

Hebrews 12:18-29

Serving God with Reverence and Godly Fear

...let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear
– v. 28.

Some regard these verses as providing a fitting climax to the argument that has permeated much of this epistle – the argument that the new dispensation is superior to the old. The two dispensations are presented to us under the emblems of mountains – Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. And would you notice that the believer is depicted as having avoided one but having come to the other.

For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched – v. 18; *But ye are come unto mount Zion* – v. 22. Verse 18 could literally read *you have come unto mount Zion*. The tense of the verb *have come* is an interesting tense for which there is no exact parallel in English. It's a perfect tense verb and a perfect tense verb in the Greek depicts a past action but with ongoing results. The most famous example of such a tense is found in the words of Christ when he announces from the cross that *it is finished*. Here is a finished action but one that has through the ages brought forth ongoing results.

In similar fashion we may understand the words of Heb. 12:22. You have come to mount Zion in the past upon your conversion to Christ and the result of your coming to this mount brings forth ongoing results in your lives. We are or should be familiar with some of those results. As a result of coming to Mt. Zion you have gained the sure hope of heaven. As a result of coming to Mt. Zion you have gained everlasting life. As a result of coming to Mt. Zion you have gained a faith that will persevere and a love for holiness that will motivate you to pursue holiness.

Barnes in his commentary notes: *In the passage before us, the apostle evidently contrasts Sinai with Mount Zion; and means to say that there was more about the latter that was adapted to win the heart, and to preserve allegiance, than there was about the former.*

As we come to the end of chp. 12 we see also that the differences between these mountains is something the apostle is drawing from to give force to the exhortations at the end of the chapter. It's as if he's saying – because you haven't come to the mountain that can be touched but have come to Mt. Zion instead, *See that ye refuse not him that speaketh* – v. 25. And because you have come to Mt. Zion and in the process have received a kingdom that cannot be moved *let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*

This is what I want to draw your attention to today – this exhortation to serve God acceptably with godly fear. The verse indicates to us, doesn't it, that not all service rendered to God is necessarily acceptable. We think that God ought to be pleased that as his creatures we would serve him at all. And people given to such a mindset think that any service rendered to God ought to please God.

But as this text plainly points out – if our service to God is to be acceptable to him then it must be accompanied with two things – reverence and godly fear. If these things are absent then the form of our service will hardly matter – it will still be unacceptable to God. What I would like to do today is demonstrate the place that the two mountains mentioned in these verses play in contributing to service that is rendered acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

We Must Serve God Acceptably with Reverence and Godly Fear

The question I'll try to answer this morning, quite simply is – how is this done? How do we serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear?

I. By Avoiding the Wrong Mountain

In vv. 18,19 we read *For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:*

We have not come to this mountain – nor do we want to attempt to approach God by scaling this mountain. The theology of this mountain tells us that God is unapproachable by sinners. This is the mountain of the law and the law does two things – it reveals the holiness of God and it magnifies the sinfulness of man.

The emphasis in Exodus 19 which is where this description comes from is that the Israelites were to keep back. They were warned by Moses to keep back and before Moses was called up to the mount he was first sent back to warn the children of Israel again. And the reason for the warning *lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish* (Exod. 19:21). And again in v. 24 *And the LORD said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD, lest he break forth upon them.*

The clear impression conveyed by this appearance of the Lord was that it took restraint on the Lord's part not to unleash his wrath upon a people that were sinful. And everything about this appearance of the Lord contributed to making it a most terrible manifestation of God. And after the people heard the voice of the Lord pronounce the 10 commandments we're told in 20:18 *And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.*

In the parallel passage in Deut. 5 we're given an even more detailed account of the reaction of the people to this terrible revelation of God. In Deut. 5:24-27 we read: *And ye said, Behold, the LORD our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth. Now therefore why should we die? for this great fire will consume us:*

if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go thou near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it.

There followed a rare instance in which the Lord commended the children of Israel for the wisdom of their words. So we read in Deut. 5:28 *And the LORD heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the LORD said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken.*

The whole point being, then, that the Lord is not approachable through Mt. Sinai. Now there are some commentators and theologians who have held the view regarding the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai that this was not simply a new and different administration of the covenant of grace but that it was, also, a restatement and a fuller statement of the covenant of works.

The emphasis on obedience and the penalty of death for disobedience as well as the promise of life where obedience was rendered all contribute to this notion that on Mt. Sinai the covenant of works was republished so to speak. This does not, of course, take away from the notion that there was no administration of grace. The sacrificial system or the ceremonial law provided for sins to be forgiven but as a matter of emphasis the Old Testament places such a strong emphasis on the law that John could write in his gospel that *the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ* (Jn. 1:17).

