

Hebrews 12:18-24  
A tale of two mountains!

**Introduction:**

It is that time of the year when people go snow skiing...

In north Spokane there are two good options...

You can go to Mt. Spokane (elevation of 5883 feet and 6 chair lifts) or you can go to 49 Degrees North, located on Chewelah Mountain (elevation of 5774 feet and 6 chair lifts).

Which mountain is better? That depends on who you ask. The Chewelah faithful think 49 Degrees North is the superior mountain. On the other hand, many of the residents in North Spokane think that Mt. Spokane is the superior mountain. I have skied both...

Some of you will say to me afterwards, "Dave, 49 Degrees North is so much better, why would you ever go back to Mt. Spokane?" Others will say to me, "Dave, Mt. Spokane is so much better, why would you ever go back to 49 Degrees North?"

We could spend all day comparing and contrasting these two mountains.

This brings us to Hebrews 12:18-24. The author of Hebrews devotes these verses to comparing and contrasting two mountains. But these two mountains are far, far, far more important than Mt. Spokane and 49 Degrees North. Why? The two mountains in Hebrews 12 represent eternal realities. Why does he compare and contrast these two mountains?

He is writing to a group of Jewish converts to Christianity. They have been running the Christian race for a while. Some want to quit and go back to Judaism (back to Mt. Sinai), where life seems so much easier. Following Jesus is just too hard, I get it. But the author of Hebrews tells them that if they stop following Jesus and head back to Judaism, they are heading back to Mt. Sinai. On the other hand, if they continue following Jesus they are heading towards Mt. Zion, a far superior mountain.

These two mountains represent two ways of live, two covenants, two religious' systems, and two eternal destinies. Which mountain are you associated with this morning? Mt. Sinai or Mt. Zion.

Let's look at these two mountains in detail.

**First, Mount Sinai**

**What does Mt. Sinai represent? Mt. Sinai represents the Old Covenant!**

**Hebrews 12:18–21 (ESV) — 18** For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest **19** and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. **20** For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." **21** Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

Every Jewish reader of the epistle to the Hebrews would have known that Heb. 12:18-19 was a description of Mt. Sinai from Exodus 19, which is found in the OT, the first half of the Bible.

Let me provide some historical background to Exodus chapter 19 and Mt. Sinai.

It is roughly 1450 BC. God just delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery after 400 years of bondage. They are a mighty throng, probably 2-3 million people.

After delivering them from Egypt, God led them into the desert to establish a covenant with them. We call it the Mosaic Covenant or the Old Covenant. They ended up at the foot of Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai was the place where God chose to reveal his covenant stipulations to Israel. But he wanted to do it in person (so to speak).

A covenant is a formal relationship with stipulations. Here is how the Mosaic Covenant worked. God said to Israel, "I have redeemed you, you are mine, now I want you to obey my commands." If you don't, there will be serious consequences.

What specifically were they supposed to obey? God was about to descend from Mt. Sinai and tell them. But before they could receive God's commands, they had to prepare themselves for three days to be in God's holy presence.

They had to wash their clothes (Ex. 19:11-14)

They had to abstain for sexual relations (Ex. 19:15)

They had to keep every man and beast off the mountain. (Ex. 19:12-13) Any man or beast that touched the mountain would die.

After three days of preparation we read what happened next...

**Exodus 19:16–20 (ESV) — 16** On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. **17** Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. **18** Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. **19** And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. **20** The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

The blazing fire, darkness, gloom and tempest were designed to keep people off the mountain. Why? Because God's holy presence was on the mountain, and it would have killed them.

The voice of God was so holy that the people begged to not hear it. They thought that God's voice, yes, simply his voice, would kill them. It was simply too intense. (Ex. 19:16-19, 20:18-19, Duet, 5:24-27)

Everyone was traumatized by the holiness of God.

Even Moses, the righteous man of God, was terrified (12:21) This was the man who spoke with God face to face (Ex. 33:11). Even *his* unrighteous deeds were exposed in the presence of God's holiness and he was terrified.

**Illustration:** Have you ever been really afraid? Describe St. Louis apartment rabbit in basement story. Or Andrew getting stung by a bee in the tree above the tennis courts.

The people of God were really afraid of God. Why? Because they came in contact with God's holiness.

God's holiness is like the sun. The sun is beautiful. It is vital for our lives on planet earth. It provides us with light, heat, and so many other essential benefits. At the same time if you look directly at the sun you will

go blind. Furthermore, if you get too close to the sun you will burst into flames. The Sun is very good, it is essential, but it also very dangerous.

