

The Awesome Reality of Christianity

Hebrews 12:18-29

In Washington DC there is a military cemetery known as Arlington National Cemetery. There you will find the *Tomb of the Unknowns*, or the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*. It is a memorial to the fallen American soldiers of World War I and II, Korea and Vietnam, whose remains have been unidentified. A plaque reads: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." Watching vigil over this memorial is a platoon of 30 soldiers. Since 1948, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year this tomb has been guarded without a single hour having gone by without a sentinel there. Watching these men is quite awe-inspiring. Twenty-one is the military's highest honour. When a guard is on duty, he walks exactly 21 steps down the black mat towards the Tomb, faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. After the turn, the sentinel executes a sharp "shoulder-arms" movement to place the weapon on the shoulder closest to the visitors to signify that the sentinel stands between the Tomb and any possible threat. For an hour in winter, and for half an hour in the blazing heat of summer, the soldier guards the tomb, in his dress uniform of 100% wool. The soldiers who serve as sentinels are not soldiers who couldn't make the cut for warfare. They are in fact, the very best soldiers of the elite 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, who train for tactical and battle missions like all other soldiers. As to preparation for each shift, a soldier takes six hours to prepare his uniform, steaming it, placing each piece of brass precisely measured. Shining the specially made shoes takes four hours. When the guard is changed, a simple but powerful ceremony takes place at which watching tourists are asked to stand and be silent. Most don't need to be asked, they just sense the reverence of the occasion.

Nothing about the ceremony, the soldiers, the preparation and training of the men would come across as casual. Nothing in it would come across as irreverent, shoddy, disrespectful. Everything tells you that the American military is paying the highest possible honour to its fallen but unidentified soldiers. It's serious, it's sober, it's reverential, it's respectful, and yet it feels entirely appropriate.

Sad to say, once you leave the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier where the visitors stand in complete silence, and you can head to any one of thousands of nearby churches which claim to worship the living God, and you won't find anything remotely like what you see at Arlington. You'll find plenty of chattiness, fun, casual back-slapping and giggles a plenty in those places that claim to know and worship Yahweh, the Creator of the Cosmos.

Why? Well, they'll tell you, we're not under the Law anymore, we're under grace! The Old Testament was heavy and reverential, but the New Testament is a party!

Hebrews puts it very differently. Hebrews has shown us that the new covenant realities actually demand more from us. New covenant realities haven't made things less serious, or made us less culpable. If anything, they have made us more so, because more has been revealed, and more has been provided. New Covenant realities should fill us with reverence and awe, albeit a joyful awe, and a trembling joy.

Here at the end of Hebrews 12, the writer gives his final warning attached to a comparison between Old Covenant and New. Of the five warning passages in Hebrews, this one is the last, summarising, concluding call to draw near to Jesus the Finisher of the Faith, and not to draw back.

You will know that you have embraced the true faith, the true new covenant, the true Messiah,

when you are filled with not despairing terror, nor with flippant casualness, but with a worship of reverence and awe.

The way he is going to do that is in two parts. First, he will contrast two mountains that symbolise the old covenant and the new. It's really summarising the whole book with all its teaching comparing old prophets, priests and kings with Jesus the mediator of the New.

Second he will contrast two responses. You can either do what some people did at the first mountain, or you can do the only appropriate thing if you embrace the second one: worship with reverence and awe.

I. Two Mountains: Old or New

18 For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard *it* begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." 21 And so terrifying was the sight *that* Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.")

All that has come before, its call to endure, to exhort one another is summed up in this reason: you haven't come to the old mountain of Mount Sinai. You have not arrived at, landed upon this mountain. Perfect tense, word from which we get proselyte. A terrifying, fearsome, awe-inspiring mountain.

Mount Sinai was a physical, tangible mountain. You could touch it, climb it, pick up its rocks. But on that day when Yahweh sealed the covenant with Israel, it was a terrifying mountain.

On that day, it took on the appearance of volcanic lava: burning, scorching, rock turning molten and glowing with fire. Alongside the deep orange burn of molten rock came the blackness and the darkness. Two Greek words here emphasise absolute murky, gloomy dark, no light whatsoever.

