

Lesson 51
Fear in the Old Covenant
Hebrews 12:18-24

We are living in a day when Christianity is weak, and this weakness has caused many to speculate as to what the problem is. It has become fashionable in some circles, especially Reformed groups, to state that the woes of Christianity are due to the fact that Christians are not keeping the law of God, which they understand to be the moral and ethical requirements of the Mosaic Law in general and the Ten Commandments in particular. Their cry is to put Christians back under the Law for sanctification, for they know of no other way to stop the loose living of so many professing Christians. The problem with this position is that the Bible teaches that the Christian is not under the Mosaic Law as a rule of life, but the Christian is under grace.

“... for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14).

“And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being with the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law” (1 Cor. 9:20-21).

To go back under the Mosaic Law as a Christian can be most damaging to one's spiritual life. Usually those who are Mosaic Law-keeping Christians understand God's wrath, holiness, and majesty, and they operate under a great deal of fear, not understanding much about God's love or displaying real joy in their experience. The spirit of the law kills the spirit of Christ!

This was exactly the experience of many of the Hebrew-Christians to whom the author was writing. Some of them were contemplating leaving Christianity to go back into Judaism because they could not take the intense social persecution from the unsaved Jews. They wanted to go back into Judaism, and the author urges them to persevere or push on in their Christian profession. The author, displaying a real pastor's heart, seeks diligently to persuade them of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, stressing the fact that the Old Covenant (Mosaic system) was an inferior economy or dispensation to the New Covenant economy. In this particular section, the author shows the superlative excellency of the age of grace (the gospel) to the age of the Law (Mosaic Law).

For these Hebrew-Christians to abandon Christianity for Judaism would be serious indeed, for they would be putting themselves under a system that would produce fear of God rather than love for Him.

This section of Scripture is very difficult to interpret because it deals in figurative language and uses a spiritualizing technique.

When I get to heaven, I plan to talk to the author of Hebrews about his method of writing.

FEAR UNDER THE OLD DISPENSATION - Hebrews 12:18-21

“For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind ...” -- The author attempts to show the Hebrew-Christians what they do have by showing them negatively what they do not have. The “for” looks back to chapter twelve where they were exhorted to persevere in the Christian faith in spite of the persecution they were receiving, and the fact that they were not under the Mosaic Law as a way of life gave them strong motivation to stay with Christ and to push on for Christ. The “mountain” refers to Mount Sinai where God gave the Mosaic Law or the Old Covenant. When Israel received the Law, there was great dread and fear. The whole situation struck terror into their hearts. With the giving of the Law came fire, gloom, darkness and a whirlwind. These are words of judgment and terror, and they caused the people to tremble. ***“So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled”*** (Exodus 19:16). These things were terrifying manifestations threatening judgment upon the people.

God primarily gave the Mosaic Law to show the Israelites their utter sinfulness.

“And the Law came in that the transgression might increase, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more ...” (Rom. 5:20).

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God ...” (Rom. 3:19).

“Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions ...” (Gal. 3:19).

The Law was given to show the sinfulness of sin. It is true that the Law was given as a rule of life for Israel as a nation, and they agreed to do all that was in the Law.

“So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’ And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD” (Exodus 19:7-8).

Yet they were unable to keep the Law, and this should have driven them to God and His provision of sacrifice through the shedding of blood.

The giving of the Law gave the people of Israel a certain concept of God. God was portrayed at Sinai as absolutely sovereign, perfectly holy and a severe judge. There is much to learn at Sinai about God’s awe-inspiring majesty, but not much to learn of His love, mercy, and grace. Why did a loving God terrify Israel at Mt. Sinai? Because the most gracious and loving thing He could do for them at that stage of their education was to convince them that He alone was holy, righteous, and sovereign, and that every soul is answerable to Him and that they were sinners in

need of a Savior.

