

Text: Heb. 12:18-24

Title: "Zion, the mountain of refuge for the sinner"

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Place: NBBC

Intro -In May of 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson sat atop Mount Monadnock and wrote a poem in its honor. It said in part:

"Happy,' I said, 'whose home is here,  
Fair fortunes to the mountaineer!  
Boon Nature to his poorest shed  
Has royal pleasure-grounds outspread.'"

In this paragraph of his poem, Emerson reflects on how the beauty of this mountain is a boon of nature available to even the poorest of men as royal pleasure-grounds outspread. I have read that our Mount Monadnock is the most frequently climbed mountain in the world, and so it has over the years proven the point that Emerson made. Monadnock is approachable and accessible. It can be enjoyed by most anyone.

Our author mentions two mountains in our passage this morning, Mount Sinai (vv. 18-21) and Mount Zion (vv. 22-24). He does so in the context of trying to encourage believers who have known the paralysis of sin (v. 12) and the discipline of a loving heavenly Father as His children (vv. 3-11). So this passage about these two mountains is really a passage about how it is that the Lord deals with sin in the life of one of His own children, a believer.

In describing these truths, our author tells us that the believer deals with his sin as a result of having approached one mountain and not the other. He has at some point in

the past with continuing results into the present (the perfect tense) approached Zion (v. 22), and not Sinai (v. 18). So when he sins, he does so as someone before Mount Zion, not as someone before Mount Sinai

As a child of God saved by faith in Jesus Christ, when we sin, we never have to worry about what happened at Sinai. Instead, we can always rejoice in the wonder of Zion. This is the encouragement our author seeks to give these Hebrew Christians who were in danger of quitting on the Lord and going back to their former lives in the darkness of Judaism. Judaism knew about Sinai, but it knew nothing about the true Mount Zion. All false religions are like that. They condemn, but they offer little hope. Our author pleads with his readers not to go back to Judaism, and he does so first with a description of Sinai, and then with one of Zion.

I have titled the message this morning, "Zion, the mountain of refuge for the sinner," and we will organize our thoughts under two points.

I. Sinai is the mountain of condemnation of the sinner (vv. 18-21).

Ill: One thing that climbing Mount Monadnock will do for you is let you know what kind of shape you are in. The last time I climbed that mountain, I approached it thinking that I was in pretty good health. What the mountain showed me, however, as I ascended and then descended some 30 minutes or so after everyone else got back, is that I am in terrible shape physically. The mountain exposed my true physical condition.

Appl: God's design for His work on Mount Sinai was that it would expose the true spiritual condition of sinful man.

The passage tells us three important things about this mountain.

1. Sinai was touchable (v. 18a). One of the truths important to the message of Hebrews is that salvation comes from things that cannot be touched, things not made with hands. Heb. 9:11, "But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building." The Jewish tabernacle could be touched because it was made with hands. The same is true of Sinai. Heb. 9:24, "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

Things that can be touched, things that are physical, are at best only figures, or pictures, or symbols of what truly saves. Nothing in this earthly existence can save us – it can only condemn us. Baptism and communion cannot save us, they can only symbolize the work of the One who can save us, whom we cannot touch. God's Spirit baptizes us with new life – that saves, not the water. God's Son suffered God's wrath on the cross in His broken body and shed blood – that saves, not the bread and the juice. Sinai could not save because it was touchable.

2. Sinai was terrifying (vv. 18b-21). Our author wants us to reflect on the terrors of Sinai. He mentions two things especially that struck fear in the hearts of those who approached that mountain – its appearance and its commandments.

Appl1: The appearance of Sinai reminds sinners of God's judgment on their sin (v. 18b). The word translated *darkness* here is used 5 times in the New Testament, here and four

other times in parallel passages that describe the thick darkness of hell (2 Pet. 2:4, 17; Jude 6, 13). Sinai's appearance teaches the sinner that God is holy, that sin against His eternal holiness has eternal consequences, and that those consequences involve a literal hell and the suffering of burning fire. No wonder the sight was unbearable for those who saw it.

Appl2: The commandments of Sinai also terrified those who heard them (vv. 19-21). The fear was universal. What was heard at Sinai terrified everyone from the animals to Moses himself. None were exempt from the reason to tremble. That reason were the words. The lightest command they heard that day was, "Do not touch the mountain or be stoned." There were heavier ones, and we read ten of these commandments in Deuteronomy 5 earlier this morning:

- Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
- Thou shalt not make a human-designed image of God.
- Thou shalt not speak God's name in vain.
- Thou shalt keep the Sabbath day holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- Thou shalt not kill.
- Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- Thou shalt not steal.
- Thou shalt not bear false witness.
- Thou shalt not covet.

These commandments terrified those who heard them. Because we are sinners, they rightly terrify us as well. Which of these have we not broken? Perhaps you will say, "Pastor, I have never killed anyone." Well, Jesus spoke an even more terrifying commandment when He said that if we feel hatred for someone we have broken this commandment in our hearts. He said we have committed adultery in our hearts if we look at a woman with the lust of the flesh for her. In its appearance and its commandments, Sinai is terrifying for every man, for all have sinned.

