

Two very different mountains. Both referred to in the Bible and both play a vital part in the amazing but true story of God’s dealings with man.

One is mentioned mainly in the Old Testament. Its name is well known and when you read about it in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy you are left with a picture in your mind of a rugged and tough, yet majestic location, where God met through Moses with His people. A fearful yet holy place known as Mount Sinai.

The other is an unnamed Mountain. Possibly little more than a large hill with no particular natural grandeur about it. This mount is definitely not a fearful place but a comfortable place to come and sit and listen to One speak, who some say is a Prophet, and others say is the Messiah. In fact He is God the Son come to earth, and the words He proclaims will from that time on be always associated with this spot in the minds of men as ‘the sermon on the mount’.

Two different mountains. One became a place of rules and regulations, as upon it God gave to His people the laws that they must keep in order to avoid His holy judgment.

Upon the other great blessings could be offered as the result of great Grace. Directions given for people already made right in the sight of God by His mercy alone, now able to live in a manner that pleases Him and also gives to them great joy.

On both these mountains God presented Himself to humankind. To people who are the pinnacle of His creation. But on each mountain in a remarkably different way.

It is God as lawgiver who declares His presence with thunder and lightning and a shaking of the earth, there on Mount Sinai. Exodus 19:10-12, 16-20a

¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹ and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently,¹⁹ and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. ²⁰ The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up

I'm sure we can all understand the dreadful fear that filled the people's hearts as they stood at the base of that mountain. As they watched Moses ascending into the thickness of the cloud and the smoke—towards the fire that declared God's actual presence there—they would have sensed the terrible separation between them and their God. A separation that they knew was brought about by their impurity. By their inability to constantly please Him. They didn't have to be told they were sinners. They saw the signs of God's awesome presence and they knew just how sinful they were.

And when Moses was given by God the ten commandments and the Law, they understood that such was God revealing to them the totality of their sin. This law was indeed their schoolmaster revealing the gulf that existed between the lives they lived, and the purity of life needed for them to exist eternally with their Holy God as loved children in His presence.

The law presented a way into the heart of God that they realized was beyond them, for sin existed already in every heart. And because of that ever-present sin there was no sacrifice that they could present in their own strength that would give them any more than limited access towards a God who was enclosed by His holiness.

And it is all this that makes the second mountain experience so incredible. For Matthew, who has strongly declared Jesus to be Emmanuel or God With Us, in his initial four chapters, now tells us in chapter 5:1-2

5 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,² and he began to teach them

Here we have God incarnate. God become man sat down in the place of authority prepared once again to proclaim what it is that makes a person pleasing in the sight of God. And there is no thunder or lightning or shaking of the ground. There are no barriers to keep people away. He welcomes first His disciples who have already made a decision to follow Him, but the crowd is welcomed too, to gather and to listen.

So well may we ask what has happened, to enable God now to meet in such a way with sinful men, women, and children. And that is where our reading today from the book of Hebrews gives so much insight.

The author says in Hebrews 12:18-24 (CEV)

¹⁸ You have not come to a place like Mount Sinai that can be seen and touched. There is no flaming fire or dark cloud or storm ¹⁹ or trumpet sound. The people of Israel heard a voice speak. But they begged it to stop, ²⁰ because they could not obey its commands. They were even told to kill any animal that touched the mountain. ²¹ The sight was so frightening that Moses said he shook with fear.

²² You have now come to Mount Zion and to the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the city of the living God, where thousands and thousands of angels have come to celebrate. Here you will find all of God's dearest children, whose names are written in heaven. And you will find God himself, who judges everyone. Here also are the spirits of those good people who have been made perfect. And Jesus is here! He is the one who makes God's new agreement with us, and his sprinkled blood says much better things than the blood of Abel.

The difference is not to be found in the mountain but in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the One who has made this new agreement between us and God possible, and He has done it through His own blood. He became the sacrifice that cleanses from all sin past, present and future.

God could become man and meet face to face with sinners even before the cross, because in the heart of God that sacrifice had already been made.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:18-20

¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

The difference is not to be found in God Himself either. His holiness was declared on that mountain against the sin that the giving of the law revealed as present in all. Sinai proves that the perfection necessary to be at one with God is not possible for man, despite His best efforts. Something humankind still needs to understand and accept today. God's wrath against sin will always stand and judgment for all, because all have sinned, cannot be avoided.

The experience of that first mountain was absolutely necessary so that all people could see the peril we face from a holy judge.

But at the right time God could become a man and sit upon another mountain, and welcome all to come to Him. And there declare how a person now can live a life pleasing to God and become part of His heavenly kingdom.

And it was not because the standard of perfection needed to enter that kingdom had been lowered. Holiness, righteousness is still definitely required. Neither was it because the consequences of being a sinner in the eyes of God had changed. As sinners we are all still liable for the judgment.

It was because God as man chose to take upon Himself the consequences of the sin of the whole world, and to give to all who come to Him the Grace to receive the forgiveness and righteous we need to be part of His kingdom.

So this second mountain proclaims Grace and Mercy, and talks about the possibility of blessings right now for all who choose to believe in Jesus as God the Son. Who personally accept His gift of grace, and follow the directions He gives for living according to the desires of His heart for us.

Two so different Mountain experiences:

At Sinai where the Law was Given, THE LORD CAME DOWN.

At the Mount we read that THE LORD WENT UP

At Sinai the Lord SPOKE IN THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

On the Mount Jesus spoke IN A GENTLE VOICE WITH AUTHORITY

At Sinai the people were ORDERED TO KEEP THEIR DISTANCE

On the Mount all ARE ENCOURAGED TO COME AND HEAR

What a wonderful difference that we can reflect upon as we begin our study of this sermon on the mount. And what a glorious privilege we have to be found on this side of the second mountain. Yet with that privilege of knowing Jesus comes the responsibility of accepting the Grace He offers and living the life He calls us to live. To praise Him for saving us when we could not save ourselves and to do so by being Christ to others as He is Christ in us.