God's holiness is very good, but it is also very dangerous. This is why the people of God were terrified.

### **Application:**

Why does the author of Hebrews recount this scene from Mt. Sinai?

He wants to make a simple point. Under the Old Covenant, it was very difficult and dangerous to approach God.

Was God really that unapproachable under the Old Covenant? Yes, this is exactly what the fire, smoke and lightning symbolized on Mt. Sinai.

If we approach God on our own, it is like trying to walk up mount Sinai. God's holiness will crush us. It burns hot like lightning. It is like getting to close the sun.

Yet, this is what the Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> century tried to do. They wanted to go back to a system, the Mosaic Covenant, where they approached God through their good deeds. This never worked.

We do the same thing, don't we? We may not think that we are going back to Sinai, or Judaism, but every time we think we can approach God because we think we are good, is like trying to walk up Mt. Sinai in our own goodness. God will strike us down.

Some People think they can approach God because they have gone to church, read their Bible, served, given away their money, and told their friends about Jesus.

Others think they can approach God because they have been tolerant of others, recycled, purchased an electric car, engaged in humanitarian work, and cleaned up trash on earth day.

If we think we can approach God because we are good, we are in deep trouble. We will not get very far up Mount Sinai. God will strike us down... HE IS HOLY!!!

But Dave, that was the God of the OT. My Jesus is meek and mild, tolerant and accepting. He accepts everyone, regardless. Does He???

God has not changed. God, the triune God, the God of the Bible, is still very holy.

**Hebrews 12:29 (ESV) — 29 for our God is a consuming fire.**

See also Rev. 19:11-16

God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and he God of the New Testament is a consuming fire. In other words, His holiness consumes everything unholy in his path. This means that He must not be approached casually. Is there any hope for us? Yes, Mt. Sinai is not the only mountain. This brings us to the second mountain.

*First, Mount Sinai.*

**Second, Mount Zion**

*Mount Zion represents the New covenant. How is Mount Zion better than Mt. Sinai? Mt. Zion is better in at least four ways...*

### **Mount Zion is inhabited by heaven!**

**Hebrews 12:22 (ESV) — 22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

“But you...” Who? All those living under the New Covenant. “You,” have come to Mount Zion, the location of the heavenly Jerusalem.

In the OT, the city of Jerusalem was located on Mt. Zion, a real mountain. Around 1000 BC, King David made Jerusalem his capital city. From this point on the city of Jerusalem was identified with Mt. Zion.

The author of Hebrews identifies Mt. Zion not only with Jerusalem, but with the New Jerusalem that is the heavenly city. In other words, he identifies Mt. Zion with Heaven. In this heavenly city thousands and thousands of angels enthusiastically and joyfully sing the praises of the triune God, right now!

### **Application:**

We learned in Hebrews 11 that the OT saints longed for this heavenly city (Heb. 11:10,16)

This city is described in more detail in the last book of the Bible...

**Revelation 21:2–4 (ESV) — 2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

According to the apostle Paul, every Christian is already a citizen of this city...

**Philippians 3:20 (ESV) — 20** But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

But, we will not enter this city until we die or Christ returns. In the meantime, we eagerly wait.

Life is hard... someday all of our problems will be over. No more influenza b, no more snowstorms, no more cars stuck in snow, no more fighting against sin, no more fighting with spouses, siblings, and parents, no more pride, anger, hunger, and violence. No more sadness and sorrow. No more death and dying.

How is Mt. Zion better?

*Mount Zion is inhabited by heaven! In addition...*

### **Mount Zion is inhabited by firstborns!**

**Hebrews 12:22–23 (ESV) — 22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,

According to verse 23a, the heavenly city on Mt. Zion is inhabited by the assembly of the firstborn...

In the ANE the firstborn son was cherished and privileged above all the other children, which often caused problems. If you don't believe me, read the book of Genesis. The first-born son received at least a double portion of the inheritance from his father. This meant that if you were the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> born son, or a daughter, you got the leftovers, if you were lucky.

Heb. 12:23 says that heaven will be inhabited by the assembly of the firstborn. The word firstborn is a plural noun in the Greek. This means that there are many firstborns. How is this possible?

Here is how? Christ was the first-born son of the father.

**Romans 8:29 (ESV) — 29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (See also Col. 1:18)

Jesus Christ was the first-born son of God the Father. Since every Christian is united to Christ, every Christian shares in Christ's first-born status. This means that every Christian is a firstborn son. This means that every Christian will receive all the rights and privileges of God's firstborn son, Jesus Christ.

