

Heb 12:18-24 The Kingdom of Christ (part 3)

Today is our third sermon under the overall title of the Kingdom of Christ. In the first part, we looked at Mt. Sinai, as compared to Mt. Zion, particularly the differences between the old covenant (Mosaic Law) and the new covenant in Christ. In the 2nd part, we considered Mt. Zion to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of everything said about Zion in the OT. Today, I want to finish the passage. Really, what we have is a comparison between the old covenant and the new covenant, which is fitting as we take the Lord's Supper and remember Jesus' words, "***This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.***" In vv. 18-21 we see 7 pictures of Mt. Sinai which show the holiness of God and his law that comes down to sinners. And if any of us stand before God as sinners, this is ALL we can expect. "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Rom. 3:23). And, "**the wages of sin is death**" (Rom. 6:23). But, then he moves to Mt. Zion as he pictures for those Hebrew Christians (and for us) what we have in Christ. And the descriptions are vastly different than what was experienced at Sinai. In vv. 22-24 we have 8 pictures of what Christians possess in the new covenant. Last week we saw the first and really the second: Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, and the Heavenly Jerusalem. Today I want to consider the remaining 6 pictures of what we have come to in Christ in the new covenant.

1. To Innumerable Angels in Festal Gathering. Brothers and sisters, there are more inhabitants in Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. We are not alone! Our text is literally "miriads" or "ten thousand" who gather to worship. But when used in the plural, it means a number that cannot be counted. This certainly refers to the angels that did not fall with Satan. Before the fall of Adam, there was some kind of union, kinship with the angels. But, after the fall, this changed. God put an angel with a flaming sword to guard the Garden and the tree of life. And often God's angels have been his arm of judgment. At Mt. Sinai when the law came to the people there, God comes with "myriads" of angels (Ps. 68). Because of sin the peoples of the earth have become the attention of God's angels in judgment. Many times in history as angels appear to people, they only fall down in fear, knowing death is near.

But, in Christ, God's people in the new covenant, those who make up the church, NOW are fellow worshipers with the angels. The fear and dread of their ministry is taken from us. Eph. 1:9-10 says He has made known "**to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**" Eph. 3:14 says: "**For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,**"

Although there is a difference and distance between their persons and ours as to dignity and power, yet, in communion and worship with God, we are equal with them. What happens when the Apostle John falls down to worship before an angel? He says: "**You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God**" (Rev. 19:10). Today, we and an uncountable number of angels worship the same God through Jesus Christ! There is a perfect reconciliation between the church on earth and the angels above. And we have the same purpose: To worship God in spirit and in truth!

2. To the Assembly of the Firstborn Who Are Enrolled in Heaven. The word for assembly is also translated as “congregation” or “church.” It is a political term used for citizens of a city that gather with a purpose. And these people have been given authority to gather. It is like a town hall meeting where the citizens of a city (and those alone) have the right to show up and listen to the city’s plans and to communicate their support and/or their complaints. And there is a roll. Trust me when I say the city KNOWS who is on their roll. For we get the tax bill every year. And in our text, the “assembly” is described as being “*enrolled in heaven.*” This is certainly true of the church as we are God’s representatives on this earth. We are “*citizens of heaven*” (Phil. 3:20).

There are some who say this refers to only the apostles, or only to the OT saints. However, I believe this must be ALL the elect of God from the fall. This is the “church” of the OT and the “church” of the new covenant. They look forward. We look back. But, the foundation of our faith is Jesus Christ. And, I believe there is an emphasis (See Owen) on the bringing together of Jew and Gentile; the citizens of heaven are from all nations, tribes, and tongues.

Also, here we see this “assembly” is called the “firstborn.” This is a very important theme in the Bible. “Firstborn” does not refer to something physical. Yes, to be firstborn in the literal sense means to be born first. But, when our author uses the word “firstborn” here, he does not mean “physically born first.” He does not intend priority of birth order, but instead the fact that the firstborn has a particular right to an inheritance. For example, the son of a king has the RIGHT to the throne and to all the rights of inheritance that other siblings do not have. When speaking of Reuben, his firstborn, Isaac says, “**you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.**” The nation of Israel was called God’s “firstborn” in this same way. In Exod. 4:22, God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh: “**Israel is my firstborn son.**” God is not saying “*Israel is physical my firstborn.*” He is saying Israel is special. They are my priority. They are given a special dignity and honor and preeminence above all the nations of the earth. This is why when we come to the NT, Paul says of Christ, “**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation**” (Col. 1:15).

In the same kind of way, as Christians, enrolled in heaven, we are God’s “firstborn.” Paul says in Eph. 1:3-11 we read: “**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance . . .**”

Let’s move on.

3. To God the Judge of All. We have come to God, the judge of all. The word “judge” comes before God, stressing the awesome holiness of God. And God will always do what is right. He cannot do otherwise. He is holy. Therefore, He is just! And how can any of us say we have come

to God . . . as sinners . . . as those who have broken God's laws . . . from the Garden of Eden to Mt. Sinai to the words of Jesus who says if you've even looked at a woman with lust, you've committed adultery. Or, even if you've thought evil of your neighbor, you've committed adultery in your heart. I think of Job as he tries to make sense of all his losses and the sickness which held his body. He recalls his former days as he speaks of his own good deeds and even his motive as he loved God and his ways. And finally, He comes to the judge. And as he stands there before the presence of God (mystery), he says, "**Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand upon my mouth**" (Job 40:4). And then, as Holy, God, Creator and the Judge of the earth, he answers Job. And then Job says at the end: "**I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes**" (Job 42:5-6).

