



TWIN PEAKS

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Today we are officially wrapping up our study of Hebrews. Back at the very beginning, I titled this series "Lift," because I said the author was intent on raising up Jesus, holding him above everything else. Like an elevator, the writer has been taking us up, floor by floor, showing us new things about Christ. Today we reach the top. Our text is this powerful statement that sums up both the message and the feeling the author wants to convey.

Hebrews 12:18-29

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; 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, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

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

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? 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." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

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

For 22 years, thousands of people from around the world have made their way to Nepal to say they climbed Mera Peak. It's the highest trekking peak in the Himalayas, meaning you don't need mountaineering experience to climb it. At over 21,000 feet, it's a challenge.

But as it turns out, it isn't the real Mera Peak. People have been climbing the wrong mountain. The real Mera is some 5 miles away and a good 600 feet higher. And it's never been climbed. It's far more difficult, but the real one nonetheless.

Are we on the right mountain? That's the question the author of Hebrews puts before us. He describes two very different mountains for us – Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Both are holy mountains and have to do with God. But they lead to very different experiences.

To me, this is one of the most amazing and breath taking sections of Hebrews. It's like we're standing at a door into heaven that's been cracked open just a bit, and we're peeking inside. We begin to see some of the shape and the glory of it.

And on the other hand, it's a chunk of Scripture that seems very far removed from me. All that talk about Mount Sinai seems like ancient history, when the Israelites got the 10 commandments. Even Charlton Heston's Moses feels like a long time ago, let alone the real Moses.

And then when the author gets going about Mount Zion and Jerusalem, that sounds like something far off in the future. It sounds like heaven. That's not really part of my world either. So in my mind, I don't really feel like I'm climbing either mountain. I'm a prairie dweller.

In many ways, that would have been true for the first readers as well. Sinai was way back in their history and they were a lot closer to the earthly Jerusalem than a heavenly one. And yet the author thought his point was extremely, relevant. I'd even say he thought it was urgent. What was it he was trying to say?

When you get closer and spend a little more time with the text, you begin to see that he's not really talking about mountains. The mountains are just symbols. He's talking about what we think of God and how we think about ourselves in relationship to him. That's why it's relevant, and that's why it's important no matter what century we live in or what continent we find ourselves on.

So let's hike these two mountains and see what we find. Mt. Sinai was where the Israelites went when they first fled from Egypt. They had been traveling exactly 3 months when they got there. It was the place God chose to confirm that Israel was his people by giving them his law. That was the event that would forever define that place in their minds.

God told Moses, "Here's what's going to happen: You need to set up a perimeter around the mountain, because I'm going to come down on top of it in a cloud, and anybody who

gets too close forfeits their life.” Then he tells Moses he will be the only one allowed on the mountain. He’ll be the mediator.

So Moses tells the people what God said. Then, three days later, a dense cloud settles on top of the mountain. Exodus tells us there was thunder and lightning. Then smoke started billowing up from the mountain. It says the whole mountain shook violently, and this trumpet sound got louder and louder and louder.

It’s sensory overload. It would be hard to imagine a more impressive display of God’s presence. If anybody wanted some sort of physical proof of God’s existence and his power, this seems like a good way to do it.

There were three primary results of this demonstration: darkness, dread and distance.

Darkness

God told Moses he was going to show up in a dense cloud. The author of Hebrews described it as “darkness and gloom.”

When I was in college, I would drive my 1966 VW bug back and forth from Olympia to Los Angeles. I would drive straight through for 17 hours. One night I was driving in the Sacramento area when I hit fog that was thicker than I had ever seen. Now my bug had a 6 volt battery instead of 12, so the headlights were more like flashlights, even on high beams. It was the scariest driving I’ve ever done in my life. I could barely see a few feet in front of me. I couldn’t pick out the features of the road and it felt like I was in a tunnel.

You get the same feeling when you’re flying and the plane lowers down into the clouds, and for a while you can’t see anything outside the window. You hope the pilots have reliable instruments, because there’s no way to tell what else is out there.

That’s the nature of clouds. They are mysterious and confusing. This cloud on the mountain presented a mysterious God. There was no solid body for the Israelites to see and relate to. No face. Just this impersonal, billowy substance you couldn’t even grab on to. You can’t really get to know a bank of fog. God in a cloud is shadowy and elusive.

