

The Fear of Sinai and the Joy of Zion
 Exodus 20:18-21, Hebrews 12:18-29
 Tampa Covenant Church
 16 August 2026

Proposition: Because the LORD is holy and has redeemed us as his own, we're called to respond to his word with reverence and awe in joyful worship.

FCF: Failing to receive the word of God with worshipful reverence but with terror and fear due to our sin and guilt before him.

RHF: Because Jesus is the better mediator whose blood speaks a better word of forgiveness; we no longer stand in terror of Sinai but have come to Zion with joy, as we worship our Savior with reverence and awe.

(#1) Introduction:

This morning we conclude our series entitled, *"The Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Grace."* Over the past eleven weeks, the commandments have taught us what it means to love God and love our neighbor. We've also seen how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every commandment, and in our union with him; what God commands of us, we desire of ourselves. In today's text, the commandments have been given; and God's people respond in fear at Mt. Sinai. But we'll see the story doesn't ultimately end there but points to the joy of Mt. Zion. These two mountains provide us a contrast.

And we understand the value of contrast. We see it in fashion, home décor, music, writing, art, and in creation itself. (#2) Painter Bob Ross once said, *"Put light against light you have nothing. Put dark against dark; you have nothing. It's the contrast of light against dark that gives the other meaning."* (#3 Blank) And Scripture contrasts these two mountains in helping us to grasp the meaning and significance of each. So we'll explore; the fear of Sinai and discover how Christ brings us to Zion where we worship him with reverence and awe as God's redeemed people.

(#4) The Fear of Sinai: *Creates distance between God and man*

In chap 19, the Israelites arrive at Sinai and God calls Moses up to the mountain to give him a message for the people, *"you yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, bore you on eagles' wings, brought you to myself."* (#5) Now if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession, kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." (#6) And the people respond, *"All that the LORD has spoken, we will do."* And chap 19 is also clear that the God who redeems is holy. (#7 Blank) Before receiving the law; the people had to consecrate themselves; boundaries were set up. And with the LORD's presence, came thunder, lightning, smoke, fire, trumpet blast, and trembling. And a holy, transcendent God speaks to his (#8) redeemed people; *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"*: And after he speaks the Ten Words, we would expect to hear the same refrain, *"All that the LORD has spoken, we will do."* But not this time.

(#9) We read in v.18, *"Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off."* This familiar imagery of the natural order helps our finite minds understand what God's people encountered on that day; nothing less than the manifest presence of a holy God and understandably, they stood back with fear (#10 Blank) and trembling. In 2001, I was near the Afghan Pakistani border visiting

some of our guys in a safe house. And after the visit, my commander and I went to the rally point to wait for the helicopter. As we were waiting, I suddenly felt my heart racing and for the first time in my life, my knees began to knock. I was paralyzed by fear at the thought of getting shot. Fear is real; it isn't just something we think about; it's also something we feel in our bodies that elicits that fight, flight or freeze response.

(#11) And v.19 the people cry out to Moses, *"You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."* The people haven't outright rejected the word of God; but they can no longer bear his voice speaking directly to them. And in their terror, they cry out to Moses to stand in the gap as their mediator.¹ **(#12) One commentator said,** *"mankind are weak creatures at best; and all the uncommon appearances or extraordinary occurrences of nature are to them messengers of terror. Men are also guilty creatures; and every indication of supernatural power makes their hearts tremble with alarm, lest the power should be exerted for their punishment."*² This is what we see at Sinai; a picture of guilty, frail humanity standing before a holy and powerful God. And the result is fear, trembling, distance and a desperate plea to Moses to stand before God on their behalf.

