

A better approach to God's presence (Hebrews 12:18–24)

Hold firmly to your confession of Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior, the perfect High Priest and sacrifice for sin. Do not be tempted toward any legalistic system, like the readers of Hebrews seemed to be tempted to return to a reliance upon Judaism. The author uses a contrast between the old and the new, as represented in Sinai and Zion, to argue for the reasonableness of enduring in a complete faith in Christ alone to the end.

I. Mount Sinai: the old covenant's character and inadequacy (12:18–21)

1. *Touchable*: The Sinai experience of Israel as well as the whole Old Testament system dealt with things that could be handled, seen, and audibly heard. Judaism was for that reason still attractive to many, as similar “touchable” experiences today. But NT believers have come to that which is not “touchable” and need to guard against reverting to something less.
2. *Exclusive*: The Sinai experience as well as the old covenant system kept the worshiper at a distance. It excluded the worshiper from the presence of God, setting up boundaries which should not be crossed on pain of death. Systems which put a distance between God and the believer are not what NT believers have approached.
3. *Fearsome*: The Sinai experience awoke fear in all the people, including Moses. They rightly feared crossing the barrier between them and God as further experience showed (cf. Lev 10:1–3; Isa 6:5). Such fear is reasonable for those who would live legalistically, but that fear has been removed for the NT believer.

II. Mount Zion: the new covenant and believers' privileges (12:22–24)

1. *The believer arrives at a better place*. Mount Zion, as the physical capital chosen by King David, was the political and religious center of Israel and became representative of the presence of God in heaven, corresponding to the heavenly Jerusalem. Under the new covenant the believer approaches the spiritual reality of a city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, though we still look for its coming (Hebr 13:14). It is the city of our citizenship and the one to which the patriarchs looked (11:10). It is the residence of the King (cf. Ps 2:6). Unlike Sinai where God came cloaked to mankind, believers today approach the city of God with no reason to fear. Jesus has prepared a place for us (John 14:2–3).
2. *The believer expects a better reception*. Angels at Sinai and in the O.T, represented the awesome power and glory of God, but we know them as those sent to minister to the heirs of salvation (1:14) and those who rejoice and praise God for the salvation He has worked in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (cf. Luke 15:10; Rev 5). This joyful gathering is the expectation of NT believers as well as an “assembly of firstborn, registered in heaven.” These are redeemed men and women (cf. Luke 10:20; Dan 12:1; Rev 13:18; 17:8; 21:27), who are joint heirs with Jesus Christ, the Firstborn (Col 1:15) and share in His inheritance. Although the “church” could be in mind, it is probably best to consider this simply as an assembly, such as the official gathering of citizens.
3. *The believer anticipates a better condition*. Believers approach a judge, who as God of all, will judge justly and wisely over all. For the believer this is a comfort, knowing that the penalty for the believer's sin has been paid by Christ. Those men and women of faith who had to wait to be perfected (11:40), though yet waiting for their resurrection bodies, have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection, and made perfect with all those who place their faith in Jesus Christ. The law with its offerings and sacrifices makes no one perfect (7:19; 9:9; 10:1), but Christ accomplished that with a single offering (10:14). Why revert to a system that could not help?
4. *The believer possesses a better promise*. Jesus as God and man is the perfect mediator of God's promise for those who believe to forgive, remember sins no more, put His law on the heart, and be our God. Jesus makes that promise possible. It is His blood that cleanses (10:22); His voluntary death speaks better than Abel's martyrdom and the promise of forgiveness and cleansing better than vindication.

A reliance upon Judaism, or any ritual or law-keeping, rather than on Christ alone requires keeping all the law to live. But we can't keep it and the law can't save. Believers in Jesus have come to something much better, a great hope and a positive reason to persevere in the faith.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- Do you find yourself tempted by Sinai oriented thinking, e.g., wanting “touchable” things to aid worship or imagining the need for others to approach God for you? What do you need to change that thinking?
- What excites you most about what lies before the true believer (as described in these verses)? Why?
- How will understanding the difference between “Sinai” and “Zion” better help you persevere in the faith?