

Not Sinai but Zion

With other coming glories heavenly and earthly.

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"For ye are not come to a palpable thing and all aglow with fire, and to obscurity and gloom and tempest, and to trumpet's sound, and a voice of words, which those that heard deprecated that a word more should be addressed to them; for they were not able to bear that which was enjoined: And, if a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned; and, so fearful was the scene, Moses said, I am affrighted and trembling all over. But ye are come to mount Zion; and to a living God's city, heavenly Jerusalem; and to myriads of angels, a universal gathering; and to an assembly of firstborns, enrolled in heaven; and to God judge of all; and to spirits of just made perfect; and to Jesus mediator of a new covenant; and to blood of sprinkling speaking better than Abel" (Heb. 12: 18-24).

Let us look at this wonderful contrast drawn between the people under the law, after which so many uninstructed and unsteady of the Jewish confessors of the Lord Jesus were hankering, and the Christian privileges to which the gospel entitles all who now believe. Therefore was the Epistle written to wean them from an unbelieving return to a covenant which the prophet, who predicts a new one of divine grace and blessing to come, makes the first old and nigh to vanishing away (Heb. 8: 8-13). The sins, folly and danger of such unbelief is vividly set forth here in Heb. 12: 18-21.

Hence this word boldly declared to the circumcision that confessed Jesus, "ye are *not* come," as the Jewish people in their fathers came to Sinai: a mountain that might be touched, before all eyes in its stern and barren and solitary grandeur. Then also was a state of burning with supernatural fire still more terrible than anything ordinary, along with obscurity and gloom and tempest. What an unearthly and strange aggravation (attested in Ex. 19 and Deut. 4, 5)! and a trumpet's sound, never heard before nor since, which waxed louder and louder in its awful summons; and a voice of words audible to every soul as God's, more terrifying than all the rest in majesty and deadly meaning for the conscience! Therefore did they above all deprecate this voice that they might hear no more, but Moses on their behalf. For was it not charged that even a beast, unconscious of sin, if it touched the mountain, should be stoned? How then could a poor sinful Israelite stand? And so fearful was the scene, the very mediator on whom they set their hope said, as the inspired writer could avouch, I am affrighted and full of trembling.

How truly the law was a ministry, not of life and the Spirit, not of pardon and peace, but of death and condemnation! Could God have made it plainer than that, in itself and in its accompaniments, it was to make sin exceeding sinful, and to warn sinners off the delusion that the least help for the sinner lay within its condition? Salvation must come through another, the Messiah; salvation is and must be of God's grace in Him, of whom God had spoken from the day sin entered man and the world (Gen. 3: 15); as He confirmed it by many signs and tokens and sacrifices and deliverances throughout the O.T., which no believer that searches can overlook.

Alas! it is not only that Jews are still obdurate. Christendom is more guilty still; and as faith in grace and truth declined, a judaizing reaction has tainted it everywhere. Hence the more ancient bodies have revived the temple, altar, sacrifice, and priests (some with its three orders of high-priest, priests, and Levites). The more modern societies follow the synagogue with its preachers. Both are now flooded with rationalism, superstition, heterodoxy, and worldliness; and this in their all but universal prevalence and alarming growth. Sight and sound, learning, science, sentiment, oratory, show, carry away high and low, with the utmost zeal to gain the masses, but gold and silver also, earthly rank and

reputation. Thus is the cross of Christ (abused in a material or idolatrous form) undermined and overthrown on earth; and His heavenly glory in dogmatic and practical power utterly ignored, as is the Holy Spirit's presence and action and testimony to both set aside more and more. It is Judaism and Gentilism supplanting Christianity; and this is Christendom.