Notice carefully that the Christian has not come to a mount that may be touched. This teaches that the gospel in the dispensation of the church is not something material and visible, palpable, and touchable, nor perceived by the physical senses. The true gospel is spiritual and can be apprehended only by faith. ***“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers”*** (John 4:23). Judaism was kindergarten revelation that instructed men primarily through the physical senses, but true Christianity is primarily spiritual and understood by faith, making it a far superior system to Judaism. Folks who are all wrapped up in Christian ritual are still very much tied up with Old Testament religion. They have not yet graduated out of the kindergarten stage of Christianity.

“... and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them.” -- At the giving of the Law there was the blast of a trumpet (Ex, 19:16). This supernatural trumpet blast, emitting ear-splitting tones, shrilly and loudly, was designed to strike reverential fear into the people’s hearts. The ***“sound of words”*** must refer to the actual giving of the Ten Commandments, and when the people heard it they were struck with fear and terror in their hearts and said to Moses, ***“Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us lest we die”*** (Ex. 20:19).

The Law produced fear and terrifying dread in the hearts of the people, but not much grace and love.

“For they could not bear the command, ‘IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED.’” -- Mount Sinai was such a dreadful place that anyone or any animal that touched it would die (Ex. 19:12). The revelation of God and His Law was so awesome that Israel could not endure to receive any more of it directly from God, realizing their own sinfulness and God’s ability to snuff them out at any moment.

“And so terrible was the sight that Moses said, ‘I AM FULL OF FEAR AND TREMBLING.’” -- The fear of Moses was not recorded in the Old Testament, but we assume that it happened and this incident was given to the author of Hebrews by special revelation.

The point is clear: all who were connected with the giving of the Mosaic Law were filled with fear and trembling because the Law does not save but condemns. Law-keepers are always filled with fear, for the Law is stern, severe, and a hard taskmaster.

GRACE UNDER THE NEW DISPENSATION - Hebrews 12:22-24

“But you have come to Mount Zion ...” -- The “but” gives a contrast between the economy of Law and the economy of grace. We must understand with the coming of Christ and His death and resurrection, God began a new dispensation or economy. The word “dispensation” means “a way of running things.” God’s way of salvation has always been the same which is by grace through faith in Christ, but His way of running things on earth has varied. Obviously things were run differently before and after the Cross. For instance, God has always been a loving God

and He is ever gracious. But the full manifestation of God's grace awaited the coming of Christ.

“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5).

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Also, a full manifestation of God's grace awaited the coming of Christ. ***“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ”*** (John 1:17). The Old Testament pointed forward to Christ, but the New Testament looks back to Christ who has come. The Old Covenant (Mosaic Law) has been done away with in Christ, and the New Covenant is now in force for God's people.

“But you have come to Mount Zion ...” -- This states clearly that the Christian has come in his experience to many spiritual privileges although he may not actually possess them fully. Yet these privileges are his in Christ Jesus who died for his sins. Spiritually, the Christian has come to Mount Zion, the place of blessing. Mount Zion lay to the southwest of Jerusalem, being the oldest and highest part of that ancient city. It had two peaks. One peak was called Moriah on which the temple was erected, signifying God's presence with His people, and on the other peak the royal palace of David was built. Mount Zion, to a Jew, was always a place of joy and blessing. In a spiritual sense, because of Christ, we Christians have entered into the full blessing of God, and God dwells in us and we in Him. ***“In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you”*** (John 14:20).

The Christian now has an intimate relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. God is revealed in the New Testament more clearly as a God of love, and His love abides eternally upon the true children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Fear is now cast out by love.

“... and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ...” -- The Christian under grace has come to New Jerusalem, the heavenly city which is nothing else but heaven itself. While we are not yet in heaven, we are as good as there, because we are in Christ Jesus, and He promised to prepare us a mansion and take us to heaven.

Fear of death and judgment is taken away from Christians because they are a heaven-bound people.

“... and to myriads of angels ...” -- Christians will one day fellowship with multitudes of angels in heaven. Christians, with the angels, shall praise and serve God throughout eternity. There can be no fear when one is surrounded by angels.

