

“Jesus, the Mediator of a New Covenant”

The Twenty-Third in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 12:18-29; Exodus 19:7-25

It has been said that the biblical teaching about the covenants lies at the heart of Reformed theology. No doubt, this is true. It has also been said that Jesus Christ is the central figure in redemptive history because he is the mediator of the covenant of grace. This is also true. Both themes of covenant and Christ’s work as mediator are found in the second half of Hebrews 12. In fact, as the author of Hebrews points out, apart from the mediator of God’s gracious covenant, we must face a holy God whose very presence will consume us. In a culture such as our own where seemingly everything is trivialized—including the God of the Bible—it is vital that we take careful account of the God with whom we have to do. The God of the Bible is not the God of the sinful human imagination. Although he is loving and gracious toward us in Jesus Christ, he is also a consuming fire whose wrath will destroy us, if not turned aside by the cross of Christ. As the author of Hebrews begins to wrap up this epistle, he reminds us that God’s people do have a gracious covenant with God because we have a gracious covenant mediator, Jesus Christ.

As we return to our series on the Book of Hebrews, we are making our way through the second half of chapter 12. Recall that in the opening half of this chapter, the author set forth an exhortation for the persecuted Christians receiving this letter to persevere in the Christian life, all the while keeping their eyes on Jesus Christ, who is the founder and perfecter of faith. Using an athletic metaphor—the Christian life is like a race—the author reminds God’s people that Jesus Christ fulfilled the demands of God for us and in our place, so that when we grow tired or give up, when we complain and whine about our circumstances, we can take heart knowing that we can look to Jesus (at the finish line), “*who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*” Jesus fulfilled his messianic mission, unlike us, who are very prone to quit or fail.

Because of Jesus’ perfect endurance (in fulfilling the demands of God’s law), we are to run the race knowing that God disciplines us because we are his sons and daughters. Using our earthly fathers as an analogy, the author of Hebrews informs us that God disciplines us because it is for our good (even if we do not like it, nor understand it), and because God loves us. This fact provides us with a perspective on life that non-Christians can never have—they see whatever happens to them as the result of cruel fate, or a vengeful God who is out to get them. But as Christians, we see in all our suffering and hardship both the discipline of God and the bloody cross of Jesus Christ, who knows our human weakness and understands our suffering. It is only when we keep these things in mind that we can run the marathon of life with our eyes trained upon the founder and perfecter of our faith, the Lord Jesus. The knowledge of what lies ahead enables us to run the race with endurance, and to see the value of the discipline of a loving father in the midst of the trials and tribulations of life.

In verses 18-29 of chapter 12, the author of the Hebrews returns to a theme he has addressed earlier in this letter, reminding his readers/hearers one more time of the superiority of the new covenant to the old, because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, is vastly superior to that of Moses and the old covenant.

Since he is writing to a church composed of Jewish converts to Christianity, a number of whom had returned to Judaism after facing persecution from the state or the synagogue, throughout this epistle the

author has made every effort to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus Christ to the key figures and events of the Old Testament. Jesus is the Son of God, the creator of all things and the redeemer of God's people. He is superior to the angels, Moses, and the priests of Israel. Now, as the author nears the end of this epistle he returns to a topic he addressed in chapters 8 and 10—the superiority of the new covenant to the old. Once again, we learn a great deal about the how the New Testament writers interpret the major events of the Old Testament in the light of the coming of Christ.

For example, in Galatians 4:21-31, the Apostle Paul contrasts two mountains and two women. The two mountains are Mount Sinai (where God gave Israel his law) and a heavenly mountain (the heavenly Jerusalem which is above). The two women are Hagar who bore to Abraham a son (Ishmael), and Sarah who miraculously gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise. When setting out this analogy, Paul does something utterly remarkable—he allegorizes an Old Testament historical event to make an important theological point about the superiority of the new covenant to the old. Keep in mind, the old covenant is not a reference to the Old Testament, but to the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai (old covenant = Sinai), while the new covenant is a reference to the covenant of grace God made with Abraham and which is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ in whom all of God's promises are “yes and amen.”

