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Sermon Notes

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Mt. Zion Infinitely Better Than Mt. Sinai

Hebrews 12:18-24

How well do you really know those you worship with every week? Do you really know them? You may come here to FBC week after week, and by mere appearance think you know those you worship with... but do you really? I know you may be tempted to be sneaking a look at other people right now, as if to peer into their souls, but I tell you it won't do you any good. The clothes worn by the people who stream in the doors won't tell you much about those you worship with... their facial expressions might actually be misleading... hair styles and jewelry and what Bibles they carry and their accent... all of these things will actually cause you to be barking up the wrong tree or coming to false conclusions. Because the true assembly of those called to worship the eternal God can only be seen BY FAITH. In making the point I'm seeking to make right now, I am not encouraging the members of FBC to really get to know each other better, by fellowship or by discipleship or accountability relationships, or by hospitality – having more people over for a meal after worship. All of those things are important in the healthy life of the church, but none of them will help you get to know your fellow worshipers every week. Actually the true assembly of worshipers are worshipping God in the heavenly realms, assembled before God at a mountain that CANNOT BE TOUCHED... a heavenly mountain, called in our text today Mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. Here you are worshipping every week with thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly. Here you are worshipping every week with "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." You can't get to know any of these worshipers any better by these ordinary means... and you can only know they exist by faith.

But this is the nature of TRUE CORPORATE WORSHIP... it is a spiritual union by the power of the Spirit with the saints on earth and the saints in heaven... it can only be perceived by faith!!

In today's text, we are told of two mountains... one of them could be touched with hands, the other cannot. The first of these mountains is Mount Sinai, and it represents the Old Covenant with all its terrors and condemnation. The second of these mountains is Mount Zion, and it represents Heaven with all its joys and delights in corporate worship.

I. Mt. Sinai Described: The Terrors of the Old Covenant

A. Context: First Century Jewish Professors of Faith in Christ

1. Pressed by their family, neighbors and religious authorities to forsake Jesus and go back to Old Covenant Judaism
2. They had stood firm in the early days when these Jewish opponents had insulted them, mocked them, arrested some of them, imprisoned some of them
3. They had stood side by side with those imprisoned and willingly accepted the confiscation of their property because they KNEW that they had better and lasting possessions
4. They had not yet resisted their opponents to the point of shedding their blood
5. BUT they were under intense pressure to forsake Christ and go back to Old Covenant Judaism

B. The Author's Strategy: The Supremacy of Christianity to Judaism

1. A Superior Mediator (Jesus Christ) brought a Superior Covenant (the New Covenant) resulting in a superior life (the life of faith described in Hebrews 11)
2. Jesus Christ superior to ALL Old Covenant figures
 - a. Superior to the prophets who spoke at many times and in various ways to the people

- b. Superior to the angels who brought the Old Covenant and gave it to the people
 - c. Superior to Moses who was merely a servant in all God's house, but Jesus the Son over God's house
 - d. Superior to Joshua, who merely led the Jews into a physical Promised Land which the Jews could not keep because it was dependent on their full obedience to the Laws of Moses... but Jesus leads us into a perfect and final "Promised Land"
 - e. Superior to Abraham and to Levi, who paid a tithe to Melchizedek, the picture of Christ
 - f. This Superior Jesus was the mediator of a superior covenant
3. The New Covenant Superior to the Old Covenant
- a. The Old Covenant was founded on the Laws of Moses and was based on the animal sacrificial system
 - b. But the tabernacle set up as the place of worship was merely a TYPE and a SHADOW of the perfect reality of heaven
 - c. The Aaronic priesthood was made up of flawed, sinful priests who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, and who understood the sinfulness of the people because they were sinful too... men who died and could not continue in their priestly ministry ...
 - d. BUT Jesus is a perfect high priest, who is sinless, the Son of God... who offered ONCE FOR ALL TIME the perfect sacrifice for sins—His own blood;
 - e. and He ministers in heaven, the perfect heavenly tabernacle set up by God not by men... He is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us, constantly praying for us, ever living to continue as our High Priest in the heavenly realms
 - f. thus the New Covenant is superior to the Old because the blood of bulls and goats offered endlessly, year after year, can NEVER take away sin, but the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, offered ONCE FOR ALL TIME is perfectly powerful to

remove sin and cleanse our guilty consciences... through the New Covenant, our SINS ARE FORGIVEN

