

Where Have You Come (Heb. 12.18-24.Pt2)?

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¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched... 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, ²³ 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, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Introduction

What is in view in the contrast of “comings” in this text (Heb. 12.18 with 22-24)? In contrast to what you have not come to, what does the writer mean when he speaks of where you *have* come? Broadly speaking, you have not come to Mount Sinai to a mountain of gloom, a harsh word, and death, but you have come to Mount Zion. You have come to the new that surpasses the old. **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, ²³ 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, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel** (Heb.12.22-24). The phrase **you have come to Mount Zion** has the function of a general heading that stands over against the phrase **what may be touched** in 12.18. Accordingly, Mount Zion *cannot be touched and is therefore figurative*. So, in general, you have come to the Zion of prophetic metaphor. You have come to the fulfillment reality of what has been long anticipated in OT promise.

Now let us consider the details of your coming to Zion. The author lists seven details that have some overlap between them. They are like seven reflections from a single diamond or seven slices of a single pie. They interface with each other to produce a rich picture; perhaps one might call it a three dimensional picture with a richness of depth, height, and width. Because of the overlap, we can tie them all together in the following brief but heavily packed sentence: You have come to the church for worship by the gospel. That gives us three main points with three key words: church, worship, and gospel.

1A. You have come *to the church*

That the church is the subject here is clear from the fact that you have come to the assembly, to the city, and to the saints.

1B. First, “to the assembly” (**to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, 12.23**)

God called Israel of the Exodus His firstborn son: **²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'** (Ex. 4.22-23). In a word, the church is the new Israel made up of Jews and Gentiles who trust in Christ (Eph. 3.6; 5.32; Gal. 3.29). The Lord Jesus is the firstborn Son and all who trust in Him share in that status with Him; they are heirs, joint heirs with Him of all things (Rom. 8.17). He is the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8.29, **For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers**). So, the church is a family of brothers and sisters with Christ as the elder brother. This is the church that Jesus promised to build on the foundational rock of the apostolic proclamation (Mat. 16.18; **And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it**).

Furthermore, the church is made up of the firstborn enrolled in heaven. This alludes to the action of Moses when he enrolled all the firstborn sons of Israel: **So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel, as the LORD commanded him** (Num. 3.42). However, the earthly gives way in fulfillment to the heavenly. Thus, the writer mentions the fact of enrollment *in heaven*. Jesus told His disciples to rejoice that their names are written in heaven (Lk. 10.20). Those who worked

along side of Paul are people, the apostle says, **“Whose names are written in the book of life”** (Phil. 4.3). God keeps this book as a permanent record of the people who have eternal life; their names are written **in the book of life from the foundation of the world** (Rev. 17.8) and **if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire** (Rev. 20.15).

So it is appropriate that we speak often about coming to church, and this is what it means: you have come to the gathered ones that belong to Christ the preeminent, firstborn Son. He keeps your name securely written down in glory! Furthermore, coming to the church is to the city.

2B. Second, **“to the city” (to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, 12.22)**

In the OT context of our passage, Israel traveled from Egypt and after forty years of wandering in the wilderness arrived at Sinai. This mountain was a desolate and forbidding place where God was present, and the Israelites were forbidden to go. But the “mountain” in metaphor to which you have come is a city, **the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem**. What is a city? Well, it is not so much a location like the boundary lines of Jerusalem on top of the hill of Zion. People make up a city; this is the city of the redeemed. It is a place where the living God dwells with His people: **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Rev. 21.1-4).

Although the patriarchs of the OT, especially Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob made a long journey to the Promised Land, that land was not their destination; it was a symbol of where they were going, namely the heavenly city that God will build: they looked forward **to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God** (Heb. 11.10). The patriarchs died in faith without receiving the things promised but they greeted them from afar. Accordingly, the writer tells us that **people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.** (Heb. 11.14-16). On one hand, this remains a city of the future: **the city that is to come** (Heb. 13.14). On the other hand, this is the city of our journey today as well; it is where we have our citizenship according to Philippians 3.20: **But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ**. Thus, it is a rich point. We have come to city of the living God, the better country, a heavenly one, to the city of the Lamb who is the life and light of men: **the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb** (Rev. 21.23). You have come to the church, which is the city of the living God.

