

September 29, 2019

PARALYZING TERROR AND GLORIOUS JOY

Hebrews 12:18-24

(26 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

“In the monastery . . . my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow grace on me. . . . For I had strayed . . . and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works.” That was Martin Luther, describing his time as a monk, prior to his realization that we are justified by faith alone. For him, this life of “good works” meant “meager meals, coarse clothing, hard work during the day, keeping vigil during the night, chastising the flesh, . . . begging, extensive fasting, and an uneventful monastic life in one place.”¹ And yet Luther knew it wasn’t enough. Even after the monastery but before his conversion, he was reported to confess sin for as long as six hours at a time, with the priest often telling him to go away. But he knew that the Scriptures bore witness of God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice. God was his righteous judge, and Luther knew himself to be a sinner. How in the world could a sinner like himself be judged as righteous before the holy God? He would go on to say, “If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.”²

Then the glorious day came. It was while studying Romans 1:16-17, in which Paul writes, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Meditating on that text, Luther suddenly realized that God credits to us, by faith, the gift of Christ’s very own righteousness. In his own words, he wrote, “At last, God being merciful, as I meditated day and night . . . I began to understand that ‘righteousness of God’ as that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith. . . . This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself.”³

Now, the second that Luther understood that by faith in Christ, God had credited him with righteousness, I don’t know if he actually stood on his head for joy. But I do know that this glorious realization that we’re declared righteous before God by faith in his crucified and risen Son led Luther to stand firm on the teaching of God’s Word, even when the emperor said that he’d decided to mobilize everything in his power against this man. And how could he not stand

¹Heiko Oberman, *Luther Man between God and the Devil*, Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 127-28.

²*Ibid.*, 315.

³Martin Luther, “Preface to the Latin Works.” In *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Vol. 54, 185.12-186.21 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1938). Quoted in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister McGrath (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 228-29.

firm when he finally came to the point of seeing that God approved of him through faith in the finished work of Christ on his behalf?

Now, could you imagine for one second Martin Luther encountering difficulty after coming to faith in Christ and saying, “This is too much. I want to go back to the life I knew in the monastery”? Of course not. Even if he felt the appeal of that for one second, you’d want to take hold of him and say, “Brother, have you forgotten what that was like? Have you forgotten that you’ve found, in Jesus, the thing you’ve longed for and never found in that life? You’ve found the very favor of God, and you’re wanting to walk away from it?” Of course he’d never go back if he remembered the aching of his soul before he came to faith in Christ and the joy of knowing God now approved of him. Yet this is the very thing that these Jewish believers were tempted to do. After encountering a season—perhaps a long one—of persecution, they were feeling the temptation to go back to the life and worship they knew before their eyes were open to the glory of Jesus Christ. They were tempted to go back to life under the old covenant. That’s why this letter was written, to encourage the readers to persevere in the faith and hold fast to Jesus Christ. It’s filled with teaching about the glory of Christ compared to those things that were just types and shadows, with warnings about the furious and merciless judgment of God that will be poured out on all who do not hold to faith in Christ, with encouragement to walk by faith even as many others have in days prior, and with exhortations to press on.

But when we come to our text today, the aim seems to be to provide a reminder. In other words, just in case they’ve forgotten about the reality before Christ compared to the reality now that they’re in Christ, he reminds them. And the hope, so it seems, is that by reminding them their eyes will be open to how foolish it would be to walk away from what they’ve found in Christ and head back toward life without him. He reminds them by providing a contrast of life under the law and life in Christ, but he uses the metaphor of two mountains to do it.

The first mountain that he uses as a metaphor for the law is Mount Sinai. And though he never mentions Mount Sinai by name, we know that’s the mountain he’s referencing because everything he describes is a picture of Exodus 19-20 as the Lord came to his people at Mount Sinai. So, he points to this mountain as a picture of reality without Christ. It is a picture of what they will have to face if they decide that they want to go back and live under the old covenant, pretending that Jesus never came. The second mountain is Mount Zion, which is pictured throughout Scripture as the dwelling place of God. Here he uses it to picture the glorious standing and situation of those who have trusted in Christ and hold fast to faith in him. It is a picture of life when one is justified and, like Luther, has found favor before God through faith in his crucified and risen Son.

But what we’re going to find as we examine these verses is that in many ways this provides a brief summary of what we’ve seen in the book of Hebrews to this point. So if you’re only with us for the first time in our study through the book of Hebrews, you’ve picked a good day to come. And if you’ve been with us for a while, this may serve to provide us with a bit of a refresher concerning things we may have forgotten. Let’s begin by looking at that picture of Mount Sinai.