- g. the New Covenant also provides for the total transformation of our hearts... the Laws of Moses remained external to the people, engraved in tablets of stone... a perfect standard they could never live up to; but in the New Covenant, the Law of God is written in our hearts
 - h. The New Covenant is thus infinitely superior to the Old Covenant
4. The Author now reaches the CLIMAX of his appeal to these people by reminding them of the circumstances of the giving of the Old Covenant... the dreadful, terrifying day they stood before God at Mt. Sinai
 5. He COMPARES the two mountains... Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion
 6. And he says

You have NOT come to the Mt. Sinai... but YOU HAVE COME to Mt. Zion...

In effect, now that you have come into your inheritance in Christ, WHY WOULD YOU EVER GO BACK to the mountain of terror, the mountain of fire, the mountain of death? Instead understand that your true home, your present spiritual home and your future eternal home is the heavenly Mount Zion... The mountain of death has been replaced by the mountain of life

C. Mt. Sinai Described

1. The context
 - a. The Jewish people had been delivered from slavery in Egypt by the ten plagues and the Red Sea crossing
 - b. They had been brought by God's leadership to this mountain where He was to meet with His people
 - c. The people were told to consecrate themselves, to be ready to stand before their maker and Judge... the Creator of the universe was going to descend and meet with them

2. A mountain that can be touched

- a. Mt. Sinai was PHYSICAL... a mountain that can be touched; Mt. Zion is spiritual and not discerned by the senses
- b. The physical nature of the Old Covenant is highlighted... flesh gives birth to flesh... the Old Covenant was an EARTH-BOUND set of regulations that could never deliver us to heaven
- c. We can't climb to heaven from Mt. Sinai
- d. Mt. Sinai is of the earth, it is a mountain that can be touched... but Mt. Zion is called the HEAVENLY mountain

3. A mountain that is burning with fire

- a. Exodus 19 a terrifying scene

Exodus 19:18 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,

- b. God desired to show His wrath and make His power known to His people and to all the earth
- c. This was not a picture of warm invitation but of holy terror
- d. Mt. Sinai suddenly became like a volcano... but the fire CAME DOWN from God rather than going up from the center of the earth
- e. God made the mountain BURN... he made the mountain SHAKE
- f. Why? Because He wanted the people to be terrified of what He does to sinners who are not forgiven
- g. Fire frequently symbolizes God's holy wrath... His rage against sin... God is a consuming fire, and He burns up the chaff of the earth with fire

4. Darkness, gloom, and storm

Exodus 20:21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Deuteronomy 4:11 You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness.

2 Samuel 22:10-12 He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. ¹¹ He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind. ¹² He made darkness his canopy around him-- the dark rain clouds of the sky.

- a. The darkness is an intentional message to the sinful human race
- b. The terror of God NOT REVEALING HIMSELF to us because of our sins
- c. It is the terror of the wrath of God about to be poured out
- d. It is especially acute because God declares this about Himself

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

1 Timothy 6:15-16 God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light

- e. I believe it is tied to God's determination to JUDGE the dark sins of the human race by depriving us of His glorious presence

Exodus 10:21-23 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt-- darkness that can be felt." ²² So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. ²³ No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days.

Revelation 16:10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony

Matthew 8:12 the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

f. Hebrews adds “GLOOM AND STORM”

- i) God added a violent wind, like a whirlwind or a hurricane of some sort
- ii) The tempest is implied in the thick cloud cover God surrounded Himself with

KJV Job 38:1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind...

Job 38:2 "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"

- g. This is all a picture of the terrifying power of God against sinful humanity

Isaiah 29:6 you will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.