Next is the divine picture of Christianity, as presented to correct and instruct and warn the Jewish confession (22-24). "But ye *are* come to mount Zion;" etc. It is a coming, not actually in letter, but in spirit by faith, even if only professedly so. Sinai was the original standing of Israel, their proudest boast. What nation could truthfully say that the living God appeared unequivocally as to them in giving His fiery law, spoken directly and afterwards written on tables of stone by His own hand? But ye, Christians, have come to the mountain of grace, not law.

Such then is the principle of Zion. 1 Sam. tells us of the priests corrupt and profane; of the ark taken, of Ichabod written even on their religion and state; of the people sick of Jehovah in their midst, and demanding a king like the nations, in disobedience of the prophet, and their king disobedient like themselves, and pursuing him whom Jehovah chose till *he* wearied of faith, and the king sought a witch and fell with his three sons by Philistine hands on mount Gilboa. David came at length to the throne of all Israel; but Jerusalem, the future and true metropolis, was so firmly Jebusite, that they taunted him with the insult that the blind and the lame could hold the fort in his defiance. Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion; and there was the king's palace, as the temple later on Moriah.

Thus Zion became the most marked sign of royal grace; but it awaits great David's greater Son to prove and display it effectively and for ever. And the day hastens. He whom the Jews rejected in reckless hate shall sit on the hill of Jehovah's holiness in royal glory as well as grace. It is not heaven, as the Socinians expound; nor is it the church, as the theologians of Christendom dream. It is the centre of the kingdom restored to Israel, when they repent and are converted to their true King. Compare Ps. 2, 9, 14, 48, 68, 69, 76, 78, 84, 87, 110, 128, 132, 137, 149. The Prophets abound in similar anticipations, as Isa. 1, 2, 4, 12, 24, 33, 35, 40, 49, 51, 52, 59, 62, 66; Jer. 3, 31, 50, 51. See too Micah 4, 5, Joel 3, Obadiah 17, 21, Zeph. 3, Zech. 1, 2, 8, 9.

Zion therefore is not merely like Gerizim a pledge of blessing at the start, but an ever recurring signal of sovereign and royal grace triumphing after utter sin and shame and ruin. No mountain named in the Bible suited the aim here so admirably as Zion, the Zion of scripture, not the whimsical substitute of theology, "the catholic church" as even Cromwell's Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, the able and excellent J. Owen makes it to be, militant and triumphant, and to this end omits the copulative (Works, xxiv. 329, Goold's Ed.). But here we may add that almost all editors of the Greek Test. as well as the commentators almost universally fall into error, sometimes repeatedly, by not heeding the plain and sure fact that the conjunction (καὶ — and) connects with Zion each new and distinct link in the chain of glory. In the next page after, as in the text of the page before, it is given correctly; but such laxity makes sound exegesis impossible. The most prevalent instance is in joining "general assembly" (as in the A. V.) with "the church of the firstborn;" of which Dr. Owen of course is also guilty, to the destruction of all right intelligence of the context. The least skilful of handlers could not have the hardihood to construe "God the judge of all," "Jesus the mediator of the new covenant," and "the blood of sprinkling" etc., as the further description of the catholic church; but they do strive hard to merge "the spirits of just men made perfect" in the same object.

Even J. A. Bengel (Gnomon ii. 467, Ed. 1836) lumped "myriads of angels and firstborn" in one category, so as to make out his double sevenfold; whereas the latter consists really of eight, not of seven. Yet in the next p. 468 he properly asks, who would join together as synonyms the church of the

firstborn with the general assembly of angels? Nevertheless, who knows not that able men of research like Dean Alford, and Bp. Chr. Wordsworth, and Bp. Westcott, persisted in the same false punctuation, and in joining more or less two categories so different as the angels and the church; as the erudite Bp. J. Pearson laid down in his famous exposition of the Creed since 1658? The perplexities of the learned are great and varied, as F. Delitzsch here speaks of three closely connected questions, and among the hardest in our Epistle. But, whatever the connection, the difficulty is largely due to overlooking the help rendered by the conjunction as the introduction of each added object after the first, or Zion. The neglect of this threw even so eminent a preacher and teacher as J. Howe into confusion like almost every other, as we may see in his use of this scripture everywhere, particularly in his sermon or part of it dedicated to Lady Russell. Lesser lights we need not notice.