Around that mountain came a thick cloud combined with smoke from the fire. This is the kind of darkness reserved for the cosmos where the black is so total that light is drained into it and disappears. This darkness envelops and chokes and consumes all around it. The word is often associated with Hell and punishment. So it is as if God appeared to Israel and showed some of the deepest darkness that is part of His judgement for sin and transgressing His law. For a moment, the clouds of Hell, the sky of Gehenna appeared over Sinai.

Gathering with this was a hurricane-like wind and storm, with its lightning and thunder, the blasting wind and the rumbling thunder. The mountain itself quaked, and Israel would have felt the ground beneath them shaking, heard rocks splitting and rolling.

Then from the sights and sounds of nature to the extreme came then the sounds that meant this was an intelligence, a Person manifesting.

First came the sound of a trumpet. Not the sound we associate with a brass instrument. But the sound of a ram's horn, a shofar, but with a volume that would make a pipe organ sound quiet and humble. A blasting ear-bursting call to worship. The trumpet was the sound that Israel was to approach the mountain. But before that, they had received the command that not a single man or beast should go up to the mountain or touch it. And should an animal stray and run off and touch the mountain, it was not to be retrieved. It was to be shot with an arrow or stoned. So holy was God's presence, so off-limits was a place where God manifested, that nothing was to go near unless called.

Finally came the voice. Israel heard a voice calling Moses to come up. Once up, God told Moses to return and tell Israel not to break through to attempt to gaze at the Lord, and to return with Aaron.

Once down, God then announced the Ten Commandments. Each of those ten commandments, all of Israel heard, not from Moses, but from the voice of God. It seems they heard the Ten Commandments from the very voice of God.

10 "*especially concerning* the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and *that* they may teach their children.' 11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. 12 "And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; *you only heard* a voice. 13 "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.
(Deut. 4:10-13)

Deu 4:33 "Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?

Such was the power of that voice, that those who heard it begged Moses to become the intermediary between them and God. They could not endure hearing that voice. Our text tells us that the command that if even a non-rational beast should break through and touch the mountain, it was to be instantly killed, how much more were they in danger as rational, moral beings, when they heard this voice.

And so terrifying was this whole appearance and manifestation, that Moses himself was overcome with fear. His words, here given under inspiration, though not recorded in Exodus are literally, *I am terrified and quaking with dread*. I am afraid and trembling.

What is this meant to tell us? This was what Mount Sinai meant. This was the Law: God in His holiness showing Israel how unapproachable is His perfection, how dangerous it is to trifle with Him, how perilous it is for sinners to deal with this God.

For the first readers of this book, they were in danger of staying at, or even turning back to Sinai. The persecution and the pressure from their fellow Jews was calling on them to return to Moses, return to Levi and Aaron. Come back to the covenant God first made with us, stick to it, keep its laws, present its sacrifices. Leave behind Yeshua and this new covenant and this new law, and this new tabernacle and new priest.

The writer says to turn back to this is to turn back to threatened judgement unless you meet the Law's demands, and pay the Law's penalties. Do the right, and present all the animals and offerings in the right place in the right way by the right priest to make up for your wrongs. And as he has shown, God no longer accepts those sacrifices. The veil has been torn. The Levitical priesthood has been retired. The Mosaic Covenant has been annulled. So you are going back to an unapproachable holiness with no means to approach.

Instead, he says, you have come to something else.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn *who are* registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of* Abel.

He now gives the spiritual realities that every believer enters into once in Christ. Some of these are future, but he treats them as if they are present. Most of them are invisible, but he treats them as if they are visible to us in some way. That's not surprising because he defined faith as faith is the

substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1)

These are the realities already and not yet, now with more to come of those in Christ. He describes it with seven things. One of them is the place, five of them are the people of the place, and one of them is the price of that place.

First, he says we have come to Mount Zion, City of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem

Zion was originally just a mountain fortress which David conquered. But as it became associated with the Ark, and then the Temple, and the Davidic covenant, it became associated with the city of God. **Psa 48:2** Beautiful in elevation, The joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, The city of the great King.

