

A Better Mountain

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of October 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Mountain and is based on Hebrews chapter 12 verses 14 to 29. You may like to have open the pew Bibles, the black Bibles in front of you at page 979 from the first Bible reading from the letter to the Hebrews chapter 12.

And for those visiting, this is part of a sermon series we've had on and off during the year. After today there's a little gap while we do a few other things in November and then at the end of November we'll resume and finish Hebrews 13 for a couple of weeks into December.

So let's pray first. Our God, we thank you that you speak to us and reveal yourself in the words of the scriptures and we pray now that as we come to these words you will speak to our hearts, write your word on our hearts so that we may believe it and do it for the glory of Jesus.

Amen. I vividly remember when I was in grade 2 aged 6 or 7 our teacher at school was describing an earthquake that I presume had recently happened in New Zealand and she was saying that in this earthquake in New Zealand an old lady had been sitting in her chair and the earth had opened up and swallowed her and then closed up around her.

[1 : 3 8] Now I don't know whether that to what extent that was true or not she was certainly telling us as though it was true but it left a huge fear and nightmare for me about an earthquake and about being swallowed up when the earth shook and shuddered.

Not that in Melbourne we ever really experienced that sort of earthquake but I vividly remember my fear at being told about that. And when we see pictures on television of earthquakes and their aftermath that often comes to mind because we see pictures of devastation, of fear people trapped people digging for days in Turkey or in San Francisco or in Central America when there have been earthquakes trying to find survivors buried under tons of rubble and buildings and so on.

And we invariably see pictures of fear, of terror of people fleeing and screaming and mourning. When the earth shakes it's a terrifying thing.

I remember some years ago visiting Pompeii south of Rome near Naples and when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD and swallowed and buried the whole of the town of Pompeii people were in effect caught just doing their daily life and covered with lava molten lava from Vesuvius and there is one body that was found in the excavations of Pompeii of someone fleeing unsuccessfully of course with no doubt with terror at the shaking of the earth as Vesuvius erupted.

Well periodically in the scriptures we find the earthquakes and the earth shuddering. It happened when Jesus was crucified on the cross and the most notable event of that occurrence in the Old Testament was when the people of God came to Mount Sinai.

[3 : 2 9] They'd left Egypt under the leadership of Moses it was the time when the plagues were brought on Pharaoh and the Red Sea parted and the people came through towards the Promised Land but on the way to the Promised Land they stopped for some time at Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula between Egypt and as it is today Israel.

And there at Mount Sinai atop the mountain was cloud and fire thunder, lightning the trumpets sounding the earth and the mountain shaking a terrifying occurrence for the people of God.

There were strict limits placed on approach to that mountain laws given to the people by God through Moses. They were not to go onto the mountain or even touch it not even animals were to touch it and if even a stray animal wandered onto the side of the mountain it would be stoned to death.

The people were terrified and doubly so because from the top of the mountain to all they're hearing was the voice of God himself giving what we know as the Ten Commandments and so fearful were the people that they pleaded with Moses to say to God we don't want to hear God's voice anymore.

Let God tell you Moses all the laws and you then pass them on to us and so it happened the remaining laws in the Old Testament were given by God to Moses who then relayed them and then wrote them down for the benefit of the people.

[4 : 54] Now that is one of the crucial events of the Old Testament a high point a significant point in all the events of the Old Testament a terrifying event for the people of God hearing the voice of God the mountain shaking in effect the tremors the fire the cloud the lightning the trumpets and so on and the people knew and were told that they needed to keep their distance from the mountain they're not allowed to go there in fact they wanted to keep away and they didn't want to hear God's voice if there's one way in which we summarise the faith of God's people in the Old Testament it would be to keep the distance or if you go on the London Underground as the train pulls in and out of the stations on the London Underground you hear this recorded message saying mind the gap and that would summarise Old Testament faith in a sense mind the gap keep a gap between God and you keep your distance from a holy fearful God now the readers of this letter to the Hebrews originally were Jews before they became

Christians they knew their Old Testaments and one of the things that we've found in this letter is that many of them were in danger of drifting back to be Jews but no longer Christians of giving up on the Lord Jesus Christ drifting away from faith in him and for some of them drifting back to Judaism so throughout the letter the writer has been at pains to show that at every point Jesus Christ is better than people and institutions and places of the Old Testament and so for those who have been here this year in the months that we've preached through this letter have seen that Jesus is better than the Old Testament priests better than angels better than Moses his covenant that he brings is better than the Old Covenant of the Old Testament his sacrifice is better than the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament that the access that Jesus gives to heaven is better than the access into the Old Testament temple and so on at each point Jesus is better and we come in this paragraph to the final comparison between the old and the new to make us realise like the original readers to realise that Jesus is better and not worth drifting from after the people entered the land in the Old Testament passing through the Sinai Peninsula after 400 years in the land eventually Jerusalem became its capital under its second

King David and there David's son Solomon built a temple a temple a temple is a place where God would meet with his people in a sense it was a little bit like Mount Sinai had been God come down to earth in a form and the people able to worship God in a sense at Jerusalem in its temple but like the Mount Sinai experience mind the gap was still the theme of worship so though the people could approach the temple and offer sacrifices. It was only the priests who could actually deal with the sacrifices in the inner court and only the high priest who could go into the most holy place as we saw earlier in Hebrews earlier in the year.

