

INTRODUCTION

I just got back from another trip to Israel. If you've flown much, you may be a little bored by the preflight briefing. Here are some examples of how some flight attendants have tried to use a little humor.

- (1) "To operate your seat belt, insert the metal tab into the buckle, and pull tight. If you don't know how to operate one you probably shouldn't be out in public unsupervised.
- (2) One captain said, "Delta Airlines is pleased to have some of the best flight attendants in the industry. Unfortunately, none of them are on this flight!
- (3) In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Stop screaming and grab the mask and pull it over your face. If you have a small child, secure your mask before assisting with theirs. If you are traveling with more than one child, pick your favorite.
- (4) And finally, my favorite: In the event of an emergency water evacuation, your seat bottom can be used for a flotation device. Place your arms through the straps and paddle to shore. And feel free to keep the seat bottom with our compliments.

We're at the point in Hebrews where the writer is warning Hebrew Christians against the danger of evacuating from their faith, and going back into the binding religion of Judaism. In this passage, the writer warns against two dangers: the danger of bitterness and the danger of going back to Mount Sinai. He speaks of another mountain, Mount Zion. That's why I've entitled this message, "Don't miss the Mountain!"

Hebrews 12:14-24 (CSB). "Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness—without it no one will see the Lord. Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many. And make sure that there isn't any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for a single meal. For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, even though he sought it with tears, because he didn't find any opportunity for repentance."

"For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, for they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." [Exodus 19:12] The appearance was so terrifying that Moses said. "I am trembling with fear." [Deuteronomy 9:19] Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel."

There are two Old Testament Characters mentioned here and we can learn a lesson from both of them. Esau was the older twin of Jacob and he teaches us about the danger of bitterness. And of course, we're familiar with Moses, who went to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. He teaches us to move on to a better mountain: Mount Zion. So let's learn a personal lesson from each of these two Old Testament characters.

I. THE ESAU LESSON: Root out bitterness or it may displace God's grace in your life.

We've seen from an earlier passage that a Christian can't fall FROM grace, but there is the possibility that in your attitudes and actions you may fall short of reflecting God's grace to others. God's Word says, "Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up." (Hebrews 12:15 CSB)

Esau was the firstborn of twin sons. His name meant "red." His younger brother came out grabbing his heel, so he was named "Jacob" which means grabber. And that's pretty much what Jacob did all his life.

One day Esau came in from hunting and Jacob had a big pot of chili cooking. Esau said, "Can I have some of your chili?" Jacob said, "I'll swap you some for your first born birthright." Esau made a bad trade, but he agreed.

Later, Jacob and his mother fooled Isaac into believing he was giving the family estate to Esau, when it was Jacob who snuck in and grabbed it.

When Esau heard about this he became so bitter he vowed to kill his younger brother. Jacob skipped town to flee from his the temper of his redheaded brother. Esau is an example of how bitterness can ruin your life. Do you have any bitterness in your life? Let's learn three things about bitterness.

A. The root of bitterness is resentment.

Bitterness is an attitude of deep resentment that refuses to be reconciled. For many years Esau was bitter toward Jacob. The word bitter describes something with a bad taste. When I was in high school, one of my classmates handed me a green persimmon and invited me to take a bite. He assured me that it tasted sweet like a peach. I had never tasted a persimmon and I was in for a surprise. It was so bitter than my mouth became dry and I had to spit it out. My mouth puckered up so much I could only whistle.

Bitterness is created when you harbor a hurt in your heart. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Bitterness writes down every single slight and offense. Bitterness is like an iceberg. You can only see the cold top of an iceberg, but most of it is submerged Bitterness exists when you have a cold heart toward someone, yet most of the resentment is still below the surface.

B. The fruit of bitterness is anger.

Bitterness is like an acid that burns the bottle that contains it. Bitterness will destroy you. Bitterness is rooted in your heart, but it usually doesn't stay there; it eventually manifests itself as anger toward the person against whom you hold a grudge.

There are a lot of mean, bitter people in the world. Aesop tells the fable of a man wronged by his neighbor. He was angry and bitter at his neighbor. The angry man was visited by Zeus, who said, "I will grant you any wish that you want. The only stipulation is that I will grant to your neighbor, whom you hate, twice as much of whatever you ask. If you ask for 500 diamonds, your neighbor will receive 1,000."

The bitter man agonized over the wish he should request of Zeus. So intense was his hatred for his neighbor that finally he said, "I know what wish I want and you can double it for my neighbor. I wish you to make me blind in one eye."

Bitterness creates a cycle of animosity. The root of bitterness produces the fruit of anger, and the fruit of anger often is expressed as harmful, hurtful words that we speak.

In the book of James, we learn that a mark of spiritual maturity is the ability to control the unruly tongue. By the same measurement, a mark of immaturity is hateful, harmful speech. Words can wound more than sticks and stones.

Sometimes parents wound their children by saying things like, "I wish you'd never been born." Or, "You're such a disappointment to me." Or "You're the most unthankful child I've ever seen."

Or a person can say to their spouse, "I wish I'd never met you. It was a mistake for us to ever get married." The root of bitterness can lead to the poisonous fruit of hateful angry words.

C. The remedy for bitterness is forgiveness.

Several years ago, I tackled the job of cleaning some jasmine vines out of our flowerbed. Thinking I would save some time, I made the mistake of cutting off the vines at ground level. For several days, everything looked neat. However, when I chopped off the vines without removing the root, it was like pruning the plants to make them stronger. The vines returned with a vengeance. The next time, I spent several hours digging in the dirt to remove the roots. I was surprised to see how big the roots were and how widely distributed they were underneath the ground. It was hard, backbreaking work, but I finally removed most of the roots and the vines did not grow back.