3B. Third, you have come **“to the saints” (to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 12.23)**

How can these things be? How can it be that you have come to the church-city-family in the presence of God instead of being kept at a distance as was the case at Mount Sinai? You have one answer to this question in one of the rare references to justification in the book of Hebrews. That is, you can come to God to His very throne and presence, and to His judgment chambers without fear because you have come **to the spirits of the righteous made perfect** (12.23). The church that you have come to be a part of includes all the saints that have died and who are spirits, that is, absent from the body but at home with the Lord (Phil. 1.21-23).

In this connection, you have come **to God, the judge of all** (12.23). He is no ordinary or local judge with limited jurisdiction. The judge to whom the church has come is **God of all**. He is the universal sovereign who created all things and then took His seat on the throne of the heavens with His feet propped up on the footstool of the earth. Therefore, He is Sabbath King over all that He created and made, over all the unfolding days of the created order (Gen. 2.1-2; Isa.66.1-2). Accordingly, the writer to the Hebrews speaks of this judge as the one to whom all must give

an accounting: **And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account** (Heb.4.13). His word penetrates to the inner workings of the human heart: **discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart** (Heb. 4.12).

At first, you might think that coming to this God, universal judge, and discerner of your every thought is something uncomfortable and frightening. But His knowledge causes more marvel than it causes fear. His knowledge is too wonderful for me when I consider that I have come to God the final, holy, and perfect judge of all people, but I come to His throne of judgment as a throne of grace to which I am to come boldly and often to receive mercy and help in time of need: **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need** (Heb. 4.16). Instead of judgment, you have grace and mercy. You are to continually enter His presence without fear but with bold confidence because you are not simply sinful people within His jurisdiction, no, you are much more, you are His sons and daughters. You are part of the family of the justified against whom no charge can be made to stick for time and eternity (Rom. 8.33). You have come to the church to the assembly of the redeemed and therefore to the throne of mercy in the city of God.

2A. Second, you have come to the church *for worship* (to a city of worship; a worshipping city)

When you think about the big cities of our time with so many people living in unrest with their hearts fixated on fleeting things, and worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, it is great to imagine an entire city like New York City dedicated to God and characterized as a city of worship. You have come to such a city where the worship of the Creator is personal fellowship with joy. Note each of these in the text.

1) The worship is personal

You have come and **to God... and to Jesus** to share in *personal* fellowship (12.23-24). Rather than being kept at a distance because of your sin, you not only have access to the heavenly city and citizenship there with all the members of the covenant family, but you also have access to God who is the judge of all but who is your heavenly Father. You not only have access to the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus sprinkled the blood of the new covenant, but you also have access to Him as your personal Lord and Savior: **indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ** (1 Jn. 1.3). He is with you always to the end of the age and in a special way (Mat. 28.20). He is there with you when two or three of you gather together in His name for He is your risen Lord (Mat. 18.20).

2) The worship is joyous: you have come to **innumerable angels in festal gathering** (12.22)

Angels are exalted spiritual beings that hear and heed God's commands (Ps. 103.20) for perpetual service to His saints (Heb. 1.14). They worship the Lord Jesus (Heb. 1.6-7) and **in festal gathering** they adore Him in singing the new song (5.9) they confess: ¹¹ **Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,** ¹² **saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"** (Rev. 5.11). Remarkably, Jesus sings in our midst when we sing (Heb. 2.12: Jesus says, **in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise**). How can we be anything other than a singing church?

We must sing because our singing Savior is the mediator of a new and better covenant (9.15; 8.6). Our Lord's name (Jesus) designates His status as the incarnate Son of God and Savior of sinners. It was because His brothers and sisters by eternal covenant partook of flesh and blood that He came in the incarnation to partake of the same (Heb. 2.11-13). He did this with the explicit goal of tasting death for all that God gave to Him in the covenant of redemption (Heb. 2.9). Therefore, He is the mediator who bridges the gap between the holy God and sinful man. He is Jacob's ladder that extends from earth to heaven (Jn. 1.51). Hence, the new covenant

includes the promise that God will remember our sins no more because Christ died in our place. He endured our death in order to give us His life. On the cross, He secured eternal redemption for us in His blood. That means that on the cross He made it certain that each one for whom He died, all His children by covenant, will never taste of eternal death because the redemptive release He secured for them is everlasting (Heb. 9.12). This leads all who trust in Him to the privilege of worship defined as personal fellowship with the Father and Son with joy.

