

***Introduction...***

By the summer of 2000 I had been a Christian for just over 2 years, but I found myself standing on the front steps of a one room church building in the middle of a cotton field in Louisiana. It was a hot and dusty and unfamiliar but I was in the right place. I was early, which would account for the fact that the front door was still locked, but my knock on the door was nothing compared the pounding of my heart in my chest.

You see, that morning I was set to preach for the first time and I was nervous. My father had bought me a new suit and tie, but as soon as the door opened it was obvious that I would look out of place. The smiling woman who opened the door was wearing a flannel shirt and denim overalls and she was holding a can of Lysol in her hand because a skunk had gotten under the building the night before. But those details didn't matter all that much at the time.

Stepping into the building I was less focused on the surroundings as I was on the sermon I was about to preach. I had been studying for weeks and had revised my manuscript several times. I had practiced the sermon in front of the mirror and had almost memorized every line.

But still I was nervous in a way that I will never forget. That old fear of failure was there, the fear of messing up in front of a room full of people. **James 3** was there in the back of my mind as well, "Not many of you should become teachers...for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." My fiancé was there and no one wants to look like a fool in front of the person they love.

But over all of these fears and anxieties there was something much more pressing. It's hard to explain, but it comes to this, **I was filled with a deep sense of my inadequacy and unworthiness at standing before a group of Christians and representing God to them.** I suddenly felt that I had no business behind the pulpit. Who am I to proclaim God's Word? Who am I to stand before God's people? Who am I to stand before God and declare what He has said?

Each week, before I ascend to the pulpit, I sit on this front row and pray that God would humble me, strengthen me, fill me and use me. And each week I feel that same old inadequacy and unworthiness. But I'm okay with it, in fact I welcome it and hope that I never lose it because no matter how long I've been preaching or how well I might know my sermon or my audience, our God is still a consuming fire and we should approach Him with reverence and awe.

***Transition...***

12 weeks ago we started a study on the doctrine of God. I wanted us to take the time to look deeply into Scripture so that we could better understand, know and worship our God. In the process, we have learned some wonderful things about Him but today I want to bring this series to a close in a very practical way by asking the question, "How do we approach the God of the Bible?"

How do we relate to and approach an eternally powerful, eternally present, eternally good God? How do we approach a God who is perfectly holy, perfectly loving, and perfectly just? How can we hope to have a relationship with our Creator; with the God who exists as three-in-one?

This morning we are going to allow the author of Hebrews help us answer this question.

**Hebrews 12:18** For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup>For they could not endure the order that was

given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." <sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

**V. 22** 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, <sup>23</sup> 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, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

### ***Sermon Focus...***

#### **I. The Mountain of Law**

When we began this journey to ***behold our God*** we entered into the story on the heels of the plagues in Egypt, the night of the Passover and the Exodus. We kicked this whole thing off with Moses' request for God to, "Show me your Glory!" This stage of redemptive history was more about God ***showing*** Himself to His people than about God ***telling*** His people about Him. **Theology wasn't a subject to be read it was miracles to be witnessed.** Sure, God had spoken to a few people and Moses was among that short list; but the primary way that Israel knew their God was through the signs that they had seen.

God had raised up a redeemer and sent Him to the people. He had commanded the forces of nature and the creatures of the world to do His will and to declare that He was the One True God. The memory of signs and wonders helped form the people's understanding of God, but that was going to change.

God led the people into the wilderness and to the base of Mount Sinai and when they arrived...

**Exo 19:9** And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, ***I am coming to you*** in a thick cloud, (so) that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."

Finally, the people are going to hear God speak. Can you imagine how exciting that must have been? The God who loved them and heard their cries and sent them a redeemer and freed them from slavery was going to come and speak to them. But they weren't prepared for what their God was going to say.

This mountain was ground zero for what we call the Old Covenant, which was an agreement between God and the people that outlined how they were to live in relationship to Him. It revealed God's nature, character, will and standards. It described the requirements and restrictions that the people would have to follow. But more than that, this covenant at Sinai made it crystal clear what it was like to approach God.

That is what we all want, right? We want to approach God. We want to know God and be close to Him and be in relationship to Him. But what the people learned at Sinai is that God is unapproachable. Sinful man could not come near to God and live.

Even before God came down to talk with Moses, He made all the people back up away from the mountain. The people had to spend 3 days consecrating (cleansing and preparing) themselves. Then the people weren't even allowed to come near to the mountain because if they touched the mountain they would die. God even sent Moses back down a second time to warn the people not to touch the mountain.

