

Further Up and Further In

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[0 : 00] Well, we turn now to our Bible reading this morning, and you'll find that in Hebrews chapter 12. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, that's page 1009.

Otherwise, you'll find it's pretty near the end of your Bibles, just before Peter's letters, and just after 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus. And Bob Feil is continuing the studies in Hebrews this morning, and we're going to look at Hebrews chapter 12 from verse 18 right through to the end of the chapter. Chapter where the Apostle is laying out the great development and the great much more of what we have as the New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Hebrews 12 and verse 18, For he says, 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 message be spoken to them.

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.

[1 : 28] 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 spirit 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.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens. This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken, that is, things that have been made, in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

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.

Amen. May God bless us his word. Now, could I ask you please to have your Bibles open at page 109, the passage that was read for us a few moments ago.

[3 : 13] And before we look at that together, let's have a moment of prayer and ask the Lord's help. Be still for the presence of the Lord. moving in this place.

Father, we pray that as we open your word, as we listen, as we listen to what you have to say to us, that your Holy Spirit will take the human words, and use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. In Ellison Wonderland, Humpty Dumpty says, Words mean what I want them to mean.

Nothing more, and nothing less. Well, that may work in Wonderland, but in ordinary life, including in Christian life, it's very important that we know what words mean, and that we use them in a way that can be understood.

Good. Now, one such word, which causes often controversy in Christian circles, is worship. What does it mean to worship? Now, you know that many people can find worship to what happens when we meet together like this, and more especially to the singing part of it.

[4 : 38] If you go to a church, and you find a guy who says, Oh, I'm a worship leader, you can be pretty certain he's in charge of the music group. Now, I love music. I love singing.

But we mustn't collapse worship into what we do when we meet together, and most certainly, we must not collapse it into singing. Paul says in Romans, Present your bodies a living sacrifice.

That is your reasonable worship. In other words, where do you worship? Do you say the Tron Church, or St. Doldrums in the Dumps, or wherever it is you happen to go on Sunday? Or do you say, Wherever my body happens to be? Now, they're both true, of course. We mustn't, of course, go to the opposite extreme and say, The only place we don't worship is when we meet together.

Worship is about the whole of our lives. As the Anglican poet-preacher, George Herbert says, Seven whole days, not one in seven. I will praise you.

[5 : 43] So, this chapter is about worshipping God. This chapter is about, We have come. You'll notice verse 18, You have not come. And then verse 22, You have come.

Now, this word come is used especially of God's people gathering together in his presence. It's used throughout the letter in that way in other places.

Come with confidence, says the author, to the throne of grace. And we are told in verse 28, Therefore, let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

And we saw last week about acceptable behavior, if you like, about perspective and perseverance. Now, our author has talked about coming together before in 1025, and he said, Don't neglect coming together, but encourage one another.

And in that context, of course, that's particularly encouraging in the difficult task of the Christian life, running the Christian race. I feel like the horizontal dimension.

[6 : 58] But here, it's something far deeper and far bigger. Further up and further in, as I've called it. These are the words of the unicorn at the end of the Narnia stories when Aslan's friends arrive in Aslan's country.

This is a deeper country, he says. We are further up and further in. That's our title for today, further up and further in.

Now, notice how the passage develops. We have a contrast of two mountains. Sinai is not named, but it's obviously Sinai that's meant. You have not come to what may be touched.

Verse 18, A blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and a tempest. And then in verse 20, if even a beast touches the mountain. Obviously, Sinai and the other mountain.

You have come, verse 22, to Zion. Now, there are too many people commenting on this passage basically say that's what God used to be like at Sinai, but he's different now.

[8 : 07] Now, that is totally, that's totally unsustainable as an interpretation. Look at verse 18. A blazing fire. That's what God was like at Sinai.

What is God like now? Look at the last verse, verse 29. Our God is a consuming fire. Not a contrast between two gods, two different kinds of gods.

It's a contrast of the visible and the invisible. It's a contrast of how God revealed himself at different stages in history.

It's not that God is different. God is still a consuming fire. Indeed, what the verses 25 and so on are saying is we have an even greater responsibility than those who tremble at the blazing fire, those who shuddered in the darkness, those who are terrified by the tempest because God has spoken fully, finally, and clearly in Jesus Christ.

