Welcome to Mount Zion!
September 28, 2025

Hebrews 12:18-24 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, to the spirits of the righteous 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. (Rev 7:12) "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

I met a man one time who made this observation when he found out I was a pastor. He said, "I wish that more pastors would make applications to day-to-day life." This gentleman wished that pastors would be better at helping their people live life in this world. I know that his comment holds a lot of truth in general. And it holds a lot of truth for me as well. I think the hardest thing for a pastor to do effectively is to share God's Word in such a way that it seems pertinent, that it has application to life in the 21st century. Well, here is the most significant application I can make to life in this world. We all will die one day. And when we die, we will either go to heaven or hell. All who disregard Jesus will go to hell. All who believe that Jesus earned forgiveness for their sins will go to heaven.

It doesn't matter how wisely or well you have lived the rest of your life, if you don't have Jesus, you have lived poorly and lost everything. In the same way, it doesn't matter how poorly or foolishly you have lived your life, if you do have Jesus, you have lived wisely and gained everything. That's as applicable as I can possibly be to everyday life. Maybe it doesn't give any insights on dealing with an increasing cost of living, but it sure helps one keep things in perspective. The writer to the Hebrews is making the same point in our focus verses. He says, There are two ways that people look to be spiritually saved. Either they try to be saved through what they do themselves, (pictured by Mt. Sinai), or they rely entirely upon Jesus' redemption (pictured by Mt. Zion). The Bible book of Hebrews was written to Christian Jews in the early Christian church. These Christian Jews had an incredibly difficult time. The entire Jewish culture was wrapped around the Old Testament covenant. There was a tremendous amount of emphasis placed on keeping the Old Testament ceremonial laws. The ceremonial laws had to do with the ceremonies of worship, things like sacrifices, religious festivals, and how one should keep themselves ceremonially clean. Basically, these Jewish ceremonial laws affected the entire life of a Jew. The ceremonial laws permeated their entire culture. In the Old Testament times, God expected his people to keep these laws. It was a crucial part of the covenant God had made with the Israelites.

But then Jesus, the Son of God, came along, and Jesus as the Messiah fulfilled the Old Testament covenant perfectly. Jesus did away with the need for the Old Testament

ceremonial laws. As life-long Jews living in Judah, to break free from the law-oriented customs of the nation was very difficult. To do what had always been prohibited, such as eat certain foods, was incredibly difficult for them to accept. To not do what had always been commanded, such as no longer offering certain sacrifices, was also incredibly difficult. And perhaps most difficult of all, these Jewish Christians had to deal with the peer pressure, the antagonism, the utter rejection, the outright hatred and persecution from some of the non-believing Jews in their lives. This portion of Hebrews is written to encourage these Jewish believers to hold the course, to reiterate once again that Jesus the Messiah did everything God demanded, and therefore the Ceremonial Laws no longer applied to them, to recognize that following Jesus is a far better path than trying to make it on one's own, to urge the Jewish Christians to keep looking forward to their heavenly reward, to focus on Mt. Zion and not look back to Mt. Sinai.

Mt. Sinai, of course, was the hill on which God gave the Old Testament laws. Mt. Zion was the hill upon which the temple in Jerusalem was built, the place where the people worshiped the Lord who saved them. Here Mt. Zion is used to refer to heaven, the dwelling place of the Lord, and the place where believers will one day dwell with the Lord, and worship the Lord because of Jesus.

The persecuted Jewish Christians to whom this letter was written were tempted to flee back to Sinai. "Certainly," they thought, "they would be safe in their old way of life, safe with the rest of the Jews." Relying on obedience to the law itself seemed to be a comfort. There seemed to be safety in obeying. But what happened on Mt. Sinai when the law was first given showed clearly what the law proclaims, sinners are cut off from God. On Mt. Sinai God appeared to his people in a glorious and terrifying form. (Exodus 19:16-22) On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

What an awesome sight! What a terrifying sight! And to make it perfectly clear where the sinful people stood in regard to the holy God, listen to the very next words of Exodus. "The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them." The entire scene at Sinai was so filled with fear and foreboding that even Moses, their leader and God's friend, was shaking with fear. Is that what the Hebrews, the Jews wanted? Did they really want to return to Judaism with its old covenant of the law? The law with its thunder and trumpets can provide no pardon for sin-troubled hearts. The law can provide no peace for sin-torn consciences. The law with its penalty can provide no hope for sinful people. All it offers is the awesome revelation of God's righteous requirements, and the horrible fear of his just punishment over infractions. All it can do is point out the impassable, and impossible distance sin puts between man and God. But the law can do nothing to bridge the gap. There is no future at Mt. Sinai. No access to God. No acceptance by God. No eternity with God. No peace and

no joy. And yet people try. Misled by the devil, who piles on the guilt when we make mistakes, people try their very best to make up for those mistakes. Misguided by their own sinful natures, which come to the natural conclusion that blessing from God must come through good actions, people try to win God's approval on their own. Even misinformed sometimes by churches, some of which teach blatantly or subtly, that God's favor is bestowed on those who obey him best, people try to earn God's love. Mistakenly, people dare to think they can approach the holy God by means of what they do.