So the physical darkness pictured a spiritual darkness, a barrier between God and his people.

The feeling that accompanied the darkness wasn’t a pleasant one. It was

Dread

The sheer magnitude and force of God in that place overwhelmed the people with awe. No matter how affirming it was to see firsthand that God was real, it was also terrifying.

Exodus 20:18

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear.

It was sensory overload. They were undone, feeling absolutely puny and filthy in the presence of a perfectly perfect God. They could hardly bear it.

They felt what Isaiah felt when he saw God and said,

Isaiah 6:5

Doom! It's Doomsday!

I'm as good as dead!

*Every word I've ever spoken is tainted —
blasphemous even!*

*And the people I live with talk the same way,
using words that corrupt and desecrate.*

And here I've looked God in the face!

There is something devastating in an encounter with God. Over and over again in the Bible, you see people drop to their knees or their faces, flattened by the realization of just how holy God is compared to us. It's not something they have to think about or some emotion they have to work up. It's instant and uncompromising.

If God had a publicist, about right now he would be telling God he had an image problem. "All that noise and negativity – it's just sending the wrong message."

But God was sending exactly the message he wanted to send. Stay away. Stand back. That's the third aspect of the Sinai experience: a need for

Distance

Just because God came close didn't mean the people could walk right up to him. Ironically, his presence there on the mountain highlighted how unapproachable he was. God told Moses,

Exodus 19:24

...the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord or he will break out against them.

Why? Because of that all-consuming purity. The people were exposed to the danger of God, which made them realize how serious it was to offend him. The distance was for their own protection. They couldn't even touch the mountain without risking their lives. They needed a buffer zone. That's why God appointed Moses to be a go between. That created a way for God to talk to the people without destroying them. And they were only too glad to let him run interference for them.

But even Moses was intimidated by the idea. Hebrews quotes him as saying, “I am trembling with fear.” In the long run, he was helpless to actually change anything in the dynamic between God and Israel. He brought messages from God, pled for the people to God, but he never had the ability to heal the divide or change basic human nature.

Even while Moses was up on the mountain talking to God, while the fire was still blazing, the people down below were making their golden calf idol! In the very face of what they had just seen and were still seeing, they chose to go their own way. The big show that was so impressive, the one thing that should have captured their hearts for good, had no lasting ability to make the people follow God.

It goes to show that an awareness of God’s power doesn’t translate into a close relationship with him. That’s just as true for us as it was for them. I may not have ever been to Sinai, but I can still find myself climbing that mountain. I can still think of God in terms of darkness, dread and distance.

For one thing, it’s more convenient to have a God who is cloudy. I’d prefer to keep him less specific, because the more vague my concept of him is, the less accountable I am to him. If he’s all a fog to me, then he won’t take it personally if I don’t pay attention. I say I want to know God, but really I’m more interested in a passing acquaintance. I become content with darkness.

For some people, the idea of God is full of dread. We might see him as being like the Wizard in the Wizard of Oz, powerful but angry. I can think of at least two friends I have who before becoming Christians were plagued by fear of not going to heaven. It was very real to them. We can be scared of God and have that drive our actions.

And sometimes, we like to keep our distance. We prefer God to be at arms’ length. The closer he is, the more he might notice what I don’t want him to. I might need to change if he invades my space.

So even though I’ve never seen what the Israelites saw, I can still end up hiking their mountain. I can get stuck with their vision of God in my head – powerful but unapproachable, holy but distant. Good but mysterious. And I can grow comfortable with that understanding, because that doesn’t require much of me.

But that’s not our mountain. And now the author of Hebrews turns our attention to the real mountain of God, Mount Zion. He gives us this incredible picture, and I’d like to read it for you again:

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

On Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, pretty much the best part of the show is the last 10 minutes. That's when they reveal the new house to the family. And these houses are never like just a new coat of paint or new roof. They're always large and luxurious, with all top of the line appliances and big screen TVs. You watch the families as Ty Pennington takes them through, and their hands go up to their faces, their mouths drop open and they try to take it all in. Then he takes them to the next room, and their eyes get even wider. And finally they get to go check out their own rooms, and they're always designed specifically with the individual in mind. That's usually when it gets to be too much and they start to cry, and then they say something to the effect of, "It's like they read my mind. They knew just what I would want."

