

In regards to interpretation, context is king. That is why I usually begin the sermon with a review of what has come before the passage we are studying. Without the context we can miss the author's point. Through this entire letter to the Hebrew church, the author has been demonstrating that nothing comes close to what we have in the Messiah, Jesus. Angels, patriarchs, and prophets, all are inferior to Jesus and merely point to His coming. For these believers to return to Judaism for the purpose of escaping persecution would be to walk away from the faith delivered to them, faith by which the heroes of old took their stand and were justified before God (Genesis 15:6).

The first portion of this chapter reminded them that God's discipline is a blessing. It means we have a loving Father. Some of those heroes of faith died painful deaths even though they had not seen the coming of the One who was promised. However, the readers had the knowledge of His coming and what He accomplished to save us from sins. How could they go backward? They hadn't been persecuted to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:4). That was perhaps a reminder of what the heroes of faith and their founders endured, but even more importantly, what their Savior had done to redeem them. Whatever God would allow them to go through, He would be with them in it. And He will be with us too, as we endure by faith (Matthew 28:20).

The author now returns to the contrast of the covenant with Israel in the wilderness and the greater revelation and promises that had since been revealed to emphasize the point he is making. *¹⁸ 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.* Hebrews 12:18-19 He is describing the experience of the nation at the foot of Sinai as described in Exodus (Exodus 20:18; Deuteronomy 4:11). As is common in the New Testament, the author is using the exact language of the Torah. The LORD was in a dark cloud to hide the manifestation of His holiness from the people. The fire that descended on the mountain was said to rise to the heart of heaven. The whole mountain shook with God's presence. They couldn't endure the voice of God, so they begged Moses to communicate with God for them (Exodus 20:19).

So that we get a sense of what the author is describing, we need to picture this in our minds. What would your experience be if you stood at the base of Gray Back Mountain and saw something similar, not just a fire, but a black thundercloud the likes of which you had never witnessed before, with fire going up into the upper atmosphere, while the whole mountain shook? But that isn't all. A voice comes booming out of the cloud like trumpets blasting in your ear announcing God's commands. The Creator of heaven and earth is manifestly present and the sense of His holiness and of your own sin causes you to tremble with fear. You know everyone around you feels the same; and your faces are down toward the earth, bowing in fearful awe (Isaiah 6:5).

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

Commented [PW1]: Genesis 15:6 (ESV)

⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Commented [PW2]: Hebrews 12:4 (ESV)

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Commented [PW3]: Matthew 28:20 (ESV)

²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Commented [PW4]: Exodus 20:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ 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

Commented [PW5]: Deuteronomy 4:11 (ESV)

¹¹ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.

Commented [PW6]:

Commented [PW7]: Exodus 20:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

Commented [PW8]: Isaiah 6:5 (ESV)

⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

tremble with fear. Hebrews 12:20-21 So holy is the presence of God that any part of this fallen creation that dared to approach was to be stoned for doing so. Even Moses, the man who talked with God at the burning bush and was God’s instrument to deliver the Children of Israel from Egypt, was trembling with fear. What was the difference from the first Sinai experience that now caused such fear? God is about deliver His Law. The Law shows us how far short we fall from the holiness of God. The Law was a great blessing in that it showed them the way to a blessed life (Deuteronomy 28:1). But it was a curse in that now knowing God’s just demands, we are even more accountable to God to obey those commands (Deuteronomy 28:15; Romans 7:7). That was a part of the reason for this fearful manifestation. The people were being instilled with a healthy fear of the righteous demands of a just and holy God.

That is not where the people of God stand now, for grace has been given us in Christ (John 1:17). However, that does not change who God is. It does not change the fact that He is holy and just in all He does. We don’t stand at the foot of Sinai. 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,* Hebrews 12:22-23

Now let us consider where we stand today. That great cloud of witnesses that surround us make up the spiritual Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the location on earth where God chose to dwell in the Temple. It was the apex of the city of God, Jerusalem. But all that was a picture of the spiritual realm, a place where the people of God throughout the ages make up New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). They are living stones in the heavenly Temple where God dwells (1 Peter 2:5). Countless angels are gathered joyfully celebrating the completed work of God, the end of evil, the saints made perfect. This is where we stand today because of what Jesus has done for us.

Firstborn is a title of inheritance and responsibility. While Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead (Colossians 1:18) as well as holding the title of the firstborn in the Kingdom (Romans 8:29), He will share His glory with the redeemed in heaven (Romans 8:17). Jesus shares His inheritance with us, the church of the firstborn, sons and daughters of God. Paul tells us that we will inherit all things, and that includes the honor and responsibilities that come with the honor of firstborn (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

The Torah had instructions for the yearly feasts of Israel. They were times when all Israelites were to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the goodness of God, remembering what God had done in their history. Some events were more solemn, but most were joyous times like our Christmas, only with a lot more people gathered and many more songs sung together with hearts overflowing with joy (Leviticus 23:40). They are the chosen people of God, and they knew it. God had shown it in many miraculous ways in their history. Those feasts just vaguely foreshadow our celebration in heaven. We taste it sometimes when we are all in unity worshiping God, wholeheartedly singing songs of gratitude. Joy overflows in tears. God is with us and we know it, not just in our minds but in our hearts as well. We sense the glory of being in covenant with God.

