

Sermon Transcript

09.06.2026

Hebrews 12:18-24

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- Good morning. Please turn to Hebrews 12:18-24. As you do, I want to mention a few terms to see if anyone knows what they all have in common. The terms are: nyctophobia, lygophobia, scotophobia, achluophobia. They are all forms of a fear of what phenomena?
- The dark.
- How many of you would say that you had a general fear of the dark?
- Let's test it out.
- Imagine this scenario. It's midnight and you and one other friend are in the church and you have to walk the length of the children's hallway and then into the sanctuary and then make your way into the brunch room without turning on the lights or using a flashlight. Once you get to the brunch room, you have to spend the night there.
- Raise your hand if you would be relatively relaxed doing so?
- Keep your hands up.
- Now, let's change the scenario to you are all alone. Same assignment, but you are the only one in the building (that you know of) and you have no weapon at your disposal. Keep your hand up if you're still comfortable in that scenario.
- Now, let's change it again, suppose that there is loud disorienting music being blasted throughout the building so loudly that you literally can't hear anything else. So now you can neither see nor hear anything.
- Keep your hand up if you are still feeling good?
- Now, let's change the setting from this building to an old abandoned insane asylum. You still comfy?
- Okay, one more. Now, remember that you're all alone, but imagine you hear a child's laughter down the hall.
- We lost some people there.
- Okay, we could keep going, but you get the point. We have some brave souls, but I could eventually get everyone to lower their hands if I just made the situation more and more unbearable with snakes or rats or clowns with chainsaws or something.
- And that foreboding setting is what the author establishes in our passage today.
- He wants us to feel the palpable terror and tension; the gravity and sobriety of Israel at Sinai and to contrast that with the joy and festivity of Zion in order for us to understand the superiority of what is ours in Christ.
- This past weekend I officiated a sermon and quoted Ecclesiastes which says that it's better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Because in suffering, we are reminded of our mortality and that pain can rouse us from apathy. So in this present age it's better to go to a funeral than a wedding, but that's only true as it relates to this present age.
- In the age to come, there is no mourning, only feasting. There is no funeral, but a wedding supper of the Lamb.
- So let's pray and we'll see how today's passage helps us to see that Christ is better.
- Self, others, me.

- We've mentioned before that Exodus ends with a problem.
- Israel builds the tabernacle, the mobile sanctuary or temple in the wilderness, and then we read this at the end of the book:
 - *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34–35)*
- Even Moses was unable to enter the tent. So what was to be done about that?
- Well, that's where Leviticus picks up the narrative with the establishment of the Levitical priesthood. You had innumerable Levitical priests doing daily activities like setting out bread and offering incense in the holy place, the outer room, but you also have a chief priest, the Aaronic priest who was responsible for offering sacrifice to purify the inner room, the most holy place to make atonement for the people.
- But the problems with that system were multi-faceted.
- First, the blood of bulls and goats could never actually atone. Like counterfeit money, it was a representation but not the reality. It was shadow, not substance.
- Second, those priests were themselves sinful. So you had unblemished offerings offered by blemished offerers and that's a problem.
- Third, those priests were mortal and temporal so they would eventually die. Over the centuries, there were nearly 100 different high priests so there was no permanence, no continuity.
- Fourth, the tabernacle was only a copy or shadow of the real dwelling place of God.
- Because of all this, those sacrifices would have to be perpetually offered since they didn't actually suffice to provide atonement. They were pictures, but imperfect. Like a Xerox, or a copy of a copy of the real thing.
- And so, as we've seen throughout the book of Hebrews, the architecture of the tabernacle was intentionally designed to communicate the inaccessibility of God because of the imperfection of the Mosaic covenant. It was never designed to be perfect or permanent. It was designed with planned obsolescence so the courtyards and curtains and cherubim all scream, do not enter. Trespassers will quite literally be killed.
- Well a similar unapproachability was conveyed by this picture of Mount Sinai that the author draws from the Old Testament. The darkness and fear communicated God's holiness and thus His transcendence and man's inability to draw near.
- And whereas the old was marked by separation and distance, the new is new precisely because what was previously forbidden is now commanded. We are encouraged to draw near. To come. To approach the very presence of God.
- We can rest this Labor Day because tetelestai, it is finished. Christ has provided what we could not, what the Mosaic Law could not, what the Levitical priesthood could not.
- So let's look at what the author says in this section starting in vss. 18 & 19.