So, let's look at this passage then as it develops. It really develops in three movements, if you like. Verses 18 to 21, we have the majesty of God.

[9 : 20] You have not come to what may be touched. Now, remember our author is addressing those who are tempted to go back to Sinai, to the old rituals that God established there.

Now, as I say, it doesn't mean that God has changed. It doesn't mean it's a different God. It means that the way we approach Him, the way that we know Him, has developed.

He's now revealed fully and finally. So, we don't go back and offer goats and lambs. We don't go back and build temples, earthly temples.

We come to Him, but we come to the same God. So, the majesty of God. And that majesty of God is revealed in the visible world.

These elements again in verse 18. These are all parts of the visible world. Blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and tempest.

[10 : 22] Aspects of God revealed in the created order, particularly fire. The first time that's mentioned in the Bible is at the gates of Eden when a flaming sword prevents people coming back to the tree of life.

Mentioned again, of course, and particularly in this passage when God appears on Sinai. And, of course, earlier He appeared to Moses in the bush that burned and was not consumed. Look at Daniel, the throne of God, is surrounded by a river of fire. That's what God was like in the Old Testament. But wait a minute. How does the New Testament begin? John the Baptist says this, when Jesus comes, He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now, these are not two elements.

He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit and another element called fire. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit who is fire. That's the same God, is it not?

[11 : 20] And then again, in Acts chapter 2, when the Spirit comes, He comes in tongues of flame and a rushing mighty wind. The same God who appeared at Sinai.

and darkness. Now, God, of course, is not darkness. God is light, says John, and in Him is no darkness at all.

But the point is that He is separate from us. And Moses, we are told, in the Sinai passage, approached the thick darkness where God was.

God is light. He concealed Himself in darkness. And the trumpet, the call in the story of the desert wanderings, the trumpet signal that they are to move on to the next stage of the journey.

And in the New Testament, we read that trumpet again. The trumpet that will herald the Lord's return. When the Lord returns, He will return with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, which will summon all God's people together.

[12 : 27] This is the God who is holy, holy, holy. The majesty of God. And the second thing we read about in these verses is the word of God which strikes fear into people's hearts.

As people heard the voice at Sinai, they trembled. Now, our author has already spoken of that in chapter 4. The word of God is living and active.

piercing soul and spirit and discerning thoughts and intentions of the heart. They needed to learn that God was holy and to tremble at His word.

Now, for us, it's not sacred places. There's nothing sacred about this building. There is nothing about this building that requires us to bow down in particular places or to have respect to particular pieces of furniture.

That's not what it's about. But, what the word of God is telling us is the same thing. We are sinful and God is holy.

[13 : 33] Now, we'll never realize that God is holy unless we realize that we are sinful and unless we realize that Christ can save us from that sin.

And all these go together. In the 16th century, every merchant was visiting a number of Scottish towns. This was the time of the 17th century, rather, and he went and listened to a number of famous preachers.

Went to Ayrshire, I think, and heard the distinguished preacher of the time, David Dixon, and he said, he told us of the majesty of God and made us tremble.

Then he went somewhere, I think, about Stirling. He said we heard another preacher and he showed us the sinfulness of our hearts and made us repent. Then he said we went to St. Andrews. The little fair man called Rutherford was preaching there and he showed us the loveliness of Christ. Now you see, that's exactly what our author is talking about, is it not?

[14 : 38] We need all of them. We're not likely to appreciate the loveliness of Christ unless we appreciate the majesty of God and the sinfulness of our own hearts. If we don't appreciate that God is holy, that God is majestic, that God cannot look upon sin, then we're never likely to come to him in repentance.

And on the other hand, if we don't appreciate who Jesus is and what he's done, we're going to be left trembling, dismayed, and totally shut up to ourselves.

Only by grace can we enter. Only by grace can we stand. And notice, this isn't just the kind of thing that happened in the Old Testament.

If you read Luke chapter 5, Peter, Peter listening to Jesus and a miraculous catch of fish comes. And what does Peter do? He falls on his knees and says, Lord, I'm a sinful man.

I need forgiveness. And at the end of the Bible in Revelation 1, the Apostle John falls on his face before the risen Christ. When I saw him, he says, I fell at his feet as though I were dead.