Psa 87:3 Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God! Selah

When John received His revelation, Heaven itself is then given the title, the New Jerusalem. It is not simply the earthly city adopted by God, it is God's Heavenly city that will one day come to Earth. This is the mountain that we come to in the new covenant. It is a mountain not only of holiness and judgement, but of life and light and rejoicing. Sinai said, stay back. But Revelation 22 says this about the New Jerusalem: 17 And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Rev. 22:17)

This brings us to the people of this place. Who can be found there? That's the second reality. Second, we have come to myriads of angels. Our companions now include spirit beings that in all likelihood far outnumber us. Angels are most often compared to the stars, and conservative estimates put the number of stars in the universe at 1 septillion, which is one with 24 zeroes after it. By comparison the total number of humans that have ever lived is a tiny fraction of that.

Dan 7:10 A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, And the books were opened.

Who else are our companions?

The General Assembly and Church Of The Firstborn Who Are Registered in Heaven

This is the church triumphant. All those born-again believers, from the day of Pentecost till the rapture of the church. Believers are sometimes called the firstborn of God.

Jam 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

What a statement: our names are registered in Heaven.

Luk 10:20 "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

If you are a believer then 1 Peter 1:4 says that there is an inheritance waiting for you that is unfading, undefiled and reserved in Heaven for you.

The next being and the fourth reality to be found there is God the Father: "God the Judge of All". The ultimate Law-Maker and Law-Enforcer: the Sovereign Ruler of All, the High Authority over all. The same one who showed only His judgement at Sinai is here among all these rejoicing, glorified and holy beings.

Fifth, Heaven is populated by the Spirits of Just men made perfect. Just men made perfect refers to Old Testament saints. These were believers, declared righteous in anticipation of Christ's death. They are now perfected, and they await the resurrection.

Sixth, Heaven is occupied by the Mediator of New Covenant – Jesus Himself. The author and finisher of the Faith, the Eternal Son, the one who walked with Adam, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, but who also died for their and our sins, He is there.

The seventh reality is the price of admission to this place. to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of Abel*.

Blood of Sprinkling is the sacrificial blood of Jesus that brought us into the new covenant and washed away our sins. This blood is not like Abel's blood, whether it means the sacrifice Abel brought, or whether it means his own blood shed by Cain.

Abel's sacrifice says “covered temporarily”; Christ's says “forgiven forever”. Abel's blood made Cain guilty and drove him away; Christ's blood frees us from guilt and draws us in. Abel's blood cried “vengeance”. Christ's blood cries “Mercy, pardon”.

So what can we conclude about these two mountains, their inhabitants and their price? Mount Sinai is the capital of Law and the Old Covenant. Mount Sinai was not a home or a city. It was a barren place where God declared His holiness and was unapproachable. God was there, angels were there, but this was no home, no country, no company.

The price was perfection, which was why it was also bondage. Paul says in Galatians 4 For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar-- 25 for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children-- 26 but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Gal. 4:24-26)

You had to perform perfectly, all the while your sinful nature was rebelling and finding no enablement to perform. It was touchable but not approachable. It was visible, but with no welcome. It was greatness, but the goodness was not as visible.

Mount Zion is the capital of grace and the new covenant. It is a glorious and welcoming throng, calling on you to come and to stay. The price is someone else's perfection: the life and death of Jesus the Messiah. It includes the holiness of Sinai, but absorbs it in the grace of Jesus.

Mount Zion is not touchable or yet visible, but it is approachable. The Gospel of the New Covenant says: draw near, come boldly to the throne of grace

Having shown us that we have not come to one mountain, and have come to the other, he is now going to tell us to not do one thing, and to instead do the other.

II. Two Responses: Rejection or Reverence

25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven,

Do not refuse Him who speaks. This word for refuse means to reject, to shun, to turn away. We see that meaning in the next sentence. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven

Don't reject the Gospel. Don't turn away from the new covenant. Don't reject Jesus the Messiah for Mount Sinai, for Moses, and Levi, and Aaron. Don't refuse Him who speaks. Remember how the book opened? God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; (Heb. 1:1-2)

He is speaking, and more clearly and distinctly than the voice they heard from Sinai. Here is the logic of these verses. Those who heard His voice thundering from an earthly mountain did not escape judgement when they rejected Him. That refers to several incidents during the Exodus when Israelites died through divine judgement. But now, the voice comes from Heaven. How so? Christ Himself has come from Heaven and spoken to us. When He ascended, the Spirit of God came from Heaven and indwelt and continues to testify to this day, through the book that is God-breathed, the Bible. At Sinai, none of the Bible had yet been written, and now we have the complete Word of God.