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. (Hebrews 12:18–19)

- When you think of God, what divine attribute most stands out? Some might say His love, or His grace or mercy. Those would be good answers, but I think there is a more fundamental answer.
- I think of God's holiness.
- Did you know that holy is the only attribute of God that is tripled in Scripture?
- We hear the cherubim crying out in Isaiah 6:3

- ...*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!* (Isaiah 6:3)
- Unlike the Beatles, they aren't crying out love, love, love. Or grace, grace, grace, or wisdom, wisdom, wisdom, but holy, holy, holy.
- And again in Revelation 4:8 we read
 - *And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"* (Revelation 4:8)
- Why is this significant? Well, in biblical language, to double something is to emphasize it kinda like our adverb very. You could think of one holy as meaning holy, two as being holier and three as holiest, but even that's a bit watered down. But the tripling of an attribute is otherwise unprecedented.
- As one commentator notes of the Isaiah passage
 - "But here for the only time in the Hebrew Bible a quality is 'raised to the power of three,' as if to say that the divine holiness is so far beyond anything the human mind can grasp that a 'super-superlative' has to be invented to express it and, furthermore, this transcendent holiness is the total truth about God." (Alec Motyer)
- God's holiness means that He is distinct, set apart, wholly unlike anyone or anything else. He is other. And His holiness describes each of His other attributes as the Puritans note. His love is a holy love, his justice a holy justice, his grace a holy grace, his power a holy power.
- Much that ails the modern evangelical world is that we've forgotten God's holiness. We've domesticated God. We've rendered Him safe. But as Mr. Beaver points out he's good, but not safe.
- Our God is a consuming fire. He hates sin. His wrath burns against sin and sinners.
- We need that vision of God's utter and absolute holiness as a backdrop in order to understand the good news.
- The good news isn't nearly as good if we don't understand how bad the bad news was.
- As Ephesians 1 says, we were by nature children of wrath. Dead in our trespasses and sins. As Edwards said in his famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, every single day we treasured up more and more wrath. His holy wrath. His righteous wrath.
- And I mention all of that because in this scene at Sinai, we see the glory of God's holiness and terror. We don't see an old grandfatherly Santa Claus God who gives us candy canes and Werther's Originals. We see a staggering sight and hear a horrifying sound that reminds us of how high and exalted He is and how low and defiled we are.
- We see it in the blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and tempest, and hear it in the terrifying trumpet and words.
- All of that terror and threat communicated the utter inaccessibility of God. It showed a separation between Creator and creatures.
- We get this image from Dt 4.
 - *And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.* (Deuteronomy 4:11–12)
- And Exodus 19
 - *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.* (Exodus 19:16)
- And Deuteronomy 5

- *Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.'* (Deuteronomy 5:25–27)
- So there is palpable tension in the air. And the tension is the point. It communicates that God is holy and thus inaccessible, at least for unholy people.
- So the Levitical law and the tabernacle was the solution, but the problem was, as most of Hebrews 7-10 can attest, that the solution itself was flawed, temporal.
- And, again, this is important for us to understand lest we skip over the bad to get to the good. The problem with that is you then dilute the good.
- You'll never appreciate the depth of God's grace toward you until you understand the depth of your depravity. You'll never understand God's mercy until you understand what you deserved. You'll never understand His love until you've reckoned with how unlovable you are.
- You'll never understood the joy of Zion until you feel the horror of Sinai.
- So Sinai is a sign. A sign of what an unholy people experience in the presence of a holy God. Do not enter. Trespassers will be killed.
- And yet, that is not what we have come to.
- Notice that phrase. You have not come to.
- The verb come to is the same that we have seen throughout Hebrews translated as draw near.
- We haven't come to Mount Sinai, but Zion. We'll read about that starting in vs 22, but first the author continues to stress how wild the wilderness actually was.
- Let's look at 20-21.

For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."
(Hebrews 12:20–21)

- This is coming from Exodus 19:12-13
 - *And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.'* (Exodus 19:12–13)
- Now, if you thought I was exaggerating the severity of the scene, you can see for yourself.
- In the garden of Eden, Eve expands the prohibition from you shall not eat to you shall not touch, but here that is exactly what is commanded. No one could draw near.
- Look, but don't touch was the law.
- In fact, not only Israel as a whole, but even Moses, the greater leader, the friend of God, was frightened. The Lord's holiness is so awesome that all are undone at the sight and sound.
- Now, the reference to Moses trembling with fear is interesting because it doesn't match anything we read in the OT precisely.
- The closest we get is Dt. 9:19 where Moses says:
 - *For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the LORD bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you...* (Deuteronomy 9:19)
- The word afraid there is the same Greek word as fear in Hebrews 12, but this is from the account of the golden calf so it seems like the author is as one commentator notes,

“deliberately fusing the initial Sinai theophany with the subsequent disobedience of the people” in order to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Sinai.

