

“Marching to Zion (Part 1)” – Hebrews 12:18-24; Romans 1:21

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

This morning we are going to look at the next section of Hebrews 12, but to illustrate why that passage is so important I would like to consider something the Apostle Paul says in Romans.¹ So take a Bible and meet me in the first chapter of Romans...Think of this sermon as an introduction to next week's sermon in Hebrews.

This incredible letter in the New Testament serves as Paul's introduction to the church at Rome. More than that, though, it consists of Paul's most detailed exposition of the Gospel and its implications in the New Testament. It begins in a typical fashion, with a standard Pauline greeting, a word of thanksgiving, and some remarks on the Apostle's desires for the believers at Rome. Then we come to verses 16 and 17, which are generally regarded as the thesis statement of the letter. He writes,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17)

That's Romans in a nutshell. The rest of the letter fleshes out this Gospel. But as I often tell you, to truly understand and appreciate the “good news,” which is the Gospel, you have to start by grasping the “bad news” of every person's standing before God because of sin. So, not surprisingly, Paul begins with the grim picture of the human depravity and what sinners like us rightly deserve for our rebellion against God. Look at verse 18 and following...This is God's Word...

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” (Romans 1:18-25)

Now there are a lot of interesting (and, dare I say, terrifying) things that Paul says in these verses. To start with, he claims, as we considered last week through the lens of sexual ethics, that our unrighteousness is the reason we suppress the truth. We don't like what God says about how we are to live and so we either try to redefine it to match our desired morality or we reject it all together, rejecting the Lordship of God, its source, in the process. In either case, Paul calls this an attempt to “*suppress the truth*.” We have all done this. It is the sinner's way. And we are all sinners. But it's not very effective, because the truth will always win out as the judgment of God will convincingly show. Fight as we might to “hold down” the truth (which is what “*suppress*” means), the truth always prevails. Tony Evans likens this to how a beach ball interacts with water.

“A beach ball held under water resists and wants to pop back up; so if you want to keep the ball under, you have to force it down. Humans tend to do the same thing to the truth about God’s righteousness because they don’t want to deal with it.”²

But sooner or later God is going to deal with those who suppress the truth. And Paul says that, in fact, He already is to some extent. Since we “*are without excuse*”, Paul explains that “*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against*” them already. But did you catch how God’s wrath is being manifested in this present age? Verse 24. “*God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity*”. In other words, He gave them what they wanted. He let them pursue their destructive desires and thereby poison the soul and ready themselves for destruction. God is under no obligation to intervene. They are getting what they want. And it will utterly destroy them eventually and this, Paul says, is a form of God’s wrath on the sinner. And, but for the grace of God, so go we...

But what I want you to see this morning is something that Paul says in verse 21 that is very neglected in the literature. I continue to be shocked how little is made of it among the commentaries because it seems so striking to me. Look at the verse again.

“*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*” (Romans 1:21)

Paul says that the sinner, in one sense, “*knew God*,” which in the context is a reference to knowing enough of what can be known about God from what is observable in the created order (i.e., “general revelation”). It’s not the knowledge of a believer. It’s not a saving knowledge. As the theologian John Frame remarks,

“We can say that if the believer’s knowledge of God is a knowledge in friendship, the unbeliever’s knowledge is a knowledge of enmity. Any such relationship colors the knowledge that one person has for another. The believer’s knowledge of his Father and Lord necessitates obedience...The unbeliever’s knowledge of God as an enemy necessitates rebellion and hatred. It also necessitates the rejection of the very knowledge that the unbeliever has.”³

And this is exactly what Paul shows here. They, the unbelievers, refused to respond appropriately to that revelation. They suppressed it. And the evidence of that rejection is seen in two things—“*they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...*” They did not worship Him or offer to Him their thanksgiving. So what happens? Their thinking becomes “*futile*” and their hearts are “*darkened*.” I think then we can infer from this that a lack of worship and thanksgiving are symptomatic of a heart that is being hardened. They are evidence of or, at the very least, precursors for a heart that “*exchanged the glory of the immortal God*” for their preferred flavor of idolatry (1:23) and those who “*exchanged the truth about God for a lie*” (1:25).

So what does that say about the person whose life is not characteristically overflowing in worship and thanksgiving to God? It’s not positive. It’s in decline spiritually. It may even be dead spiritually, lost and under the wrath of God. But Christians, of all people, should be people marked by thanksgiving.⁴ We have much to be thankful for. More than anyone else on the planet! So worship and gratitude are the natural fruit of our faith.