Paul tells the Galatians that Mount Sinai corresponds *not* to Sarah and the promise of a redeemer (as Jews would have expected), but to Hagar, and to the bondage of sin (about which the law could do nothing). Although Paul was a well-trained Rabbi, at first glance his interpretation of these important events in Israel's history may make us wonder whether Paul had been paying attention in Sabbath school. But Paul offers this redemptive-historical re-interpretation of these well-known Old Testament events *because* of the coming of Jesus Christ in whom the promise is fulfilled and who was rejected by his people (Israel). Re-assigning Hagar (and not Sarah) to Mount Sinai is to say that the Jews of Paul's day have rejected the promise God made to his people through Abraham, and that those who remain Jews have chosen the slavery of seeking to be justified before God by works of law over the promise received through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. In using this analogy, Paul is showing how his people, the Jews, completely misunderstood the coming of Jesus Christ. Sadly, they are no longer heirs to the promise, but remain slaves to the flesh.

In the last half of Hebrews 12, the author makes much the same point as Paul did in Galatians, focusing upon the heavenly Jerusalem, but also reflecting upon the person of mediator of the new covenant—Jesus Christ. In doing so, the author is returning to a point he made back in chapter 2, verses 2-4: *“For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”* In the contrast in chapter 2, the author makes the point that even though the giving of the law at Mount Sinai was a remarkable demonstration of God's holiness and power, the coming of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, along with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, showed that the blessings of the gospel and the new covenant, are far greater than those associated with the giving of law and the Sinaitic covenant.

But here in chapter 12, the contrast spelled out in verses 18-19 focuses upon the sheer terror of God's presence when he gave his law to Israel at Sinai. *“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.”* In these verses, the author is recounting from Exodus 19 and 20 (the first of which is our Old Testament lesson, while the latter was our text for the reading of the law). In Exodus 19:18-19 we read, *“now Mount Sinai was wrapped in*

smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.” When God made his holy presence manifest on the mountain, it was an indication of a very significant moment in the history of our redemption—the giving of the law and the establishing of the old covenant.

The presence of YHWH on the mount was such that the people were absolutely terrified as bolts of lightning crashed through the sky and as the ground shook beneath them. As we read in Exodus 20:18-20, *“now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’”* The people of Israel knew that sinners needed a mediator to stand between themselves and the holy God, whose holiness would otherwise consume them. So the Israelites pled with Moses to go up and listen to God’s voice, and then reveal to the people what God had said to him. The people knew that the voice of God would be too much for them to bear. Furthermore, the presence of God consecrated the mount of his descent so that no one dare draw near. In verse 20, the author refers again to the events of Exodus 19. *“For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’”* Anything or anyone who dares to touch the mountain where God is present is to be put to death. Sinai was now holy ground. No human or animal may approach, except those invited (Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders) who were sprinkled with sacrificial blood (Exodus 24:5-8).

Likely alluding to the Moses’ account of his fear of God in Deuteronomy 9:19 after the golden calf incident, *“for I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you,”* in verse 21 of Hebrews 12, the author recounts that *“indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’”* The author’s point in recounting these events as he does is to remind his original audience of the holiness and transcendence of YHWH, which was such that when God made his presence known nature itself convulses, and should God speak, his people would die because they are unable to bear the consequences of his holy speech. God’s presence so consecrated the mountain that no person or creature could touch it and live. Israel’s God is the holy God.

But this is not information for information’s sake—“look what God can do if he wants.” Rather, this account should serve to remind us that the presence of the holy God without a mediator is a very dangerous thing with eternal consequences, a point to which the author will return verse 29. At the very least, this passage in Hebrews (as well as the Old Testament events upon which it is based) should serve as a strong warning to us of the danger of speaking of, or thinking about, the holy God in a flippant or trivial way. And in light of the terror of God’s holy presence, we can see why obeying the law of God is so important, and why any disobedience to God’s commandments is such a serious offense against him.

