

A Mountain of Joy

A study of Hebrews 12:18 to 13:6

By Michael Morrison

After exhorting readers to continue in the Christian faith, Hebrews gives further encouragement by painting a picture of the choice set before them. On one side is fear and death, but the readers have chosen a life of joy with Christ.

The mountain of fear

“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’” (Heb. 12:18-21, referring to Ex. 19:13).

The mountain does not need to be named, for the readers know it well: Mount Sinai, where the old covenant was made with Israel. The mountain stands for the old covenant—a covenant they once participated in, but a covenant they have left behind in order to embrace a life with Christ.

If we read between the lines, we see that the readers were being pressured by neighbors to return to the old covenant. The author, by describing the results of the choice they have made, is encouraging them to remain faithful to Jesus. Don’t look back, he says. That is a covenant of gloom and doom. It has condemnation, not salvation.

Moses did not fear for his own life—he said, “I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you” (Deut. 9:19). Moses knew that the people had rebelled against God and deserved to die. He asked God to spare them, and God did, but his fear shows the serious penalties involved in breaking the Sinai covenant.

A joyful assembly

In contrast, the new covenant is a place of joy

and fellowship with God: **“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”** (Heb. 12:22-24).

The new covenant is a place with happy people, where angels rejoice. This is the reward of the saved, those who are the firstborn children of God, who have been welcomed by the Judge of the universe. They were not perfect, but they have been made perfect by the blood of Christ, which promises forgiveness rather than vengeance.

The readers have not come to this place yet, but the author describes it as if they have. When they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, this joyful place became their new destination, and the author wants to make sure that they do not turn aside.

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” (v. 25). The readers probably had Jewish neighbors who said, “If you turn away from the old covenant, you will be punished.” And so the author responds with threats of his own: “It is true that people were punished for turning away from Moses, but now, we will be punished if we turn away from what he is saying in Jesus Christ.”

The unshakable kingdom

The author makes a smooth transition from this warning into a reminder of the reward God has promised: **“At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so**

that what cannot be shaken may remain” (vv. 26-27, quoting Haggai 2:6).

At Mount Sinai, God’s voice shook the earth, but he has also promised to shake the earth again, and the author of Hebrews focuses our attention on the word *once*. He will do it only once—never again will the heavens and earth need to be shaken, because the shaking will be so severe that only the permanent will remain.

Haggai 2:7 promises that God “will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty.”

The eternal kingdom will come, so how should we respond? **“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’ ”** (vv. 28-29, quoting Deut. 4:24).

Since God has promised us a great reward, we should be thankful and worship him—and as the letter makes plain, we must come to him through Jesus. But the threat still exists for those who turn away, for God is still a consuming fire to those who refuse him. God will consume everyone who disobeys, so we all need the intercession that Jesus offers in the new covenant.

Concluding exhortations

In chapter 13, the writing style changes abruptly, and the author gives some short reminders: **“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”** (13:1-2).

The chance of entertaining angels is incredibly small, but the author is reminding the readers to do

something that they already know they should.

He gets more serious in verse 3: **“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”**

Some members of the congregation were in jail, and the author encourages the readers to continue to visit them. Ancient prisons did not give prisoners any food, so visits from friends were essential, even though the officers might suspect that the visitors had the same illegal beliefs. Why should we risk our safety to visit prisoners? Because we might be in prison tomorrow, and we will need people to visit us.

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (v. 4). The author does not emphasize this point, and it was probably not a problem for the readers. This ethical exhortation was common advice among Jews.

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’ ” (v. 5, quoting Deut. 31:6).

Although enemies may steal our possessions (see 10:34), we can be content with the greatest treasure of all: a promise of life eternal with God.

“So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can human beings do to me?’ ” (Heb. 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6-7). What can people do to us when we have faith in Christ?

As the author has already noted, they can ridicule us, take our possessions, put us in jail, even kill us. But they can never take away the reward that God will give us. We can be confident because he gives us an eternal perspective on the things of this world.

Questions for discussion

- Why does the author characterize Mount Sinai so negatively? (12:18-21)
- Do I feel like I have come to a joyful assembly in heaven? (12:23)
- Do I worship God with thanksgiving, or with fear? (12:28-29)
- Am I commanded to visit prisoners today? (13:3)
- Am I completely unafraid of what people can do to me? (13:6)