

November 19 Lesson 12

Mediator of THE New Covenant

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 66](#)

Background Scripture: [Hebrews 12:14, 15, 18-29](#); [Psalm 66](#)

[HEBREWS 12:14, 15, 18-29](#)

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.



¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

KEY VERSE

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”—[Hebrews 12:28, 29](#)

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Introduction

A. In the Presence of Greatness

At one time or another, we wonder what it would be like to meet a great figure of the past. What would it be like to have breakfast with Abraham Lincoln during America's Civil War? How would we react in the presence of Winston Churchill or Catherine the Great?

Chances are, such meetings would not be as pleasant as we would like them to be! After all, why would such leaders even acknowledge us? The only way such a meeting could happen (aside from solving the issue of time travel!) is if someone were to take us into the presence of such greatness.

At Mount Sinai to approach God was forbidden (see [lesson 6](#)). To that scenario we contrast the era of the new heavens and earth, when believers are welcomed into God's presence. Even now, we are encouraged to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" ([Hebrews 4:16](#)). Something significant has changed that allows us into God's presence.

B. Lesson Background

We do not know who wrote the book of Hebrews. One reason for this uncertainty is that the book, unlike most biblical letters, does not begin by identifying the author. Some Bible students think Paul wrote Hebrews. Various similarities between Hebrews and Galatians, one of Paul's letters, are seen to lend support to this proposal. One such similarity is the subject of this lesson: the contrast of Mount Sinai with the heavenly Jerusalem (see [Galatians 4:24-26](#)).

There is less uncertainty regarding the original intended audience of the book of Hebrews: Christians of Jewish background who, in the face of persecution and doubt, wanted to abandon the church and return to the synagogue. By the time we get to the text of today's lesson, the author of Hebrews has painted the consequences for such a decision in stark terms: there is no escape for those who reject the Christian message of salvation ([Hebrews 2:3](#)). Forsaking the blessings of the Christian life (such as the Holy Spirit) leaves one with no options for repentance and restoration to God ([6:4-6](#)).

The bottom line is not that the old covenant is bad; rather, it is that the old covenant is obsolete, having been superseded by a better covenant ([Hebrews 8:13](#)). And this new covenant did not arise from thin air. The Christian covenant was prophesied in the Old Testament ([Hebrews 8:7-12](#), which quotes [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); see [lesson 11](#)).

The author of Hebrews uses vivid word pictures to support his points. The function of the Word of God is compared with that of a sword ([Hebrews 4:12](#)). Christian teachings are likened to categories of milk and solid food ([5:12-14](#)). The Christian life is compared with a foot race

(12:1). Worship is described as “a sacrifice of praise” (13:15). Our lesson today relies on the imagination of the reader to picture Mount Sinai at the time of the reception of the law. It was a place of terrifying thunder and lightning and of a supernatural trumpet blast that caused the people to tremble. The mountain was filled with smoke and fire, and it shook violently (Exodus 19:16-19; lesson 6). This filled the hearts of the people with fear. We must keep this unique, awe-inspiring event from Israel’s past in mind as we engage our lesson this week.

I. The Terrifying Mountain

(Hebrews 12:14, 15, 18-21)

A. Peace and Holiness (vv. 14, 15)

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

The context of Hebrews shines clearly here, for *peace* is a reference to the Jewish concept of *shalom*, a peace that results in personal well-being. The original readers of the book, having come from a Jewish background, are well acquainted with this idea. This is not a peace in which hostilities are merely paused. Rather, differences and disputes have been resolved and laid aside for good.

The Old Testament teaches that this kind of peace ultimately comes from God (Numbers 6:26; Psalm 29:11). But the author knows that our behavior influences that of others; therefore, he couples the admonition for *peace with everyone* to a call for *holiness*. This means we are to live lives that are above reproach so that we represent our holy God faithfully to our family and neighbors.

If the context of Hebrews is that of Jewish Christians leaving the church to return to the synagogue, then we can understand the urgency of these words. There has been a church split. It is likely that bitter words and accusations have been traded. The author reminds everyone that peace and holiness are central teachings in both old and new covenants. Without holiness, one cannot *see the Lord* (compare Matthew 5:8; 1 Peter 1:15, 16, quoting Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2). There is no justification for ungodly actions.

¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

The author’s concern, is reinforced by a warning. It is embarrassing to witness callous and angry behavior within the church. When attitudes and actions of Christians are founded on bitterness rather than holiness, the method and mission of the church is damaged. When we think we are upholding godly standards in a strong and confident manner, we actually may be hindering the church’s message of *the grace of God*.

B. Burning and Blasting (vv. 18, 19)

^{18a.} You have not come to a mountain that can be touched

The author now turns to one of his last major illustrations from the Old Testament: the setting of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. That event is burned into the collective memories of his readers of Jewish background, since the giving of the law marked the nation of Israel distinct from all other nations. There is no event more cherished in the heart of a devout Jew than this one.