“...to the general assembly...” -- This may refer to all the creatures of heaven, whether angels or the redeemed, but it probably refers to just the redeemed of all ages. Christians, as far as God is concerned, are one with all the believers of history and are already in heaven with them.

Presbyterians once a year go to the general assembly where representatives from the whole denomination meet to discuss business and set policy. However, the real general assembly of God has never convened yet, but it will one day when all God's people gather together in heaven.

“... and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven ...” -- This probably refers to the Church of Jesus Christ which began on the Day of Pentecost. Christians are one with all Christians who have died and all will be in heaven together. God's people have their names written in heaven and will most certainly be with Christ one day. **“... but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven”** (Luke 10:20). Grace does not produce fear but appreciation and love for God.

“... and to God, the judge of all ...” -- Christians, because of Christ, have come face to face with the Judge of all men, but they do not fear as did men in the Old Testament. Why? Because God is their father through Christ and they are His sons and daughters. The new dispensation of grace has produced deeper spiritual relationships between God and His people.

Are you occupied with the love of God? Do you see your need to know God as your Father? The Apostle Paul felt that nothing could separate him from the love of God. **“For I am convinced ... that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Rom. 8:38-39).

“... and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect ...” -- Christians are also one with the Old Testament saints. In heaven the redeemed people of God, both Old Testament and New Testament saints will worship God forever.

“... and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant ...” -- Christians have come to Christ who is the only mediator between God and man and the whole redemption of men is based on the New Covenant which provides for the forgiveness of sin. The New Covenant is a new arrangement for living, and God is not only some distant, holy and sovereign God, but He is near and available to us. God is available to be our strength, our righteousness, our wisdom, or whatever we need.

When a Christian is discouraged, he must think of his spiritual privileges. Certainly it gets rough at times, certainly it gets discouraging, surely there are times when the pressures are intense, but have you reckoned on your resources?

I shall never forget the true story of a Navajo Indian which clearly illustrates the truth that we must tap the resources that are ours. This Navajo Indian was a rich old man, having made a lot of money in oil, and it was all in the bank. Periodically he came off the reservation to see his banker. He would come to the banker and say, “Money all gone. Sheep all dead. Cattle all stolen. Fences all down. Everything bad.” His banker knew exactly what to do. He would go into the vault, put a lot of money into some bags and set it down in front of the old man. He would count the money, and his eyes would begin to gleam. Then he would say to the banker, “Sheep all well. Cattle all back. Fences all up. Everything good.” He was reckoning on his resources.

“... and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.” -- The forgiveness of sins is based solely on the shed blood of Jesus Christ, for without the shedding of blood is no forgiveness of sins. Even Abel who shed his blood as a believer is nothing compared to Christ, who shed His blood to redeem men. The blood of Abel cried out for vengeance, but the blood of Christ purges the conscience from sin (Heb. 9:14-15).

The answer to weak Christianity is not to put people back under the Mosaic Law, but to give them a right understanding of God's love and grace which will give them a great appreciation for their salvation and motivate them to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The Law of Moses brought terror to men because the law points out sin. If you are ever to be saved, you must come to Mount Sinai before you can come to Mount Zion and Calvary. God holds the law up before you, unbeliever, to show you that you are a sinner and to condemn you justly. The Law says, “Thou shalt not steal!” Have you ever stolen anything? “Thou shalt not commit adultery!” Have you ever committed adultery in act or thought? “Thou shalt not lie!” Have you ever lied? “Thou shalt honor thy father and mother!” Have you always obeyed and honored your parents? Any honest person would have to admit that he has broken God's law, but this should strike terror into your heart, for God is a sovereign, holy Judge who judges sinners with everlasting punishment.

Sinner, turn to Christ for He alone is grace and truth and He alone can save you from your sins. The Law cannot save, but the blood of Christ does save. The Old Covenant only condemns, but the Christ of the New Covenant forgives sins. God is love, mercy, and grace for all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Stop fearing and trust this God of love who sent His Son to die for sinners!