Our revelation is clearer, more intelligible, more available, and that makes us more culpable, more responsible. To reject and turn away from this is a willing, knowing, active act of apostasy.

26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 27 Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God *is* a consuming fire.

At Sinai, God's voice shook rocks, trees and the ground. But long after that, in Haggai 2, God said, "Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory"

There he is referring to the great judgement that is coming upon the Earth at the conclusion of the church age, where the Bible predicts terrifying judgements that will envelop the Earth and the Cosmos. The book of Revelation describes a global earthquake, the sun being darkened, the moon eclipsing, hail and fire, darkness, scorching heat, pain, waters turned to blood. And even beyond the Tribulation period and the time of the Millennial Kingdom, the Bible promises that the heaven will melt with fervent heat as God creates a new heavens and a new earth. The point is, at some point, everything temporal, everything material, will be destroyed and undone. Not a single atom of matter will survive. The only things that will survive that shaking are the human souls, whose bodies will be resurrected.

If it can't live in the New Jerusalem, it's temporal and it won't survive the shaking. As the last verse of this chapter says, our God is a consuming fire.

It's worth asking at this point, are you building your life around what cannot be shaken, or on what can? If your life is about those things that will end up burnt in the great judgement or in the recreation of the universe, then you are truly that man building his house upon the sand.

Since, he says, we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, in other words that inheritance of the New Jerusalem, since our destiny is things ultimate and things permanent, here is the opposite response to rejecting Him who speaks.

He says, "Let us have grace" Four times in the NT, this means "be grateful" and two times it means "receive grace". Those are so related, they are really one. Receive the Gospel, accept the offered grace of God in Jesus, and then gratefully respond. Since you are offered Mount Zion, the permanent place, the place of welcome, don't reject it, don't refuse it, but take it with both hands, and let gratitude fill your soul to be delivered from Sinai or from the gloom of Gehenna that Sinai warned you about.

If we have this grateful grace, or this gracious gratitude, it will enable something. What will it enable?
by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

We can serve God acceptably. This is a special word for serve. It is the word for spiritual service of worship. It is to present your Temple worship, to serve God sacrificially. Notice something very important here. It is possible to worship Him acceptably, which implies it is possible to worship Him unacceptably.

What does acceptable worship look like? According to this verse, it is worship in reverence and godly fear. Reverence, which not only means deep, even trembling respect, it also means modesty. When you dress modestly you do not try to draw attention to your body or hint at sexual availability. You show respect for your neighbour, for the occasion and for the Temple of the Holy Spirit, which is not meant to have tacky neon lights on it making it look like a cheap motel. Reverence is this modest and respectful and sober attitude when coming before the King, not being casual, or flippant, or flamboyant. When we worship we don't worship in loud, casual, sensual, or immodest ways.

The second term here is godly fear. It means awe, and carries the idea of caution, carefulness, great awareness. We have a sense of dread at the power of Him with whom we have to do.

And yet we approach. This is what Mount Zion does. This is the what the new covenant does. It does not do away with the holiness and judgement of Sinai. But it now answers it with the person and work of God the Son. And now in the fullness of time we have perfect judgement and perfect mercy. We have infinite greatness, and infinite goodness. We have the holiness and forgiveness, perfection and penalty meeting at the Cross. When you have both greatness and goodness held in tension, the result is grateful reverence and awe. When Sinai melts into Zion, you have glad, grateful reverent awe.

The two impulses of idolatry are to either make God great without being good or good without being great. One ditch makes God great without good: too far away, too transcendent, too unapproachable. Then we get to either avoid Him, or put all kinds of little mediators and sub-gods in between Him and us.

The other impulse is to make God good without being great: too near, too immanent, too approachable. Then we get to tame Him, control Him, domesticate Him, pal around with Him. We can put Him in a pocket for when we need Him, and shelve Him when we don't. He gives us all the warm feelings and none of the fearful ones; it's all safety and no danger. But neither of those come from truly knowing the new covenant.

When you truly have grace, you remember that the One who saves us will one day shake all of creation, and only if we are hidden in Him will we be safe. That should fill us with dread. But the fact that He has died to rescue us, laying down Himself to pay our penalty, that should fill us with relief and joy. And you should never stop feeling both: greatness and goodness, holiness and happiness, glory and grace, justice and mercy.

Psalm 2:11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. (Ps. 2:11)