The author of Hebrews describes Mount Sinai in ways that parallel Old Testament depictions in [Exodus 19](#) and [Deuteronomy 5](#). For one thing, the mountain could *be touched* ([Exodus 19:12](#)). That indicates the mountain was real, not a mythical creation. Scholars today debate the location of Mount Sinai, but most recognize Jebel Musa (Arabic for “Mount Moses”) in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula as the site.

^{18b.} and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;

The author also recalls atmospheric phenomena: darkness, dense cloud cover, and storminess, including thunder and lightning, characterized the day ([Exodus 19:16a](#)). The stormy darkness was pierced by the descent of the Lord in fire accompanied by thick smoke that covered the mountain ([19:18](#)).

^{19.} to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,

A trumpet blast signaled the descent of the Lord to the top of Mount Sinai. That explosion of sound was not a fanfare from a human trumpeter hiding in the rocks. [Exodus 19:19](#) describes it as a single long blast that grew louder and louder. We are left to imagine that this was from the horn of an angelic trumpeter having inexhaustible lung capacity (see [Revelation 8:6](#)).

The trumpet blast was accompanied by *the voice* of the Lord ([Exodus 19:19](#); compare [Revelation 1:10](#)). What this sounded like is not described. But it struck terror into the hearts of the people, so much so that they begged for it to stop (see [Deuteronomy 5:23-27](#)).

C. Fear and Quaking ([vv. 20, 21](#))

^{20, 21.} because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

The author elaborates on the terror that beset the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. First, there was a fear of physical well being, because *touching the mountain* meant death. The consequence extended even to livestock. If a cow or lamb wandered too close and made contact with Mount Sinai, the people had to kill it. That represented a loss of high value to the owner, given the remote location in the desert of Sinai.

Second, *Moses* himself was cowed by what he witnessed. We should not forget that Moses was called to ascend this mountain of terror in short order ([Exodus 19:20](#)). We honor him for his fortitude in various situations as leader of the Israelites. Yet even Moses, among the greatest of the Jewish heroes, was afraid on this occasion.

II. The Blessed Mountain

([Hebrews 12:22-29](#))

A. Heavenly Jerusalem ([vv. 22-24](#))

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,

The author turns to another mountain, a metaphorical peak that represents the realities of the Christian life and system: *Mount Zion*. It is not a remote desert crag. Rather, it is a *city*, a place where people live. As the location *of the living God*, it is the Lord's permanent presence, not a place of temporary visitation as was Sinai. It is a *heavenly* place, not found on the earth at the end of any highway or sea voyage. It is *Jerusalem*, the site of God's perfect temple. It is populated by *thousands upon thousands of angels*, heavenly beings we would expect to find there.

The book of Revelation elaborates on the idea of a *heavenly Jerusalem*, there called "new Jerusalem" ([Revelation 3:12](#); [21:2](#)). The city descends onto a mountain, much like the Lord's descent to Mount Sinai ([21:10](#)). The presence of the Lord results in a perfect temple for worship ([21:22](#)). Heaven is full of the hosts of God's angels offering worship to the Lord ([5:11](#)).

²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

This is no dreamworld in the sky, but a reality for the author and his readers. His blessed mountain is seen in *the church*, a community made up of those *whose names are written in heaven*, in the book of life ([Philippians 4:3](#); [Revelation 21:27](#)). *God, the Judge of all*, controls this book. His judgments are absolute and final; therefore, a name in this book is the assurance of salvation (compare [Revelation 3:5](#); [13:8](#); [17:8](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.

Galatians *Guh-lay-shunz*.

Haggai *Hag-eye* or *Hag-ay-eye*.

Jebel Musa *Jeh-buhl Moo-suh*.

Sinai *Sigh-nye* or *Sigh-nay-eye*.

synagogues *in-uh-gog*.

Jesus Christ, *the firstborn*, is the preeminent person in God's plans ([Colossians 1:15, 18](#)). Since Christians are made holy by his atonement ([Hebrews 2:11](#)), we are *the church of the firstborn*. Our names are in the book, for we are judged *righteous*, even *perfect*, through the sacrificial work of Christ (see [Hebrews 10:14](#); [11:40](#)).

²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus must be the central focus of this spiritual mountain of the church because he has mediated the *new covenant*. Without his atoning sacrifice, there would be no new covenant, and the Jewish Christians might as well return to the synagogue.

The author leaves the Sinai illustration momentarily to reconsider Abel ([Genesis 4:10](#)), already mentioned in [Hebrews 11](#), the Faith Hall of Fame chapter. There it is said of righteous Abel that he “still speaks, even though he is dead,” his offering having been declared “better” than Cain’s ([Hebrews 11:4](#)). Even so, this voice from the old covenant cannot compare with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ ([Hebrews 9:26](#); compare [1 Peter 3:18](#)). Both Jesus and Abel lost their lives at the hands of those who had evil intent ([Luke 24:7](#); [1 John 3:12](#)). But the shedding of Jesus’ blood is infinitely more valuable than that of Abel or of all animals ever sacrificed (see [Hebrews 9:11-10:18](#)).