- Think back to the giving of the 10 commandments. God is giving the people a law. A good law.
- Meanwhile, what are the people doing? Literally, in the very moment that He is giving them a good and righteous law, they are rebelling.
- IOW, they immediately show their inability to fulfill the law.
- And, again, this fits within the larger concern of Hebrews to show the utter inability of the Mosaic covenant or Levitical law or priesthood. The problem wasn't that the law was bad, but that it wasn't designed to deal with the root problem which was man.
- The law could regulate behavior, but never actually cleanse the heart. It cleaned the outside of the cup, but couldn't touch the inner man. That's why a new covenant was necessary.
- So both the tabernacle and Sinai demonstrated God's inaccessibility and that is a foil or contrast to the accessibility that we have in Christ. At Sinai, worshipers couldn't draw near under penalty of death. In the tabernacle, Israelites couldn't draw near under threat of death. And yet, because of Christ, we are now encouraged and even commanded to draw near.
- Let's keep going. Vss. 22-24.

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. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

- So we have not come to Sinai, but we have come to Mount Zion, which is also described as the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem.
- You've heard of a tale of two cities, well this is a tale of two mountains.
- We've talked about Sinai. Now, let's consider Zion.
- Zion was originally the name of a hill just to the south of the temple mount which was captured by David and his men, but over time it began to function as a poetic name for all of Jerusalem. In other words, Zion no longer referred to the solitary hill, but to the whole city.
- And Zion is interesting because Hebrews has quoted a couple of passages about the kingdom of the Son.
 - *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."* (Psalm 110:1)
 - *I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."* (Psalm 2:7)
- Both of those passages have played a significant role in shaping the theology of Hebrews.
- And look in the immediate context of both texts.
- Right after Psalm 110:1 we read:
 - *The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!* (Psalm 110:2)
- And right before Psalm 2:7 we read:
 - *As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.* (Psalm 2:6)
- So Zion represents the dwelling place of the Davidic king and thus it functions here in Hebrews as the place where the Christ dwells. And if we are drawing near to Christ, then we are drawing near to Zion.

- And this would have been particularly important to a group of Hebrew Christian who are used to the idea of Zion as the destination of a pilgrimage. The author is using that imagery here.
- At the end of your journey, you don't arrive at Sinai with God's fire and judgment. But rather, you arrive at Zion and joy and festivity.
- And notice how that journey is portrayed. Notice it doesn't say, you will come, but you have come. That's very definitive in the Greek. We have come, we have arrived.
- Why? Because tetelestai, it is finished. Christ is sufficient.
- And again, this points to the already, but not yet nature of what is ours. There is a sense in which we are even now citizens of the holy city.
 - *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* (Colossians 3:3)
 - *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...* (Ephesians 2:5–6)
- So there's a tension in the already, but not yet nature of the gospel. We have come.
- Later the author will bring in some of the not yet. He'll portray us as pilgrims still searching. Look at Hebrews 13:14
 - *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.* (Hebrews 13:14)
- So we have come and are coming. Already, but not yet.
- Yes, there is more to come, but even now, we have come. Even now all things are ours in Christ.
- So we've come to Zion. Let's see the way that is pictured.
- Who's on the guest list?
- First there are innumerable angels in festal gathering.
- The word innumerable in Greek literally means 10,000, but figuratively it means myriad. In fact, the Greek is where we get the word myriad. So countless thousands upon thousands.
- And they are in festal gathering which sounds a bit wooden and archaic. That word just means festival and was used of the various feasts and festivals of the OT.
- In other words, the angels are partying it up.
- Eating their angel food cake and holy guacamole and hitting a Satan pinata.
- We see the same Greek word in the LXX of Isaiah 66:10
 - *Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy...* (Isaiah 66:10)
- So if your vision of eternity is monotonous and boring, you need to get your eyesight checked.
- From the gospels we see the angels rejoicing at the celebration of sinners repenting so how much more at this scene of consummation. After all, according to Hebrews 1:14 angels are...
 - *...ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation* (Hebrews 1:14)
- Next is the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.
- The word assembly here is ekklesia or gathering or church. And the idea of being enrolled in heaven fits into a common biblical theme of a book of life. We see that in the OT in places like Exodus 32
 - *But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book."* (Exodus 32:33)
- And in the NT in Luke 10:20
 - *Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."* (Luke 10:20)
- And Revelation 3:5