The author of Hebrews is guiding us through our real home that's way better than we could have imagined. He shows us one thing, then moves on to the next and the next, and our eyes get wider and wider as we go. And all the while, God is speaking to something deep inside us, and we say, "Yes. This is exactly what I want and I didn't even know it."

I've said right from the start that the book of Hebrews intimidates me as a preacher. It's so beyond me at times and it leaves me at a loss for words. This is one of those passages. Every time I read it, it stirs my soul. Honestly, I don't even know that I can tell you exactly why. I just love this description. And as I thought about how to get in and analyze it and talk about it with you this morning, I felt like I didn't have the chops for it. I work with words all the time, but sometimes there aren't adequate words to do God's word justice. But as I was thinking about it, it occurred to me that I was approaching it from the wrong angle.

When I like a song, and I hope somebody else will like it, I don't sit down and start telling them about the chord progressions in it or how many instruments are playing on the CD. I play them the song. I want to share it with them. I might play it more than once so they can take it in. Then I might say why it touched me. If I come across a poem I think is meaningful, I don't go on and on to Karin about iambic pentameter – I read her the poem, (if she's really lucky, maybe even with voices.) Then I'll talk about why it means something to me. I want to share it with her because I want her to like it, too.

I realized this section of Hebrews is much more like a song or poetry than a textbook. It's the beauty of it that grips me. And I want you to like it. I want you to get caught up in it and to be moved by it. And I think it speaks for itself better than some dry explanation of it that I might try to give. So all I really want to do this morning is slow it down and let you hear it and then share as best I can why I think it speaks to me.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

Mount Zion, heavenly Jerusalem, city of God. Three ways to say the same thing. We have an invitation to God's home. The God who once said "Don't let the people get too close," now says, "Come to me. Come to my house."

I heard a guy's story yesterday that was absolutely heartbreaking. When he was growing up, he was being raised by a single mom who was an alcoholic and had M.S. She drank all the time, and she used to make her son go get her liquor for her. One day she said, "Go get me my drink," and he said, "No." She said, "What did you say?" and again, he refused to get it. And she died.

He was absolutely petrified and had no idea where he would live or what he would do. As bad of a mom as she was, she was the only home he knew. So he went to his uncle's house and told him what had happened. And his uncle said, "I am so sorry. You come live with us." And then he said, "Let's go back to your house and pack up your stuff."

The boy said, "Well...this is it," and he held up a paper bag with all his earthly possessions. His uncle looked at it and said, "Oh...that's not right." So he took him out shopping and bought him a whole new wardrobe and everything he needed. Then they went back and burned the paper bag.

It's that kind of difference it makes to be invited to God's home. Scripture even describes him as giving us new clothes to wear.

And guess what? The author says, "You HAVE come." He doesn't say, "One day you'll get to see Zion." We're already planted there. We live now with the full authority of God taking us in and accepting us. I read a quote from Michael W. Smith this week that said, "It's time to take a stand, believing we are loved."

What difference does it make in our lives to be fully accepted by God here and now? It is fact. It is done. We have come. His mountain is now our mountain.

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

Remember the Million Man March about 10 years ago? It may not have quite made a million, but it sure packed Washington, D.C. Imagine a scene like that, with far too many angels to count, and they're all ecstatic. Everyone is bursting with jubilation. This is a huge angelic block party to celebrate the victory of Christ. And it's a party that doesn't stop. Instead of the ear-splitting trumpets you have the beautiful song of countless heavenly host praising God. Instead of isolation from God, you have the whole community there together. Instead of gloom, we're walking on sunshine.

We are called to joy. Our call to other people is a call to joy. Flip through any newspaper. Flip through all your TV channels. Tell me where else in the world do you find joy? Plenty of sarcasm. Lots of joking. Occasional glimmers of happiness. But nowhere do you get any sense of a deep, lasting joy that goes way beyond circumstances and changes our character.

This is an area where the church can shine the brightest, and yet where we often get caught in the same mentality as the rest of the world. We're just as bombarded by trouble in life as everyone else, and as we've said before, we're not supposed to pretend nothing

hurts. But joy is a contentment beyond circumstances, based on what we know will ultimately be true.

Joy makes me think of Karin's great aunt Ruby. She was a missionary to Cameroon. When she was well into her seventies, she was driving along with a friend from the states to a village in Cameroon. Now the roads in Cameroon are absolutely treacherous, with enormous potholes and dropoffs. Her friend was completely petrified, and she looks over, and here's aunt Ruby laughing and enjoying the ride. Aunt Ruby reaches her hand over to her and says with a big smile, "don't be afraid." She was someone who was able to take in life's experiences because she felt secure.

