

INTRODUCTION (PRAY)

Well, this morning we're continuing our series of studies in **Hebrews**, and in so doing we'll be reading from **Hebrews chapter 12 and verses 18-29. Hebrews 12**, and we'll begin reading in **verse 18**. Let us now hear God's Word. **(PRAY)**

THE BRIDGE

Well, a couple of years ago Neechia and I had the opportunity to travel to Ireland and the city of Dublin. And in getting ready for this trip, one of the things I did was I purchased a small travel guide that contained a map of the city as well as pictures and descriptions of the main sites of Dublin, sites such as...

- Trinity College and its historical library
- The Grand Canal and its many bridges
- Grafton Street and Temple Bar
- Saint Stephen's Cathedral (and of course)
- The Guinness Storehouse and Brewery, for you can't visit Ireland without enjoying a glass of Guinness.

And I can say to you that while we were in Dublin I was thankful for that little travel guide. For it made that magnificent city a little easier to manage and to find our way around, enabling us to spend more time on the sites and less time worrying about getting lost or wondering what to do next.

Now I mention this because in this passage, the writer, or as we've noted, the preacher of **Hebrews** gives us a travel guide, and it's a travel guide to God's own city, the city that he refers to in **verse 22** as...**the Heavenly Jerusalem**. And as you may recall, we were introduced to this city back in **chapter 11** when we're told that...**Abraham was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God**. In other words, when Abraham departed from his own country, he set out not looking for another city of man, a city that's subject to decay and death. For every city of man is subject to corruption. Every city of man is passing away, for we're passing away. And therefore, God didn't promise Abraham and all of his people a transient city. No, he's promised us a city that will last. And now, here in these verses we're actually shown and given a travel guide to this eternal and incorruptible city that's been *designed* and *founded* and *built* by God himself. For this is the city that...**God has prepared for his people**. And it's to this city, says the preacher, that...**we, that is the followers of Jesus, have come**. For we aren't visitors to this city. No, we're now citizens of this city. We've come to it even as we wait upon it, as we wait for its full realization in the future. For God's city is the Christian's city.

And here the preacher shows us the sites of this city. He enables us to hear the sounds of this city. And he does so to encourage us. For as we've seen in our studies, **Hebrews** was written to a people who'd suffered much. They'd suffered hardship and loss in the corruptible city of man, so much so, that they were now tempted to leave the Christian faith. They were tempted to go back, thinking that if they abandoned Jesus then they'd once again find a sense of stability and security in society, in the city of man. But, warns the preacher, to leave Jesus is to leave the only thing, the only One who is truly stable and secure. For only in Jesus do we find an incorruptible city and an unshakable Kingdom. And how we need to hear this today. For in the midst of all we're going through...isolation and cancellations, disruption, disease and death, in the midst of all this, we're being reminded that everything in this world is transient and temporary. It's fading and fleeting. And that's why we're not to put our ultimate hope and trust in this world, in the city of man. For we've been given something better.

For we've been given Jesus who is better, better than anything and everything else in this world, and in having Jesus we've come and one day we'll enter in fully to God's incorruptible city that alone will make all things right and new and beautiful.

A CONTRST BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAINS (vv. 18-24)

And to help us grasp the marvels of God's city, the preacher, as he's done throughout this sermon that is **Hebrews**, sets up a contrast, and it's...**A Contrast Between Two Mountains**. The mountain of Sinai and the mountain of Zion.

Now you may recall that in the Old Testament, Mount Sinai was the place God promised to bring his people after he delivered them from the slavery in Egypt. And indeed he did this, and in bringing them to Mount Sinai, he manifested himself to his people. And at the same time, he entered into covenant with them and gave his law to them, his law of love...to love their God and to love their neighbor. On Mount Sinai God showed up, and in showing up, he showed himself to his people, and in being confronted by God, the preacher tells us (echoing what we read in **Exodus**) that the people, including Moses, were terrified. They couldn't bear the sights and sounds of God. And who could blame them. For in coming to Mount Sinai they were confronted with three natural disasters all at once...a volcano, a hurricane and an earthquake, each of these physical manifestations declaring the glory and greatness of God himself. And in the face of these things the people rightly cowered, for this was terrifying sight. But notice, the terrifying sight wasn't as terrifying as the voice, that is, God's own voice speaking to his people from the mountain. For in speaking to them, he warned them not to come near the mountain. For if they or even an animal touched the mountain, death was to immediately follow. Why? Well, because Mount Sinai represented God's infinite holiness, a holiness humanity cannot approach without being utterly consumed. For God in his holiness is a consuming fire of all that's unholy. And that's what God was showing his people on Mount Sinai, that he alone is holy and humanity left to themselves are not. And as we're told in **verse 20...the people couldn't endure this**. They couldn't endure God's holy character. They couldn't endure God's holy Word because they themselves were unclean and therefore unfit to come to God, which is really was that main message of the Old Mosaic Covenant.