God wanted to make it crystal clear that sinners weren't allowed to come near His awesome holiness on their own. Sinful man cannot hope to come into the presence of God and live. Then when the day finally came things got worse. The writer of Hebrews described the scene from **Exodus 19...**

**Exo 19:16** On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, ***so that all the people in the camp trembled.***  
<sup>17</sup> Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. <sup>19</sup> And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. <sup>20</sup> The Lord came down on Mount Sinai

**The scene was so frightening that the people trembled in fear and begged Moses to talk to God and ask Him to stop speaking. The sound of His voice was so terrifying that they felt as though they would die. The God of Sinai is a God to be feared. His power is terrifying and no man can stand in His presence on his own.**

This scene would become the context for our understanding of the Old Covenant. The Sinai covenant was marked by the fear of being in the presence of God. It was marked by the commandments, the law and the fear of death. In **2 Cor 3:7** the Apostle Paul referred to it as "the ministry of death carved in letters on stone...the ministry of condemnation."

Now, why does Paul speak of it this way? Because, Mt. Sinai makes demands that man can't fulfill. At Sinai we see our inability and we fear the punishment that it announces. Sinai is the mountain of law and the law can't save us it can only condemn **us. But the law is not the problem, we are the problem.**

**You see, we can't get our act together and in Romans 7, Paul tells us why.** In **Romans 7** the apostle Paul gets vulnerable with us when he lets us know about his own struggle with sin. He says, "I was once alive, but then the law came and when I saw the commandments of God, it was like sin came alive in me and I died. The commandments that promised life actually proved to be death to me."

He had been studying the law of God all of his life, but he finally came to the point where he realizes that there was no way that he, or any other man, could keep the law perfectly. The law doesn't bring life, it brings death. But he goes on to say that the law is not the problem, sin is the problem.

**Rom 7:13** Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin...

**The law puts a spotlight on our sin. It exposes just how sinful we are. It makes us to see the fact that we are liars, thieves, adulterers, murders, and idolaters. But the law doesn't create those things in us, it simply exposes that our hearts are filled with sinful desires. Our spirit may be willing but our flesh is weak.**

**V. 18** For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh. I have the ***desire*** to do what is right, but not the ***ability*** to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

**V. 22** I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

**In Romans 7 Paul is seeing himself as a man standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai hopelessly and helplessly condemned under the weight of his sin.** It wasn't that God was wrong when He came down on Mt. Sinai and gave us the law; but when He came down He revealed something to us. The reason we can't get our act together, the reason we can't get free from sin, the reason we can't come near to God on our own is because we are wretched sinners through and through.

He is holy and we are not. He is righteous and we are wretched. He is perfect and we are stuck in the cycle of trying to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps only we keep slipping and falling on the floor and our bootstraps end up wrapped around our neck choking us to death.

This is what Sinai does to us. It reveals our sin in a vivid scene of darkness, fire, gloom and despair...**But there is another mountain that God wants us to come to.**

## **II. The Mountain of Grace**

**V. 22** 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, <sup>23</sup> 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, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Sinai is synonymous with the law but Zion is synonymous with grace. Zion was the name given to the city of the Jebusites. It was situated on a hill and when David became King he took the city and made it His capital. Zion refers to Jerusalem, the city of God and His people. The city where the temple of God was built. The city where the presence of God dwelt.

The people could not approach Mt. Sinai but they could approach Mt. Zion.

Sinai was forbidding and terrifying, Zion is inviting and gracious. Sinai is closed to all, because no one is able to please God on Sinai's terms – perfect fulfillment of the law. Zion is open to all, because Jesus Christ has met those terms and will stand in the place of anyone who will come to God through Him. Zion symbolizes the approachable God (*J Mac, Commentary on Hebrews. Pg 413*).

We can't come to Sinai on our own and we can't come to Zion on our own either. In order to come to Mt. Zion we must come through the sacrifice of Jesus. He kept the law on our behalf. He achieved righteousness for us. He died our death on the cross. He paid the price for our freedom and adoption. **Sinai reveals our bondage to sin, Zion is where we come to be free.**

Here's another way for us to look at this...Sinai brings us face to face with **Romans 7** but Zion ushers us into the comfort of **Romans 8**. *Jared Wilson writes...*

"Every day I wake up in Romans 7...My alarm goes off and I sit up in bed, my uncoffeed consciousness groggily geared up for sins – both of omission and of commission. I am engaged in the flesh before I even get my feet on the carpet.