5. A trumpet blast

Exodus 19:16 ¶ 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.

Exodus 19:19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

6. A terrifying voice speaking words... so terrifying that the people begged that the voice no longer speak to them

Exodus 20:18-19 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Deuteronomy 5:28-29 The LORD heard you when you spoke to me and the LORD said to me, "I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good. ²⁹ Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"

- a. This voice was nothing less than the voice of Almighty God
- b. God can speak in a quiet, gentle whisper as He did to Elijah in the Cave on this EXACT SAME MOUNTAIN... Mt. Horeb = Mt. Sinai... so God CAN speak in a gentle whisper...
- c. But the day He gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, the day He made the Old Covenant with Israel, He did not choose to speak in a gentle whisper but in the TERRIFYING LOUD VOICE OF GOD
- d. The Psalmist writes of the voice of the Lord:

Psalm 29:3-5 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

7. A terrifying command fencing off the mountain and ordering death

Hebrews 12:20 they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."

Exodus 19:12-13 Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain."

Exodus 19:21-24 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. ²² Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them." ²³ Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'" ²⁴ The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

8. The terror so great EVEN MOSES THE MEDIATOR was trembling

Hebrews 12:21 The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

- a. Moses knew very well that he himself was a sinner deserving of death
- b. Even Moses could not approach God on the basis of the ministry of Mount Sinai
- c. Even Moses knew that God was linking the Law with the righteous death of all who failed to keep it perfectly
- d. Even Moses knew that God would have broken out against him were it not for His grace
- e. And Mount Sinai was not the mountain of grace... it was the mountain of death

D. Cumulative Lesson: The Old Covenant Brought Death

1. Central Lesson: DO NOT COME ANY CLOSER!!

Exodus 3:4-5 God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

So also the barrier around the base of Sinai taught the same lesson... THUS FAR YOU MAY COME AND NOT FARTHER

2. God is a Consuming Fire... and Our Sins Make us the Tinder
3. The Old Covenant's Laws Could Not Be Obeyed
 - a. Peter at the Jerusalem Council
 - b. Dealing with the question of what to do with Gentile converts concerning the Law of Moses

Acts 15:5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Acts 15:10 why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

John 7:19 Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law.

4. The Old Covenant Only Brought Death, Never Life!!

Romans 7:10-11 I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Romans 4:15 ... law brings wrath.

2 Corinthians 3:6-8 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ⁷ ¶ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

Galatians 3:10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

5. So Flee the Wrath to Come and Embrace the Delights of the New Covenant

- a. The author's point is REMEMBER how it actually was under the Old Covenant
- b. Why would you forsake the comforts of the delightful New Covenant to go back to the DEATH GUARANTEED in the Laws of the Old Covenant??

- c. Ultimately the terrors of Sinai are a picture of the infinitely greater terrors of hell... the active wrath of God against sinners

II. Mt. Zion Described: The Delights of the New Covenant

A. Three Names for Mt. Zion

Hebrews 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

1. Mt. Zion is the heavenly abode of the LIVING GOD
2. The earthly version was the City of David, the fortress of Zion which he conquered from the Jebusites
3. God had told Israel that there would be one place He chose from among all the tribes of Israel to PUT HIS NAME... there, all Israel would go to worship and present their offerings
4. That place was identified as Jerusalem... there the Ark of the Covenant was put and there Solomon built the temple... a symbol of God's desire ultimately to stop living in a tent—the tabernacle—and settle down permanently with His people
5. In the Psalms, though, Zion became a mixture of reference to Jerusalem the earthly city and the heavenly dwelling place of the living God

Psalms 50:1-3 The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. ² Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. ³ Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest.