Paul could also refer to this covenant at Sinai as a ministration of death. So we read in 2Cor. 3:7,8 *But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?*

We cannot, therefore, serve God acceptably by coming to this mountain and yet there were Judaizers in Paul's day that would suggest that this was how God must be approached and served. Even in the church there were those that would set forth the notion that obedience to the law contributed to salvation and that a person could not be saved without rendering that obedience. The Galatians were being lured into thinking that they had to approach and serve God from Mt. Sinai.

The history of the church demonstrates to us a tendency for the church to fall prey to this notion. This mountain could be called the mountain of the church of Rome. And during the dark ages it was as if Rome convinced her followers that the church was in charge of this mountain and one could only be saved through obedience to the church.

This is why I have said on numerous occasions that when you read the 10 commandments it's very important to read the setting in which the 10 commandments were given. *So terrible was the sight*, we read in Heb. 12:21 *that Moses said, I exceedingly*

fear and quake. This mountain does play a significant role in shaping us for serving God acceptably as we'll see before we're through with this study but let's not ever harbor the notion that our approach to God and our service to God is through Mt. Sinai. Such thinking only reveals a vast ignorance about the pure character of God as well as a sense of puffed up pride regarding our own character.

Our text tells us that we have not come to this mount – let's make sure that never come to such a mount in our approach and service to God. This is the negative side of our study then. Let's consider the matter positively now by thinking upon the truth that if we would serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear we must do so:

II. By Coming to the Right Mountain

For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched v. 18 – but rather ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels – v. 22.

The contrast between these mountains couldn't be greater. The one is foreboding, the other is inviting. The one ministers death, the other ministers life. The one creates in us fear and trembling, the other stirs us to humble praise and thanksgiving. The one leaves us in isolation, the other brings to an innumerable company of angels, and to the general assembly and church of the firstborn which are written in heaven. The one makes approaching and serving God impossible, the other enables us to approach and serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

The thing that must be noted here is that it is Jesus that makes all the difference between these two mountains. We are come, you see, unto Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel (v. 24). We should note here as well how the text depicts these things as present blessings and present possessions of the follower of Christ.

The text does not say that one day you will come to Mt. Sion but that you have come to Mt. Sion. We may, of course, anticipate the day when our voices will join the voices of just men made perfect in heaven and we will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God forever but the fact that the kingdom of grace will one day blossom into the kingdom of glory doesn't mean that the blessings of Mt. Sion are not ours now.

Blessed [be] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly [places] in Christ Paul writes in Eph. 1:3. He doesn't say *who will bless us with all spiritual blessings* but *he hath blessed us* with these things. And so this tells us redemption is a present blessing – that having our sins forgiven is a present blessing – that having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us is a present blessing and that our citizenship in heaven is a present blessing.

And the reason these things can be present blessings to us is because they are present blessings to Christ and our lives are hidden in him and we are joined in spiritual and mystical union to him. The challenge to gospel obedience, then, is quite different from the

impossible challenge of scaling Mt. Sinai. The challenge of gospel obedience is to count these present blessings by faith to be ours on account of Jesus Christ. I've referred to Rom. 6:11 on several occasions as presenting to us the essence of gospel obedience. This is where Paul exhorts us to *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

How can we count ourselves dead indeed unto sin when we feel ourselves to be alive indeed unto sin? Or how can we count ourselves to be alive unto God when we feel ourselves to be too often dead toward God and alive to the world? Or if I could express the dilemma in terms of our text in Hebrews – how can I count myself to have come to Mt. Sion and to the city of the living God when I'm surrounded by a world of sin and woe that is bent against God? How can I count myself as having come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven when I live in a world that sees the kings and rulers of the world taking counsel together against Christ?

This becomes the challenge of faith, then. And the way the challenge is met is by keeping in mind that you have also come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of sprinkling. You see yourselves in him not in some make believe or psychological fashion. You see yourselves in him because you believe the truth that God sees you in him. And because God sees you in him, God sees you as dead to sin and alive to God. And God sees you as members of that general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. And God hears the speaking blood bearing witness that you are his purchased possession and that the burning wrath of Mt. Sinai has been appeased and the demands of the law have been satisfied.

And through this reckoning process, a process that is exercised by faith, you are enabled to approach God, to commune with God and to serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. Do you begin to see what strong motivation Mt. Sion provides for us for serving God?

Listen to the words of Albert Barnes on this passage: *The design is to contrast the Christian dispensation with the Jewish, and to show that its excellences and soul; advantages were far superior to the religion of their fathers. It had more to win the affections; more to elevate the more to inspire with hope. It had less that was terrific and alarming; it appealed less to the fears and more to the hopes of mankind; but still apostasy from this religion could not be less terrible in its consequences than apostasy from the religion of Moses. In the passage before us, the apostle evidently contrasts Sinai with Mount Zion; and means to say that there was more about the latter that was adapted to win the heart, and to preserve allegiance, than there was about the former. Mount Zion literally denoted the southern hill in Jerusalem, on which a part of the city was built.*

It is certainly through our understanding of our position and the blessings conveyed to us in the spiritual Mt. Sion that Paul can say *let us have grace* (v. 28). *Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.* Do you see, then, how everything that is beyond us in Mt. Sinai is brought near to us in Mt. Sion? Do you

see how it is possible to approach God and it's possible to serve God in such a way that our service will be acceptable to him? We must serve him in the light of the gospel by pleading the blood of Christ over our efforts to serve him. And when we serve him this way he will accept our service.