Visual for Lesson 12. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask your learners to give synonyms for the word mediator.

B. Inescapable God ([vv. 25-27](#))

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?

The author's plea takes on a heightened urgency as he moves toward a conclusion. Don't be stubborn, he warns. There was no escape from the terrifying voice of God at Mount Sinai; there can be no escape for those who reject the message of salvation through Jesus (see [Hebrews 2:2-4](#)). This is the current and eternal voice *from heaven*. To leave the church and turn back to the synagogue is a foolish choice with eternally grave consequences.

^{26a}. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised,

The author recalls the Sinai experience a final time, now focusing on the quaking of the mountain ([Exodus 19:18](#)). Those who witnessed the event had confirmation of God's powerful visitation to the earth. The shaking of the earth is used frequently in the Bible as a confirmation of the Lord's presence (examples: [Judges 5:4, 5](#); [Psalm 18:7](#)).

^{26b}. "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

The quaking at Sinai serves as the writer's launching point for quoting [Haggai 2:6](#). This is a prophetic promise that, unlike at Sinai, a future shaking will include *the heavens* as well as *the earth*. The setting of the book of Haggai is 520 BC, the year the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple was completed. The author uses the promised shaking to confirm the superiority of the Christian claims since the shaking is associated with "what is desired by all nations" coming and filling "this house with glory" ([Haggai 2:7](#)). In Christ, we are not dealing with a mere system of laws directed at a single people group of the earth, but with an eternal system that encompasses *not only the earth but also the heavens* (compare [Revelation 6:14](#)).

²⁷. The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Hebrews uses the full prophetic import of Haggai's words to arrive at the conclusion of this argument. The prophet's words indicate yet again a finality to God's visitations. The Jewish system is built on things that can be shaken, meaning they are temporary (compare [Matthew 27:51](#)). The old system is obsolete, and its elements are no longer valid. Christians, by contrast, have a system that *cannot be shaken* because its constituent parts are eternal. The centerpiece is the eternal, perfect, "once for all" sacrifice of Christ ([Hebrews 10:10](#)). This is the visitation of God that marks "the culmination of the ages" ([9:26](#)) and starts the countdown to the future return of Christ in glory.

C. Godly Fear ([vv. 28, 29](#))

^{28, 29}. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

Having concluded his resounding argument that only Christians are in a right relationship with God, the author moves to application. Since our kingdom, the church, is impervious to any quaking or disruption, we should appreciate our situation with thankfulness. We can learn something from the people of Israel who were overwhelmed by the majesty of the Lord's presence: that "something" is to come before him *with reverence and awe* as we commit to worship him. The Greek word behind the word *worship* is translated "serve" elsewhere (example: [Hebrews 8:5](#)), and both senses are here. We worship God when we serve him.

For Hebrews, serving God must be done with the proper attitude. He describes this as *reverence and awe*. This is reinforced by a dire warning: *God is a consuming fire*. This warning is borrowed from Moses himself ([Deuteronomy 4:24](#)) and serves to remind the readers that Christians worship the same God who visited Israel at Mount Sinai. Christians are the beneficiary of a superior relationship to God based on the mediating work of Christ ([Hebrews 9:15](#); [12:24](#)), but they do not serve a different God.

Therefore, he ends where he began this section, the picture of the Bible's fiery, powerful, awe-inspiring God (see [Hebrews 12:18](#)). We should never take God's grace as a sign of weakness. He is still "Judge of all" ([Hebrews 12:23](#)), and when he judges, his verdicts are swift and sure.

Conclusion

A. Two Mountains

[Isaiah 2:2](#) looks forward to the day when "the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established . . . and all nations will stream to it." What a glorious promise! There will be a single place of worship that will unite believers of all nations in their service to the one true God.

But which mountain is this? Is it Mount Sinai, the place of terror, the place of law? Or is it the mountain John sees in [Revelation 21](#), a great high peak that has new Jerusalem dropped onto its top ([Revelation 21:10](#))?

Hebrews points us to this second mountain and does not require us to wait for it. It is available now. God shook the earth when he gave the law. When Jesus died and then broke the bonds of death, God shook the earth and the heavens. The old is passed away, for God has made all things new ([Revelation 21:5](#)). Let us go to the new mountain, the kingdom that will not be shaken.

B. Prayer

Lord of fire and earthquakes, Lord of light and truth, may we never forget your power or your grace. May we serve you with holiness and reverence. We pray in the name of Jesus; amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's grace is not an absence of holiness.