6. As throughout the Book of Hebrews, then, the EARTHLY JERUSALEM is merely a TYPE and a SHADOW of the true Jerusalem, the heavenly city of the living God... the Jerusalem that is ABOVE

Galatians 4:24-26 One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem,

because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

7. This “city of the living God” has been mentioned as the DESIRE of all true pilgrims in this world...

Hebrews 11:10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:16 Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

8. This is the coming New Jerusalem... prepared in heaven as a dwelling place where God and redeemed humanity will live together forever

B. Six Descriptions of This Heavenly Mt. Zion

1. Fellowship with the holy angels

Hebrews 12:22 You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly

- a. The number: “innumerable”...
- b. In Daniel 7:10 100 million angels served God
- c. “joyful assembly”
 - i) Unlike the assembly at the foot of Mt. Sinai, these angels and redeemed people are JOYFUL, delighted to be in the presence of God
 - ii) They are not terrified of His wrath, for they know His love is completely in them
 - iii) Neither are they alone or isolated... they delight to be in the presence of God and WITH EACH OTHER
 - iv) This is the “great assembly” where the created beings join together and worship God

2. The “Church of the Firstborn...”

Hebrews 12:23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

- a. These are the redeemed from every nation on earth
- b. They are called the “church” ... the Greek word means “assembly”... called out to assemble together
- c. They are called the church of the “firstborn” ... the Greek word refers to HEIRS... those who stand to inherit what their father has to give them

Exodus 4:22 Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son,

Revelation 21:7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Romans 4:13 ¶ ...Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world

- d. Whose names are written in heaven
 - i) This refers to the SECURITY that we have... enrolled in heaven

Luke 10:20 However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

- ii) These are the elect, because the scriptures reveal that God wrote their names in his book before the foundation of the earth

Revelation 17:8 The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast

- iii) These are the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem

Revelation 21:27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

3. To God, the judge of all mankind

- a. God the judge is no longer a terrifying figure
- b. Now, the redeemed will see His face and delight in Him and walk with Him

4. To the spirits of righteous men made perfect

5. To Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant

6. To the sprinkled blood, which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel

C. aa

III. Mt. Zion Already Ours... and Not Yet Ours

A. First word of the Passage: "For..."

1. Overall flow of Hebrews 12

- a. We have a RACE to run... it is a race for heaven's joys
- b. In that race we need ENDURANCE
- c. In that race, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith
- d. In that race we must be willing to suffer in our battle against sin
- e. In that race, we must understand that God our heavenly Father will discipline us for our sins
- f. In that race we must help each other when we are weak and feeble and unable to continue
- g. In that race we must pursue holiness... PURSUE IT EVERY DAY... because without holiness we will not see the Lord

h. So, we have a very ACTIVE PURSUIT that unifies the whole chapter

i. The basic message is “YOU’RE NOT THERE YET... YOU MUST KEEP RUNNING...”

2. YET... verse 18 says “For...” meaning we are to run and run and run for holiness BECAUSE WE HAVE ALREADY IN SOME SENSE ARRIVED AT OUR DESTINATION

3.

B. “Already and Not Yet”

1. We are already in some sense in heavenly fellowship,

2. So we must run and run and run until we are actually there

C. We Have NOT COME to a Mountain that Can Be Touched

D. WE HAVE ALREADY COME to Mount Zion

IV. Applications

A. Outsiders: Please come to Christ

B. “You have already come to Mt. Zion”: Focus on what is yours in Christ

C. Be Thankful and Worship God Acceptably (coming in next section)

D. Understand your trials from a heavenly perspective: “This sickness will not end in death”

E. Be freed from the fear of wrath... Mt. Sinai represents wrath

F. Sinai is not your home: You are not under law but under grace; Galatians 4... not children of the slave woman but of the free

G. Live moment by moment fixed on heavenly Jerusalem... study heaven... see the physical world in light of this coming heavenly city

H. Come to Corporate worship differently; come expecting an encounter with the living God [Medieval cathedrals designed to create

“otherworldliness” aura... ours come by faith in the word] develop a sense of heavenly fellowship with saints who lived in 13th century... Reformation... 100 years ago... all over the world] DON'T FOCUS TOO MUCH ON INCIDENTALS on corporate worship, like music, song selection,

I. Rest in Security of Phrase: “church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven”... REJOICE more than that demons are subject

J. Lord's Supper