

Stay at Mt. Zion

After Jesus ascended into heaven, his disciples started telling everyone that Jesus was true God and the Savior of the world. Thousands of Jews were brought to faith. We'll call them Jewish Christians as opposed to traditional Jews. They had the blood of Abraham running through their veins but they trusted in Jesus as the Messiah, their Savior. The Romans, who ruled most of the world, decreed that Judaism was a legal religion so the traditional Jews were allowed to practice their religion in peace. From the viewpoint of the Romans, however, Christianity was just an illegal cult. Many, many Jewish Christians were persecuted. Some had their property and bank accounts seized. Others ended up in prison. Execution was likely. Meanwhile, their traditional Jewish friends and relatives who rejected Jesus kept pestering them, "What good is Jesus doing you? You are suffering. Let go of Jesus." It was very tempting. No one enjoys persecution. One of the apostles wrote a letter to the Jewish Christians pleading with them to hold on to Jesus. Throughout the book of Hebrews, he kept explaining that following Jesus was much better than returning to traditional Judaism. Here in chapter 12, he put his argument this way, "Do not return to Mt. Sinai. Stay at Mt. Zion."

I will never forget the time that a military jet flew over a group I was with. It must have been on some kind of training mission. It was flying very fast and very low. As it flew over us, we could feel the ground shake. We were a bit rattled. I can only imagine how terrifying it would be if such a powerful jet was strafing us with bullets and dropping bombs on us. That's how the Israelites must have felt when they were camped at Mt. Sinai.

Some 3500 years ago, about 2 million Israelites were living as slaves in Egypt. The Lord called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt by walking through the Red Sea. Three months later, they camped at Mt. Sinai where they stayed for a year as the Lord shaped them into a nation with their own laws and customs. Those laws were summarized in the Ten Commandments. When God gave the Ten Commandments, he made his presence known. There was thunder and lightening at the top of Mt. Sinai. A thick cloud of smoke covered the mountain. The sound of a trumpet – used by attacking armies – got louder and louder. The ground was shaking. If any person or animal touched the mountain where God was, the Israelites were to kill them with arrows or rocks and not even touch them. God's voice was so loud that all 2 million Israelites could hear him say, "**You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God,**" and on

and on as he listed all Ten Commandments. The people were terrified. Even Moses was shaking.

The Lord purposefully scared the Israelites with such a dramatic presentation. He was teaching them how dreadful it was to sin and fall into the hands of the living God. To disobey God meant disaster and death. The author of Hebrews was asking the Jewish Christians, "You don't want to return to Mt. Sinai, do you?" Mt. Sinai did not give them any comfort or joy. There was no pardon for sin-troubled hearts or peace for sin-torn consciences. Mt. Sinai demonstrated God's righteous anger over sin. Mt. Sinai demonstrated the impassable and impossible distance sin puts between sinners and the holy God. The law does nothing to bridge that gap of separation between a holy God and sinful humans. The law – God's commands for moral living and the punishment we deserve for not being perfect – can only scare us and lead us to despair. Did the Jewish Christians really want to live under the law with its threats? Did they want to return to Mt. Sinai? No.

In verse 22, the author shifts his focus from Mt. Sinai to Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion was the mountain in Judea where the temple was built. Mt. Zion was the place of God's special presence among God's people (Joel 3:21b). Here, in Hebrews 12, the writer is referring to God's presence in heaven, the dwelling place of the Most High. The writer says to the Jewish Christians (:22), [Instead of Mt. Sinai] "**you have come to Mt. Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.**" The "city of God," the "heavenly Jerusalem," is where God reveals his awesome glory. What a glorious place heaven is. Mt. Zion represents the gospel, the good news of salvation through Christ. Mt. Zion is FAR greater than Mt. Sinai. The holy author was urging the Hebrews to hang on to Jesus.

I do not think that any of us are considering giving up bacon or traveling to Palestine to sacrifice a lamb. Yet, there is a very real danger to our faith that we need to watch out for. Mt. Sinai was about much more than eating kosher and offering sacrifices. At Mt. Sinai, God gave the people his law and he promised to bless them if they obeyed. If they did not obey, however, then they would suffer. The Old Covenant that God made with Moses and the nation of Israel was a conditional covenant. It was a covenant of works and the Israelites blew it. The history of the Old Testament from the time of Moses until Jesus finally came is a history of God's people wandering away from him. The fear of God they experienced at Mt. Sinai was quickly forgotten. They were like naughty children who continued to disobey God.