There was still a sense in which, a very real sense in which the people had to mine the gap or keep their distance from God in the Old Testament. Jerusalem was traditionally regarded as being on top of Mount Zion. It's not really quite the same sort of peak that Mount Sinai is. It's really just a rise surrounded on three sides by little valleys. Indeed, the Mount of Olives across one valley is higher than Mount Zion is. But it was a fairly safe place for a capital and so Mount Zion was regarded as the place where the temple was, where Jerusalem was, where God and his people would meet. A different mountain from Mount Sinai but a similar sort of idea. Now the comparison then the writer makes in this section is between two mountains. Between Mount Sinai, as we heard about it when the people were there in the time of Moses, and Mount Zion.

But not the earthly Mount Zion where Jerusalem is to this day in the land contested by Israelis and Palestinians. Rather now a heavenly Mount Zion.

[9 : 28] So see how the writer makes this comparison. In verse 18 he says, you've not come, and now he describes Mount Sinai without naming it, to something that can be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest.

You've not come to the sound of a trumpet or to a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. And then in the brackets it refers to that incident back in the book of Exodus and the fear that Moses as well as the people had at that time.

But, verse 22 says, you have come to Mount Zion. But he's talking now about heaven. A heavenly Mount Zion. Notice how he uses the past tense.

He's not saying you will come to heaven, to the heavenly Mount Zion, but you have come because there's a real sense for Christians in which already we are there. Not that this is heaven on earth.

There is something much greater yet to come. But we already belong in heaven. Our citizenship is there. So see how it's described in the verses that follow. You've come to Mount Zion firstly. But as I say, not the earthly one, the heavenly one. Because he goes on to say, to the city of the living God. Not a city built by human beings, but a city built by God. A city where God himself, the living God, is present and dwells in its midst.

[10 : 51] It's the same city that we saw in the previous chapter. Abraham looked forward to a city whose foundations are laid by God. And then we're the same city as described to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Making it absolutely clear for us that he's not saying you've come to the earthly Jerusalem. But you've come already as Christians to the heavenly Jerusalem. To heaven itself.

The same heavenly Jerusalem that the end of the Bible in the vision that John has, he sees and describes. Now not only is this the place of God's dwelling, it's also the place where angels dwell.

So the next part of the description in verse 22 is, you have come to innumerable angels in festal gathering. Heaven is the home of angels. Innumerable, literally myriads, tens of thousands of angels dwelling in heaven. Notice that they are there in a festal gathering. That is, they are there rejoicing.

It is a place of festivity and joy and celebration. We know from Jesus' words that the angels rejoice when a sinner is converted and their citizenship in heaven begins in a sense.

[12 : 01] So, so too here there is joy in heaven with the angels gathered. But not just is heaven the home of God and of angels, but it is also the home of humans.

And so the description goes on in verse 23 to say, you have come to the assembly of the firstborn. Now in the Old Testament the firstborn child in a family was specially dedicated to God.

That's the imagery at the background of this description here. That is, it is humans who are dedicated to, separated to God who are dwelling in heaven here.

Not just every human but those who belong to God. And notice that it's described as the assembly of the firstborn. Literally, that is the church of the firstborn.

The word for assembly is the word from which we get the English word church in effect. So here in heaven there is the community of God's people. It is not just that in heaven we'll have our own little cubicle and it'll be me and God relating together, that's it.

[13 : 08] God's people are fundamentally people together in community. It's why in the previous two chapters ago, we saw a few weeks ago, the writer urges Christians not to give up meeting together because Christians even on earth as we gather together Sunday by Sunday there is a sense in which our gathering here is meant to be a foretaste of the gathering of all of God's people in heaven.

Now the humans who are there are then described in verse 23 as those whose names are enrolled in heaven. Our names are written there by God to signify our eternal enduring citizenship of heaven.

It's already the case that for those who are Christians their names are written in heaven already by God and so when we arrive in heaven there will be a place reserved for us.

We can be sure and confident about that. It won't be the case like when you go to a hotel or you go to something that you've pre-booked feeling anxious that they've got the booking right and will your name be actually in their register.