Commented [PW9]: Deuteronomy 28:1 (ESV)

¹ “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

Commented [PW10]: Deuteronomy 28:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

Commented [PW11]: Romans 7:7 (ESV)

⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

Commented [PW12]: John 1:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Commented [PW13]: Revelation 21:2 (ESV)

² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Commented [PW14]: 1 Peter 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Commented [PW15]: Colossians 1:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Commented [PW16]: Romans 8:29 (ESV)

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Commented [PW17]: Romans 8:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Commented [PW18]: 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 (ESV)

²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

Commented [PW19]: Leviticus 23:40 (ESV)

⁴⁰ And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.

Coming to Zion is a future event, but it's also happening right now in the spiritual realm. You *have* come to Mount Zion. Mountains represent kingdoms in Scripture. The kingdom of God in Daniel chapter two is a mountain that fills the whole earth (Daniel 2:44-45). You are already in that kingdom for you have come 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.* Hebrews 12:24 (parenthesis mine) While we still live in this fallen world, we are new creations being transformed by the Spirit of God and His Word (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Peter 1:23). Our citizenship has changed from this fallen world to the kingdom of God. We have come to Mount Zion. The old covenant was mediated by angels and sealed with the blood of animals, but the new covenant is mediated by the Son of God and sealed with His righteous blood on our behalf. Again, the author is pointing out the giant leap forward in revelation that we have in the Messiah, Jesus.

All around us are the joyful angels and the saints who have gone before us who are watching the plan of God unfold, the creation of the bride of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17; 1 Peter 1:12). All heaven rejoices as each person transfers their citizenship by accepting Jesus as their Savior who paid for their sins (Luke 15:7). A new living stone is added to the Temple of God and heaven erupts in songs of joy. What an explosion of joy there will be when the last battle is won and evil is no more!

Just as an aside, I was wondering as I wrote this what it will be like to talk with those joyful angels and hear about the battles they were sent into and the times they assisted me when I was completely unaware (Daniel 9:21-22). What is it like to be an angel and exactly how did they fight the fallen angels? Did God show them in advance the outcome so they would be encouraged? Did they ever band together in mighty battles that turned nations? And what did they think when they saw Jesus die on the cross? But perhaps we will be so enamored with the presence of Jesus we won't even care.

The author returns to the thought of shedding blood in resistance of sin by reminding them of the ultimate resistance, that of Jesus shedding His blood on the cross. He wrote that it speaks a better word than that of Abel. In Hebrews eleven he wrote that Abel still speaks through his faith (Hebrews 11:4). What does Abel's blood speak? It tells us there is sin in the world. That injustice can prevail over physical life. That is what the Hebrew believers feared. It may be what we fear at times. It's a part of living in a fallen world. But Jesus' blood speaks a much better word. It tells us that God loves us and has provided salvation for all who come to Him in faith. It tells us that good will prevail over evil in the end. It tells us God is just and holy, but also loving and merciful.

The blood of Christ speaks even more than that, but the author is emphasizing a contrast between the blood that speaks of injustice and the blood that says justice has been provided in Christ for all who will receive Him. You don't have to be condemned on the Day of Judgment. The blood of Abel says Cain is guilty. The blood of Christ says we are all guilty, but in love God has provided atonement for our sins if we turn from them and receive His free gift of salvation in Jesus (1 John 1:7).

Commented [PW20]: Daniel 2:44-45 (ESV)

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever,
⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."

Commented [PW21]: 2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Commented [PW22]: 1 Peter 1:23 (ESV)

²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

Commented [PW23]: 1 Corinthians 6:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Commented [PW24]: 1 Peter 1:12 (ESV)

¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Commented [PW25]: Luke 15:7 (ESV)

⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Commented [PW26]: Daniel 9:21-22 (ESV)

²¹ while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.
²² He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.

Commented [PW27]: Hebrews 11:4 (ESV)

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

Commented [PW28]: 1 John 1:7 (ESV)

⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

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. Hebrews 12:25 Because the revelation is so much greater and clearer, because it is completely sufficient to deal with the fallen state of man, because it is the ultimate revelation of the love of God, we had better not refuse the One who came from heaven and is speaking to us through His blood. Look what happened to Israel when they refused to hear the words of the covenant delivered by Moses. The word "hear" doesn't just mean to let the sound enter your ears but to receive and live by those words. When the Jews ignored those words during the times of the judges of Israel, their enemies oppressed them. When their kings turned to other gods, they were harassed by their enemies, the nation split, and eventually they all went into captivity. Even after the return to the land, when they ignored God's Word, their crops failed, their resources dried up (Haggai 1:6; Ezra 9:7), and their neighbors forced them to stop the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The author is reminding these Hebrews of their history and pleading with them not to do what their forefathers had often done (Acts 7:51-53).