A picture of Mount Sinai

I think the aim of this image in verses 18-21 will make sense if we imagine a scenario in our mind that feels preposterous. Imagine that you look across the street at your neighbor's house, and you see your neighbor, sitting in a chair in his living room, calmly reading a book, with his window raised on a nice fall afternoon. However, while this is a pleasant scene for your neighbor, what is unbeknownst to him is that the house is on fire. From your perspective, you can see the flames on the opposite end of the house from where this man is sitting rising up and consuming more and more of the house, racing toward him. Now, imagine that you're sitting on your front porch, watching all of this unfold, and so you decide to call out to your neighbor. But instead of screaming with urgency, you say, "Hey, neighbor, I was wondering if you'd like to come across the street over here to my house and join me on my front porch"? He responds, "No thanks. I really am having a pleasant afternoon sitting right here in the chair in my living room. I'm quite comfortable. Thanks again." You answer, "Are you sure? Because I really think you'd enjoy this beautiful fall afternoon a bit more from my front porch. This rocking chair really provides good lumbar support for your back, and I'm happy to make some lemonade for us."

We all recognize, I hope, that this story is preposterous. You don't try to hold out the appeal of a chair with better lumbar support when your neighbor has an all-consuming fire racing toward him. This is why the author takes us back to a scene from Exodus 19-20 of the holy and majestic and terrifying God descending on the mountain to meet with Moses. These Jewish believers may well have fallen into a place of thinking that life confessing Jesus as Lord is difficult, and they'd prefer to go back to life before confessing Jesus, as if the decision is simply about what stage of life made you feel more comfortable—like the man declining your offer to join him on your porch because he thinks his seat in his house is more comfortable. And this scene is the author's way of saying, in essence, but there's a consuming fire you're going to have to deal with if you don't get up out of your chair. He's saying, "This is the God you'll face if you walk away from Jesus. This is the situation in which you'll live if you seek to go back."

He writes, 'For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beat touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear'" (vv. 18-21).

As God came to the people at Mount Sinai, it was a terrifying picture. The holy God, who is infinitely majestic and glorious, came to his people with a dreadful scene. As God came to his people on that mountain to give them the law, there was fire, darkness, gloom, the sound of a trumpet that grew louder and louder, smoke, and the whole mountain itself shaking. As God spoke, it was like the sound of thunder. And the Lord made clear that no one better even approach the mountain, lest they die. Even an animal, which can't understand what's going on, would die if it were to touch that mountain. And so the people trembled with fear, and even Moses was afraid. This led the people to tell Moses that they didn't want to speak to God; he

could be their representative, lest they die. So they trembled in fear and stood far off. That was the picture in Exodus 19-20.

Everything about this scene screams to us that God is unapproachable in his holiness. Attempt to approach him and you'll die. This picture sets for us the great question of the Bible, "How can an unholy people dwell in the presence of a holy God?" It seems impossible. This is why Isaiah declared that he was undone, ready to bear judgment, when he saw a glimpse of the holy, holy, holy God in Isaiah 6. The glorious answer, of course, is that the Son of God came to us, lived perfectly, died for our sins, and rose from the dead so that by faith in him we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, credited with his very own righteousness. But the reason this was required is because God is holy and does not simply ignore sin. Sinners, as we all are, are by nature under his furious, merciless, terrifying wrath.

And so by showing this scene, the point the author is making to his readers is that they're not standing in the shoes of that Israelite under the old covenant, terrified of God, removed from him, without access to that unapproachable judge, trembling in fear, and ready to die if you attempted to draw near to him. That's not their position. They're not storing up wrath on the day of judgment. They've not come to this mountain. Rather, because they've repented of their sins and trusted in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, they are in Christ. And so he shows them another mountain.

A picture of Mount Zion (our position in Christ)

As the author transitions to remind them of their position in Christ, he pictures them as approaching another mountain, drawing a comparison and contrast with that scene at Mount Sinai. And he pictures their position in Christ as if they've come to the glorious dwelling of God called "Mount Zion." He writes, "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, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (vv. 22-24).

In this glorious description in these verses, he provides a picture of their position in Christ. First, they've come to the very dwelling place of God. Throughout this letter the author has spoken of "drawing near" to God, and here the word translated "have come" is the same. They've come to Mount Zion, the city of God, and the heavenly Jerusalem. They've drawn near to the very presence of God. They're in a place and position now where there is no longer restricted access to God. They're in his very presence, able to cry out to him in prayer, and approach him in boldness at any time.

And just in case you think, "Sure, we can approach God, but we still must do it in a spirit of dread and fear," he adds to this scene "innumerable angels in festal gathering." In other words, the atmosphere of this scene in verses 22-24 is festive. There is joy and celebration. And remember how the people were told to stay at a distance and happily stayed away from God in Exodus 19?

