

## **Judgment and Grace**

### **The Better Covenant**

The writer continues building our confidence in the New Covenant of Christ. The writer sets up a classic comparison between choices which he has done so well in other parts of the Book of Hebrews. It is the classic comparison contrast of - not this, but that.

The writer of Hebrews has already told us that the New Covenant is far better than the Old Covenant. The New Covenant theme runs through the Book of Hebrews from chapter 7 to 13. In chapter 7 we discovered, <sup>21</sup> “**This one, (speaking of Jesus), was made a priest with an oath by the one (God the Father) who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever.”**”<sup>22</sup> **This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.** <sup>23</sup> The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, <sup>24</sup> **but he (Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.**” This is followed in chapter 8 by an incredible passage where the New is put forth to complete the Old and ends with those who accept God’s pardon from judgement through Jesus as the Lord and Savior – He remembers their sins, no more. Reading verse at 6 of chapter 8, “**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.**” <sup>7</sup> **For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.** <sup>8</sup> For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘**Behold, the days**

are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,<sup>9</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. *Quoting from Jeremiah*, For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. *(Jeremiah 31:31-34)*<sup>10</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.<sup>11</sup> And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.<sup>12</sup> **For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.**” So, we understand, the New Covenant is better than the Old just as Mount Zion is better than Mount Sinai.

### **Judgment at Mount Sinai** (vs. 18-21)

To understand the beginning of this passage from Hebrews one needs to be familiar with Exodus chapters 19 and 20 and Deuteronomy chapters, 4, 5 and 18. Back in Exodus Moses had gone up the mountain and the people below observed, “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.” (Ex. 19:18) The Lord was holy and the people were not, so there could approach Mount Sinai. This relates to verse 14 of Hebrews 12, where the writer refers to what happened in Exodus by referring to Mount Sinai and the people who failed to “Strive for peace with everyone, and for **the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.**” With understanding there is a relationship between Exodus and Hebrews let me read verses 18 to 21 which quote both Exodus and Deuteronomy throughout, “For you have not come to what may be touched, a

blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest *(Ex. 19:18, 20:18 and Deut. 4:11, 5:22)*<sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. *(Ex. 19:16, 20:19 and Deut. 5:5, 18:16)*<sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ *(Ex. 19:12-13)*<sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’” *(Ex. 19:16 and Deut. 9:19)* So it becomes obvious the original readers, who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, had a good working knowledge of Exodus and Deuteronomy and probably the Old Testament in general. For us today, in order to have a more complete understanding of the New Testament we must have a good working knowledge of the Old. As for believers of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and for us, as believers this day, we need to understand the difference between the Old Covenant represented by Mount Sinai and the New Covenant represented here by Mount Zion.

As we begin to explore the difference between judgment and grace let’s begin with, what happened on Mount Sinai. Let me ask, **what was the key event on Mount Sinai?** God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. With the giving of the Ten Commandments came the Law of God. The way the Law worked is God gave the Israelites the rules or laws for pleasing Him and its conditions. Moses tells the people the blessings of God through obedience to the laws in Deuteronomy chapter 28, “**And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.**”<sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.<sup>3</sup> **Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.**<sup>4</sup> **Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.**<sup>5</sup> **Blessed shall**

**be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>6</sup> Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.**” (vs. 1-6) However, Moses continues, saying, but if you disobey God, He will not just withhold blessing but He will curse you. Reading from Deuteronomy 28, verses 15 to 19, **“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. <sup>16</sup> Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. <sup>17</sup> Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>18</sup> Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>19</sup> Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.”** One can have either blessing or curse but not both.

While Moses was on the top of Sinai the people were commanded to stay in the valley near its base. They were not allowed to approach even the base of the mountain. In fact, if any person or animal touched the mountain’s base that they would be put to death. Mount Sinai is not a special mountain in the sense of possessing some special qualities or power. What made that mountain different or special was when God’s presence was on the mountain and was visibly seen and heard. The glory of God brought with it terror to the sinner. Imagine you are there while God is on the mountain top, you are among the Hebrews seeing the fire on top and the deep dark clouds surrounding it, the flashes of lightening, would you not have been fearful? Not only that but the text tells us that the mountain shook like an earthquake and there was an extremely loud trumpet blast. The sight of all this would have brought fear into one’s heart.