That a lack of worship might indicate lostness, probably surprises none of us. But a lack of thanksgiving? That’ll raise some eyebrows. Idolatry *and* ingratitude. We don’t often see these things as related. Indeed most commentators on this passage focus the majority of time on the worship issue and curiously little (if at all!) on what the lack of thanksgiving suggests.⁵ But “Why is ingratitude so dangerous? Because”, as James Montgomery Boice puts it, “it is based upon a willful unawareness of the most basic facts about God and upon our lack of a proper relationship to him...Ingratitude...is the mark of those who repress the truth about him.”⁶ This is one of the lessons of Romans 1:21.

Unfortunately, it's just not a point of emphasis in most of the literature I have seen. But there are, however, some notable exceptions. Os Guinness, for example, in a book called *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Solve It*, dedicates an entire chapter on how ingratitude can lead to doubt and ultimately to walking away from the faith. In reference to Romans 1:21, he writes, "rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism but with the self-satisfied heart of the one for whom 'thank you' is redundant."⁷

Those who suppress the truth of God are not those giving thanks to God and those who do give proper thanks to God do so on the basis of the truth of God. Is it any wonder, then, that the Bible puts so much emphasis on memory? The biblical authors understood how important it was to look back at what God has done and meditate on who God is so that we might give Him thanks. They understood that thanksgiving helps to stave off unbelief.

And this brings us now to Hebrews 12. Meet me there. You may be thinking that I chose this sermon because this is the week of Thanksgiving, but, in truth, that was just a happy accident from my perspective and a gracious providence from God's. We just so happen to have arrived at the climactic section of the book of Hebrews this morning. It's a pretty incredible text. And it's one that is about thanksgiving, though the word is not used. And it will allow us to bookend our celebration of Thanksgiving with some thoughts on why Christians should be thankful people and what we have to be thankful about.

The author is reminding his readers how thankful they should be for the realities that Christ has brought into existence for His church. The author closes on this note because he, like Paul in Romans 1, recognizes that thanksgiving helps ward off unbelief and, by extension, apostasy, the full and final abandonment of the faith. And, as we have seen repeatedly, the author's driving concern is that his readers not turn away from Christ in unbelief to go back to the comforts of their old Judaism. So how does he begin his conclusion? Well, let's look, beginning where we left off in verse 18. This is God's Word...

"For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.'²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.'²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:18-24)

These verses put before our eyes two mountains. He reminds them (and, by extension, all Christians after them) in verses 18, that they "*have not come*" to the first of these mountains, but they "*have come*", verse 22, to the second. This verb—"come to"—is one of the author's favorite words in the book.⁸ The first mountain is Mount Sinai and the second is Mount Zion. And given the description, it is really good news that our place is at the latter.

We are going to consider these two mountains in greater depth next week, Lord willing, but my goal today, as I've said, was just to introduce that sermon this week. I wanted us to see what we have considered from Romans 1 so that we can better understand the function and placement of this passage in the argument of Hebrews. In many ways it is a summary of the glorious superiority of Christ and the New Covenant that He has inaugurated. These are themes we have seen throughout the book. But we just don't have time to do justice to what the author does with those themes here at the end of chapter 12 this morning.

But it's all meant to fuel our sense of thanksgiving. It's meant to fuel our worship. And together—this worship and thanksgiving—just like in Romans 1, is intended to guard our hearts to keep us from falling away from the Lord. So the next time we gather—after the Thanksgiving holiday—we will see what these verses have to contribute to the content of our ongoing thanksgiving.

But let me at least whet the appetite by offering a few reminders of what our author has shared with us thus far. A few reminders of why Christians should be known as thankful people. And since our time is short, let's just limit our examples to those that employ our author's favorite word—"come to" (12:18, 22)—shall we? It shows up in some very memorable texts after all. For example, chapter four concludes with these words...

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Is it not wonderful to know that even if no one else can understand what you are going through—the pain, the temptations, the betrayals, the mistreatment—that there is One in heaven who can sympathize with you completely? And this One—Jesus Christ—is your Great High Priest, the One who mediates between us and God. He was sinless and so He alone was able to carry the blood of the New Covenant, His own blood shed for us, through the heavenly curtain, to make atonement for our sins. His work was perfect and so utterly sufficient that we need not fear approaching the Lord. We will not be condemned in Christ. Indeed, we are invited to come with confidence. Literally we are told to "come to" (there's our word) the throne of God's grace with the confidence so that we will "*receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" As you reflect on all you have to be thankful for this season, somewhere at the top of your list needs to be that we can "come to" the Lord in this way because of Jesus!

And, make no mistake, it is *only* because of Jesus. You would have no way to "come to" God but for the work of Christ on your behalf. Do you remember the way chapter 7 closed?

