

November 19
Lesson 12 (NIV)

MEDIATOR

OF THE NEW COVENANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 66

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:14, 15, 18-29; Psalm 66

HEBREWS 12:14, 15, 18-29

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”



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KEY VERSE

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”—Hebrews 12:28, 29

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the meaning and significance of the word *mediator*.
2. Explain how and why the believers' approach to God in the Old Testament era differs from the believers' approach to him in the New.
3. Explain Jesus' role as mediator to one unbeliever in the week ahead.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. In the Presence of Greatness
- B. Lesson Background

I. The Terrifying Mountain (HEBREWS 12:14, 15, 18-21)

- A. Peace and Holiness (vv. 14, 15)
Peace with Others
- B. Burning and Blasting (vv. 18, 19)
- C. Fear and Quaking (vv. 20, 21)

II. The Blessed Mountain (HEBREWS 12:22-29)

- A. Heavenly Jerusalem (vv. 22-24)
A Mediator Makes a Difference
- B. Inescapable God (vv. 25-27)
- C. Godly Fear (vv. 28, 29)

Conclusion

- A. Two Mountains
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. In the Presence of Greatness

At one time or another, we wonder what it would be like to meet a great figure of the past. What would it be like to have breakfast with Abraham Lincoln during America's Civil War? How would we react in the presence of Winston Churchill or Catherine the Great?

Chances are, such meetings would not be as pleasant as we would like them to be! After all, why would such leaders even acknowledge us? The only way such a meeting could happen (aside from solving the issue of time travel!) is if someone were to take us into the presence of such greatness.

At Mount Sinai to approach God was forbidden (see [lesson 6](#)). To that scenario we contrast the era of the new heavens and earth, when believers are welcomed into God's presence. Even now, we are encouraged to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" ([Hebrews 4:16](#)). Something significant has changed that allows us into God's presence.

B. Lesson Background

We do not know who wrote the book of Hebrews. One reason for this uncertainty is that the book, unlike most biblical letters, does not begin by identifying the author. Some Bible students think Paul wrote Hebrews. Various similarities between Hebrews and Galatians, one of Paul's letters, are seen to lend support to this proposal. One such similarity is the subject of this lesson: the contrast of Mount Sinai with the heavenly Jerusalem (see [Galatians 4:24-26](#)).

There is less uncertainty regarding the original intended audience of the book of Hebrews: Christians of Jewish background who, in the face of persecution and doubt, wanted to abandon the church and return to the synagogue. By the time we get to the text of today's lesson, the author of Hebrews has painted the consequences for such a decision in stark terms: there is no escape for those who reject the Christian message of salvation ([Hebrews 2:3](#)). Forsaking the blessings of the Christian life (such as the Holy Spirit) leaves one with no options for repentance and restoration to God ([6:4-6](#)).

The bottom line is not that the old covenant is bad; rather, it is that the old covenant is obsolete, having been superseded by a better covenant ([Hebrews 8:13](#)). And this new covenant did not arise from thin air. The Christian covenant was prophesied in the Old Testament ([Hebrews 8:7-12](#), which quotes [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); see [lesson 11](#)).

The author of Hebrews uses vivid word pictures to support his points. The function of the Word of God is compared with that of a sword ([Hebrews 4:12](#)). Christian teachings are likened to categories of milk and solid food ([5:12-14](#)). The Christian life is compared with a foot race ([12:1](#)). Worship is described as "a sacrifice of praise" ([13:15](#)). Our lesson today relies on the imagination of the reader to picture Mount Sinai at the time of the reception of the law. It was a place of terrifying thunder and lightning and of a supernatural trumpet blast that caused the people to tremble. The mountain was filled with smoke and fire, and it shook violently ([Exodus 19:16-19](#); [lesson 6](#)). This filled the hearts of the people with fear. We must keep this unique, awe-inspiring event from Israel's past in mind as we engage our lesson this week.

I. The Terrifying Mountain

(HEBREWS 12:14, 15, 18-21)

A. Peace and Holiness (vv. 14, 15)

14 Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

The context of Hebrews shines clearly here, for *peace* is a reference to the Jewish concept of *shalom*, a peace that results in personal well-being. The original readers of the book, having come from a Jewish background, are well acquainted with this idea. This is not a peace in which hostilities are merely paused. Rather, differences and disputes have been resolved and laid aside for good.