In this account, we glimpse the holiness of God who gave Israel his law. It is only by keeping this in mind that we are now in any position to consider the very serious offense of taking the Lord’s name in vain, or committing any form of blasphemy against his holy majesty. We can see why idolatry and false religion is such a grave matter and punishable by the eternal fires of hell. It is the holiness of God which exposes the folly of our questions about “whether a loving God should send innocent people to hell?” When God comes down to Sinai, it is clear that there is no one innocent in his presence. There is no one who can withstand his holy judgment. Yet, because Israel is not consumed when God reveals himself, there is also no one who can deny God’s love for his people. He protects Israel from his approach.

From the account of God manifesting himself on the mountain, we can also see that anyone in our own

day and age who claims that God appeared to them, or that they died and went to heaven so that they can come back and write best-selling books about their experience, or who claim that God audibly spoke to them, but who did not soil themselves, or die on the spot, is lying. God's presence, apart from a mediator, will consume us. He is holy and we are sinful. His presence exposes every human pretense otherwise. No wonder those present were terrified and begged for Moses to approach God so that the people might be spared. There must be a mediator between us (as sinners) and the holy God, lest we be consumed. This is the author's point in recounting the giving of the law.

So, it is with all this in mind that in verse 22 the author sets out the wonderful contrast between the new covenant and the old. *"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."* Like Paul, the author contrasts two mountains—Sinai and Mount Zion, Zion possibly the site of Mount Moriah where Abraham offered up Isaac, the place where David settled, and where Solomon built that temple where God dwelt in the midst of his people. This divine connection to Zion can be seen in the words of Psalm 78:68-69, *"but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever."* Zion then, was the earthly dwelling of God now that Israel left the wilderness and was firmly established in Canaan. Built on the slope of Mount Zion, Jerusalem became the royal city where the people of God offered sacrifices at the temple, and gave thanks to the name of God (cf. Psalm 122:3-4).

Like Paul, the author of Hebrews sees in Mount Zion and in the temple built there (which was the high water mark of Israel's history), a type of the heavenly reality of which the earthly city and temple are but shadows. The author's point is that just as the ancient Israelites ascended Mount Zion in Jerusalem to worship God in his temple, so too those who trust in Jesus Christ now have complete access to an invisible spiritual realm (a heavenly city and temple) where Jesus is always present as eternal high priest.

In the Book of Revelation (21:1-8), John describes the heavenly Jerusalem as follows: *"then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.'" Notice that in this heavenly Jerusalem, Jesus is eternally present with his people, and God's gracious covenant promise is forever realized—"I will be your God and you will be my people."*

The author of Hebrew's point is that through faith in Jesus Christ we have already come in some sense to the heavenly city (the heavenly Jerusalem), and to the heavenly mountain (the heavenly Zion), and that we now have free access to the presence of God through Jesus Christ our ascended redeemer and great high priest. Here again, we see **the already** (the spiritual reality we cannot see) and **the not yet** (the heavenly city which one day will be our eternal dwelling place). We enjoy the blessings of the heavenly city now in part through word and sacrament, but one day when we dwell there (after completing the race), we will enjoy it all of its blessings. Given this remarkable contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, there can be no doubt that the new covenant has vastly greater promises than the old. This was yet another powerful reminder to those in that church which received this letter, and who may have

been considering a return to Judaism, that to return to Judaism was, ironically, to renounce the covenant promise made throughout the Old Testament. To return to Judaism was to leave Jerusalem and the promised land only to return to the wilderness.

Picking up on additional elements of the superiority of the new covenant to the old, the author of Hebrews again mentions the angels which were present when God gave the law to Israel at Sinai. According to Deuteronomy 33:2, “*the Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.*” Yet, at the end of verse 23 of Hebrews 12, we read that in the heavenly city there are “*innumerable angels in festal gathering.*” Those angels present when God gave his law to Israel, now minister to the people of God. As the author stated back in chapter one, “*are [angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*” These angels who are ministering spirits also serve as attendants in the royal court in the heavenly city.

In verse 23, the author speaks of “*the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.*” Some have tried to argue that this is a reference to angels, but it is far more likely a reference to the church, composed of those regenerated saints (i.e., the “firstborn”) whose names are already recorded in heaven. In Luke 10:20, Jesus tells us to “*rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*” In Revelation 21:27, we read of “*those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*” I take the author to be speaking here of all those who are running the race despite the difficult obstacles they face (i.e., living the Christian life) whose names are even now recorded (enrolled) in heaven, even though they’ve not yet finished the race.¹ In other words, this is a reference to the church militant here on earth, the members of which have full access to God (the heavenly city) through the priestly work of Jesus Christ, the mediator.