But God tells us how it really is through his prophet Isaiah. (Isaiah 64:6) All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. And yet, even as Christians, each of us is also tempted to think that we are responsible for bringing God's blessing upon ourselves. Perhaps we buy into the false teaching that we have to ask God into our hearts, that we have to make a decision for Christ to be accepted by the Lord. Perhaps we look at the sins of other Christians and come to the conclusion that we are a step or two above the rest. Perhaps we look at the times when we actually resisted temptation, and we lift up our heads in pride, convinced that God is especially pleased with us. Perhaps we look at the more wholesome lifestyle we maintain compared to our neighbors and we conclude that we merit extra blessing from God. James brings us plummeting back to reality. (James 2:10) For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. None of us, no matter how good we have been on occasion, have kept God's laws perfectly.

That's where Jesus comes in. That's why we need Jesus. Jesus kept the whole law without stumbling at any point, and then he went to the cross as God's perfect Sacrifice and our perfect Substitute. Only his life was good enough. and only his offering was sufficient to win God's favor. Perhaps you remember about 20 years ago when some terrorists took over a Russian school? At that time a 27 year-old mother was trapped with her two children in the school. Her name was Zalina Dzandarova, and she was allowed to leave the school, but she could only take one of her children with her. She had to choose, and choose quickly, so she chose her 2 year-old son Alan and left her sobbing 6 year-old daughter Alana behind. Zalina said afterwards: "I didn't have time to think what I was doing. I pressed Alan even stronger to myself, and I went out, and I heard all the time how my daughter was crying and calling for me behind my back. I thought my heart would break into pieces there and then." The newspaper article summarized the situation in this way. She couldn't save both. She could only die with both of them or save one of them, and herself.

And in reality, that's what God the Father did. He also made a choice. He could have kept his holy Son, Jesus, with him in the safety and security of heaven. But that would have meant that we would have been doomed to an eternity in hell. So God the Father made his choice. He chose us, you and me. He left his Son Jesus to endure the agony of the cross, and the horrors of hell. He left his Son Jesus to endure the punishment for our sins, so that we could be rescued from certain destruction. He left his Son Jesus to die, so that we could live forever. And Jesus willingly endured the punishment, the agony, the hell, the death, because just like his Heavenly Father, Jesus loved us so much he was willing to take our place.

Regarding Zalina Dzandarova and her children, there was good news. As the horrible standoff erupted in explosions and gunfire, 6 year-old Alana was able to get out of that school alive and be reunited with her mother and brother. The same happened with Jesus. After the supreme horror of Good Friday, came the sublime joy of Easter Sunday. After being separated from his Heavenly Father while on the cross, Jesus was reunited with him in his resurrection and ascension. Jesus did what he came to do, and he returned to his rightful place with his Father in heaven, in heaven where he waits for us to arrive. And that's what the writer to the Hebrews urges the Jewish Christians to remember.

(Heb 12:18-19) 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. You have not come to Mt. Sinai and the judgement and condemnation of God's law. (Heb 12:22-24) But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have left the Old Testament laws of Mt. Sinai behind and have come to another mountain, the mountain of God's grace in Jesus. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, praising God for the amazing grace he shows believing sinners, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. In the Old Testament, the firstborn son received special blessings from their fathers. In the New Testament, everyone who knows Jesus as their Savior, no matter when they were born, no matter what their gender may be, every Christian receives the Heavenly Father's special blessing, their names are written in the book of heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all, God is the one who casts the unbelievers into oblivion. And he is the one who welcomes and embraces all believers in Jesus into the joys and wonders of his salvation, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. There on Mt. Zion, there in heaven, the souls of the righteous, of the believers in Jesus, are made perfect. They are finally and fully free from sin and the effects of sin. To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. On Mt Zion we come into the presence of Jesus, the one who brought about a new covenant, a covenant of mercy and grace, through the blood that sprinkled from his wounds as he suffered and bled and died on the cross.

Mt. Zion, what a wonderful place it is! What a comfort it is to look forward to in this world so filled with frustration and heartache. "So," the writer asks, "what would it be for the Hebrews?" What will it be for us? Mt. Sinai or Mt Zion? The law's loud thunder or the gospel's tender love. The empty promises of making it to heaven on our own, or the certain comfort that Jesus has won heaven for us by his perfect obedience in our place? The terrors of the demands of the holy God, or the joys of knowing Jesus has done it all for us? The law's curse "Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Is. 59:2) or the gospel's inviting cry "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest." Already the Hebrews, the Jewish believers in Christ, had come to Mount Zion through Jesus. Already we, believers in Christ, have also come to Mt. Zion through Jesus. Already on earth we own heaven. Already today we possess tomorrow. As we trust in the Savior in this world, we stand with one foot in that everlasting city. Already now on earth we have a foot in heaven. Each believer in Christ carries citizenship papers for heaven, written in the indelible ink of God's grace, written lovingly with the blood of Christ. Without Jesus and his blood of the new covenant we would have nothing. But with Jesus and his blood we have everything, even if we have nothing else.

Through Jesus, we have free access to the Father's throne. We have an inheritance in the Father's house. We have the company of rejoicing angels. We have fellow believers as companions along the way. We have mercy in the final judgement. We have hope for beyond the grave.

This is a truth that has supreme application to our lives in this world. It shows us that this world is just a stepping stone to something much bigger and better. It reminds us that there are far more important things to focus on than the stresses of this life. It helps us cope with all the difficulties and frustrations that we have to deal with here. We can't see all the glories of heaven here in this world. But God lets us catch glimpses of the wonders of heaven in his Word. And the day will come when we will be welcomed by our Savior into the incredible blessings of Mt. Zion. And on that day we will be glad that we focused on the grace of Mt. Zion, instead of on the law of Mt. Sinai.