The Old Testament teaches that this kind of peace ultimately comes from God ([Numbers 6:26](#); [Psalm 29:11](#)). But the author knows that our behavior influences that of others; therefore, he couples the admonition for *peace with everyone* to a call for *holiness*. This means we are to live lives that are above reproach so that we represent our holy God faithfully to our family and neighbors.

What Do You Think?

What are some things you can do to foster peace with others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To repair a broken peace

To maintain an existing peace

Considering [Matthew 10:34-36](#)

If the context of Hebrews is that of Jewish Christians leaving the church to return to the synagogue, then we can understand the urgency of these words. There has been a church split. It is likely that bitter words and accusations have been traded. The author reminds everyone that peace and holiness are central teachings in both old and new covenants. Without holiness, one cannot *see the Lord* (compare [Matthew 5:8](#); [1 Peter 1:15, 16](#), quoting [Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2](#)). There is no justification for ungodly actions.

What Do You Think?

How will God see holiness in you daily?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

At times when only He can see you

At times when others are watching as well

15. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

The author's concern, is reinforced by a warning. It is embarrassing to witness callous and angry behavior within the church. When attitudes and actions of Christians are founded on bitterness rather than holiness, the method and mission of the church is damaged. When we think we are upholding godly standards in a strong and confident manner, we actually may be hindering the church's message of *the grace of God*.

PEACE WITH OTHERS

I met a new believer who had experienced a huge life transformation when she came to know the Lord. Her newfound faith grew, and she became involved in the children's program at her church. Her enthusiasm spread to other members of the congregation.

Somewhere along the way, she began having conflicts with the minister. He had different ideas about ministry, and the new believer's ideas and enthusiasm clashed with his. One afternoon she vented her frustrations to me regarding how he wouldn't allow innovation and change.

I empathized with her. I was young and enthusiastic myself and understood the frustration of feeling stifled in my excitement for service. However, I also understood that the conflict was simply a matter of perspective.

At one point in the conversation, the woman confided that she might leave that church and attend another one. "That might be a good idea, but you'll need to come to some peace with him eventually since you'll be spending eternity together in Heaven," I replied. "You don't want to be stuck around someone you didn't get along with here on earth!"

I was half joking, but I could see that my point hit home. She smiled as she realized that though they had differing opinions about how to serve Jesus, they still loved the same God, who wants his children to get along.

—L. M. W.

B. Burning and Blasting (vv. 18, 19)

18a. You have not come to a mountain that can be touched

The author now turns to one of his last major illustrations from the Old Testament: the setting of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. That event is burned into the collective memories of his readers of Jewish background, since the giving of the law marked the nation of Israel distinct from all other nations. There is no event more cherished in the heart of a devout Jew than this one.

The author of Hebrews describes Mount Sinai in ways that parallel Old Testament depictions in [Exodus 19](#) and [Deuteronomy 5](#). For one thing, the mountain could *be touched* ([Exodus 19:12](#)). That indicates the mountain was real, not a mythical creation. Scholars today debate the location of Mount Sinai, but most recognize Jebel Musa (Arabic for "Mount Moses") in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula as the site.

18b. and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;

The author also recalls atmospheric phenomena: darkness, dense cloud cover, and storminess, including thunder and lightning, characterized the day ([Exodus 19:16a](#)). The stormy darkness was pierced by the descent of the Lord in fire accompanied by thick smoke that covered the mountain ([19:18](#)).

19. to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,

A *trumpet blast* signaled the descent of the Lord to the top of Mount Sinai. That explosion of sound was not a fanfare from a human trumpeter hiding in the rocks. [Exodus 19:19](#) describes it as a single long blast that grew louder and louder. We are left to imagine that this was from the horn of an angelic trumpeter having inexhaustible lung capacity (see [Revelation 8:6](#)).

The trumpet blast was accompanied by *the voice* of the Lord ([Exodus 19:19](#); compare [Revelation 1:10](#)). What this sounded like is not described. But it struck terror into the hearts of the people, so much so that they begged for it to stop (see [Deuteronomy 5:23-27](#)).

