritual sense; since we are receiving that which is unshakeable, unchangeable and eternal, what manner of persons should we be (2 Peter 3.11)? We are to have '**grace**', a well-known expression for gratitude and thanksgiving (1 Timothy 1.12, 2 Timothy 1.3). This is expressed in **service** (*latreuo*); not the service of a bondsman or deacon, but the willing service of worshippers (9.14, Revelation 22.3). This is a service which springs from communion *with* and devotion *to* the Lord. If we are to serve God 'acceptably' or in a manner which is 'well pleasing' to Him then it should also be characterised by 'reverence' and 'awe', i.e. with a sense of the holiness and majesty of God; nothing loud, frivolous or over-familiar. Let us ever remember, the holy character of our God ('consuming fire') has not changed under the new covenant. Not only will He consume the apostate (cf. Deuteronomy 4.24) but true believers must be careful to serve Him in purity and righteousness and thus be well-pleasing to Him.