There is a very real danger for us of returning to Mt. Sinai, of trusting in our works without even realizing it. I do not expect that anyone here is thinking, "I'm such a good person and I do so much for the church that I deserve to be

in heaven.” We would not say that. We know we are not perfect as God is. Still, our sinful nature likes to take some credit and tries to sneak into our hearts. For example: Let’s say that you drop a plate onto your kitchen floor and it breaks. You lose your temper and you use God’s holy name to swear. After you calm down, you recognize your sin and pray, “Lord, I’m sorry that I let my temper control me so that I misused your holy name. Forgive me and give me strength not to do that again.” Then, the next day, you happen to drop another plate that breaks. This time, though, you do not lose your temper and swear. That evening, you think to yourself, “I was a better Christian today than yesterday. I did not lose my temper and swear.” Certainly, it’s good that you do not lose your temper and swear, but suddenly and subtly, you are looking to what you did or did not do for your spiritual status. The devil and our own sinful nature are always trying to get their foot into the door of our heart. That’s scary and dangerous.

Some of my friends in college were on the college tennis team. They once had a tennis meet at St. Norbert College near Green Bay. After their tennis match, they were sweaty and smelly. The coach told them to enter a particular building, go through some hallways and through a door to get to the visitors locker room. That’s where they could shower and clean up. Somehow, they mixed up the directions. They opened a door which they thought was going to get them into the locker room. Instead, they saw a few hundred college ladies dressed in formal dresses for some type of spring gala. Instantly, as everyone stared at them, my friends realized that they did not belong there.

What will it be like when we stand before our holy God in heaven? When we see God in his dazzling holiness along with thousands of perfectly pure angels and hosts arrayed in white, we will instantly realize that we do not belong there. God could say, “You are sweaty and smelly with your sins. You do not belong here.” It will not work to say, “Well, at least I’m not as sweaty and smelly and sinful as others.” Pointing to anything that we do is going back to Mt. Sinai with its threats and punishments. Since we are sweaty and smelly and sinful, we can not point to ourselves. All we can say is, “The guy on the middle cross said that I could come.” Our spiritual status does not depend on what we do or do not do. It all depends on Jesus.

Mt. Zion was not just the mountain where the temple was. It was also the mountain where Jesus was crucified. As Jesus was stretched out on the cross, he could not hide from God’s righteous anger over sin. It was more than a fighter jet firing bullets and dropping bombs on him. It was the thunder and lightning, the black cloud, the shaking ground, the blasting trumpet of Mt. Sinai unleashed on Jesus as he suffered the punishment that you and I and the whole world deserved for our sins. Jesus was your substitute. He

paid a debt he did not owe because you owed a debt you could not pay. The cross of Christ served as a lightning rod for all of God’s offended holiness. Since Jesus was punished for us, God is not going to punish you. Your sins are forgiven. Your guilt is gone. You are already saved. Do not mess that up by looking to your own good works. Rejoice that because of Jesus, God has already declared you to be perfect and holy.

Listen to what you already have through Christ. Verses 22-24: [Instead of Mt. Sinai] **“you HAVE come to Mount Zion.”** It is not “You might come,” or “you will come.” It is **“you HAVE come.”** Through faith, heaven is already yours. “[You have come], **to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.**” I have been involved with worship where thousands of people were together. It’s an amazing sound to hear so many people singing. I could barely hear the trumpet I was playing. How much more powerful and beautiful it will be to join the myriads of angels singing praises in perfect pitch. “[You have come] ²³**to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven**” Every believer – every one of you – are considered **“the firstborn.”** That means you will inherit God’s estate of heaven. Your names are already written on your citizen papers in the indelible ink of God’s love. **“You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.”** Because of Jesus, God has already judged you to be righteous and perfect. You are enjoying the new covenant of grace. “[You have come] ²⁴**to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**” Abel was murdered by his brother. Abel’s blood spilt on the ground cried out for vengeance from God for his murder. The blood of Jesus sprinkling the sinner speaks of pardon and peace. You have come to the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. You have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. You have peace with God here and eternally.

Turn back to Mt. Sinai? NEVER! Point to our stumbling efforts to be good and hope that we’re good enough? NEVER! Try to argue that we are not as bad as others? NEVER! By God’s grace you have come to Mt. Zion and by God’s grace you will stay at Mt. Zion. Amen.