

## Hebrews 12:21-24

MW Lent 6, March 20, 2024

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***Indeed, so terrifying was the sight [of Mount Sinai] that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> 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, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.***

The "Fight or Flight Response," popularized by American Physiologist Walter Cannon in the 1920's, is a natural survival reaction that occurs in response to a physical threat. Although we might not put it into so many words, we experience this kind of reaction all the time. God created your body with natural survival instincts. When someone hiding in the corner of a dark room yells, "Boo!" we either fight or we flee. The same thing happens when you come upon a large growling dog on the sidewalk. Fight or flee?

Perhaps for most of us, when we face dangers and threats to our survival, our *most* natural reaction is to run away. And usually there's nothing wrong with that. Living is good. Survival is good. But what about threats to our spiritual survival? Do the principles of the "Fight or Flight Response" apply also to our spiritual life? More often than not, when we face threats and opposition to our faith—to Jesus—our sinful tendency is to fearfully flee. We tremble with fear like Moses and the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai.

I'm going to read to you another text revolving around an individual who could have just remained silent, who could have stayed on the sidelines, or who could have fled—but he did none of those things. That person is Joseph of Arimathea, who did not run away but took courage and buried Jesus' body. ***"And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."*** (Mark 15:42-43) How can we get over the natural reaction to flee? How can we learn to *take courage* like Joseph of Arimathea? The answer is found in our theme:

### **Keep Your Eyes on Jesus: He is Our Courage**

The first readers of the letter to the Hebrews were quite familiar with the Pentateuch, that is the first five books of the Bible—Genesis through Deuteronomy. So, as the writer mentions Moses, that struck a chord with the readers. In the verses before us this evening, the writer hearkens back to the days of Moses and the Israelites as they camped at Mount Sinai. About 45 days after they had escaped from Egypt, they had arrived at Sinai. And they spent just about an entire year camped at its base.

And we're told in Exodus that ***"The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai."*** (24:16) That was very apparent to them, as they felt the mountain rumble, heard the sound of a trumpet that no man was playing. They saw the fire burning at the peak—Exodus tells us that smoke went up from the top of the mountain like a furnace. The people faced the clouds and the flashes of lightning and trembled as the mountain shook. It's hard to imagine what that scene was like, but it's *easy* to imagine that the people were terrified. And who could blame them! God's glory is terrifying! God's Law is terrifying.

Israel's experience at Mount Sinai is meant to show us how great and fearful the Mosaic covenant, especially the 10 Commandments—all that which God was delivering to Moses on the mountain—it's meant to show us how fearful these things were. In summary, God had told the people of Israel, ***"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."*** (Leviticus 19:2) That's a tall order. For us, that's an impossible order. When we peer into the mirror of God's holy law, we see just how unworthy we are to be anywhere near God. We fail to love the Lord our God and treasure Him with all our hearts. We love ourselves much more than we love our neighbors. And God doesn't tell us to be better than most people in these ways, He says we are to be as holy as *He* is. And we are clearly not, so we are judged! And we deserve hell. And in the face of that terrible news, fear and flight are the natural responses.

When bad things happen because of our actions, we naturally don't want to face the consequences. There's a reason why "fleeing a crime scene" and "resisting arrest" are perennially two of the most common criminal charges in our country. When the going gets tough, the sinner gets fleeing. Just look at the disciples on Maundy Thursday. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane—when Judas, the chief priests, and the soldiers showed up to arrest Jesus—what did the disciples do? They booked it out of there! And when we see that reaction from the disciples, I hope we can all see our own similar failings. Don't we also sometimes flee when the Christian-going gets tough?

Maybe a conversation takes a gossip turn for the worse, and we flee to the safety of conformity, joining in with the name-smearing. Maybe someone asks us about what we believe, and we sort of mumble through a non-committal answer. Frightful flight can take a lot of different forms, and we've all been guilty of abandoning Jesus like the disciples did.

But not all of Jesus' disciples fled in fear. We already considered Joseph of Arimathea, that respected member of the council, who ***"took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."*** Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus. He was a member of the council, that is a member of the Sanhedrin—that group of chief priests, Pharisees, and elders who judged the people of Israel. That's the same Sanhedrin who falsely accused and unfairly condemned Jesus to be crucified. That was the group of peers to whom Joseph of Arimathea belonged. And imagine how *easy* it would have been for him to just blend in with the crowd. He could have run like the rest of the disciples. He could have pretended to have never known Jesus. He could have fled to the safety of conformity. But he didn't!

Joseph of Arimathea ***"took courage,"*** we are told. So, we have to ask, how did he do that? Where did his courage come from? It wasn't because of any supreme self-confidence. His courage came from his God-given faith. You see, Joseph had courage and confidence in God's promises. He had courage and confidence that the Messiah was coming to establish the Kingdom of God—a permanent, spiritual Mt. Zion—just as God had promised. So, because of who Jesus is and because of what Jesus had done, Joseph took courage.

And the crux of the issue, the ability to take courage rather than flee with fear, lies in the difference between the two mountains mentioned in our text as well as what they represent. We've already spoken about what Mount Sinai represented—the giving of the Law—the proclamation that holiness is demanded because God is holy. Anything less than that bears the promise of death and hell. But then Mount Zion is mentioned. ***"You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the***

**heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”** That’s quite a different picture than the one of fear at the base of Mount Sinai with its thundering and quaking and smoking and the pronouncement of God’s demands on a sinful people.

The reason it’s so different is because of that final phrase that we just read, **“Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”** The old covenant, the old contractual agreement between God and His people is the one that was given at Mount Sinai. It was the declaration that they needed to be just as perfect as God is perfect. It carried a promise, that if they were able to be perfect, then they would continue to *be* God’s people. But it also carried the penalty that all who failed would be condemned to die. That’s the *old* covenant. That’s a reason for real fear.

The *new* covenant, the *new* contractual agreement between God and His people is that Jesus would take care of all of it. Jesus would keep the law for us; He would never flee in terror before sin, death, or the devil. He would not flee in fear when surrounded in the garden, nor succumb to fear before the terrors of Calvary. And because Christ was courageous, because Christ faced all that was thrown at Him, because *Christ* never fled or fought back for His own life—God now does not turn away from us. This is what Joseph of Arimathea believed. So he took courage. He knew that whatever the Sanhedrin might take from him could not be compared with the glory awaiting him through Jesus.

At times in our lives, we’re going to be tempted to go the way of the fleeing disciples. But in those moments, remember Jesus! He is your courage! You are able to approach God now without fear, without trembling, because of that new covenant which He brings, which He accomplished for you. Taking care of all of your sins and putting all of the responsibility on His own shoulders, He has given you reason to never fear. Because the promise is that that picture of Mount Zion, the city of the living God with innumerable angels in festal gathering—that’s where you belong! That’s where your residency truly lies, as a member of the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. So we can live without fear. No matter what happens today, tomorrow, or ever—you are those whose spirits have already been made perfect, and whose passports are stamped for heaven.

So, “Fight or Flight”? How do we respond to fear? Let’s be like Joseph of Arimathea and keep our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross. In Him, we can fight the battles of this life without fear, because He has already won the war against sin. Keep your eyes on Jesus. He is your courage. Amen.

**“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.