[15 : 51] The majesty of God. Holy, holy, holy. God in three persons. Blessed Trinity. That's the first movement. Then we come on to verses 22 to 24, the approachability of God.

Remember I said it's not a different God we're approaching. It's not that God was like that at Sinai. I know he's changed so we can approach him in our own right.

Now the atmosphere is joyful. Indeed, party-like. Mount Zion, the city of David, 2 Samuel chapter 5, David captures that.

He makes it the place not only where his palace is, but where a temple for the Lord is going to be built to hold the Ark of the Covenant. Now God is majestic and holy.

But if you go back to Exodus and read the passage about Sinai, what is that? That passage is revealing God dwells in unapproachable light.

[16:59] He covers himself in darkness. What does he say about himself to Moses? Moses says, Lord, show me your glory. What does the Lord say?

The Lord says, I will cause all my goodness to pass before you. I am the Lord, merciful, compassionate, who shows steadfast love.

It is the same God. And that God who reveals himself to us today, that God whose presence we approach, not in this way that they approach through the temple, through the rituals, through priests, and so on.

It is the same God. So where have we come to? You have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God. The city talked about in chapter 11. Abraham, we are told, travel to the city which had foundations, whose builder and creator is God.

The city of Revelation 21, which comes down from heaven out of God. Comes down out of heaven from God. And it's the city of the living God.

[18:10] This God will never die. This city will never disappear. We'll be singing at the end of the service, fallen thrones and shattered empires, realms and riches lost to sight.

This city will never disappear. This city will never be destroyed. Zion founded on the mountain. Zion, city of our God. So first of all, the place we have come to.

We have come to Zion. About the people of Zion, the people of the city. We have come, he says, to innumerable angels in festal gathering.

Angels were how the letter began. It tells us about the mighty ones as Psalm 103 says, who do God's will. The angels who are part of God's gracious provision for us in this world.

As I said before, angels have fared badly in Christian thinking. They've either been exalted to a place they don't deserve or they've simply been ignored. When did you last thank God for the ministry of angels?

[19:17] Probably not very recently because it's unseen. But remember what this letter tells us. Angels are ministering spirits sent out to help us on our way to glory.

But of course, they've often been sensationalized and bizarre stories and so on. But don't let that rob us of the importance of angels.

Angels in heaven who rejoice when someone on earth comes to repent. Angels who we'll join with around the throne. And then all of God's people to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.

Elsewhere, we read about people's names written in heaven. And the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Those now in heaven who have not yet received their resurrection bodies.

So, when we meet together, who are we meeting with? We're not simply meeting with the people who happen to be in the same building.

[20:23] Whether that's huge numbers or tiny numbers, we're meeting with the people of God around the throne. A present reality which will one day be seen in its fullness.

Angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as the prayer book says, a young Anglican vicar was taking his first communion service in a country church.

He was really excited. He was looking forward to it. It was a snowy evening and when he got to the church there were only about five elderly people there.

His heart sank. Don't ever believe a preacher who tells you don't care how many people are there. Preachers are human like everybody else. Anyway, he went through the liturgy till he came to the place angels and that we meet with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

To the astonishment of the five people there, he broke away from the liturgy and said, forgive me Lord, I didn't realize I was in that company. What happens when we meet with the Lord's people?

[21:32] Not just those who are here on earth, those who have gone to be with him, those surrounding the throne and with angels and that of course great number includes those who are still

to become Christian.

Those who are not yet Christian but one day will be. The great multitude that Revelation talks about around the throne singing worthy is the Lamb.

But notice God the judge of all, verse 23, he is still judge. Sin still has to be dealt with. It's not, as I've said several times, it's not that he's changed.

He is still the judge. So we come to the people of the city and to the judge and we come to the Savior, verse 24, Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Now it was Abel who began the great story of the people of faith in chapter 11, verse 4, by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain.

[22 : 45] Why was it a better sacrifice? Because it pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. His words speak better because in his blood there is full forgiveness.

He is the final word. the majesty of God, the approachability of God. And we need to hold these two together because they're both still true and indeed will be true to all eternity.