The inspired picture then starts as a great principle from the spot of all on earth most ennobled by its associations to believing Israelites. For though the Epistle would bind their hearts and relations with Him who sits in heaven at God's right hand (and therefore Christian truth, above all visible forms and shadows), care is taken to notice briefly by the way the people of God and their hopes of the Kingdom and rest on earth also (chaps. 2, 4).

Next, we read "and living God's city, heavenly Jerusalem." There is thus no connection with a dying David's city, but a rise from earth to heavenly glory, as this Epistle testified of Abraham's case when in the land. For "by faith he sojourned as a stranger in the land of promise as a foreign [country] having dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob the joint-heirs of the same promise; for he waited for the city that hath the foundations, of which God is architect and builder" (Heb. 11: 9, 10). The same truth is if possible more plainly stated in vers. 13-16. It will be in addition to what their seed will have on earth under Messiah and the new covenant for their joy and the blessing of all the families of the earth; their own seat of glory above as risen saints. Not that we should confound the coming and abiding city on high of which this Epistle speaks with the holy city in Rev. 21: 9, which was seen coming down out of heaven from God. For the Epistle never rises to the mystery in the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. When "church" is spoken of in chaps. 2 and 12 in this context, it is not in its unity but in its constituents, as "of first-borns" proves. Its city is a place of glory which risen saints are to occupy. But in the Revelation it is *what* the church is to be, and not *where*; not objective but subjective, as men say. For it would contradict scripture, to infer that Abraham or any other O.T. saint had any idea of that union as the one body with its heavenly Head which is its essence, being the great mystery expressly declared to be not made known to the sons of men, the mystery or secret hid, not in scripture, but in God, and now revealed to the holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.

Then we hear, "and to myriads of angels, a universal gathering (or, myriads, universal gathering of angels)." A multitude of this heavenly host at the Incarnation hailed with unjealous delight the Divine Saviour's birth as man, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good pleasure in men. Here they are seen as the indigenous denizens of heaven in festal assembly, rejoicing in the results of grace for men on earth.

But now follows not only the glory of God seen above supremely, but first an unexpected sight: those who, expressly as lost ones saved irrespectively of special promises (after all seemed a hopeless ruin of Jew no less than Gentile in the cross of Christ), were brought into the nearest association with Him for heavenly places. "And an assembly of firstborns, enrolled in heaven" by sovereign grace as angels are not, and called to reign with Christ which a created angel never is. If we do not hear of them as Christ's body and bride of the Lamb, as the apostles Paul and John speak elsewhere, their being heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ is here recognised in the remarkable title of these as individuals. Contrary to nature which admits of but one in human limits, here they were all and equally

first-borns, as He who in His own right infinitely above them deigned to treat them as His "fellows," in no way ashamed to call them "brethren" (chaps. 1, 2), His holy brethren partakers of a heavenly calling, not like Israel of an earthly one however grand. They were enregistered in heaven as their proper fatherland in sovereign grace.

Thence we ascend to Him who is supreme. "And to God judge of all." Judicially He had been known, though by few comparatively in O.T. times, as in the age to come here contemplated He will be universally manifested, proved, and confessed. So for instance He is celebrated in Ps. 1, to take one witness out of many. "El Elohim Jehovah hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined forth. Our God will come and will not keep silence; fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him. He will call to the heavens above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. Gather to me my godly ones, those that have made a covenant with me over sacrifice! And the heavens shall declare his righteousness; for God is judge himself." Isaiah points out (Isa. 24: 21-23) His action still more loftily and profoundly: "And it shall come to pass in that day Jehovah will punish the host of the high ones on high, and the kings of the earth on the earth. And they shall be brought together, an assembly of prisoners for the pit, and shall be shut up in prison, and after many days shall they be visited. And the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed; for Jehovah of hosts shall reign on mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients [in] glory."