When we arrive in heaven it will be there. It's written by God. The names are enrolled in heaven. Our citizenship of heaven is secure and as we've seen in earlier parts of this letter the reason why we can be sure our names are enrolled there is because Jesus when he ascended to heaven placed an anchor for our soul in heaven.

[14 : 34] So it is secure, safe for eternity, our place in heaven. Now then the description moves another step towards its climax.

In verse 23 it then says you have come to God the judge of all. That's an astonishing thing because all through the Old Testament though there are approaches from God to people there is also the clear sense all the time of keep your distance.

But now we read for Christians who have faith in Christ you have come to God. no more mind the gap no more passing on things to priests to take into the holy place no more relaying of God's words through Moses or other mediators you have come to God the judge of all.

And as we've seen throughout this letter we've been exhorted as Christians to draw near to God. So back in chapter 4 draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.

Chapter 10 we have confidence to enter the most holy place by means of the death of Jesus. So all through this letter we're being exhorted to do what is already in one sense the case we have come to God so draw near to him with hearts full of faith and so on.

[15 : 57] The next part of the description of heaven to which we've come is that we've come to spirits of the righteous made perfect in verse 23. And the reference in a sense to that is that we've seen throughout this letter the power of Jesus' sacrifice is not just to forgive us our sins but Jesus' sacrifice is powerful enough sufficient enough to perfect us for the presence of God.

And so this is another description of the people of God in heaven. They are the spirits of the righteous made perfect by the power of Jesus' death. And then finally in verse 24 we come to the climax of this description held back to the end building up with suspense and you have come to Jesus.

He is the one whom this letter is all about. Jesus is better than anything we find in the Old Testament and you have come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant unlike Moses the mediator of the old covenant where the people trembled with fear at Mount Sinai now on a heavenly mountain the heavenly Mount Zion you have come to Jesus the mediator of a new of a better covenant as we saw in earlier chapters and also to Jesus whose blood we're told in verse 24 speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The blood of Jesus refers to his sacrificial death for us the death that brings us forgiveness and perfection for the presence of God. That's our entry ticket the only entry ticket to heaven is the blood of Jesus shed for us it's why we can be so certain of our entry to heaven because it depends on the blood of Jesus and not on ourselves and it's a blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel the son of Adam and Eve killed by his brother whom we saw a little bit about two weeks ago Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries well this is the reality for Christians this description of the heavenly Mount Zion to which we've already come this is not just wishful thinking it's not just a sort of ethereal hope of some sort of spirit life after life on earth this is the ultimate reality this is more real than earth which one day is passing away as this passage goes on to say and this is where we belong as Christian people so when we gather

Sunday by Sunday the gathering of God's people there is a sense in which this is a foretaste of heaven and not least when we gather around the Lord's table as we'll do shortly in the Lord's supper we in a sense anticipate the banquet of heaven lift up your hearts to heaven that's where we are in effect as this passage says and therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we sing and praise God's name is part of the prayer that we'll say before receiving the Lord's supper later and we say some of the words together of the praise of God in heaven worthy is the lamb who is slain worthy of all power and honour and glory and so on be to God and to Jesus that is as we gather around the Lord's table we are expressing our confidence that we actually belong in heaven and that this is in effect manifest in our gathering today well how then in the light of this reality do we respond to this glorious picture of heaven firstly we must listen to

[19 : 37] God we must heed God's word pay attention to it concentrate on it take it seriously God has spoken and in the Old Testament when the people of God heard God's voice at Mount Sinai they didn't want to hear God's voice and shied away from it if God speaking then was so significant and important how much more important now is it for us to hear God's word so verse 25 says see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth referring back to Mount Sinai in the Old Testament how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven so don't ignore God speaking if you are part of God's people heed God's voice well the second exhortation that is in this passage in response to this glorious picture of heaven is right at the beginning of the passage verse 14 pursue peace and holiness pursue peace with everyone because we belong together if we're going to share eternity together we need to pursue peace with everyone and pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord in effect here what holiness is saying is that it's part of the character of God if God is absolutely holy and pure we if we're going to dwell with him forever need to pursue the same character of God that doesn't come naturally the word for pursue is an energetic urgent word it requires it requires our activity not our passivity we don't sit back and wait for holiness to fall upon us we're to pursue it with our action determination through our lives on earth that we become more like the character the moral character of God so firstly we're to listen to

God secondly to pursue peace and holiness thirdly we are to avoid ending up in apostasy the worship of other gods and idols verse 15 says see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and through it many become defiled it's almost a quote from the book of Deuteronomy it's warning the readers not to drift from faith in God not to end up with bitterness against God not to end up away from God worshipping idols or other gods made up gods or whatever but notice the context in which that warning is given see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God by succumbing to a root of bitterness in effect that is it's not saying you Fred and you Mary look out for yourself it's saying to the church to whom this letter was written each of you look out to make sure that no one else in your fellowship fails to obtain the grace of