**Romans 8:17 (ESV) — 17** and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

### **Application:**

I will not ask for a show of hands, but how many of you doubted God's love this week?

This text reminds us that God loves us as much as he loves his first-born son.

God will lavish on you all the rights and privileges that Jesus earned!!! Wow!!!

How is Mt. Zion better?

*Mount Zion is inhabited by heaven!*

*Mount Zion is inhabited by firstborns!*

**Mount Zion is inhabited by saints!**

**Hebrews 12:22–23 (ESV) — 22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

Who or what are the spirits of the righteous made perfect?

These are the saints who have died and are currently in heaven basking in God's presence. When we die our body goes into the ground and our spirit goes to be with Christ in the temporary heaven. When Christ returns, he will reunite our bodies with our spirits. Until then the departed saints are with God in a spiritual state, that is a non-physical state.

But hopefully you also noticed that these spirits are described as the righteous made perfect. The saints have been made perfect by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This means there will be no sin in heaven...

Can you imagine what this will be like?

Can you imagine never ever being anxious again?

Can you imagine never ever coveting someone else's stuff?

Can you imagine being perfectly content all the time?  
Can you imagine always acting perfectly in your neighbors' best interest?  
Can you imagine listening to someone perfectly?  
Can you imagine never overeating?

When you die, all sin will be in your past.

**Illustration:** Dave Thommen (died of a heart attack on Tuesday night). Dave, is one of the righteous spirits that has been made perfect.

How is Mt. Zion better?

*Mount Zion is inhabited by heaven!*  
*Mount Zion is inhabited by firstborns!*  
*Mount Zion is inhabited by saints!*

**Mount Zion is accessible through the mediator!**

**Hebrews 12:22–24 (ESV)** — **22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, **24** and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

When the people stood at the base of Mt. Sinai, they desperately needed a mediator. They could not approach God because God is holy, and they were not. They needed someone to be their mediator.

Jesus Christ is the mediator of the new covenant; he is the mediator between God and man. He is the only one capable of fulfilling this role. Since he is the only one who is fully God and fully man. Since he is fully God he can be in God's presence. Since he is fully man he can be in our presence. He is the go between.

He makes away for us to be in God's holy presence, by shedding his blood in our place. He died instead of us, taking the penalty for our sins on his shoulders. This enables us to be forgiven of our all our sins. With our sins removed by the blood of Jesus we can be in God's presence.

Jesus makes the new covenant so much better.

The old covenant (the Sinai covenant) was not working. It was not God's fault, it was man's fault. Man could not keep the covenant stipulations.

Jesus came and inaugurated a new covenant. He obeyed all the covenant obligations and took all the covenant curses on himself on the cross so that we could be forgiven and seen as covenant keepers.

**Illustration:** Oscar was given tickets by Bill Moose the AD of WSU athletics. Oscar did not even look at the tickets until he got to the stadium. He thought he would be up in the nosebleed sections with no shade and no padded seats. Bill Moose gave Oscar Torres access to the sky box to watch at WSU game. Jesus Christ gives us access to climb up the mountain and be in God's presence...

How is Mt. Zion better?

*Mount Zion is inhabited by heaven!*

*Mount Zion is inhabited by firstborns!*  
*Mount Zion is inhabited by saints!*  
*Mount Zion is accessible through the mediator!*

**Conclusion:**

We have looked at two mountains... Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion.

The contrast between these two mountains is utterly stunning. One represents paralyzing terror and the other represents extraordinary joy.

The author of Hebrews asks his audience this question... “why would you ever want to go back to Mt. Sinai and the conditions of the old Covenant? The New Covenant is so much better....”

Under the new covenant we have a mediator in Jesus Christ, he opens the way for us to stand on Mt. Zion, in God’s very presence, with the angels, and the saints for all eternity.

You may not be tempted to go back to Judaism, but you may be tempted to quit following Jesus. Don’t do it... but... my friends... but.... My career.... But my marriage.... But my freedom... don’t!!! He is the only way to experience the glories of Mt. Zion. He is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other way up the mountain than through Jesus Christ.

He offers free, full, and confident access up the mountain to anyone, literally anyone, who is willing to follow him in faith and repentance.

Come boldly, not in your own righteousness, but clothed in his.

He is the only one who can lead us to everlasting paradise. Let’s pray...