C. Fear and Quaking (vv. 20, 21)

20, 21. because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

The author elaborates on the terror that beset the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. First, there was a fear of physical well being, because *touching the mountain* meant death. The consequence extended even to livestock. If a cow or lamb wandered too close and made contact with Mount Sinai, the people had to kill it. That

represented a loss of high value to the owner, given the remote location in the desert of Sinai.

Second, *Moses* himself was cowed by what he witnessed. We should not forget that Moses was called to ascend this mountain of terror in short order ([Exodus 19:20](#)). We honor him for his fortitude in various situations as leader of the Israelites. Yet even Moses, among the greatest of the Jewish heroes, was afraid on this occasion.

II. The Blessed Mountain

([HEBREWS 12:22-29](#))

A. Heavenly Jerusalem ([vv. 22-24](#))

²². But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,

The author turns to another mountain, a metaphorical peak that represents the realities of the Christian life and system: *Mount Zion*. It is not a remote desert crag. Rather, it is a *city*, a place where people live. As the location of *the living God*, it is the Lord's permanent presence, not a place of temporary visitation as was Sinai. It is a *heavenly* place, not found on the earth at the end of any highway or sea voyage. It is *Jerusalem*, the site of God's perfect temple. It is populated by *thousands upon thousands of angels*, heavenly beings we would expect to find there.

The book of Revelation elaborates on the idea of a *heavenly Jerusalem*, there called "new Jerusalem" ([Revelation 3:12](#); [21:2](#)). The city descends onto a mountain, much like the Lord's descent to Mount Sinai ([21:10](#)). The presence of the Lord results in a perfect temple for worship ([21:22](#)). Heaven is full of the hosts of God's angels offering worship to the Lord ([5:11](#)).

²³. to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

This is no dreamworld in the sky, but a reality for the author and his readers. His blessed mountain is seen in *the church*, a community made up of those *whose names are written in heaven*, in the book of life ([Philippians 4:3](#); [Revelation 21:27](#)). *God, the Judge of all*, controls this book. His judgments are absolute and final; therefore, a name in this book is the assurance of salvation (compare [Revelation 3:5](#); [13:8](#); [17:8](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.

Galatians Guh-lay-shunz.

Haggai Hag-eye or Hag-ay-eye.

Jebel Musa Jeh-buhl Moo-suh.

Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.

synagogue sin-uh-gog.

Jesus Christ, *the firstborn*, is the preeminent person in God's plans ([Colossians 1:15, 18](#)). Since Christians are made holy by his atonement ([Hebrews 2:11](#)), we are *the church of the firstborn*. Our names are in the book, for we are judged *righteous*, even *perfect*, through the sacrificial work of Christ (see [Hebrews 10:14](#); [11:40](#)).

What Do You Think?

Of the images in [verses 22, 23](#) contrasting the Christian's destination with Mount Sinai, which is most significant to you? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

City of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem

Company of angels

The firstborn

Spirits made perfect

²⁴. to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus must be the central focus of this spiritual mountain of the church because he has mediated the *new covenant*. Without his atoning sacrifice, there would be no new covenant, and the Jewish Christians might as well return to the synagogue.

The author leaves the Sinai illustration momentarily to reconsider Abel ([Genesis 4:10](#)), already mentioned in [Hebrews 11](#), the Faith Hall of Fame chapter. There it is said of righteous Abel that he "still speaks, even though he is dead," his offering having been declared "better" than Cain's ([Hebrews 11:4](#)). Even so, this voice from the old covenant cannot compare with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ ([Hebrews 9:26](#); compare [1 Peter 3:18](#)). Both Jesus and Abel lost their lives at the hands of those who had evil intent ([Luke 24:7](#); [1 John 3:12](#)). But the shedding of Jesus' blood is infinitely more valuable than that of Abel or of all animals ever sacrificed (see [Hebrews 9:11-10:18](#)).

mediator ('mē-dē-,ā-t)
 one who intervenes
 between conflicting p



Sheet 5—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 12. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask your learners to give synonyms for the word mediator.