(#13) But Moses responds in v.20: *"Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."* On the surface, it sounds crazy, *"don't fear so you can fear."* In Scripture, the word for fear meaning dread of judgment before God is very similar to word for fear meaning reverence and awe before him.³ So, Moses is distinguishing between the fear that drives us away from God and the fear that teaches us to walk in obedience to his commands. **(#14 Blank) Theologian John Murray** in his book, *Principles of Conduct* helps us to see both sides of the fear coin. He says, God is holy and his wrath rests upon sin but it isn't irrational to live with dread of judgment because it can restrain sin and motivate obedience. But dread of judgment by itself will never produce a true love for God nor hatred of sin. Rather, the fear of God which consists in godliness is more complete and formative because it moves our hearts toward him in love and adoration, characterized by reverence and awe in worship.⁴

Sinai teaches us that we must take God's holiness very seriously because in this fallen world there are glimpses of Sinai all around us. It's true many people live as though God's holy wrath against sin isn't real. And others may recognize his holiness but presume if they live a decent life; he'll understand and make a few concessions. But it won't work because the law of God doesn't make concessions. See, if we think judgment day will be like a classroom; we walk in and God checks the grade book. And when he sees we've passed more moral tests than we've failed, he'll let us in. Nope, we've got it wrong. Because the law makes no concessions; it calls for perfect obedience. And in so doing, it exposes our guilt and frailty before God. That's the situation with the Israelites at Sinai; distancing themselves from God in fear and trembling. **(#15)** In v.21, Moses draws near to God on their behalf as he enters that thick darkness where God was. Now as we follow Israel's sojourn to Canaan, we know Moses' mediation didn't solve their sin problem. And so we walk away from this text with that sense of longing for a better mediator who will not only stand in the gap but one who is able to bring sinful mankind joyfully into the presence of God. **(#16) And that** brings us to the joy of Zion, drawing near to God through the work of a better mediator.

The Joy of Zion: *Drawing near to God through the work of the better mediator*

We open the book of Hebrews and recognize the audience consisted of Jewish Christians, who were facing hardship and opposition for the faith. And they were being tempted to drift back to the old system of worship (*temple, sacrifices and priesthood*). And in chap 12, the writer is saying if you do that; you're headed back to Sinai. (#17) **And he reminds them** in v.18, that they haven't come to that foreboding mountain characterized by darkness, gloom, tempest winds, and trumpet blasts. Where the LORD's voice was so powerful, the people begged no further messages be spoken. Even the animals were threatened with death and Moses himself was terrified!

Rather, this is (#18) **their present reality**. They've come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. And this city is filled with worship: countless angels in joyful gathering, the church of God's firstborn whose names are written in heaven, God himself the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous who are now made perfect. Zion isn't marked by trembling at a distance, but by the joy of gathered worship to the living God. He's the centerpiece of the whole scene. The one to whom the city belongs and to whom the worshipers are accountable to.⁵ But there's another person there, and the whole scene is pointing to him because without him, no one is able to stand in (#19) **God's presence**. They've come to "*Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*" As mediator, Moses stood between God and the people. And as great as he was, he couldn't remove their guilt nor cleanse their consciences from sin before God.

(#20 Blank) **But in Jesus** we have a better mediator, the one to whom Moses points. He's the eternal Son of God who became man. And while on this earth, he was tempted in every respect, yet he never sinned in thought, word or deed. Therefore, he's the only person on the face of this earth who could stand before the Father with neither guilt nor shame. Nonetheless, he took our sin on himself and bore the punishment we deserved in bringing us into this new covenant relationship with God.⁶ And church, this is all made possible by the sprinkling of his blood, which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. In Gen 4, Abel's blood cried out from the ground to God after Cain murdered him. It cried out for retribution but the blood of Jesus speaks a better word; it cries out for forgiveness. Because through the blood of Christ, justice has been satisfied, our guilt has been removed; thus, we're able to stand in the presence of God; not on the basis of our righteousness but on the righteousness of Christ. And now that our Savior is seated at the right hand of the Father, his work of mediation continues in our lives; because we're united to him and utterly dependent upon him.⁷

So the joy of Zion isn't that we've come to a better mountain but that we've come to Jesus. Amen and Amen! But after showing us the joy of Zion, the writer gives a sober (#21) **warning in v25**: "*See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.*" If the Israelites didn't escape judgment when they refused to listen to God's word mediated through Moses; then there's no possibility of escape if we refuse to listen to the one who speaks from heaven. Church, the blood of Jesus speaks forgiveness, but his voice must be heard and received by faith and repentance. (#22) **In v. 26 following**, the writer returns to the giving of the law at Sinai: *At that time His voice shook the earth*. But now the Lord makes another promise that there's coming a day when he will once more shake the earth and the heavens too; all of creation will shake but only the unshakable will remain.