3. Sinai is the unbeliever's mountain, not the believer's mountain (v. 18). I want to emphasize a very important word in that first phrase. It is the word *not*. Sinai is touchable and terrifying, but we have not come to it. The author is saying that the day his readers came to Christ for salvation by faith and not by works was the day that they left Mount Sinai for Mount Zion. Do you remember the day you left Mount Sinai? Do you remember the day you realized that you no longer have to tremble before the holy God of Sinai?

III: I was around 12 years old when that happened to me. I was trembling before Sinai after hearing a message on Revelation 20, which speaks of the second death and the lake of fire for sinners. God's Spirit impressed upon my heart that I needed to be saved from my sin and the condemnation of Sinai upon my sin. I found a sure Savior in Christ, who perfectly obeyed every command of Sinai and suffered every judgement of that mountain – all for me. I trusted Him for salvation that night, and since then, I have approached a very different mountain.

II. Zion is the mountain of refuge for the believer (vv. 22-24).

III: I want to remind you of what Emerson wrote about beautiful Mount Monadnock:

"'Happy,' I said, 'whose home is here,  
Fair fortunes to the mountaineer!  
Boon Nature to his poorest shed  
Has royal pleasure-grounds outspread.'"

To the degree those lines are true of Mount Monadnock, they are 10,000 times more true of Mount Zion. Happy are those whose home is here. Fair fortunes belong to the mountaineers of Zion. To its poorest climbers, boon is shed

and royal pleasure-grounds are outspread. Our author describes some of these wonderful blessing to us in his description of Zion. I will highlight three things.

1. Zion is heavenly, not earthly like Sinai (v. 22b). Zion is the mountain that cannot be touched. There is a city there built by the living God (John 14:1-2, Jesus: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.") This city is the heavenly Jerusalem and it is in the neighborhood of an innumerable host of joyous angelic beings (*general assembly* in v. 23 means *festive-gathering*, and it likely describes the angels here).

We cannot see these things with our eyes right now, but we can see them with our faith. We cannot touch them right now with our hands, but we can feel them by our faith. When was the last time you saw and felt the glory of Zion by faith? Paul told us to set our affection on things above and not on things of the earth (Col. 3:2). Is it not true that we are often too enamored with earthly possessions and pleasures and pride to be at all attracted to Zion? The things of earth will all be destroyed by the realities of Sinai someday. Only the treasures laid up in Zion will last.

2. Zion is inhabited by a joyous assembly, not uninhabited like Sinai (v. 23). The first Inhabitant is, of course, God, the Judge of all. He is the same God who inhabited Sinai, not a different one. But now He is no longer a terror to Zion's other inhabitants, for they are just men, or we might say men justified in the righteousness of Christ. They are made perfect, now glorified in heaven. Given that perfection, we can understand how they would belong in the kingdom of Zion.

But there is more – the church of the firstborn (pl.) belong to Zion. We are not yet in heaven, but our names are written down there – we have registered. We are the firstborn in the sense that we have a birthright in Zion, though we find no welcoming home in this sinful world. Is that what the church means to you? Can you see that the church is a bit of heaven on earth? Are you doing your part in her work and mission as one of the privileged firstborn, or like Esau have you been desecrating your birthright?

3. Zion is the believer's mountain, not the unbeliever's mountain (v. 24). We are believers because we have placed our faith in Jesus, who has done two things for us:

(1) He has mediated the new covenant. He did so by obeying Sinai's commandments. A mediator is a go-between. The old covenant was Sinai, which condemned Israel when they broke it. The new covenant is the promise that came through Jeremiah after the destruction of Israel, which will someday save Israel because God will save them from their sins. That salvation depends on Christ's mediation, and Christ's mediation saves us as well.

(2) He has shed His blood to atone for our sins. This was Sinai's judgment. The sprinkled blood is the blood of atonement. It is better than Abel's blood. Abel was the first martyr, and his blood cried out from the ground to God for justice. Christ's sprinkled blood silenced Abel's blood by providing justice – paying the penalty for even Cain's sin, and then offering a cry of its own, the cry of forgiveness. Jesus cried, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Zion is the believer's mountain, not the unbeliever's. Are you a believer in Christ for salvation? You can become one today.

Conclusion: The Bible speaks of many mountains, but three are especially important to its message – Sinai at the begin-

ning, Zion at the end, and in between Calvary, where Christ was crucified. Mount Calvary was a mix of Sinai and Zion. For Jesus, Calvary was approaching Sinai; for those who trust what Christ did there for salvation, Calvary is how we approach Zion. So believer, having approached Zion, be healed from the paralysis of your sin. Accept God's chastening. Yours are the eternal blessings of Zion, not the condemnation of Sinai. Sin shall not reign over you.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*