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April 25th: Job 23 & Hebrews 12:18-29

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Where is God to be found? Our God is a consuming fire.

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Transcript

Job chapter 23. Then Job answered and said, Today also my complaint is bitter. My hand is heavy on account of my groaning.

O, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No, he would pay attention to me.

There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge. Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him. On the left hand, when he is working, I do not behold him.

He turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take. When

he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.

My foot has held fast to his steps. I have kept his way, and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips.

I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food. But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind.

Therefore I am terrified at his presence, when I consider I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint. The Almighty has terrified me.

Yet I am not silenced because of the darkness, nor because thick darkness covers my face. Job chapter 23 is Job's first speech in the third and final cycle of speeches. However, even though he is speaking after Eliphaz the Temanite, he isn't responding to his friend at this point.

Eliphaz had been grossly unjust in his characterisations of Job. He had accused Job of great wrong and oppression, and given the feelings on both sides, there is little point in responding to him. Exactly what is being referred to by today in verse 2 is not entirely clear.

Perhaps Job's conversations with his friends are proceeding over a number of different days, perhaps three days, one for each cycle. John Hartley suggests rather that we should read this as even now. Job, perhaps referring in part back to the previous speech, is insisting that he is going to go on with his complaint.

He has not been swayed from that course. Job's woes continue, and his complaint remains bitter. Job's complaint is the case that he wants to bring before God.

The problem for Job, however, is that he does not know where God is to be found. If he cannot find where God is, how can he have an audience with him? Job imagines what he would do if he did in fact find God and have an audience with him. He would lay his case out before the Lord.

He would present all his different arguments. The Lord would then address Job and his situation in a way that he could understand and accept. Job is confident that he would be acquitted in such a scenario.

But he is also confident that the process itself, in which he would present his case and his arguments to the Lord, and the Lord would listen and respond, would itself bring some satisfaction and prove cathartic. He raises the question in verse 6 whether God would just overwhelm him with his might. Yet, answering his own question, he believes that he would not.

Rather, the Lord would be just and would listen to his case and then respond in a manner marked by his justice. Yet, attractive as this imagined scenario is for Job, there is no way to realise it. He still cannot locate God.

Verses 8-9 describe the problem with trying to localise God. God cannot be pinned down anywhere. God's ways are inscrutable and he himself is transcendent.

He acts everywhere but he is contained nowhere. Arrestingly, in verse 10, Job speaks of his confidence that the Lord, once he has tried him, proven his quality, he will be shown to be gold. In earlier speeches, Job has expressed his uncertainty that he would be able to take any more.

He felt as if he were being pushed to his limit and beyond. But here there is a note of strength and perseverance that we have not really heard from Job to this point, at least not in quite such a pronounced form. The trying in question is not the same thing as refining.

The point is not that God is refining Job to make him a purer form of gold. Rather God is testing Job to manifest what quality he is. To this point, of all the explanations given by Job and the friends, this is the nearest to the actual truth.

God, or perhaps more properly Satan who has been given permission by God, is testing Job to see whether his quality is really what God has suggested. Job believes that he will be proven through such testing because, as he says in verses 10-12, he has been faithful in his steps and the Lord knows this. He has not departed from God's commandments.

He is treasured and delighted in God's word and he has walked in his way. Norman Harville observes of the language of way in these verses. The term way carries several connotations here and is rich in associations.

The way for Job includes the way of God to which Job has adhered unswervingly. That way is apparently the righteous way of life Job elaborates in his extended confession in chapter 31 verses 4 following where he maintains that his feet have not deviated from the way of integrity. But the way with Job recalls Job's complaint that God prevents mortals from finding their way, that is, their direction or destiny in life.

Way, however, is also associated with the quest motif. Mortals do not know the way to wisdom or God, but God knows the way of humans in all senses of that word. From this note of confidence Job returns to speaking about the problem that he will face in presenting this case.

The beginning of verse 13 declares that God is one which has been read in a number of different ways. Maybe God is in one mind, meaning that he is unchangeable and fixed in his opinion. Maybe it means that he is unique or another such statement about his deity.

Job might be referring to the way that the incomparable God above all earthly and created things cannot be swayed by a mere mortal man's opinion. If God has set his mind on a matter, in this case bringing suffering and punishment upon Job, then how could a mere mortal expect to sway him? Surely God's purpose would just be followed through to its conclusion. On the one hand we have an expression of Job's faith and confidence in God's justice.

On the other hand his knowledge of the greatness and majesty and uniqueness of God causes him to waver. How could Job hope to change what seems to be God's settled and determined negative purpose towards him? He expresses further trepidation in the concluding verses of the chapter. He is terrified by God's presence.

He wants to come face to face to deal with God, but yet he knows that God's presence is terrifying and could overwhelm him. He has earlier spoken of feeling terrorized by God and has always struggled with the lurking fear that should he come into the presence of God, God would just overwhelm him with his majesty and greatness. Yet despite all of this apprehension and the darkness that engulfs him, Job is determined nonetheless to go through with his appeal.

He wants to seek the Lord's face, to have dealings directly with God. A question to consider, what are some of the distinctive hallmarks of faith that we can see in Job's response at this point? Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 to 29 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens. This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken, that is, things that have been made, in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. A recurring pattern in the book of Hebrews is warning followed by reassurance. The intent and the expectation of the new covenant is great blessing, but yet there is considerable danger for any who reject or abandon what Christ has offered.