But here's the thing, that was actually the grace of the Old Covenant that was instituted at Sinai, the very covenant that continued to shape Israel's approach to God for the remainder of the Old Testament. For the Old Covenant was given to show Israel three things. **1)** To show them that God is exceedingly and unapproachably holy. **2)** To show them that they themselves were exceedingly sinful and therefore unholy, and **3)** To show them that because God is holy and they were not, what they needed most was a Saving Substitute who could actually make them thoroughly clean and holy, and therefore fit to come fully into God's holy presence.

And that was the whole point of the sacrificial system...to show Israel that a sacrifice needed to be made if they were to be cleansed and made holy. And yet, as we've seen through our studies of **Hebrews**, all those animal sacrifices couldn't get the job done. For they were never meant to get the job done. Rather, their purpose was to point beyond themselves to the day when God would provide the better and final sacrifice that alone can cleanse all of our sins, that alone can make us holy so that we might come to God boldly and unashamed. There was terror under the Old Mosaic Covenant because the people couldn't draw near fully. For the Mosaic Covenant, although it could speak of the need for holiness could never itself give holiness. And seen in this way, God never intended the Old Covenant to be permanent. Rather, it was like scaffolding that was needed for a time, but once the house was built, the scaffolding's no longer needed.

And that's the point here, that the house, or better the city that God always intended to build, has now been constructed, and it has been through Jesus...through his faithful life, through his sacrificial death, through his triumphant resurrection that's led to his glorious reign at God's right hand. That's why again and again the preacher of **Hebrews** declares...Jesus is better. He's the better than angels. He's better than Moses. He's better than Joshua. He's better than Old Covenant high priest, for he's the true high priest who's offered the better sacrifice that instituted the better covenant that alone contains the better promise that God will remember our sins no more.

For in Jesus all our sins have been forgiven, and because they have we can now come not to Mount Sinai, but...**to Mount Zion, which is the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem.** We've come to this city. We're citizens of this city, and yes we haven't yet entered into it fully, but by the Spirit we have come to it. And every Lord's Day as we worship together we enter into it more fully. And that should be an encouragement to us, especially as find ourselves separated and scattered this morning. For even though we're worshipping virtually, we're still worshipping Spiritually, in that by Spirit we're entering more deeply and truly into the city of God, into the worship of the city of God as we worship together. And that's why corporate worship is so central. For when we worship together, we're, in a sense, gathering at the foothills of Mount Zion in order to taste of its Heavenly sights and sounds, to taste and be shaped by its worship. And in coming to Mount Zion the preacher's given us a travel guide to know who and what is there. And who and what is there?

Well, **innumerable angels** are there, and in being there, they're not gloomy or stern. No, they're celebrating. For they're in...**festal gathering**, which means they're doing festal things, such as singing and laughing, dancing and shouting. They're rejoicing, and they are because they're in the presence of their King, for Jesus is the King of angels as well as the king of men and women. And because they're there with Jesus they're having a party to honor Jesus. And in doing so, they're beckoning us to join them in the celebration of Jesus. For unlike the angels we know personally what he's done. For Jesus didn't die for angels. No, he died for us, and therefore if the angels celebrate Jesus shouldn't we who've been saved by Jesus celebrate him all the more as we gather in the festal attire of his love and life and forgiveness.

But along with the angels, there's also **the Book**, that is the Book of life. And in that Book is the name of all who believe in and belong to Jesus. For we belong...**to the assembly of the Firstborn**, for Jesus is the Firstborn in that he's the true Son of God who was willingly slaughtered on the cross that our names might be written in God's Book of Life. And because our names are written in that Book we needn't fear. For nothing can erase our names from that Book. For our names are written in that Book with the sure and saving blood of Jesus, and because your name is in that Book, your life is secure. So angels are there. The Book is there...

And certainly **God himself** is there, and he's there as...**the Judge of all**. Not that may sound scary, but it shouldn't sound scary to the Christian. No, it should be something we celebrate, for it's a promise that our God will right all the wrongs in his world. God as Judge means that disease and death, sin and evil will not and cannot have the final word. For God has and will judge all that's wrong, so as to make us and his world fully alive and beautiful once again. This will happen. And yes, we don't see now fully, but we can see it in faith, and one day we'll experience it in way we scarcely imagine. For God as Judge means God being for us.