We're often time bothered, perhaps even overwhelmed by the fact that we seem so dysfunctional when it comes to our service to God and to Christ. When you begin to view your service in terms of what you think is its intrinsic quality or in terms of what you think is your intrinsic character then you begin to scale the wrong mountain. Come away from the mount that can't be touched that burns with fire and is engulfed in blackness and tempest and the sound of a trumpet which is exceeding loud. Come away from this mountain and remember and reckon upon the truth that by coming to Christ you have come to a different mountain. You have come to Mt. Sion and to the city of the living God. You have come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant whose merit in his life and the shedding of his blood makes your service acceptable to God.

And from hearts that are filled with praise and thanksgiving go on to serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. I have one more thought I want to leave with you on this subject. We've seen how, in order to serve God with reverence and godly fear we must avoid the wrong mountain and come to the right mountain. It remains for us to consider for a moment how:

III. Both Mountains Contribute to Reverence and Godly Fear

We have been noting the contrast between the two mountains and while such a contrast definitely exists and while the lesson we draw from that contrast is that there is one mountain to be avoided and one mountain to be embraced, this does not take away from the fact that the unifying factor to both mountains is God himself.

That needs to be stated because there are those unbelieving Bible critics who will go so far as to say that there are two different Deities in the Bible. There's the God of the Old Testament who is stern and harsh and who judges and condemns. And there's the God of the New Testament who is kind and gracious, merciful and loving. And the difference between these deities is so vast that two completely different Gods must be in view.

We reject this notion, of course. And would you note one particular statement in v. 23 that I passed over in my previous heading. In coming to Mt. Sion we have come v. 23 *To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.*

At first glance it might seem that this phrase *God the Judge of all* should have been assigned to Mt. Sinai but not to Mt. Sion. Perhaps the reason we find this statement in accordance with Mt. Sion is so that we'll know it is the same God in both mountains. And while we do not attempt to approach or serve God by scaling Mt. Sinai this does not mean that Mt. Sinai doesn't have any impact on our service to God and to Christ.

It is very important to note the order of the mountains. Mt. Sinai comes first. And Mt. Sinai must always come first. Before we're ready for Mt. Sion we must first learn the theology of Mt. Sinai. We must know and appreciate that God is pure and majestic and holy and powerful. And we by contrast are defiled and sinful and rebellious as well as helpless and hopeless before a thrice holy God.

If we attempt to skip Mt. Sinai before coming to Mt. Sion then we will never appreciate the greatness of God's salvation and our need for that salvation. We will never adequately understand what salvation by grace through faith means. And so Mt. Sinai does have a part in teaching us the fear of God. Indeed in Exodus 20:20 Moses explains to the Israelites that this terrible and fearful manifestation of God served a purpose. *God is come to prove you, Moses said and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.*

Mt. Sinai does contribute to our fear of the Lord, therefore. But our fear of the Lord does not end at Mt. Sinai. You remember what I said earlier how some theologians believe that in the covenant of Mt. Sinai you have a republication, so to speak, of the covenant of works? If that indeed be the case then how much more shall we esteem Christ who came in order to fulfill the covenant of works. Keep in mind that the covenant of grace is the fulfilling of the covenant of works by Christ.

And by keeping this in mind our esteem for Christ will grow. Here is One, after all, who didn't need to tremble and quake before the law of God. Here is One who walked in perfect obedience to that law in all its demands. And here is One who, although, he would certainly dread Calvary and would sweat drops of blood in a state of agony as he anticipated Calvary – he is One who nevertheless could bear the wrath. The wrath that God must restrain at Mt. Sinai is now unleashed in its fullness upon Christ. And still Christ could bear it and Christ could prevail through it until at last Christ could say *It is finished!*

And then, and only then, was the way made for us to approach God through Mt. Sion, as it were. And so both mountains contribute to serving God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. Mt. Sinai brings us low. Mt. Sinai reminds us of our helpless and hopeless estate as sinners. And then Mt. Sion lifts us up and brings us to the city of the living God. It brings us to the heavenly Jerusalem and to an innumerable company of angels and to the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

It brings us to these places because it brings us to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of sprinkling. As we contemplate these two mountains, then, let's make sure that we avoid the one and come to God by the other. And let's make sure that we recognize the contribution that both mountains make to our service to God. And in that recognition may we indeed serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.