The author of Hebrews wants to be absolutely certain that the recipients of the book grasp hold of what they have been given in Christ and do not let go. To this end, at the conclusion of Hebrews chapter 12, he presents us with two alternative mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. The contrast between Sinai and Zion is between two relationships between us and God's presence, the terrifying and threatening theophany and the fearful restriction and the glorious admittance and celebration.

He takes his description of Mount Sinai from Exodus, in Exodus chapter 19 verses 17 to 25. And the Lord said to Moses, Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.

And Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, Set limits around the mountain, and consecrate it. And the Lord said to him, Go down and come up, bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.

So Moses went down to the people and told them. And then again in Exodus chapter 20 verses 18 to 19. Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled.

And they stood far off and said to Moses, You speak to us, and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us, lest we die. The author of Hebrews describes all of this in a way that is designed to have a powerful rhetorical effect.

He describes the meeting with God at Mount Sinai in a way that draws upon the different senses. Touch what may be touched, a blazing fire, sight, darkness, gloom and tempest, and hearing the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words. The most terrifying thing on the mountain is God's voice and the fear of his judgment.

The people refused to draw near because of fear, and Moses had fear also. Yet his fear comes at a different point in the story. Moses' fear is referred to in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 19.

For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also. What he describes here is the terrifying anger of God at sin.

In that situation there was not any effective way to deal with the people's sin. He had to mediate for the people, but the people could not come close because of their sin. And if they did come close, the anger of the Lord might break out at them and they might be destroyed.

There is something a bit more subtle than a straightforward contrast between the Old and the New Covenant being drawn here. God is present of course, both on Mount Sinai and on Mount Zion, but in very different ways. On one, he is inaccessible to a sinful people that face his judgment.

On the other, he is accessible to a people who are granted access to his presence through Christ. It is also important to remember here the relationship between Sinai and the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was based upon the foundational theophanic event of Sinai.

The Tabernacle was a sort of immovable mountain. It moved around the pattern of God's appearance to the people at Sinai to different places. The pattern was received on Sinai for the Tabernacle, but Sinai itself was part of the pattern for that Tabernacle.

And much as Sinai was the place of God's awesome and dreadful presence and glory that was inaccessible to sinful human beings, so the Tabernacle was something that kept out the people of Israel. They all had to remain outside lest God's holy wrath break out against them. Indeed, not only human beings were kept out, but even if an animal came near, it had to be stoned to death.

Mount Zion by contrast is a very different sort of place. Mount Zion is an assembly. It's a place of fellowship and festivity.

It is associated with Jerusalem. It's a site of dwelling, with God dwelling in the midst of his people. There are innumerable angels.

The angels had to intermedicate between God and the people. Now however, the people are invited to join the angels' own assembly. This is the church of the firstborn.

It is associated with all of God's people in Christ who is the firstborn. They're enrolled in heaven. Heaven is their true home.

God's presence of course is at the heart of it all. The spirits of righteous people made perfect are here. Those who have died in Christ and been brought into the fullness of his presence.

This realm of fellowship and festivity, of access and presence is possible because we have been granted access and welcomed by Christ's blood. And there's a contrast drawn with the blood of Abel. In Genesis chapter 4 verses 10 to 12 we read, The forbidding image of Sinai is a picture of a lack of access to God's presence.

A place where there is no sacrifice of Christ for a sinful people and they must be held afar off or subject to God's judgment. Many of the warnings and encouragements of the book to this point might be heard here. Once again he is comparing the wilderness generation of the Exodus with the first generation of the church to follow Christ.

Once again he is arguing from the lesser to the greater. Learn the lessons from the wilderness generation. Do not turn back.

Do not reject what is set before you. If you reject Christ or turn back from him, your judgment will be far more severe than what faced the wilderness generation at Sinai. They heard God's word on earth but we have the voice of Christ from heaven.

There is a new earth shattering revelation. Christ has warned us from heaven. Not just a word spoken by angels but now by the one who is greater than all of the angels.

Quoting Haggai chapter 2 verses 6 to 7 he speaks of a coming judgment. For thus says the Lord of hosts, Yet once more in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land and I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all

nations shall come in and I will fill this house with glory says the Lord of hosts. This judgment shakes the heavenly realm also.

Christ has entered into the heavenly temple into God's presence itself and so the heavenly order has been changed also. Man now has access to God's heavenly throne itself. Yet there still remain things shaken to be removed.

The Christians to which the author of Hebrews writes are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Yet there are elements in this world that are to be shaken and even in the heavens themselves. Perhaps we should even hear some reference to the events of AD 70 here.

The earthly sanctuary of the temple is about to be removed in a few years time. Once that has been removed it will be clearer that there is no rival way of access into God's presence than that that is offered through Jesus Christ. Recognising all of this we will approach God with reverence awe and with a godly fear.

The God that we are approaching is the God of Sinai. The same God that provoked terror in Moses and the people and now we have access to his presence. Access that gives us peace with God, that gives us an enjoyment of his admittance and his acceptance.

And yet if we reject we are in a far more serious position than the Israelites were. We must not turn back, we must not give up, we must receive what God has given us in Christ and joining with that heavenly throng offer God acceptable worship. A question to consider how might the vision of the heavenly company described in this chapter change the way that we consider Christian worship?