And the third movement, verses 25 to 29, the unshakable kingdom of God. Verse 25, see to it, make sure that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

Don't be complacent, even if we've come to Zion, don't be complacent. Amos says, woe to those who are complacent in Zion.

Isn't there a great danger of imagining, imagining that we are here because we deserve to be here, imagining that God must be rather pleased with us and so on.

[23 : 53] Point is, don't take it for granted. We are here by grace. We are sustained by grace and one day grace will bring us home.

So, what's this unshakable kingdom about? First of all, it means that God will break into history again. Verse 26, at that time, that's at Sinai, his voice shook the earth.

This was a breaking into history of God, but it anticipated the time of the end. He spoke then on earth, but now he's speaking from heaven.

The whole universe will be shaken. And he quotes here from the prophet Haggai. Haggai speaking about the building of the old temple after the exile and saying, look, this doesn't seem very much. Indeed, we read in Ezra of how people wept when they saw the temple. Those who remember the magnificent temple of Solomon. and then seeing this rather shabby, not even a replica of it, so much smaller.

[25 : 05] Haggai says, don't worry, that's only a staging post. When the real temple of God comes in the future, Zion, the new Jerusalem, this will fill the whole of heaven and earth.

because this will be God's final dwelling place. In Haggai's time, there wasn't even a son of David. Zerubbabel, the governor, was the descendant of David, but no king sat on the throne. But when God shakes history again, when he breaks into creation, when Jesus reigns, where the sun does his excessive journeys run, that temple will be magnificent.

That temple, indeed, will be the whole universe. Now, you get hints of this even in the Old Testament. When in Psalm 93, for example, God reigns in magnificence, and yet, it says, in his temple, everything speaks glory.

Not just the Jerusalem temple, but the temple which is creation itself. At the moment, a badly damaged temple because of the fall. But one day, a magnificent temple, which will be God's people in God's new creation.

[26 : 23] And that's the second thing. There will be a radical new creation. Verse 27, the things that have been made in order that the things that cannot be shaken will remain.

Now, I don't believe that means the total annihilation of this present world. I think it means the radical removal of it from all that is evil and sinful and fallen of all that is of all the decay and death. I believe that all that is beautiful, all that is lovely, all that is honorable in this new creation will be there in this fallen creation, will be there in the new creation.

Cleansed from sin, music, art, literature, all these wonderful things that we enjoy in this creation. We'll be there, they say, without the sinfulness that mars our most wonderful relationships, spoils our greatest achievements.

So we'll be there in the new creation, everything made new. And the final thing is the experience of the living presence of God.

[27 : 37] our God, he says, is a consuming fire. Fire does two things, doesn't it? Fire destroys, but fire also cleanses and renews.

And this, I think, is really the end of the long section that began in chapter 10, verse 19, therefore, brothers, we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus through the new and living way, continues in chapter 11 with the record of those who have finished the race.

Our God is a consuming fire. Destroy his enemies, destroy all that is evil, but bring the cleansed renewed people who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb into the heavenly city, which is the new Jerusalem.

And in chapter 10, verses 36 to 37, the author says, don't be, you have need of endurance, that you may receive what is promised, for in a little while the one who comes will come and not delay.

There is another event to happen. In the Old Testament, prophets spoke of the Lord coming to his temple. Malachi says, the Lord whom you are looking for will one day come to his temple.

[29 : 04] Hebrews is telling us here, as Haggai was telling us, that when he did come to his temple the first time, he was of course rejected. He was cast out, he was crucified.

As chapter 13, which we'll look at in a week or two, says, Jesus suffered outside the gate. He was cast outside of the temple, cast out of the city.

But one day, he will return to his temple. And when that comes, the new creation will be ushered in, the unshakable kingdom, the new creation.

And because of that, he says, let us offer our God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

If we're going to stand in that presence, as one day we will, we have to be cleansed of our sins, don't we? Revelation says, nothing that defiles will ever enter in nor death.

[30 : 07] The only way it will happen is if we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Our author is saying, this is the end of the journey, further up and further in.

Amen. Let's pray. And Father, we praise you that we await a savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly bodies and make them like his glorious body.

We look forward to that day when this whole creation will praise him, when the redeemed of every age, angels and archangels and all the company of heaven will join in praise and thanksgiving, which will never end.

we praise you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.