

August 9, 2020

Speaker: Eric Naus **Series:** Better Together, Reflections on the Nature of the Church

Sermon Title & Passage: "Heaven on Earth" – Hebrews 12:18-24

Background: The book of Hebrews was very likely written to Jewish Christians living in Rome in the mid 60's AD, at a time when persecution under Nero was ramping up. These believers were discouraged; they were scared; and they were tempted to abandon Christ and go back to Judaism proper where they might be shielded from further suffering. The author of Hebrews (who remains anonymous to us) warns them not to turn back. Only Christ is the all-sufficient savior who can make us right with God! And in our passage, he reminds them of the fact that when Christians come together for worship, we join the worship of heaven.

Take a moment to read Hebrews 12:18-24 together, and then work through the following questions.

1. In verse 23 of this passage, the author uses a word translated "assembly" by the ESV, which we normally translate "church." The passage contrasts two assemblies at two mountains: the assembly of Israel before Mt. Sinai (see vv. 18-21 and Exodus 19-20 for more background) and the assembly of the church in heaven and earth which comes to Mt. Zion. Take some time to compare and contrast these two assemblies. How are they different? What has changed, allowing us to draw near to God in ways impossible for Israel of old?
2. In vs. 22, the author of Hebrews encourages the Roman Christians that when they worship as the church, they come to heavenly "Mt. Zion," to "the city of the living God," and to "heavenly Jerusalem." What do we learn about heaven when we understand it as God's city? In what ways should our earthly worship as Christians reflect the community of this heavenly city?
3. In verses 22 and 23, the author tells us that as Christians coming to God in worship, we come together with "innumerable angels in festal gathering," and we come to "the assembly (church) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." Heavenly worship involves countless angels in joyful celebration, as well as the souls of all the people of God (the firstborn by connection with Christ, the ultimate firstborn) whose names are enrolled in heaven. Does it encourage you to know that when we come to God in worship, we are always joining the heavenly worship of saints and angels? How would the tone of our worship change if we were able to keep this heavenly church in mind when we gather?
4. In verses 23-24, the author gives several other descriptions of this heavenly assembly to which Christians come in their worship. We come to "God, the judge of all," and so, we are reminded of the reverence we own him. We come to "the spirits of the righteous made perfect," which means that we join believers who have died and been made glorious with Christ. We come to "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant," which means that our approach to God is only possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ for us on the cross, where he established a New Covenant for the forgiveness of our sins. And we have come "to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" which means that in contrast with Abel's blood which cried out for justice when he was murdered by Cain (see Gen. 4:10), Jesus' blood cries out for forgiveness for all those who have been sprinkled by him through faith. Of these

various descriptions of heavenly worship, which one especially strikes you and why? How should these heavenly ideas of reverence, hope, assurance, and forgiveness affect the tone of our worship here on earth?

5. One main point that we might draw from this passage is that, in our worship, every local church should reflect the heavenly worship going on all the time around Christ. In other words, every local church should look like heaven on earth. Do you agree? Why do we so often fall short of this ideal, and how can we grow in our worship as a church so that our tone better matches the worship of heaven?