Brothers and sisters, God is THE JUDGE. And He judges all things. He is the father of equity! And at Mt. Sinai, the Israelites came to him, but only in fear and dread and trembling as sinners who had broken his laws. But, in Jesus, we find the justice of God given out completely on the cross. God judges his Son . . . in our place. And now, we come! We remember this today in the Lord's Supper. Two things in application: 1) We have unlimited access to God because of the gospel of Christ. I think of Rom. 8:1. 2) We are reminded that God will vindicate his justice on the last day.

4. To the Spirits of the Righteous Made Perfect. This is an interesting phrase of which we can continue discussion at a further time. (And I may miss some details here.) But, I think it is pretty simple. These are the "*spirits*" of those who have died, particularly those of the "*righteous*" made "*perfect*." These are those who have died, who are not under the punishment of God, those who have believed the promises of God in Christ . . . by faith, whether in the OT or the NT. And now, they are literally "consummated" or made "perfect." Let me make some quick statements about what I believe on this issue.

i. They are capable of communion with God. (As Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:6-8: "**So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.**")

ii. This group is a clear number of the "righteous" who have been made "perfect." He does not speak of the "unrighteous" here. These men and woman of faith who have gone before us have now "finished their race" (Heb. 12:1-2). They have "sat down," no longer in the presence of sin, trouble, labor, and temptations from life in this sinful world.

iii. It goes without saying that these "spirits" are alive, which makes any doctrine of "soul sleep" impossible. For we cannot "come" to such as are "asleep" or to those who have no faculties.

iv. And, I do believe these "spirits" are waiting for their glorified body to come.

Today, in Christ, in the new covenant, like them, we have come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. The difference is we live by faith, they now live by sight. But, all of us make up the glorious Church of Christ. By way of application, this truth should help us live

by faith NOW, giving us comfort against the fear of death and all the troubles and distresses of this present life.

5. To Jesus the Mediator of a New Covenant. Our author brings his argument to a close by proclaiming Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant. I won't give many details here because this is what we have been "living in" for the entire book of Hebrews. He is the fulfillment of all the shadows and pictures of everything we have in the old testament and the old covenant. Moses was the mediator at Mt. Sinai, the mediator given by God to deliver the law and to be God's representative, God's person between himself and Israel. But, Moses had not special interest as mediator, except in obedience. He did not offer himself as a sacrifice. He did not lay down his life as a sinless offering in the place of sinners. He was a sinner . . . just like the rest us and the rest of mankind (Rom. 3:23). He walked by faith in the promises of God. But not so with Jesus.

Today, as we remember the words: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," we remember and know that the blood of Jesus was different than any blood of any animal sacrificed under the old covenant. Yes, it was still blood. But, it was different in that it was shed by the sinless son of God, Jesus. And by his blood, ALL the blessings of God in the new covenant have come down to us! Because of his blood, our sins are forgiven.

6. To the Sprinkled Blood that Speaks a Better Word than the Blood of Abel. Finally, we come to the sprinkled blood, which is better than the blood of Abel. Throughout the Book of Hebrews we have spoken often of all the blood that was spilled through the old sacrificial system. There were all kinds of offerings where blood was "shed" or the blood was "sprinkled" on both the altar, the ark in the holy of holies, and even upon the people. I think the reference here comes from Exod. 24 and the coming of the law from Mt. Sinai. Right after God gave Moses his laws, particularly the 10 commandments, Moses comes to the people at the foot of the mountain. And the people here his words and they agree. They say to God, "We will do what you command." And then, to ratify this covenant, Moses sprinkles the blood upon the people. We read: "And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, **"Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words"** (Ex. 24:8).

Today, the new covenant is confirmed by the blood of Jesus Christ. This is what we remember today in the Lord's supper. And Jesus does not continually offer himself. Rom. 6:10: "**For the death he died he died to sin, once for all . . .**" 1 Pet. 3:18: "**For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God . . .**" Today, by faith, if you have come to Christ, your sins are covered. And there is only one offering. The blood of Christ has been "sprinkled" upon you (by faith). And, this blood, he says is "***better than the blood of Abel.***" Let me mention just a couple differences. Abel was a man of faith. And the shedding of his blood was precious to God. For "**Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints**" (Ps. 116:15). How much more precious is the blood of Christ! Abel's blood was shed and cried out from the ground. The blood of Christ speaks from heaven itself. And, the blood of Abel cries out for justice and vengeance. But, the blood of Christ calls out for blessing upon those it has been sprinkled.

In closing, turn to John 1:17, which is really a summary of the entire book of Hebrews. The Apostle John says: **“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”**

This is what we remember as we take the Lord’s Supper this morning! We are the recipients of not just law. For when we stand before the law, all we find is fear and death and awe of the holiness of God . . . exactly what Israel found at the foot of Mt. Sinai. But in Christ, we 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.”**