As God is and must be the summit of glory, it is clear that, if another step be added, it is to come down from Him on the other side. And this is just what we see next. The richest manifestation of grace in Christ is toward the church; and this we had, before we were directed to God in His judicial capacity, the great burden of O.T. expectation, which is to be displayed in the Kingdom, which our Lord taught us to consist of two distinct parts, not only the heavenly kingdom of the Father, but also the Son of man's kingdom, out of which His angels shall gather all offences and all that do lawlessness. God as judge of all prepares the way naturally for the saints in O.T. days who knew Him thus, yet walked in hope of Messiah. "And to the spirits of just [men] made perfect" fits those saints more aptly and fully than any other class. They all died according to faith, having promise but in no way its accomplishment; whereas the church of first-borns did not begin to exist as such till the Son and Heir of all things, being rejected of Jew and Gentile, suffered for sins on the cross, rose, and ascended to heaven, whence He sent forth the Holy Spirit to commence and establish that new creation by baptizing those that believe into one body, Christ's body. These spirits are the elders that obtained testimony before the Lord came, and are here grouped as spirits of men who had finished their course, but not yet crowned or enthroned till their bodies are glorified at Christ's coming. No more exact phrase could be used about them; nor any less adapted to the church, even if we had not the church already, which must have a surviving part on earth when the Lord comes, instead of being all separate "spirits."

The seventh object we come to here is, "and to Jesus mediator of a new, or fresh, covenant." This is a remarkably precise and significant clause. It is not said that we are come to the new covenant, which, as Jer. 31: 31-34 tells us, is to be made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the first covenant at Sinai where all hung on the people's faithfulness to Jehovah, and, as they were unfaithful, to their ruin till this day. The new covenant is on the opposite principle of His grace and faithfulness to them, when He will put His law in their inwards and within their heart; and He will be their God, and they His people in His love and power, not on their responsibility. They shall all know me from the least to the greatest, saith Jehovah; for I will pardon their iniquity, and their sins will I remember no more — the great hindrance to knowing Him being thus taken away. To this state

of Israel we are not said to have come, but to Jesus its mediator, as is indubitable; and we enjoy "the spirit," if not "the letter," of that covenant, on the principle of grace in contrast with law, as 2 Cor. 3 intimates. But there is more here implied in this, the only place where occurs a "fresh" covenant in the N.T. Its force appears to be that, however long that covenant of grace got suspended for the ancient people of God in their unbelieving Lo-Ammi condition, it awaits their sure and repentant acceptance of it, as "fresh" as when founded on the only sacrifice by which it could come to them.

The last is "and to blood of sprinkling speaking better than Abel." Here we descend to earth again, but it is not to the central seat of Zion, from which we rose. It is the earth in all its extent, with any such exception as is due to God's indignation during the kingdom before "a new heaven and a new earth" in their absolute form, and for the everlasting state, as in 1 Cor. 15: 24, 2 Peter 3: 13; and Rev. 21: 1-8. As the blood of Abel cried to Jehovah from the ground and brought a curse (Gen. 4: 10-12), Christ's blood of sprinkling has reconciling power, in virtue of which when He is revealed and the sons of God along with Him in glory, all things (not all persons) that were dragged down through Adam's sin shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. We even now know by faith the liberty of grace, as Rom. 8: 1-4 teaches, and Gal. 4, 5 and many another scripture. This the groaning creation cannot from its unintelligent nature enter into and enjoy through the Holy Spirit, as is now our portion. But none the less shall the whole creation which fell with the first Adam share the blessed power of the Last Adam when He appears, not only to save Israel, but to gladden the wilderness and the dry land; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose or lily: not a leaf or an insect too tiny to expand in that bright day of glory.

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