But look who else in this city, for in this city are **those who've died in the Lord**. For we're told at the end of **verse 23** that on Mount Zion are...**the spirits of the righteous made perfect**. Our loved ones who've died in the Lord are there, which means we haven't really lost them. For Jesus never loses in death those who belong to him. No, they're safe, and even now they're alive in his presence to sin no more. And yes, we still grieve their passing, but knowing they're with Jesus is a great comfort. And added to this comfort is the reality that when we worship here on earth we're actually joining them in the worship of Heaven. That's why we say around the Lord's Table...**Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven, we parries and magnify God's holy name**. In worship we're with them. For in worship we come realize that the veil that separates Heaven and earth isn't thick. No, it's actually quite thin.

And then notice, as a sort of climax, we're told in this Mount Zion travel guide that in coming to Zion we come most of all to **Jesus...the mediator of the New Covenant**. And at the heart of the New Covenant is Jesus' sacrificial blood, his blood...**that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**. Now what's the author saying? Well, what did the shed blood of Abel cry out for? It cried out for judgement against brother Cain who murdered him. But Jesus' blood doesn't cry out for judgement. No, it cries out for mercy and forgiveness to be shown us who put Jesus on the cross because of our sins. And it's his sacrificial and saving blood that's been sprinkled on all who trust in Jesus. And because his forgiving blood has been sprinkled on us that we're now able to now come to Mount Zion. For only through the death of Jesus have we been made clean and holy to come, to actually ascend into the city of the holy God, and do so not in terror, but in great joy. For we're invited and welcomed into this city. We have a right to be here not because of what we've done, but because of what Jesus has done for us. And you see, when the reality that God's city is now our city actually grips our hearts it enables us to endure, to keep going in our trust of Jesus even as the city of man is shaken. For our hope isn't in the city of man, but in the city of God...the city filled with his life and love, his city that will never fade nor fail.

Do you believe that? Do you rejoice in it? Does it give you confidence to know that in scary and shaky times, that this city is yours? Which means, no matter what befalls you, you're ultimately safe and secure because you're a citizen of Mount Zion. And in order to be deepened in the reality of your citizenship, what are to you to do? Well, you're to look to Jesus and keep looking to Jesus.

A CONTRAST BETWEEN TWO RESPONSES (vv. 25-29)

And that brings to **the second** contrast the preacher sets up in this passage, and it's...**A Contrast between Two Responses**.

For at Mount Sinai, and really throughout the history of Israel, God's people refused to listen to him. He spoke to them. He warned them about life and death, how life is found only in trusting in him and his Word, but they didn't listen to his good and powerful Word, his Word that literally shook the earth. And in not listening to him, they didn't escape his judgment. And now says, the preacher, if they were judged for not listening, do we think we'll escape God's judgment if we refuse to listen? For if we who've been given greater privileges in Jesus have also been given the greater responsibility of listening to God's Word, his Word that calls us to look to and trust always in Jesus.

For one Day, on the great Day of Jesus' return, the same God who shook the earth at Sinai will shake not only the earth, but heaven as well. He'll shake all things, so that everything that's transient and temporary may fall away, so that all that will remain will be his city and his kingdom and all who belong to his city and kingdom. That is, all who've listened to his voice, to his Word that calls us to give ourselves, to give the whole of ourselves to Jesus. For our God is holy consuming fire of sin and evil.

And none can survive that fire unless they belong to Jesus, who himself went through the consuming fire of God's judgement on the cross. For on the cross, Jesus was consumed for sin, so that all who belong to Jesus, who listen to Jesus, may come through the fire of God's judgment unshaken and untouched.

For in belonging to Jesus we've received...**a kingdom that can't be shaken.** We've received it now and one day we'll receive it in full, and that's why in the now time we're, according to **verse 28**, to cultivate a life...**of grateful and reverent worship**, of worshipping and depending on Jesus at all times and in places. For one Day the great shaking of God's judgement will come, and all that isn't rooted in Jesus will be shaken. But here's the thing...Even now our God shakes things up, and in so doing he makes clear in the present that this world on its own isn't stable and secure, that this world is easily disrupted. We're experiencing that now in the face of this scary virus. And it's hard to face, but there's actually good in it. In what way?

Well, in the way that when things are shaken up, it drives us to cast ourselves on Jesus, so that we're able to say with our eyes squarely on Jesus...**Whom have I in heaven but you? And there's nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God, the God who's spoken and shown himself in Jesus, is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**

Are you able to say that this morning? It's not an easy confession, but it is true confession, a confession we're able to proclaim as we take up the travel guide of God's Word that points us to Jesus, that tells us of God's everlasting and incorruptible city, and that calls us to seek first his unshakable kingdom that is ours in Christ.

What a city! What a kingdom! What a Savior! Look to him. Listen to him. Love him who first loved you all the death and beyond, and who now holds and keeps you in this shaky and unstable world that will one day give fully way to God's eternal city and unshakable kingdom. In Jesus you come, and in Jesus you've been given everything you truly need. Therefore let us be grateful and let us offer to God our whole ourselves in worship.