

## The Fear and Joy of God's Presence

Hebrews 12:18-24

*A number of years ago I had the opportunity to speak to a co-worker about the LORD.*

I don't remember how the conversation came up, but somehow when we were sitting in the work van either in traffic or on a break we started talking about religion.

I remember it being a very respectful and thoughtful conversation which I appreciated very much.

I don't remember everything we talked about, but something he said stood out to me and has stuck with me over the years.

We were talking about what happens when you die.

His answer was, nothing. You just die and that's it. Human beings are nothing more than a handful of elements assembled by random chance without any ultimate meaning at all.

My answer was (and still is) that we are made by the God of the Bible, we are accountable to Him, and will one day stand before Him for judgement as so we need a Saviour whose name is Jesus.

*After some back and forth with neither of us being convinced by the other I decided to ask him a question.*

I ask him, "What if you're wrong and you end up standing before God?"

Very quickly he responded, "I'll just go up to God and we'll have a chat and work it all out."

I wasn't quite sure if he was serious or trying to poke fun at the idea of being accountable to God, either way the response comes as a result of what I believe is an all too common perspective in the world.

I believe many people in our time from all walks of life, people who claim no religion, people who see themselves as spiritual, and even people who attend church can live with this mindset.

For some it is a pattern of thinking that is deliberately embraced and for others it is more subconscious but it is equally destructive to the soul.

It is a pattern of thinking that makes much of ourselves and little or nothing of God.

*Just think of how much self-talk is present in the church and amongst Christians today.*

You are smart, you are strong, you are beautiful, you are, you are, you are...

Just think of how little attention is given to guarding against idolatry in the church and amongst Christians.

Eastern religious language and beliefs have woven their way into the fabric of our culture and many church goers think nothing of absorbing that into their lives.

Listen, if you are in an exercise group, an online support network, a counselling service, or anything like that you need to be asking “what is the philosophy behind the things that I am participating in?”

What is the religion behind these things?

We cannot participate in idolatry and think that God will be o.k. with it.

We cannot ascribe things to God that are untrue, call it Christianity and think God is good with it.

People do that because they have big view of themselves and a small view of God.

[What we desperately need as believers is to have a big view of God and a small view of ourselves. That is what we find throughout the Bible including here in **Hebrews 12:18-24**. We are given picture of the tangible presence of God. We know from the Scriptures that God is present everywhere. That is what we call the omnipresence of God. He is not, however, present everywhere in the same way. He does on occasion make His presence visible in creation. He appears in a way that people can see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and feel to the core of their being. Our text this morning speaks of two situations where God is tangibly present and in these situations we see both the fear and the joy of God’s presence. The first situation of God’s presence is a fearful picture and it teaches us that...]

**Point #1 – God’s tangible presence is unbearable for imperfect people.**

When God Almighty puts His glory on visible display before human beings unworthy to stand before Him the only possible response is to want to flee in fear.

Here in verses 18-21, we are taken back to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai.

The intention here is clearly to compare the hope of the Christian to the experience of the people of Israel. That is made clear in the first few words of verse 18, it says, “You have **not** come...”

In other words knowing Jesus as your saviour is going to make your experience different, but here is what the experience is like before the coming of Christ.

First, we are told what the people see in **verse 18**.

Immediately, the thing that stands out in this experience is that it is not an experience of faith.

Hebrews 11 teaches us that faith is knowing the reality of the unseen.

There is nothing unseen about this.

This is Almighty God descending upon a real physical mountain and setting it on fire with the display of His glory.

It says here that the mountain is one of ‘darkness, gloom, and storm.’

Exodus twenty describes the mountain as being enveloped in “smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire.”

The picture that comes to my mind is that of an erupting volcano. Have you ever seen a picture of the smoke that comes from a volcano? It is thick and dark and ominous.

If that is all there was we might just chalk it up to some kind of natural phenomenon like a thunderstorm or a volcanic eruption.

But there is more, there is also what the people hear in this experience of God. (**Verse 19a**).

In Exodus, it describes thunder, lightning, and the trumpet blast. They did not mistake the sound of thunder for the sound of a trumpet it is a distinct sound.

Nor is it a couple of people up on the mountain sounding a trumpet, the mountain is on fire there are no people there.

*Still there is more (Verse 19b).*

They hear the voice of God. What is heard is the Ten Commandments and after they hear them they beg, it says, “that no further word be spoken to them.”

This is not the voice of a gentle old grandpa in the sky who makes people feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

This is the voice of the infinite almighty God whose word is so powerful, that by it all things have been made.

**Verses 20-21** put an exclamation point on the unbearable nature of this encounter with God.

While it was possible to touch the mountain in a tangible sense, if anyone or even an animal did, it would cost them their life because the Holiness of God had enveloped the mountain.

Even Moses, it says, trembles with fear.

*Why? Well, it is interesting that the quote from Moses comes from Deuteronomy 9:19 where he is recounting going up the mountain after the people had sinned by worshipping the golden calf.*

You see everything about this display of the presence of God communicates that people have been separated from God and because of that separation His tangible presence is unbearable for people because they do not measure up to His glorious perfection.

[It is sort of like what happens to a parked car in the summer time. I’m sure most of you have had the experience of getting into a car that has been parked in the sun of a thirty plus degree day with the windows rolled up. It is incredible how hot it can get in a car like that. Now, when you get in what do you do? You put the windows down and/or you put the air conditioning on. Why? Because if you get in a shut the door it’s unbearable. That doesn’t make the Sun bad, that is simply the nature of the Sun.]

The tangible presence of God is like that, only to a much higher degree, for the imperfect person.