The author also affirms that through faith we come “*to God, the judge of all.*” No doubt, this is an echo from Deuteronomy 18:25, when Abraham pled for the deliverance of Sodom. “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*” Those who renounce God, by renouncing Jesus Christ, must remember the gravity of falling away and returning to works-righteousness. But we must remain confident that God will do what is good and right, even though we cannot always understand his ways and purposes which are often beyond our understanding. The author of Hebrews also says that we come “*to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,*” which is probably a reference to the Old Testament saints mentioned in Hebrews 11, who believed the promise by looking forward to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. But now that Christ has come, his death pays for the guilt of our sin and turns aside the wrath of God. Jesus’ perfect obedience is credited to us, so that God sees us as though we have never sinned. This is now true for the Old Testament saints, just as it is for us. They too have been rendered “perfect,” because of Christ.

But as we read in verse 24, more importantly, we come “*to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” All the of blessings spelled out in verses 22-23 are realized in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of the new covenant—as we saw in Hebrews 8:6 (“*but as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises*”) and Hebrews 9:15 (“*therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant*”), Jesus’ priesthood exceeds Moses’ priesthood in every possible way.

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 358-359.

The reason why Christ's priesthood is better is that the "sprinkled blood" of Jesus—he has already entered the holy place and sanctified both it and us through his blood once shed upon the cross and applied to us in the heavenly temple—exceeds the blood of Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain in an act which cries out for vengeance. Unlike the blood of Abel, the blood of Christ fully accomplishes our redemption—it pays for the guilt of our sins and his blood turns aside the wrath of God from all those for whom Jesus dies. Jesus' death, unlike all other sacrifices, cleanses our conscience. In the old covenant God's approach was something to fear, as we see when God came down to Sinai. But as participants in the new covenant we need not fear approaching God because Jesus is our mediator before the holy God. Jesus secures our access to God. As God cannot turn his son Jesus away, so too, he will not turn us away, because we are in Christ through faith.

Because of everything Jesus has accomplished for us, the author exhorts us to have the proper attitude toward these things—we must trust in God's promise now fulfilled by the work of Christ. Therefore, the author can say to us in verse 25. *"See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven."* This warning is similar to the one we find in Hebrews 10:28-30. The danger of rejecting such a great gift (the work of Christ) is clear—especially since he has fulfilled the promise and now speaks to us through his word from the heavenly temple. If Christ is not our priestly mediator, then the God with whom we have to do is the holy God who descended on Sinai. This is a warning to all those reading this letter who think that they can stand before God apart from Christ.

In fact, as we read in verse 26, *"at that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.'"* There is indeed a judgment day yet to come in which the heavens and earth will shake—not just Mount Sinai. *"This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain."* The earthly mountains—Sinai and Zion—will be replaced by the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem when Jesus returns at the end of the age. As the author exhorts us in verse 28-29. *"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."* Because of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, we can approach God with grateful hearts and worship him in reverence and awe, and without fear. For the kingdom of God has drawn near, and sinners are invited to approach God at his heavenly mount, confident that the consuming fire will not consume us.

What, then, should we take with us from this passage?

Beloved, we have not come to Mount Sinai. There is no lightening, no thunder, no ground shaking beneath our feet. And there is no warning for us stay away because God's holiness will consume us. The law of God no longer condemns us, because Jesus has died for our sins, and has fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law. Instead of being warned to stay away and frightened by God's holy presence, we have been given a wonderful invitation to draw near to God without fear. We have heard God's voice through his word—and it is not too much to bear. And we are invited to this table, where we are to touch, taste, and see that the Lord is good, without being killed for doing so. And all of this is because the new covenant is much, much better than the old, and because Jesus, the mediator of this new (and better) covenant, is our great high priest who turns aside the wrath of God, intercedes for us whenever we are in need, and who, as the hymn writer says, has hushed the law's loud thunder.