"For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." (Hebrews 7:26-27)

There is no need for another sacrifice. All the sacrifices were insufficient. They were mere pointers to an ultimate sacrifice that would be offered. They were shadows. The true substance was (and remains) Christ Himself. As the author has told us,

"For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near [literally "come to"]. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Hebrews 10:1-4)

They were meant to point to a greater sacrifice. A sufficient sacrifice. A perfect sacrifice. And that sacrifice was the very Son of God, who died in the place of sinners on the cross. So the author continues,

"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified... Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near [there's our word again!] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:14, 19-22)

His precious blood can cleanse the sinner of all their sins. This is the gift of the Gospel that is experienced by grace, through faith. Indeed, our author says,

“Consequently, [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

His perfect life. His sacrificial death. His glorious resurrection. His ascension to the Father. His ongoing work of intercession on behalf of His people. The totality of His perfect Person and work saves *“to the uttermost”*. But who does the author say He saves so thoroughly? *“[T]hose who draw near to God through him”*. Literally, those who “come to” God through him. There’s his favorite word again. And here we are reminded of the fact that Jesus is the only way to God.

He is the Way. Period. Full stop. There is no other. We draw near to God only *“through him”* for the simple fact that we are clothed in His perfection when we first believe. He is our righteousness. We believed and His perfect righteousness was gifted to us as though it were our own. He is our righteousness. That is the basis our standing before God. He is our righteousness. That is the only reason we can “come to” God. Faith. Trusting not in our works or self-sufficiency. Trusting instead in Christ’s work and His sufficiency. So I commend Christ to you as your only hope in life and in death. Trust in Him. Rest your faith on Him alone. For as we were told in chapter 11.

“...without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to [i.e. “come to”] God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

We can see why the author loves the word, can’t we? It reminds him of the grace that God has shown all Christians in Christ. It reminds him of the access that we have to God because of Christ. We can “come to” Him because the Son of God has “come to” us. And when a person begins to grasp this—really grasp it—they possess the greatest reason to be thankful in all circumstances. His name is Jesus. So give thanks for Him! He is worthy of our gratitude and worship. He is worthy.

And all God’s people said? “Amen!”

May our thanksgiving this week reflect that. May it make much of Him.

Let’s pray...

¹ The idea for the sermon title was drawn from a chapter that shares the same title in R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 185ff. Of course, we both derive the title from the Isaac Watts hymn, “We’re Marching to Zion.”

² Tony Evans, *CSB Tony Evans Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1315 n.1:18.

³ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 711. He continues, “Throughout the passage, this rejection of the truth and embracing of wickedness is their own responsibility (‘without excuse,’ v. 20). But in the mysterious relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility...the passage also says that God ‘gave them up’ to disobedience (vv. 24, 26, 28).” Ibid.

⁴ “It is not without reason that Paul adds that *neither gave they thanks*, for there is no one who is not indebted to God’s infinite kindnesses, and even on this account alone he has abundantly put us in his debt by condescending to reveal himself to us.” John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 32.

⁵ But they are related problems. We can see that even in the development of the English language. James Montgomery Boice points out, for example, the connection between the communion we have with God in prayer and the believer’s gratitude: “It is interesting to note that in many of the world’s languages ‘giving thanks’ is the basic meaning of at least one word for prayer. A very important Greek word for prayer is *eucharisteo*, from which is derived the liturgical word *Eucharist*. The Eucharist is the Lord’s Supper, and it refers to that aspect of the communion service that involves thanksgiving to God for Christ’s atoning death. *Eucharisteō* means ‘to give thanks.’ One of the most important Latin words for prayer is *gratia*, from which we have derived the French and English words *grace*. It has two meanings. On the one hand, it means God’s ‘unmerited favor.’ That is the most common meaning of the word in English. It is the meaning in the hymn ‘Amazing Grace.’ But *gratia* also means ‘thanksgiving,’ the meaning we retain when we speak of saying ‘grace’ before a meal. Isn’t it interesting that so many of these words for prayer mean thanksgiving? Isn’t it significant that the chief element in the opening of the heart of man to God in prayer should be gratitude?” James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 167.

⁶ Boice, 164, 167. Similarly, Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “Man does not thank God for his mercy, for his goodness, for his dealings with us in providence. We take the sunshine for granted; we are annoyed if we do not get it. We take the rain for granted. How often do we thank God for all these gifts and blessings!... God is “the giver of every good and perfect gift”; he is “the Father of mercies.” Yet people go through the whole of their lives in this world and they never thank him; they ignore him completely. That is how they show their attitude toward God. In this way they suppress the truth that has been revealed concerning [him].” Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, The Gospel of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 382.

⁷ Os Guinness, *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Solve It* (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 72.

⁸ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTC; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 396.