The LORD is not being mean because His presence is unbearable, He is simply being Who He is in all His greatness.

For this reason, it is utter foolishness to make much of ourselves and little of God.

The magnitude of Who God is can never be diminished.

There is no taking the LORD aside for a chat when you stand before Him.

All the mocking a making light of His judgement will give way to sheer terror at the foot of His throne.

[If Mount Sinai were the only place to go, then we would surely be left without hope. God's presence to us would remain unbearable and our only expectation would be fear and trembling. To be sure when we have a big view of God we will know what it is to fear Him, but there is another Mountain in this text that we are told about. Christians are not at Sinai we have arrived at another place according to **verse 22**. This second mountain has another lesson for us. Now that we know that *God's tangible presence is unbearable for imperfect people*, we are ready to see that...]

**Point #2 – People made perfect by faith enjoy God's tangible presence forever.**

The only way to have a deep and joyful hope concerning coming into the visible and overwhelming majesty of the LORD is to be made right with God by God.

Having told us where the believer has NOT come, it says this in **verse 22a**.

I would have expected it to say "you will come", but instead it says "you have come". How does that make sense? It is clearly talking about heaven here and we are clearly not there yet.

That brothers and sisters is speaking to the certainty of God's promises to His people.

The reality of what is written here is so certain, he can write about it as though it has already happened.

More than that the certainty of this is for us to enjoy and delight in now while we are waiting to be a part of the fullness of the reality described here.

We have come to the 'heavenly Jerusalem the city of the living God.'

Simply put, we belong to the place where God's presence is visibly seen and experienced to the highest degree in all creation.

That's where we belong. Where the moral rule of God is perfectly administered, perfectly obeyed, and perfectly delighted in.

This is the city of the 'living God' which is saying something more than God is simply alive.

It means the LORD cannot die. God has always been and He always will be all that He is.

Therefore, the glory of His city can never diminish.

Because that is true what we are told at the end of verse 22 makes sense. (**Verse 22b**)

Literally translated it is ten thousand angels, a number likely intended to simply convey a huge number of angels.

We know from Scripture that the appearance of one angel is an awesome sight, here there is thousands, don't miss this, in 'joyful assembly'.

A far different picture than the fire and darkness of Sinai.

The description goes on in the first part of **verse 23a**.

The word 'firstborn' here is plural so it is likely referring to believers throughout history.

If you are familiar with your Bibles and/or the ancient world than you will know that the position of 'firstborn' was particularly important when it came to inheritance rights.

In Romans 8 believers are called 'co-heirs with Christ.'

The title of 'firstborn' here likely has the same meaning.

It means as Christians we get to share in the glorious riches of Jesus' inheritance in heaven.

Those that can lay claim to this inheritance are those 'whose names are written in heaven.'

That is such a glorious reality. Our names being written in heaven mean we belong there.

It means we have been registered as citizens and that no one can erase our names, no one can remove our place in the city of the living God.

Why such a different experience of the tangible presence of God?

Because God is less fearful than at Sinai?

Not at all. If God had appeared like this at Sinai everyone would have died.

The darkness and gloom and boundaries are protecting the people.

Is it because the scene is a smaller degree of God's appearing?

No, quite the opposite. The display is far more glorious.

So what is the difference? Why is Sinai an experience of fear and

trembling and Zion an experience of joy? (**Verse 23b-24**)

*God is the judge of all people and His standard is perfection.*

That is why Sinai is so terrifying because the people feel to the core of their being their imperfection.

Notice that Mount Zion, the city of God, the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven, is also the place of the ‘spirits of righteous men made perfect.’”

God hasn’t change, He has changed His people and made them fit for His presence.

[It is sort of like exploring the ocean. Have you ever seen pictures of coral reefs and ocean creatures? They are some amazing things to see, but if you just tie a cement block to your ankle and jump in you won’t get to enjoy it, it will kill you. However, if you put on scuba gear or take a ride in a submarine then you can enjoy it.]

Don’t try and go up Mount Sinai on your own, it will be your destruction.

Instead, come to Zion to ‘Jesus the mediator of a new covenant’.

Whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God says, to Cain, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”

What is it saying? It is saying you are guilty of murder and you deserve judgement.

*Jesus too is murdered. I think it is fair to say that He is murdered by His brothers.*

There is a huge difference though. Cain caught Abel by surprise. No one caught Jesus by surprise.

Jesus laid down his life willingly so that His people might be redeemed.

The blood of Jesus is indeed a better word than the blood of Abel because through faith in the redeeming blood of Christ our imperfections are erased and we are made perfect in God’s sight and, therefore, made fit for the city of God.

*This is what many people fail to see when they read through the Bible.*

This is why some people think that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament.

They think the Old Testament portrays a God who is mean and angry while the New Testament portrays and God who is meek, mild, and permission of disobedience.

They think the Bible teaches us about two different Gods or that God has changed.

People think along those lines because they have a big view of themselves and a small view of God.

God has not changed brothers and sisters.

You either come to Mount Sinai or you come to Mount Zion, but God is the same at both mountains.

Mount Sinai has only trembling and fear waiting because there people stand alone before a Holy God.

Mount Zion has complete joy and satisfaction because there God's people have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

*What mountain will you choose today?*

Either way each and every one of us will meet the living God someday.

When that day comes will it be one of fear and trembling as your eternal destruction comes upon you, or will it be joy and eternal satisfaction because you have trusted in the perfect blood and our risen Saviour Jesus Christ?

Oh how I pray you would have such a small view of yourself and such a big view of God that you would come to Mount Zion and choose the joy of God's presence forever.