That's joy – a security that lets us enjoy the ride for what it is, no matter how big the potholes are. Hebrews has said what we've got is unshakeable. We have that security.

George Guthrie writes, "If we do not live joyfully, reflecting the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem, how can we invite people to that reality? If our lives reflect the gloom of Sinai more than the excitement of Zion, we do the kingdom poor publicity."

We're called to the joy of the angels. Their mountain is our mountain. The author then says we have come

to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

Isn't that a great phrase – the church of the firstborn? When it comes to our birth order in the faith, we're all firstborns. I kind of think everyone should be a middle child, because we tend to be perfect, but the point is that we're all operating on the same level. Nobody is the overlooked baby or God's unwanted stepchild. We all have the privileges that come with being only children. God's undivided attention. A full inheritance. All the rights that go along with being the oldest. And a permanent place at the table. Our names are written in heaven, inscribed there forever. This is our mountain, because our name is on it.

You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect...

There is going to be perfect justice, because we have come to the God who looks each person in the eye and discerns truth and does what is right. We have come to the God who hears the cries of the victims and has promised to vindicate them. This is no cloud anymore – we've come straight to God who will insist on calling the world to account.

There is no more need to fear that evil will somehow triumph. God is the judge of all men. And that is cause for rejoicing.

And it says we've come to wholeness – the spirits of the righteous made perfect. The wrinkles in our souls will be smoothed, the cracks in our hearts will be filled. We are

moving toward the time when we will be everything we were meant to be and all our glaring faults and even our little annoying tendencies will be expelled from us.

Contrast that with the situation at Sinai, where all those faults were a permanent barrier. People couldn't draw near if they wanted to because they hadn't been made perfect.

For us today, it isn't as though God has just decided to turn a blind eye to the barrier and let us through – he's removed our sin so that it's no longer a problem. At Calvary, we were made perfect, and someday we'll know that for ourselves.

It's all because of what the verse goes on to say, which is that we've come

to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus is the new mediator, the new go-between, the new Moses. And he's rewritten the contract between God and his people. He's at the center of this mountain, because he's the way we got here.

The author says Jesus' blood speaks a better word than Abel's. Abel was murdered by his brother. Abel had done the right thing. Cain killed him with no cause, other than the fact that he couldn't stand Abel's goodness. And so Abel's blood cried out for justice. God told Cain it was crying out to him from the ground. It was seeking vindication and punishment. That was a perfectly valid and right word for it to speak.

Jesus, too, was murdered. And he hadn't done anything wrong either. But his blood cried out to God, "Forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." It was a word of grace. That's where the power is. James tells us mercy triumphs over judgment. Where God could have called for punishment, where he could have stayed with thunder and lightning, he chose to show grace instead. Where he could have banished us forever, he's called us to himself.

We can now walk right up to this mountain in full confidence, because that's what God wants, and because Jesus has made it safe. Instead of dread we find joy. Instead of a cloud we find a personal relationship with a personal God. Instead of distance, we come close with the whole community of God to celebrate his love and grace and healing and power.

The author caps off the section with this summary:

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

This mountain is solid. The old one may have quaked under God's hand, but this one is unshakeable. Nothing can undo what Christ has done for us. Nothing can send us back to Sinai except our own refusal to leave it.

God is still the same. He's still that intense fire of purity he always has been. But now, thanks to Jesus, we're able to sit close to the fire and enjoy its warmth. We can hand him our paper bag and let him burn away our past. To refuse Jesus means facing the fire on our own.

And that's not what we're called to. So much beauty and life and joy and fulfillment is ours through Christ that it compels us to be thankful and worship. When you stop to consider the lengths God went to in order to bring us to his mountain, all you can do is bow your head and say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I go back to the question I asked at the beginning: Are you climbing the right mountain?

Where does my view of God tend to get most stuck?

Darkness Dread Distance

What's the greatest risk for me in climbing the right mountain?

Change Having him see my sin Learning to trust

What about Zion do I most need to see right now?

Joy Grace Wholeness Justice Relational God

Hebrews has painted us a picture of life where Jesus at the center. That's where we're called. Let's climb the right mountain together.