

OUR TEXT

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.” And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

THE CONTRAST OF TWO MOUNTAINS

This is indeed a glorious passage of Scripture, contrasting two mountains. Just as light appears more brilliant to those who have struggled in darkness, and just as food is found more sweet to those who have known hunger, so Mount Zion is made more glorious by the contrast of the terror and tempest of Mount Sinai. Today we will see that these mountains represent not only two fundamentally different covenants of God, but two fundamentally different ways of living and communicating our faith in the world.

First, observe the 7-fold description of the Old Testament Mt. Sinai, to which the Israelites came after they left their slavery in Egypt, and on which the great I AM gave the Law to the people through Moses. This summary description is found in Hebrews 12:18-21, summarizing the events recorded in Exodus 19 and 20 and recounted in Deuteronomy 5.

MOUNT SINAI (Horeb)

1. *A physical mountain you could touch*
2. *Blazing fire (Ex.19:18)*
3. *Blackness (KJV, literal) /gloom = sorrow (Deut.5:22)*
4. *Darkness (Deut.5:23a)*
5. *Tempest (literal) / whirlwind / storm (Ex.19:18c; 20:18)*
6. *Trumpet blasts (bringing fear) –Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18*
7. *Sound of words (bringing fear) – Ex.19:19b, 20:19; Deut. 9:19*

If you have a New American Standard Bible or New International Bible translation, you will read “darkness (and) gloom and whirlwind (NASB) or storm (NIV)” in verse 18. But the literal translation (Young’s Literal Translation) and the early King James Version give us a better sense of the actual order and meaning: “blackness and darkness and tempest.” This is the order I have used in my list of 7 above. You will see that this becomes important and helpful as we compare this with the description of Mount Zion.

Now, in contrast, observe the 7-fold description of Mount Zion given in Hebrews 12:22-24.

MOUNT ZION (City of the living God; the heavenly Jerusalem)

1. *Untouchable (v.18a)*
2. *A myriad of angels (v.22b)*
3. *General assembly/ church of the first-born (v.23a)*
4. *God – the Judge of all (v.23b)*
5. *Spirits of the righteous made perfect (v.23c)*
6. *Jesus, mediator of a new covenant (v.24a)*
7. *Sprinkled blood that speaks (v.24b)*

Now let’s observe these two 7-fold descriptions side by side, and notice some obvious similarities and contrast.

THE 7-FOLD CONTRAST

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| 1. SINAI – the “horrible” mountain | ZION – the mountain of God and “Shalom” |
| 2. Blazing fire | Angels - “a flame of fire” – (Heb. 1:7; Ps. 104:4) |
| 3. Blackness / Sorrow | Joyful celebration (“paneguris”) of the firstborn |
| 4. Darkness | Light – God the Judge, bringing all to light |
| 5. Tempest | Calm – spirits of the righteous made perfect |
| 6. Trumpet blast (calling for war) | Jesus – the mediator, calling for unity |
| 7. Sound of words bringing fear | Blood – that speaks peace and reconciliation |

Do you see the clear contrast? And do you see better the gloriousness of the one (Zion) because of the terror of the other (Sinai)?

1. “Horeb”ble Sinai is contrasted with Beautiful Zion, also called the city of the Living God and the heavenly Jerusalem. Zion (“raised fortress”) and Jerusalem (“city of peace”) give beautiful description of God’s Holy City, *just from the meaning of their names.*

2. *There is the blazing fire of lightning bolts proceeding from the darkness of Sinai with a continual cloud of smoke, presumably from burning fire. Contrasting with that we have a myriad (thousands upon uncountable thousands) of angels on Mount Zion. We remember that in Hebrews 1:7, the author quotes from Psalm 104:4 in describing angels:*

Hebrews 1:7 *And of the angels He says, “Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.”*

Seraphim, one order of angels, means by its name “fiery, burning ones.” So we see the similarity of fire from both Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion, and yet each usage is different in contrast. The fire of Sinai was terrifying, whereas the fire of the angels in Zion is reassuring and warming. We are reminded of the comforting and powerful “fiery” ministry of the angels to us as believers:

Hebrews 1:14 *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?*

3. *The blackness and sorrow of Sinai is contrasted with the joy and celebration of the general assembly. Why? – because they are the church of the firstborn, that is each made heirs of all that God has to give (and that’s a lot!). We will soon see the wonderful hidden meaning of that celebration in the “paneguris” (translated “general assembly”).*

4. *The darkness of Sinai – made dark by the continual cloud and highlighted by the occasional blazes of fiery lightning, is contrasted with God who IS light (1 John 1:5) and who brings all things to light as the Judge of all.*

5. *The stormy tempest of Sinai, like a whirlwind, is contrasted with the calm and peace of the “spirits” of the righteous made perfect. After all, there is no peace like the peace of being right and perfect in God’s eyes.*

6. *The long trumpet blasts coming from Mount Sinai as described in Exodus are like unto the call to divide into companies for war. Contrast that with the call of Jesus, our Mediator, to come together in unity with the God of the universe.*

7. *The last contrast is about a voice that speaks. At Sinai it was the thundering, scary voice of God that made the people tremble, including Moses (Heb. 12:21; Deut. 9:19). In Zion it is the voice of the sprinkled blood of Jesus that “speaks better than the blood of Abel.” The blood of Abel spoke of death, judgment and separation. The blood of Jesus speaks of life and reconciliation.*