I can imagine the fear of the Hebrews with 2 million camped near the base of Mount Sinai. I have never seen 2 million shaking with fear, but I can imagine it.

God came to Sinai dramatically and gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The scriptures indicate that God did it the way He did - so that the people would have the fear and awe of God driving them to obey His Word and not sin.

My beloved, the fear of the Lord is a good thing and it should drive us to obey Him and to worship Him in an acceptable way. Chapter 12 of Hebrews ends with verses 28 and 29 telling us, “**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,** <sup>29</sup> **for our God is a consuming fire.**”

Throughout the New Testament God has told us how He wants to be worshipped. His Word provides guidelines how we come to God in worship. We do not simply brainstorm and come up with ideas on how we think worship should be. In His Word God tells us what elements should be there and we do not have the liberty to come up with our own ideas and agendas that take the focus off of God. If we make church into something that is not focused on God, for His glory; He will not be pleased. We are not free to worship God in any way we choose.

His Word tells us that corporate worship, church worship should include; Prayer, Psalms, Hymns - singing to His glory. There is to be the reading of His Word, exposition or preaching of His Word, the Lord’s Supper and offering – the giving of our first fruits or money back to His church. When there are new converts, we should baptize them before the church. When there are those among us who are sick, we should lay hands on and pray over them. So as a church we have to be careful in what we do. We should ask ourselves the question, are we following God’s Word in worship? Are we offering God worship that meets His standards? Is it our hearts desire to bring Him glory?

Now, back to Moses, after witnessing these glorious events firsthand on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were struck with terror. After hearing the voice of God, they understood that they did not want to hear Him again. They asked Moses if he would be the one to relay God's messages to them. They "said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but **do not let God speak to us, lest we die.**'"

(Exodus 20:19) They feared if God spoke to them directly, they would die, for they were sinners.

Mount Sinai was all about judgment. The Law of God is unable to save. Paul understood why the Law was given. He knew that it is impossible for mankind to fully keep the Law. In his letter to the church in Rome Paul wrote, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and **the whole world may be held accountable to God.**"

<sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:19-20) When we violate God's laws we are in sin. It is important to always remember the law cannot save but condemns. The law is impossible to keep completely, thereby always receiving the curse of God. The purpose of the law of God is to show us how high God's standards are and how short we fall in keeping them, and our need for a Savior.

The Gospel of Christ, on the other hand, cannot condemn but only save. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher, Ralph Erksine, had it right when he said, "A rigid matter was the law, demanding brick, denying straw, but when with gospel tongue it sings, it bids me fly and gives me wings." *The Sermons and Practical Works of Ralph Erksine*, vol. 10 (Glasgow: W. Smith and J. Bryce, 1778), 283. The New Covenant is a better than the Old Covenant just like Mount Zion is better than Mount Sinai.

**Grace at Mount Zion** (vs. 22-29)

Like the prior verses that found their root in what happened on Mount Sinai, verses 22 to 24 is rooted in what happened on Mount Zion. In 2 Samuel chapter 5 we are told David was in Hebron and the elders of Israel came and anointed David as king. Immediately King David and his army do battle and take Mount Zion from the Jebusites. It was made the capitol of David's kingdom. Mount Zion or as it is better known after David took possession as Jerusalem would be a special place, a place not only important to the Davidic Kingdom, but a place important to God's Kingdom. Reading Hebrews chapter 12, beginning at verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Psalm 48 is titled; *A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah*. Now this can be puzzling since Korah defied Moses and God and we read in Numbers chapter 16 God opened the ground swallowed up Korah and his men. However, Korah's descendants followed God and became doorkeepers and soldiers with King David. Some also became well known musicians in David's court. It is these "Sons of Korah" that wrote the song of Psalm 48 praising Zion. Reading Psalm 48 verses 1 to 3, "Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain,<sup>2</sup> beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.<sup>3</sup> Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress." Jerusalem is a city on a hill. Whenever it is spoken of in the Bible it is always in terms of coming up to Jerusalem because no matter which direction one is coming from, one must go up. Zion is a special mount and Jerusalem is a special city. It is probably the mountain on which Isaac was all but sacrificed by

his father Jacob. It is the mountain on which Christ was crucified. It is the place where God has shown amazing love to His people.