If that was the severity of God for ignoring the old covenant of the Law, what can we expect if we ignore the love of God displayed on the cross and the offer of salvation through His sacrifice? In a word, hell (John 3:36). To reject the love of God and His provision for our sins is to embrace independence from our Creator. It is to love evil and hate good. It is to be in league with darkness and hate the light. It is to love a lie and hate the truth (John 3:19). The warning is reaching a crescendo!

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. Hebrews 12:26-27 The Hebrew believers were clinging to temporal things and putting those things above their faithfulness to Jesus. Those things can be shaken. The only thing that can't be shaken is God. All created things will experience the upheaval when God puts an end to the fallen state of the universe (Revelation 21:1). What good is it to cling to the things that will be no more? What will it benefit anyone to cling to what is passing? This is a consistent message throughout Scripture. The created things point to the eternal, but when we place a greater value in them than we do in the One who made them, we miss the whole message in their existence and worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

I've told you before of the ministerial student who wanted to keep a godly mindset and so he put a sticky note on all the things he really liked. The notes read, "For the fire!" He had read the passage in 1 Corinthians 3:13: ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. All the stuff that we work so hard to obtain will be left behind. Jesus tells us not to work for food that perishes but for food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27). What will remain? Our relationship to Jesus, spiritual

Commented [PW29]: Haggai 1:6 (ESV)

⁶ You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

Commented [PW30]: Ezra 9:7 (ESV)

⁷ From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today.

Commented [PW31]: Acts 7:51-53 (ESV)

⁵¹ You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Commented [PW32]: John 3:36 (ESV)

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Commented [PW33]: John 3:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

Commented [PW34]: Revelation 21:1 (ESV)

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

Commented [PW35]: Romans 1:25 (ESV)

²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Commented [PW36]: John 6:27 (ESV)

²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

growth, the Word in our hearts, and lives that have been influenced to come into the kingdom. These will endure. All physical things will be shaken.

The comfort and safety the Hebrew believers thought they might obtain by blending into the Jewish community of worship was going to be shaken too. What good would it do them then? What price would they pay? **Is eternal loss of the only thing of real value worth a little comfort and luxury for this short time on earth (1 Timothy 5:6)?** Is the freedom from suffering for this short life worth forsaking the love of God? The truth is, most of us will suffer whether or not we follow Christ. We can suffer with His comfort or without it. That is just life in a fallen world. We can learn from it and grow, or refuse to learn and be angry. Last week a surgeon told me how doctors and nursing staff see such a difference between genuine believers and those without faith. The grace and peace of believers, even in the face of death, is so unlike those without faith. People of faith are kind and thankful. People without faith are upset and quick to lash out. That's because their hope is in what is being shaken. Our hope is in our unshakable God.

The author has set before the Hebrew church two paths that were clearly seen in their history (Matthew 6:24). He has emphasized how much more we are responsible than the Old Testament believers, for we have seen the love of God and been made aware of the glory of His kingdom. Here is his conclusion. *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.* Hebrews 12:28-29 Instead of looking for a way out, face the future with faith. Accept the glorious kingdom that is offered to us. Be fully a citizen of that realm, living for that which endures. Offer to God acceptable worship, wholehearted obedience, revering Him for who He is with awe (Romans 12:1-2). He is a consuming fire of all that is ungodly. He is the same God that descended on Sinai, but now we are even more accountable because we know what the Messiah, Jesus, did for us. We have seen the love of God and the choice is clear. Loving Jesus with our all is the only appropriate response. We stand at Mount Zion. We tend to think that means grace and love, and it does. But it also means we are responsible to offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. It means we should live with the awareness that the physical realm will be shaken and only the kingdom of God will remain.

Remembering what you have heard:

- 1 Why do sermons start with a review?
- 2 What was it like at the base of Sinai?
- 3 Where do believers stand today?
- 4 Describe that realm.
- 5 Contrast the two covenant mediators.
- 6 Compare Abel's blood and Jesus'.
- 7 Why is rejecting Jesus direr than rejecting Moses?
- 8 What does it mean to reject Jesus?
- 9 What is shakable and what is unshakable?
- 10 Has God changed?
- 11 What are the two paths before the Hebrews and before us?

Commented [PW37]: 1 Timothy 5:6 (ESV)

⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

Commented [PW38]: Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Commented [PW39]: Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.