God for it is our responsibility each one of us to ensure that each other of us does not fail to obtain the grace of God succumbing to a root of bitterness that may spread and infect the Christian community so each of you not less me has a responsibility for each other that's not something that we naturally do in such an individualistic society as ours but as Christians we have a fundamental responsibility for each other to look out for each other to urge each other on to encourage each other all the more as we see the final day approaching so listen to God pursue peace and holiness don't end up in apostasy don't succumb to the temptations of this world being immoral and greedy here verse 16 and 17 give the example of another Old Testament character called Esau see to it that no one becomes like Esau an immoral and godless person who sold his birthright for a single meal

Esau was the twin brother of Jacob and he being the elder twin in effect the birthright inheritance belonged to him but he sold it just for one meal when he came back famished from a day out stupid act the fleeting pleasures of the world meaning more to him than the lasting joys of an inheritance the very thing that the writer in previous week has exhorted us to be careful of that we don't succumb to the temptations of our world and thus forfeit our eternal inheritance is in effect what's being said here so if we fall into immorality and greed we will forfeit our inheritance as described in the heavenly mount Zion so don't be like that make sure and again it's a corporate responsibility see to it that no one becomes like Esau so each of us sitting here is the responsibility not only for ourselves to make sure that we don't succumb to the fleeting pleasures of our world but we're to see to it that no one else in our fellowship succumbs as well the day is coming when this world will be brought to an end by God a day when he will shake not only a mountain here or there but the whole earth and the heavens as well will shake who will escape such an end of history cataclysm who will be able to flee that final shaking of everything by God the writer goes on at the end of this passage in verse 26 referring back to firstly

Mount Sinai he says at that time God's voice shook the earth but now he has promised quoting a later Old Testament prophet Haggai yet once more I will shake not only the earth but the heaven now this phrase yet once more indicates the removal of what is shaken that is created things so that what cannot be shaken may remain the question then is what cannot be shaken and the answer comes in verse 28 a kingdom that cannot be shaken God's kingdom the heavenly Mount Zion the heavenly Jerusalem the kingdom to which Christians belong where their names are enrolled in God's book that kingdom cannot be shaken and to that kingdom Christians belong God is the same hope expressed in the Old Testament we'll sing the words of Psalm 46 in a version in our last hymn this morning

[26 : 47] God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble therefore we will not fear though the earth should change though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea though its waters roar and foam and though the mountains tremble with its tumult there is a city and God is in the midst of the city and it shall not be moved that city is the heavenly Jerusalem and we are citizens of that city even now here on earth through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ so the final exhortation of this passage is be thankful be thankful that we belong to the city that cannot be shaken be thankful that we belong to the city which will still stand when this earth and this heavens are all shaken and destroyed and pass away under the mighty hand of God one day soon when Jesus returns be thankful thankfulness is a fundamental ingredient to the worship of God without thankfulness in our hearts our worship of God is unacceptable to God if we gather together

Sunday by Sunday and offer our praises to God and our prayers but without thankfulness in our hearts then our worship is unacceptable verse 28 goes on to say let us give thanks by which we offer to God an acceptable worship thankfulness in our hearts is a necessity if our worship to God be acceptable but notice that it's a thankfulness that is accompanied by reverence and awe the end of verse 28 literally by fear the same word used for the fear or terror of Moses and the people at Mount Sinai you see there is still this place for fear before God because as the last verse says God is a consuming fire still it's not that there are two gods in Old Testament and New Testament God it's the same God but we have been brought into the presence of a ferocious God a God who is a consuming fire because of the blood of Jesus he is still a

God before whom we are to respond with fear and reverence and awe though that's a slightly weak translation of the word but also a God with whom we express our thankfulness you see we must never take for granted our eternal destiny secure it is because of Jesus but we cannot be complacent assured it is because of Jesus yet we must not be complacent we must heed God's word we must pursue peace and holiness we must see to it that no one falls away into apostasy we must see to it that no one falls away succumbing to temptations of greed and immorality but rather pursuing peace and holiness and with thankfulness in our hearts with reverence and awe we may look forward with confidence to taking up our residence in the heavenly Jerusalem let's pray

O God our heavenly father we rejoice and give you thanks that our names are enrolled in heaven's citizenship register that a place for our souls has been anchored there by the death resurrection and ascension of Jesus we rejoice that even now as we gather with your people in your presence on earth we taste but a foretaste of that heavenly joy we pray we pray that you'll stir us up to pursue peace and holiness to shun apostasy immorality and greed to heed your word and always to have thankfulness on our hearts for the Lord Jesus Christ amen amen