Therefore, if you ask, “where have I come” the answer is that you have come to the church for worship. One more simple point rounds off our picture of the mount Zion of prophetic metaphor: it is by the gospel.

3A. You have come to the church for worship *by the gospel*

We get this last idea on the list from 12.24b: **and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**. Both Abel and Christ endured death by violent means. Abel’s death and blood speaks a word of ultimate judgment, but the death and blood of Christ speaks gospel-good-news. All who trust in the death and blood-shedding of Christ receive eternal life to the uttermost for all time and through all circumstances (Heb. 7.25: **Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them**).

Now the unique element in the account about Abel is that his walk with God did not end when Cain murdered him; those who walk with God continue to speak beyond the grave because God is God of the living and not of the dead; they live and they give a word of hope that the coming seed of Eve will secure restoration for His promised people. Now, the anticipated promise has come to realization in the shedding and sprinkling of the blood of Christ. Now we have the gospel word of the new and better covenant (not of vengeance and of fulfillment).

Thus, you have come to the preaching of the grace of God in the gospel of the great high priest who gave Himself a sacrifice for you in the suffering of death and who lives and intercedes for you in the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7.16). Where have you come thus far in the race of your life? You have to the church for worship by the gospel.

Conclusion

Therefore, as you run the race of your life (Heb. 12.1-17) looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of your faith, and as you strive to make progress on the path of peace and holiness, and as you see to it that you persevere (and not fail) to be a sweet and pure person who builds up (not bitter person who causes damage), you have great encouragement to run for dear life because of where you have come. Consider this: you have come to the city with the throne of mercy, worshiping saints, and angels. You have come there *now* in anticipation of what is outstanding in the not yet. This fact should be doubly stressed: it is not that the city is simply yet **to come** (13.14) because it is the church-city-family to which you already **have come** (12.22).

Thus, in very practical terms, the writer has put a vision before your eyes to lift your hearts for the difficult steps of your pilgrimage. This is a vision that includes this gathering of the saints; it includes the assembly that is concrete in the present, the one we are not to forsake (Heb. 10.25). Surely, then, you have in these words an amazing elevation of gathering together as a little flock. Without question this is a place of sweet fellowship with God and Jesus.

So think about the dignity, celebration, majesty...the astounding privilege and awesome glory of local church worship in singing and preaching. In song and preached word, you fellowship in the assembly of the saints with God the Father and with His Son, our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is a great lesson in singing when we gather: if angels adore Him in song without ever experiencing redemption but with regard to our redemption, how much more ought we to

express our love and gratitude to Him in our singing: shame on us for not giving our best in song. We gather in the presence of God and of the singing angels now on the way... and our Lord sings...how can we not sing our adoration heartily unto Him? One reason will be that we do not see the truth of this gathering and how awesome it is...we are captivated by the here and now, the earthly, the temporal; we cannot see the reality; we cannot see past our noses. This is a great weakness of faith. Do you think that your singing honors your Lord? Do you do your best with your eyes fixed on Him? Or is it the case that you do not look to Jesus and know His presence here with you in the gathering; your eyes must be fixated somewhere else. Suggestions: a) do your best but forget your and our mistakes, b) It is wrong to not even open your mouth, to not even try: so begin by speaking the words of a song; do this first with the goal of moving from voice to song!

This is surely a call to worship when you get a glimpse of where you have come, namely, **to innumerable angels in festal gathering**. May the Lord open your eyes so that you can see the truth and know with certainty that this is in fact a sweet and awesome place with Christ within the doors.

Let us fall down before the majesty of our God in due acknowledgment of our need of Jesus as our mediator by His death and resurrection; may the Holy Spirit enable us to strive with great effort, with strenuous effort, to join with Christ in songs to His praise and to value the privilege of gathering to hear the gospel. To the triune God be all glory forever, amen.