A MEDIATOR MAKES A DIFFERENCE

While living overseas, I sometimes had trouble understanding the language in the community where I lived. This became painfully evident one day when I received a notice that a package awaited me at the post office. I went there and handed the notice to the clerk. She pushed a form back at me and muttered something incomprehensible. I asked her to repeat it. She sighed impatiently and did so. I finally understood she wanted me to write something. I did my best to transcribe her words while she became frustrated. She eventually gave me my package and sent me on my way.

The next time I received notice of a package, my trip to the post office was made with more reluctance. When I opened the door, the same clerk caught sight of me and yelled for me to go away! I did so but returned with an interpreter.

That encounter went smoothly. The clerk, if not kind, was at least polite. The presence of a mediator made a huge difference in her attitude toward me. Christians can approach God without fear of being told to go away! And we don't have to go in search of a mediator—he's right here. See [1 Timothy 2:5](#).

—L. M. W.

B. Inescapable God (vv. 25-27)

25. See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?

The author's plea takes on a heightened urgency as he moves toward a conclusion. Don't be stubborn, he warns. There was no escape from the terrifying voice of God at Mount Sinai; there can be no escape for those who reject the message of salvation through Jesus (see [Hebrews 2:2-4](#)). This is the current and eternal voice *from heaven*. To leave the church and turn back to the synagogue is a foolish choice with eternally grave consequences.

What Do You Think?

How can we guard against becoming resistant to God's Word?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

During times of triumph

During times of distress

26a. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised,

The author recalls the Sinai experience a final time, now focusing on the quaking of the mountain ([Exodus 19:18](#)). Those who witnessed the event had confirmation of God's powerful visitation to the earth. The shaking of the earth is used frequently in the Bible as a confirmation of the Lord's presence (examples: [Judges 5:4, 5](#); [Psalm 18:7](#)).

26b. "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

The quaking at Sinai serves as the writer's launching point for quoting [Haggai 2:6](#). This is a prophetic promise that, unlike at Sinai, a future shaking will include *the heavens* as well as *the earth*. The setting of the book of Haggai is 520 BC, the year the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple was completed. The author uses the promised shaking to confirm the superiority of the Christian claims since the shaking is associated with "what is desired by all nations" coming and filling "this house with glory" ([Haggai 2:7](#)). In Christ, we are not dealing with a mere system of laws directed at a single people group of the earth, but with an eternal system that encompasses *not only the earth but also the heavens* (compare [Revelation 6:14](#)).

27. The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Hebrews uses the full prophetic import of Haggai's words to arrive at the conclusion of this argument. The prophet's words indicate yet again a finality to God's visitations. The Jewish system is built on things that can be shaken, meaning they are temporary (compare [Matthew 27:51](#)). The old system is obsolete, and its elements are no longer valid. Christians, by contrast, have a system that *cannot be shaken* because its constituent parts are eternal. The centerpiece is the eternal, perfect, "once for all" sacrifice of Christ ([Hebrews 10:10](#)). This is the visitation of God that marks "the culmination of the ages" ([9:26](#)) and starts the countdown to the future return of Christ in glory.

C. Godly Fear (vv. 28, 29)

28, 29. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

Having concluded his resounding argument that only Christians are in a right relationship with God, the author moves to application. Since our kingdom, the church, is impervious to any quaking or disruption, we should appreciate our situation with thankfulness. We can learn something from the people of Israel who were overwhelmed by the majesty of the Lord's presence: that "something" is to come before him *with reverence and awe* as we commit to worship him. The Greek word behind the word *worship* is translated "serve" elsewhere (example: [Hebrews 8:5](#)), and both senses are here. We worship God when we serve him.

For Hebrews, serving God must be done with the proper attitude. He describes this as *reverence and awe*. This is reinforced by a dire warning: *God is a consuming fire*. This warning is borrowed from Moses himself ([Deuteronomy 4:24](#)) and serves to remind the readers that Christians worship the same God who visited Israel at Mount Sinai. Christians are the beneficiary of a superior relationship to God based on the mediating work of Christ ([Hebrews 9:15](#); [12:24](#)), but they do not serve a different God.

