

• *Warnings – as the case of Esau – followed by encouragement s*

• *Losing our inheritance is not necessary!*

• *But neither is it automatic*

• *We need to make the right choices*

• *We are not under the law (Sinai) but the gospel (Zion)*

Our writer always follows up his warnings with encouragements. There is the possibility that a rebellious Christian should lose his inheritance altogether. It happened to Esau. Although he did not altogether lose his place in the family of Isaac, he lost the privileges of being the firstborn son and they passed instead to Jacob. Yet – our writer goes on to say – this is not necessary! The Christian is in a position where there is such abundant and amazing grace available to him. But we do have to make use of it. We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, but it does not work automatically. We have to draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help us. We do not have to be like Esau. And we have come to the new covenant, not the old covenant.

Our writer puts it like this. ¹⁸*For you have not come to something physically touchable^a or to a blazing fire or to darkness or gloom or thunderstorm.* ¹⁹*You have not come to the blast of a trumpet or to the sound speaking words, like the voice which the people heard which was so terrible that they begged that no further word should be given to them.* ²⁰*For they could not take the command that was given, 'if even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.'* ²¹*So fearful was the appearance that Moses said, 'I am very terrified and trembling.'* ²²*On the contrary, you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to tens of thousands of angels in joyful assembly....*

Verses 18–24 are a long and emphatic way of insisting that we are not under the Mosaic law (represented by Sinai); we are instead under the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (represented by the hill in Jerusalem).

1. Our gospel is inward and spiritual before it is outward and visible

• *Begins in the heart*

1. **Our gospel is inward and spiritual before it is outward and visible.** When the Israelites came to Sinai it was all very physical. They literally and physically travelled hundreds of kilometres to get there. Then they literally and physically stood around a mountain which was shaking and burning and which was functioning as the throne and dwelling place of God. It was very physical and literal. Worldly 'religion' is still like that. It is full of pilgrimages to holy places which are dark and gloomy! The gospel is different. It certainly touches the actual world we live in. It is not anti-physical. Its ultimate hope is the resurrection of the body. And yet we can come to God without any pilgrimages or holy mountains. Holy geography is no longer important (as Jesus said to the woman at the well¹). The new covenant begins in the heart, more than in some religious tourist-attraction!

¹ John 4:21

2. Our gospel does not operate by terror

• *The God of the law is not different from the God of the gospel*

2. **Our gospel does not operate by terror.** The law worked by terror. There were terrible punishments – including the death-penalty for major sins – and fearful displays of the holiness of God. Of course God is **still** holy. Without the gospel there is still every reason to be terrified! Hell is still pictured as a place of fire and darkness. The God of the law is not different from the God of the gospel. We are not Marcionites.^b But the law's display of the holiness of God which was 'added'¹ at the point where the people of God became a nation has given way to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has been 'propitiated'; his anger has turned away from those who are in Christ.

¹ Galatians 3:19

• *The gospel does not work by terror; it works by assurance*

3. The Christian longs to hear God's voice

4. We are rescued for ever from the realm of Mosaic law

• *Our way of relating to God is different to Israel's*

• *Zion – the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit*

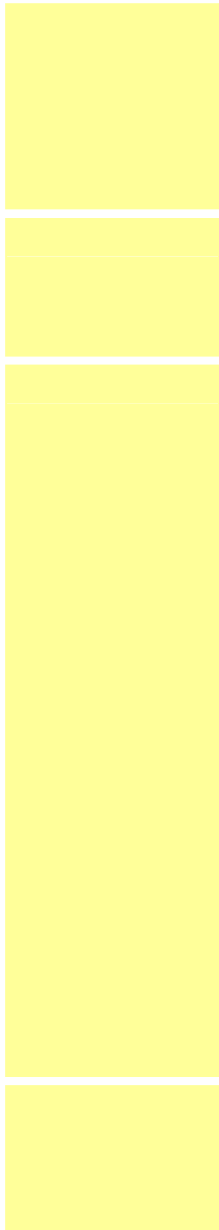
We are not camping around Mount Sinai! The gospel does not work by terror; it works by assurance. The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts. At Sinai even Moses was terrified; even animals were stoned to death. For us, the 'fear of the Lord' is the fear that we should not offend his love! The fire has not been put out but we are protected from it.

3. **The Christian longs to hear God's voice.** At Sinai they pleaded not to hear the voice of God! The gospel says we **must** hear the loving and tender voice of God. To do so is the secret of spiritual progress.

4. **We are rescued for ever from the realm of Mosaic law.** Of course I do not mean that we are rescued from principles of righteousness. I mean we are rescued from the Mosaic covenant. When the Bible talks of 'the law' it does not simply mean 'principles of righteousness'. We die to the law – but we do not die to principles of righteousness! This kind of definition comes from Thomas Aquinas – the thirteenth-century theologian, born in Aquino, Italy, who produced a highly systematized theology, making use of Aristotle's philosophy. It included very **abstract** definitions of law. But 'the law' in the Bible mostly means 'the Mosaic system of relating to God'. We have died to that! There were reasons for the Mosaic system. It was designed to keep Israel up to a certain level of morality out of fear of punishment. Even in that it failed eventually! But our way of relating to God is different. There is no blessing for us in anything that is purely physical or which is so terrible we plead to hear no more. There are systems of religion like that, even some which call themselves Christian. But we have not come to Sinai, we have come to Zion – the place where Jesus died, the place where the Holy Spirit was poured out, the place from which the nations began to be reached not with terrifying news but with the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notes

- a. Some translations use the word 'mountain'. The best manuscripts actually do not have the word; it was a (correct) interpretive addition put in by early scribes.
- b. Marcion was the second-century heretic who taught that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are not the same.



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