- *The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.* (Revelation 3:5)
- But why are we called firstborn? Because the firstborn carries more than just chronological significance, it represents the inheritance. So this is probably offering a contrast to Esau who sacrificed his birthright. Like Jacob, we have inherited something that isn't ours by nature, but by grace.
- And Christ is the firstborn and we are in Him. So assembly of the firstborn just refers to the church in some sense.
- Next, we see that God is there. And He is described as judge of all though we are not subject to that judgment. But the fact that the judge is there at this joyous occasion signifies that He has pronounced a favorable verdict on our behalf.
- And this is something that makes Christianity unique among the other religions of the world. We talked about it in reference to Islam, but in no other religion is the adherents outcome guaranteed & certain. In no other religion can one have true assurance of salvation because in all other religions salvation is by works and not grace and thus salvation is entirely not yet and there is no already. The verdict has yet to be declared. But in Christianity, our verdict has already been rendered because our sins were nailed to the cross and we have died with Christ.
- We have been justified, approved, perfected.
- Speaking of perfected, he next mentions the spirits of the righteous made perfect.
- We've talked before about the significance of the word perfection in Hebrews so just note that here.
 - *For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.* (Hebrews 10:14)
- Next he mentions Jesus. This is the reason that this is a happy scene. Because he is the mediator of a new covenant, which is again a dominant theme of the book. Not just a new covenant, but an inherently better covenant.
- As Calvin says:
 - "it is he alone through whom the Father is reconciled to us, and who renders his face serene and lovely to us, so that we may come to him without fear." (John Calvin)
- He is the reason that we are perfected. He is the reason that seeing God is assuring and not terrifying. He is the reason we can draw near rather than tremble in fear. He is the reason that we long to hear the word of God rather than beg Him to speak no more.
- And the reason He is the mediator of a new covenant is because of His death.
- So we read of sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than Abel.
- The importance of blood has been traced through the book. For instance 9:22 tells us
 - *Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.* (Hebrews 9:22)
- So Christ's blood has purified and perfected us and in doing so it is better than the word of Abel. We talked about Abel in chapter 11. God tells Cain in Genesis 4 that Abel's blood cries out from the ground.
- But that word is a word of judgment. That word placed a curse upon Cain, but Christ's blood speaks a better word, a word of grace and favor and forgiveness. Abel's blood exiled Cain from the land, Christ's blood welcomes us back. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance for satisfaction, Christ's blood cries out that satisfaction has been made, atonement has been rendered, wrath has been propitiated.

- So what we see this in passage is again a contrast between two mountains and two experiences of the holiness of God.
- One way, the way of the law, the way of works is a way of terror.
- Paul offers that contrast in Galatians for instance where he distinguishes Sinai from Zion and reads them allegorically to say that Sinai represents slavery to works whereas Zion represents the liberation of faith.
- So one path, the path of Sinai is works and law. The end result is terrifying. The destination for those who choose that path is utter desolation and destruction.
- But the other path, the path of faith in Christ alone, is a path of joy where we find festivity and feasting.
- As we read back in 10:39
 - *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Hebrews 10:39)*
- All things being equal, we would continue our text through vss. 29 since the passage actually extends to there and gives us the application, but we'll pick it up in vs. 25 next time.
- In the meantime, may we be reminded of the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the terror of God, but also may we be comforted that we will know none of that wrath or terror because we are in His Son. And may that cause us to draw near in full assurance, despising the guilt and shame.
- May we be grateful that we have not come to a place of sheer terror, but to life, and joy, and all good things. Because Christ is better.
- Let's pray.

Communion

- Fence table
- As we prepare to partake of communion, I want to spend a second thinking about the meaning of the meal. We've talked before about how the taste of wine helps us to understand something of the significance of the supper.
- Unlike, juice, wine has some bitterness to it. And that bitterness is part of the communion experience. The same way that Israel ate bitter herbs at Passover to remind them of the bitterness of slavery, so we are reminded of the bitterness of our sin.
- But wine also has a certain sweetness. And in communion, we taste and see that the Lord is good. He has drunk the cup of wrath so that we drink from a cup of joy.
- Wine is a drink of funerals and weddings and communion orients us to both. To Christ's death, but also to our eschatological hope.
- So as we prepare our hearts, take a second and reflect upon the death of Christ for your sin. Examine your heart of any unconfessed, unrepentant sin and then we will partake in joy and gratitude.
- On the night...