Therefore, he ends where he began this section, the picture of the Bible's fiery, powerful, awe-inspiring God (see [Hebrews 12:18](#)). We should never take God's grace as a sign of weakness. He is still "Judge of all" ([Hebrews 12:23](#)), and when he judges, his verdicts are swift and sure.

What Do You Think?

How should the fact that "God is a consuming fire" affect the way we live?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Given that God is merciful ([Deuteronomy 4:31](#))

Given that God is a shield ([Psalm 84:11](#))

Given that God is love ([1 John 4:16](#))

Conclusion

A. Two Mountains

[Isaiah 2:2](#) looks forward to the day when "the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established . . . and all nations will stream to it." What a glorious promise! There will be a single place of worship that will unite believers of all nations in their service to the one true God.

But which mountain is this? Is it Mount Sinai, the place of terror, the place of law? Or is it the mountain John sees in [Revelation 21](#), a great high peak that has new Jerusalem dropped onto its top ([Revelation 21:10](#))?

Hebrews points us to this second mountain and does not require us to wait for it. It is available now. God shook the earth when he gave the law. When Jesus

died and then broke the bonds of death, God shook the earth and the heavens. The old is passed away, for God has made all things new ([Revelation 21:5](#)). Let us go to the new mountain, the kingdom that will not be shaken.

B. Prayer

Lord of fire and earthquakes, Lord of light and truth, may we never forget your power or your grace. May we serve you with holiness and reverence. We pray in the name of Jesus; amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's grace is not an absence of holiness.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, write this on the board: *I would love to meet [name of famous person of the past or present], but I don't know if I could handle it.*

As students arrive, point to this statement and ask them to think of how they would complete it.

After everyone has arrived and had a chance to consider the statement, ask for responses. Ask each respondent to give reasons for wanting to meet that famous person, but focus on why he or she would be nervous to do so. Encourage responders to identify feelings of awe, inadequacy, intimidation, etc. After a few responses, ask if anything could be done to make the encounter less frightening.

Alternative. Download and distribute copies of the “Awesome Kings” activity from the reproducible page. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “There have been great and powerful figures in history. We know of impressive people in our own time. But being in the presence of such a person will pale in comparison to what it will be like to meet the Lord face-to-face. How can we expect to do that?”

Into the Word

Say, “The Bible often speaks of mountains and associates certain ones with great acts of God. When we think about it, the size and majesty of mountains make them logical places to associate with God's greatness and power. In our Bible text today, two very different mountain experiences are described.”

On the board write these two headings:

Terrible Mountain Blessed Mountain

Divide the class into two teams, assigning each team one of the two mountains. Ask each team to choose a recorder to write on the board.

When recorders are ready at the board, the other members of both teams should read [Hebrews 12:18-29](#) silently. Each group should work with its recorder to list as many descriptions of its mountain that are mentioned or implied in the text. Possible lists may contain descriptions such as these:

Terrible Mountain—*burning with fire, darkness, death, earthshaking, quaking fear, tempest, terrifying voice, untouchable*

Blessed Mountain—*church of the firstborn, city of the living God, grace, heavenly Jerusalem, innumerable angels, names written in Heaven, reverence and godly fear, people made perfect, unmovable kingdom*

After group work is complete, note that both mountains describe the presence of God. Ask the class to find a single word in [verse 24](#) that explains the blessed difference. If no one says “mediator,” be sure to steer them in that direction. Have learners find synonyms to construct a definition of that word. They may think of words such as *arbiter, fixer, broker, moderator, conciliator, go-between, intercessor*, etc. The constructed definition should be along the lines of “someone who brings conflicting parties together.”

Into Life

Have someone read [1 Timothy 2:5](#) aloud. Then ask, “How is Jesus especially qualified to represent you before God?” If learners are slow to respond, give a hint to think in terms of Jesus' *person* (who he is in his being) and *work* (what he did). After some discussion have students pair off and role-play how one of them as a believer would share with the other, an unbeliever, about the benefits of having Jesus as our mediator.

Alternative. Pass out copies of the “Awesome Mediator” activity from the reproducible page. Ask students to pair off and discuss what approach they would use with each individual.