So, it is not hard to see the contrast between Mount Sinai where God's judgment took place and Mount Zion as a place of God's grace and salvation. God told the people at Mount Sinai to stay away, but for Mount Zion, God was saying by His actions come and see Me revealed. Sinai was 'don't touch' but Zion was 'come and behold'.

Mount Zion is breathtaking in its glory and beauty. Hebrews 12, verse 22 reads, ["But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering ..."](#) Zion is breathtaking in its community. At Sinai God's people were afraid and cowered in fear, asking Moses to intercede for them. At Zion we have Christ, God Himself as our mediator. We can come into God's Kingdom without fear of death from contact with the Holy - because we come in assurance that we are accepted by the atoning work of Christ.

Verse 23 continues, ["... and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect ..."](#) Here the 'firstborn' is not referring to Christ but to all His people, those who have believed in Christ as the Son of God. This is the 'firstborn' of all believers from all ages until their Lord returns. All of us who have been converted are brought into God's Kingdom. All believers are a part of the Kingdom of God whether alive or dead. We who are alive are every bit apart of it as are those who have gone on to heaven and are in the eternal presence of God. We who are alive just do not have the Kingdom in its fullness as yet.



This eternal congregation of Christ is not denominational, but the true church of Christ made up of all believers from all ages. These saints, this church of Christ is written about in John's Revelation. Reading from chapter 7, beginning at verse 9, **"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,"**<sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, **'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'**<sup>11</sup> And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,<sup>12</sup> saying, **'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'**" This is the congregation of the redeemed collected together for one purpose, the worshiping of God. This is what the ending of verse 23 of our Hebrew passage means, **"The spirits of the righteous made perfect."** In the New Jerusalem all believers will be perfected. What will worship be like when we no longer are hindered by sin? What will worship be like when we see King Jesus face to face. What will worship be like when we have experienced salvation to the fullest? I cannot fully say, but I can say, it will be Gloriously Holy!

Every single member of God's kingdom has had all sin forgiven and all sin already judged by God in Christ. Christ has paid for every sin of every member of this kingdom. If you know Christ as Lord and Savior you are welcomed into God's Kingdom, you are in fact placed into God's Kingdom, you have come to Mount Zion. If you do not know Christ, contact with the Holy means you remained at Mount Sinai a place of judgment and punishment and death.

God is not mean in the Old Testament and loving in the New. He is the same God with the same standards for holiness. Either you know this God as a loving Father through Christ's work of righteousness on your behalf or you will meet God as a consuming fire. This is the God whom the Israelites heard speak to Moses and the sound of His voice was more than they could take. Can you imagine how white-hot God's holiness must be? His voice shook the mountain and the earth trembled under the weight of His voice.

We either meet God as a loving Father through Christ or we meet Him as a consuming fire without Christ. It is all about whether or not Christ's atoning work has been applied to you through the God the Spirit. This is the meaning of verse 24, ["and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."](#) As Moses mediated the Old Covenant, we have Jesus Christ, God's Son as our Mediator by the New Covenant. He kept the covenant perfectly for His people and by Him they receive God's grace.

Abel's blood cried out for vengeance against Cain, <sup>10</sup> ["And the LORD said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.'"](#) (Genesis 4:10-11) Christ's blood speaks a much better word. It speaks reconciliation not vengeance. Abel's blood condemned Cain but the blood of Jesus saves all who believe in Him.

Are you a part of God's Kingdom? Has Jesus' blood been applied to you by faith? Sinai could not be touched. If one touched it, they would die. But with Jesus, everyone longed to touch Him for healing. They sought physical healing, which Jesus gave, but the healing Jesus gives all believers is eternal salvation.

The Old Covenant caused the people to cower in fear and not to touch the Holy. The New Covenant takes care of our unholiness so that we can touch the Holy. Christ is the difference. Without believing in Christ, one is destined to a mortal life without hope or peace and an eternal life to come of searing judgment. With Christ one lives their mortal life as a sojourner in the midst of a world in chaos with the peace Christ gives and the hope of heaven. The choice is clear – for me, like Joshua, and I hope it is true for you also, <sup>14</sup>“Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers ... <sup>15</sup>choose this day whom you will serve ... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:14-15) Amen!