(#23 Blank) What are the unshakable things that will remain? It's the scene the writer has already described for us; the unending joyful worship taking place in the city of God, where countless angels have gathered along with the firstborn children of God, and the sprinkled blood of Jesus; which speaks the better word of our forgiveness.⁸ And church, I don't have the vocabulary to fully describe this joy. I can only describe it by reflecting on the most joyful experiences we know in this life; the mountain top moments that cause us to pinch ourselves that it's really happening. But also recognizing that even those experiences don't last. Because in this fallen world; there are valleys and pitfalls that we're called to endure. But none exist in that heavenly city; only righteousness, peace and joy in our Savior's presence.

And so how do we respond to this **(#24) reality right now?** *"Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."* The verse tells us, that the appropriate response to receiving an unshakable kingdom is possessing the kind of gratitude that fuels our worship. The writer says, "let us be grateful."

(#25 Blank) Why? Because gratitude is the mark of a recipient of God's grace. If our place in this unshakable kingdom is something we've earned, there would be no reason for gratitude. But when we plumb the depths of God's grace, love and mercy toward us in Christ; our gratitude grows deeper in becoming a settled posture of our hearts. One person said, Christian gratitude is *"a joyful commitment of one's personality to God."*⁹ Meaning it's not transactional or situational in our relationship with God. Rather, it's a whole-life orientation marked by trust, humility and acceptable worship to him.

Because we know deep within our hearts that we haven't come to Sinai; rather, through the blood of Christ, we've come to Zion. Therefore, our worship is marked by reverence and awe with joy; not terror and dread. Can you imagine pulling into the parking lot this morning and being told that anyone who touches the building will die? The dread of judgment would grip every one of us. But that's not what happens; rather each LORD's Day we acknowledge that God has called us into his presence and we've gathered to worship him. May we never take those words for granted because this is the foretaste of Zion. Our meditation Psalm reminded us that the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place. It's his resting place forever, he will abundantly bless her provisions and will satisfy the poor with bread. Her priests will be clothed with salvation and her saints will shout for joy. That's our call!

Conclusion:

(#26) Church, make no mistake about it, our God is indeed a consuming fire. And in this New Covenant relationship we have with him, his holiness hasn't diminished one bit. Perfect obedience to his commands is still required to stand in his presence. **(#27 Blank) Thus, it's only for** the sake of Christ; we're able to do so with reverence and awe; without fear of condemnation. And as we journey to the consummation of this unshakable kingdom, there will be seasons in life where we feel as though we're camped at the foot of Sinai; trembling in fear because of something we've done or something we've left undone. But by grace, we listen to the voice of our Savior, turn from sin and draw near to his throne of grace. For it's there we find mercy and grace to help in our time of need. And there we hear again the better word spoken by the blood of Jesus; the word of forgiveness, granting us peace with God. Thus, we continually join with all the saints above and the saints below and we sing without dread, praise with unspeakable joy, and meditate on the beauty and magnificence of Zion. That heavenly city where our names are inscribed and our place is secured through the one who's called us by his grace and promises to keep us by his grace. Amen.

¹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 589–590.

² David Brown, A. R. Fausset, and Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Genesis–Deuteronomy*, vol. I (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 360–361.

³ יִרְאָה (*yir'â*). n. fem. fear, terror. *Refers to the emotion or feeling or state of being afraid, terrified, or in awe.* While *yir'â* may refer to fear in the natural sense, such as fear of “briars and thornbushes” (Isa 7:25), the majority of the time this noun appears with respect to the fear of God, either in the sense of proper reverence for God (Gen 20:11; Exod 20:20; Psa 5:7) or in the sense of fear at the awesome power of God (Deut 2:25; Psa 90:11). The repeated statements that the “fear” of God is the central aspect of wisdom all use *yir'â* (Job 28:28; Psa 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10).

⁴ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 233–235.

⁵ Ramsey J. Michaels, “Commentary on Hebrews,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, vol. 17 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 458.

⁶ Gerald Bray, “Jesus As Mediator,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Michaels, 460.

⁹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Gratitude,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 900–901.