Here, we're told that the dwelling place of God is the place where the firstborn assemble and are enrolled in heaven. That is, first of all, people are assembled or gathered in God's presence. They're not distant but in the very presence of their God. Second, they're called the firstborn. This is a term of sonship that the Lord uses to refer to his beloved children in the Scripture. In Christ, we are adopted sons and heirs of God, our Father. And he notes that they're enrolled in heaven. Thus, he reminds us that this isn't a temporary visit from God's children to be in his presence only to be removed at a later time. Their names, rather, are inscribed here as this is their home, the end and aim of God's purpose for them from before the foundation of the world.

And it gets better. He reminds them that the reason this is seen as the dwelling place of God is because God is there. Can you believe this? God bids us to come into his very presence, even we who have known sin so well. It's overwhelming. However, just as you might burst out in joy, he notes that God is "the judge of all," and this makes us want to put on the brakes, doesn't it? Have we been lured into this joyous picture only to bear God's wrath? After all, the God of verse 23 is the same God who appeared on Mount Sinai. He is the holy judge. And that's true, but look at what the next phrase tells us. We've come to the "spirits of the righteous who have been made perfect." In other words, it's as if we're getting a glimpse of heaven right now. Those who have died in Christ are absent from their bodies (that's why he calls them "spirits"), awaiting the resurrection, but they're with their Lord. And the reason they're with the Lord is because Christ's righteousness has been credited to them through faith. That's why they're called "the righteous who have been made perfect." They stand in his righteousness. Nothing that they need to dwell with the holy God is lacking because Christ has provided it all.

And that's why he ends with Jesus. They've come to Jesus, who is the mediator of the new covenant. That is, God has established a relationship with his people in which he will be our God and we his people, in which we will have forgiveness of sins, and in which we will know him and dwell with him. But how? The answer, of course, is Jesus. He's the one who makes all of these promises realities. They all find their "yes" in him. As the God-man, he represents us, so his life, death, and resurrection count for us. He shed his blood so that our sins might be forgiven, which is why his blood speaks a better word than Abel's. Abel's blood reminded us of his faith; Christ's blood reminds us we're forgiven.

So, here's the point: if you're trusting in Christ, this is you. This is me. This description of Mount Zion is what we get to come to every morning. We get to wake up and think, "I'm in the presence of God, as his child, whom he loves. Angels are rejoicing because I've been redeemed. God the judge approves of me because he's credited me with the very righteousness of his own Son. I'm united with Jesus in whom I have forgiveness of sins. My Father is calling me to approach his throne with boldness this morning, knowing he delights in me. That is the position of everyone in Christ. We've come to Mount Zion, and we get to live our lives there. And what the author of Hebrews wants these Jewish believers to see is that it'd be crazy to walk away from this. He's employing one more weapon to press them to persevere in the faith—remember what you have in Jesus. You have come to Mount Zion.

So I want to make two applications to us as we close. First, if you've felt the pull of sin or perhaps have been walking there this week, I want to call you to repent. And if you are hesitant because you feel it's such a delight, then remember these two mountains. Your sin is wanting you to walk away from Jesus, but it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Remember Mount Sinai. As you're tempted, remember what you have in Christ. You've come to Mount Zion. Turn from your sin this morning and run toward your glorious Father whose Spirit indwells you.

Second, don't start each day thinking that you're approaching Mount Sinai, as if that characterizes your relationship with your God. I know it's tempting, and I know that many of us—even as believers—have lived our lives like that for years. We wake up and sit before God, thinking that he's saying, "Keep your distance. You haven't done enough. Don't think I want anything to do with you in light of who you are." We always live our lives as if we're under the law, trying to gain God's favor. Don't live that way. It's a path where you'll ultimately find little joy, and it actually does not produce lasting obedience.

In fact, the only reason we can think this is a reasonable way to live is because we underestimate the holiness of God. Brothers and sisters, the God you're tempted to measure up to is the God who thundered at Sinai. Do you really think you can do enough for that holy God to let you be in his presence? No. Our only hope is Jesus, our perfect righteousness. But if our faith is resting in him, that is enough. He alone is enough.

So instead, live your life remember that you're not coming to Mount Sinai. You've come to Mount Zion. The scene of verses 22-24 is your scene. Luther said if he could think God weren't angry with him, he'd stand on his head for joy. God isn't calling us to stand on our heads this morning, but he is inviting us to draw near to his throne with boldness and live a life of obedient faith before him. Let's publicly demonstrate that our response to this call, by faith, is "yes" as we come to the table this morning. Amen.