

### **Don't Pick the Wrong Mountain!**

***"You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."***

If you wash my car, I will give you pizza. That is a covenant or agreement. We call it conditional because one person will do something only if the other does something else. So in this case, if you wash my car, I will give you pizza. On the other hand, if you don't wash my car, I will not give you pizza. The covenant is broken and I am no longer obligated to give you pizza. You can have a one sided or non-conditional covenant. I will give you pizza, period. There is no condition. You don't have to wash my car or do anything. I will simply give you pizza.

Friends, we are returning to our epistle reading from earlier and there we find two covenants. One is represented by Mount Sinai with its laws. It is conditional. If we do this or that, then God will reward us. But if we don't, God will not reward us. The other is represented by Mount Zion. That one is a one way covenant. I will give you eternal life. Period. You don't have to do this or that. God simply gives you eternal life in Christ.

Let's go into that text and pray the Holy Spirit guides us this morning so we don't enter into the wrong covenant with God. Using the picture of two mountains, we pray we don't go up the wrong mountain.

#### *I. Don't go back to Mount Sinai.*

Now, when our text speaks about Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, it doesn't mean literally to travel to the Middle East and go to Mount Sinai in the Sinai peninsula or Mount Zion in Jerusalem. He is using a figure of speech. When we talk about "Washington," we probably are not talking about the city of Washington D.C., but the federal government which there. So, Mount Sinai represents the giving of the Law at that mountain and Zion represents Christ and what he means to us.

The reason this is an issue is what was happening to this congregation. They were made up of former Jews who became Christians. They grew up living under Mount Sinai and all its rules and regulations concerning diet, circumcision, the Passover, the Sabbath and so on. But a missionary came and shared Christ with them and they believed in Jesus as their Savior. But persecution broke out against them. No one had died yet, but they were under great pressure by the government and family members to renounce or give up their Christian faith.

If you owned a lake cabin up north and the government decided to quadruple the property taxes on it, no one would blame you if you sold that cabin because you couldn't afford those taxes. In the same way, many people thought it wise to stop being Christian. It was costing them too much. Judaism was legal at that time. Why not go back to Judaism? The persecution would stop. It only made sense.

But this decision would be fatal. That is why their pastor reminded them of what happened at Mount Sinai. ***"You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'"***

When God gave his commandments at Sinai, he could have given it to them. But God wanted to make an impression on his people. He wanted them to see and feel his presence as an almighty God. He engulfed that mountain in fire and blocked out the sun. Storms and lightning flashed. An unearthly trumpet kept blasting away. Then God spoke with a voice that made them tremble. And if this was not enough, he gave them a command. Any animal that touched that holy mountain must be put to death. They were not even allowed to touch that animal. They must kill it by stoning it to death from a distance. Even Moses was afraid.

Is that what this congregation really wanted? Did they really want to bind themselves with the Sinai covenant? Did they really want to place themselves under that law which said, "Do this or else?"

I don't think there is a single person here who would suggest we turn our church into a synagogue and to start adopting those Old Testament laws and regulations. That would have meant no pork chop dinner last week. But we are naturally drawn to Mount Sinai like moths to light. Sigmund Freud called it "ego." Paul called it "conceit" in the New Testament. Our church fathers coined the phrase, "opinio legis," Latin for, "the attitude of the law."

You see, every human is born with a natural religion. It is a two way, conditional law based religion: do good, God will reward you; do bad, God will punish you. To say that we are going to heaven solely because Jesus died for me is not natural to us. Rather, we want to say that we are going to heaven because we stayed out of jail, go to church a little more than others and

are decent folks. And this natural religion feels so comfortable, like a nice warm blanket on a cold winter morning. I remember asking a gentleman the night before some serious surgery if he was sure he was going to heaven just in case. "Yes," he said, "because I pray a lot." Do you see the danger? He based heaven on what he had done. There is no Christ. There is no cross. And if he didn't keep up his end of the covenant, God will not keep his end.

So look at Sinai. Feel the rumble and see the fire. Hear the trumpet and understand that anything that touches it must die. There is no future at Sinai, no access to God, no acceptance by God, no eternity with God.

## *II. Stay on Mount Zion.*

Contrast that with mountain, Zion. ***"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."***

Zion is a hill in Jerusalem. It is the hill where the temple was built. It was here that thousands upon thousands of animals were sacrificed. But these sacrifices were not made for God. Those sacrifices were for the people. They were a picture of the sacrifice Jesus, the Lamb of God, will make for the sins of the world. Only a stone's throw away is another small hill where Jesus would be crucified for our sins.

Notice there is no thunder, no lightening. There is no darkness or terrifying trumpet blasts. Sinai is dark, scary and barren. People could not approach it without dying. But look at Zion. We will stand on the mountain. It is home. We are safe and secure and it will be full of happy people including all of God's angels. What a scene of life and happiness compared to Sinai.

We have come to the Church of the firstborn. Back then they handled inheritances differently. The firstborn was the one who got most of the inheritance. But at Zion each of us is regarded as a firstborn. Each of us gets the best share of the inheritance of eternal life. And our names are written in the book of life. It is like a really fancy restaurant. You walk in and there are about thirty people waiting for a table. The hostess asks if you have a reservation and you say, "Yes." You give them your name and just like that, you get to sit down. When he brought you to faith, God wrote your name down in the book of life.

All of this because of Jesus Christ. ***"You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*** Have you ever stood before a judge? I heard of two court cases this week, one involving a teenage girl accused of murdering her newborn child and the other an actress accused of bribing someone to give her daughter better grades for college. Both stood before the judge. Both didn't know what the verdict was. Both were scared to death. We will not be scared before God the Judge. Jesus mediated a new covenant between us and God. It is not like Sinai where it says, if you don't do this, then you will be punished. It is a one sided covenant of grace: God gives you eternal life, period.

We have a place on Zion because of Jesus' blood. Remember when Cain murdered Abel and his blood cried out to God for vengeance? Abel's blood cried, "Avenge me." Jesus' blood cries out, "Avenged. Paid for. Forgiven."

And guess what? Zion is not something in the future. Notice how it says that we ***"have come to Mount Zion,"*** not will come, but have come. We are at Zion now. Yes, the day will come when the trumpet will blast again, but not to scare us, but to announce the return of Jesus. But it is ours now. We are on it today.

Which is why we need to see both mountains. The truth is we can become lazy. We can become distracted. We can become proud and what do we do? We are naturally interested in Sinai because it would feed our ego. Look at Sinai. God isn't trying to scare you into heaven. Nor is he telling us how heaven is a reward for good behavior. But look at what it means if we make a two covenant with God and we can't keep up our end of the agreement? Sinai humbles us. It shows us we need a Savior. It tells us what we have at Zion.

So what kind of covenant do you want with God? The two way covenant at Sinai of do this or else, or the one sided covenant of Zion that says, "Look at what God does for you?"