THE IMAGE OF “PANEGURIS”

In 12:23 the original Greek for what is translated “general assembly” is “paneguris.” [with accent on the second syllable] This is the only time in the Bible this word is used. Though “paneguris” does translate as “general assembly” the meaning has a rich tradition in Greek culture. During the *height*

of the Greek empire, a festival was held at the base of Mt. Olympus every four or five years, the National Convocation of the Greeks. (Olympus is the highest mountain in Greece, just under 10,000 feet high and 50 miles SW of Thessalonica.) Greeks of different states, accomplished in their respective fields, came together by invitation of the central government for friendly competitions of poetry, song, speech, and games of physical prowess. These competitors prepared for a year or more to be considered for invitation to this festival, hoping to be the best in their field. The invitations were made by the Greek emperor, who served as the Judge and Referee of these games. The names of those invited were written down in an entry book as the only ones who could attend the festival and compete. And they competed not for fame or fortune, but simply for a wreath made of olive branches, given to all – a symbol of their having been invited and included.

Do you see in this a beautiful and sacred description of the general assembly (“paneguris”) of God’s kingdom? That general assembly will be in heaven by invitation of the King of all the universe – God Himself. They will have been chosen from every nation and tribe, and they will be the assembly of the “firstborn” – holding every right and privilege of the first born of a family. There will be no “second-borns” in the bunch! And they will all be enrolled in heaven, with their names written in the Lamb’s Book of Life as those invited, called and redeemed. God Himself will be the Judge and Referee of all the glorious activities of that place. And there will be no losers – only winners who will all win and wear the crown of life and the robe of righteousness.

This is the assembly to which we are called. “For you have come ...” is the declaration to all the children of God. And the “sprits of the righteous made perfect” will be there – the “cloud of witnesses” mentioned in Hebrews 12:1 – the saints who have gone before – also a part of that great assembly of the chosen and righteous of God.

And further realize that the “kingdom of God” or “general assembly” is not just to be thought of as in heaven to come, but on earth as well. And those “games” and “competitions” of “paneguris” go on today, with the “cloud of witnesses” watching and cheering on the chosen competitors. The struggles and challenges of this life might be thought of as difficult “trials.” But just as the competitors of the ancient Greek paneguris considered it a joy and privilege to be invited to the assembly in struggling competition, so we should be likewise joyful in our invited privilege to be going through our sufferings as the invited children of God for our ultimate earned wreath of righteousness.

This is the kingdom of God assembly in which we are now involved, and it is the assembly to which we will ultimately come to in heaven. Children of God, rejoice that you have been invited to the Paneguris of God!

THE DOCTRINE BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS

The writer of Hebrews here shows the superiority of the new covenant to the old. Mount Sinai represents the old, and Mount Zion represents the new.

The law is represented in Mount Sinai with all its rigor, terror and fear of punishment. The essence of the Law is found in Exodus 19:5.

Exodus 19:5 *Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine.*

Note the conditional nature of this promise: IF you obey, THEN I will bless. And what is there for anything but perfect obedience? The implication is NO BLESSING and NO POSSESSION by God.

The GRACE and LOVE of God are represented in Mount Zion with all its ministering angels, first-born fellow heirs of glory, and the very presence of God the Father, Son and Spirit.

The essence of the New Covenant is found in the beloved best-known verse of the New Testament.

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever*

believers in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Note that God's love is *unconditional*, and His gift of Jesus is *unconditional*. And the only condition to His gift of eternal life is our belief, or faith, which we are taught is a gift of God that we can access at any time (Ephesians 2:8,9). This belief is a faith in (1) WHO Jesus is – the Son of God, and God come in the flesh, and (2) WHAT Jesus did – die to pay for our sin and rise from the dead to give us life eternal, and (3) RECEIVING that gift by committing your life to Him and His service.

Some say that makes the New Covenant conditional. But faith is simply accepting the truth of WHO Christ is, WHAT Christ did and RECEIVING the free gift offered. There is no work to be done to merit the salvation of God.

And if you receive the free gift of salvation that God offers through His Son, “you have come” to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. This coming is for now, in this life, as well as the blessed HOPE of the life beyond the grave.

These two mountains also represent two opposing ways of representing the gospel through our lives. We can either be stern, judgmental and unyielding in reaction to the sinner. Or we can be gracious, encouraging and welcoming as we share the truth of God's good news. We don't accept or condone the sin, but we accept and love the sinner, as God does.

FINAL THOUGHT

Hebrews, Chapter 11 is all about FAITH. We will find Hebrews, Chapter 13 to be all about LOVE – love of God and love of others.

√ And here in Chapter 12 we have HOPE in the vision of a cloud of godly witnesses who have gone before, secure in God's heaven.

√ We have HOPE of the heavenly prize awaiting us as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

√ We have HOPE of our becoming more like Jesus as we allow God's discipline (discipling) to have its full work through each trial of life.

√ And we have HOPE of coming to the heavenly Mount Zion as we live our lives by FAITH in Jesus and the LOVE of God

Which mountain do you choose?