And yet, right there beside me, laid out like the day's outfit, are new mercies. Romans 8 lies right there, spooning Romans 7 in a full-size bed, no wiggle room.<sup>1</sup> And it says to us...

**Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

**Romans 7** is a world of shadow, fear and judgment; but **Romans 8** is a world of light, peace, and deep joy of Christ. **Romans 7** speaks a terrifying word of guilt, shame and condemnation; but **Romans 8** speaks of mercy, grace, and full atonement. **Romans 7** provides a window into a hellish eternity; but **Romans 8** opens the doors to eternal rest in the presence of God.

The best news in the world is that we are not gathered at the fearful foot of Mt. Sinai this morning, but have been invited up onto the merciful mountain of Zion. **And the final question is, what must we do?**

### III. How must we respond to our God...

Now that we have come to the end of this study on the doctrine of God, what is to be our response? What are some practical ways that theology should impact our lives?

**Heb 12:25** See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if 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.

The author of Hebrews has shown us the contrast between the two mountains and here he helps us to understand what that means in a practical sense. We must not refuse or ignore the One that is speaking to us. Or to state it in the positive, "We must hear the Word of God and we must receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

#### **1. We must Hear and Receive God's Word –**

Many of the Israelites refused to listen to God. They heard Him and trembled in fear, but still they went their own way and the full weight of the law rested upon them. This same thing happens in the church today. People hear the Word of God, they even hear the call to turn from their sin and trust in Jesus; but being a hearer of the Word is not the same thing as being a doer of the Word.

Far too many people today come to church to get some advice, but we need more than good advice, we need good news. The reason we think we simply need some good advice is that we don't understand just how jacked-up we really are. We don't understand nor do we want to accept the fact that we are desperately wicked people. We are sinners stuck in the rut of Romans 7 and we need the powerful grace of Romans 8 to change our hearts.

We need to listen to God's speak and His message for the world today is Jesus. God's word to us today is to come to Christ and live. God's word to us today is turn from our sin and trust in Jesus to save us and lead us to God. And this is not just for unbelievers to hear and be saved, it's for believers as well. We need to remember the gospel, we need to preach God's grace to our hearts again and again. We need to **1. Hear and Receive God's Word.**

#### **2. We must Worship God with reverence and Awe**

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<sup>1</sup> Jared C. Wilson, The Imperfect Disciple (Pg. 24-25)

No one can face Sinai alone. No one can approach God through the law; but Christ has done what the law could not do. He came down the mountain. He bought our freedom with His blood. He sent the Spirit to give us a new heart and a new life. He has ushered us into a Kingdom that cannot be shaken and our response is to worship Him with reverence and awe.

**Heb 12:28** 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, <sup>29</sup>for our God is a consuming fire.

Atop both mountains (Sinai and Zion) we see the same God, the same consuming fire; but through Christ we are called up to meet with Him face to face. Christ has made a way for us to come back into the presence of God, but He is still a consuming fire. So we come before Him with gratitude and humility, with bent knees and reverent hearts and silent awe.

We use the word awesome far too flippantly when in reality there are few things in this world that truly fill us with awe. Incredible scenes in nature, breathtaking works of art, a deeply moving piece of music they fill us with joy and appreciation; but how many things leave us in a state of silent awe and gaping wonder.

***2. Every worshipful glance at our God should leave us in a state of reverence and awe.***

### **3. We Must be transformed**

The goal of this study was not simply that we could learn more things about God, but that we could grow in our understanding and be changed. That's what happens when we gaze at our god.

**2 Cor 3:16** When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed...<sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

**Theology is transformative and is not like other forms of information.** There are some subjects that you can study that don't really have an impact on your day to day life, but theology is not one of them. If you are growing in your knowledge of God you cannot stay the same. You will be shaped by that experience.

For instance, as I learn more about the grace of God, I am not only filled with more gratitude but also I should become more gracious as well. God calls us to be more like Him and His Spirit works that in us so the more I love the Lord my God with all my mind, the more I will learn to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, and strength.

As I learn more about God's holiness I am going to come to a better understanding of my own sin, which should lead me to repentance and confession....

***Beholding the glory of the Lord leads to transformation because theology is transformative.***

***Conclusion...***

### **4. We Must Serve the Lord**

How could we grow in our knowledge of God without growing in our service to Him? To know Him is to love Him and serve Him. He calls us to serve Him in our hearts, in our homes, in the church and in the world.