So how do you remove the root of bitterness? Hebrews 12:14 gives us the positive replacement for the root of bitterness: "Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness—without it no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14 CSB)

So please answer this question honestly: "Is there a root of bitterness in my heart? Is there anyone against whom I hold an attitude of bitterness? Is there anyone against whom I am holding a grudge?"

Your answer may be, "If I know my heart, there's no bitterness there." But the problem is that sometimes we don't know our own hearts. God says in Jeremiah 17:9 (KJV), "The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked—who can know it?" God knows if there is a root of bitterness in your heart. So ask Him to reveal it. God can reveal it and grace can remove it. Don't fall short of the grace of God—be willing to forgive that person.

Forgiveness is a powerful force that can root out bitterness in your life. Most of us have heard of Corrie ten Boom. But when we were in Jerusalem this week we visited the amazing Friends of Zion Museum. We learned about the ten Boom Family, Corrie's parents and grandparents who lived in Haarlem, Netherlands. They started praying for the re-establishment of Israel and for the peace of Jerusalem in 1844 and their family prayed every week for a hundred years. From 1844 until 1944, when the family was arrested by the Nazis for harboring Jews.

Corrie ten Boom never saw her parents alive again, and she and her sister Betsie were taken to the infamous Ravensbrück prison camp. Betsie died before Christmas that same year. Corrie was made to endure hard labor and she witnesses terrible atrocities carried out by the Nazi guards.

A few years after the war, Corrie was speaking at a church in Germany when one of the former prison guards came up to her. He put out his hand and asked her to forgive him.

At that moment, Corrie realized her heart was still full of bitterness and hatred toward him and the other Nazis. Let me describe what happened in her own words: "I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. But I know that the will can function without the temperature of the heart. I prayed, 'Jesus, help me.' Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started at my shoulder, raced down my arms, and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm recognition seemed to flood my whole being bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother.' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands—the former guard and the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did at that moment."

So is there bitterness in your heart? Forgiveness will destroy the root and there won't be any more fruit. Esau hated Jacob for many years, and after chasing him for years, they finally met. Jacob humbled himself and asked for forgiveness and Esau was willing to forgive. And that day, both brothers were set free. Jacob was forgiven and the Esau was delivered from the poison of bitterness.

II. THE MOSES LESSON: Turn from Mt. Sinai (Law) and run toward the blessings of Mt. Zion!

The writer describes the terrifying scene when God showed up on Mount Sinai and then observes that we don't have to go back to that terrible mountain. The Bible says, "Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem)." (Hebrews 12:22 CSB)

If you are reading through the Bible with me, this past week we read through Exodus 19, which describes the frightful scene of God appearing on the top of Mount Sinai. It had to be horrifying. God warned the people not to approach or they would die. Even if a stray cow or lamb approached the mountain it would die.

The Bible says, "Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke because the Lord came down on it in fire. Its smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in the thunder. (Exodus 19:18-19 CSB)

Can you imagine being there? You are staring at the top of the mountain and there is thunder and lightning and the loud sound of a trumpet. The people had to be both terrified and fascinated.

Forty years ago Stephen Spielberg wrote and directed the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind. It was a movie about UFOs and the climactic scene is when a huge fiery spaceship sits on top of the Devil's Tower in Wyoming. Stephen Spielberg is Jewish and even has a kosher kitchen in his Hollywood home. I've never asked him, but I wonder if he got the idea for that scene from Exodus 19. In the movie, the people were both terrified and fascinated by the sight of this otherworldly appearance. I'm certain that was the reaction of the people of Israel when God showed up on the mountain in such a dramatic way.

So why did God send all the powerful thunder, lightning, and restrictions about approaching the mountain? God was getting ready to give the Law and He wanted the people to know He was a powerful God who could punish disobedience. To God, sin is not just a mistake; it is an affront to His holy character.

But as followers of Jesus Christ, we don't have to go back to the terror of Mount Sinai. We are invited to run to a different mountain, Mount Zion. Mount Zion is one of several literal mountains in Jerusalem. There's the Mount of Olives, Mount Moriah where the Temple stood, and Mount Zion which is tallest of the three. I stood on the highest point of Mount Zion on Thursday. But the term "Zion" has come to mean more than just a hill. It represents all of Jerusalem, the Holy City. Mount Sinai represents the Law of God and His government over humanity. Mount Zion represents the Love of God and His grace.

When you compare the two mountains, at Mount Zion, God says, "Draw near to me and you will LIVE!" But at Mount Sinai God warned, "Stay away from me or you'll DIE!"

Don't miss this mountain! Let me share with you five exciting things you'll experience at this spiritual Zion.

A. The city of God.

Hebrews mentions the word "city" more than any other New Testament book. These heroes of faith were looking for a city that has foundations and whose architect and builder is God. A city isn't a collection of buildings, it's a collection of people. That's what heaven will be for us. John described this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, descended to earth in the future. The only way he could describe the beauty of it was like a bride adorned for her husband. I've performed hundreds of weddings, and I've never seen an ugly bride. A couple came close...not really; they were all radiant because they were being joined with their husband in a spiritual union. That's what Zion is for us. It's our final address, the city of God.

B. Multitudes of angels.

An innumerable number of angels are at the command of God. Angels are the servants in heavenly Zion. They will be our fellow citizens there. Jacob saw angels shuttling back and forth from heaven to earth on a ladder. Jesus told Nathaniel he would see angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man. Angels are around us. In the next chapter we are going to learn that you might have already met an angel and just didn't know it.

C. Heavenly celebration.

The Bible says Zion is a festive celebration. Heaven isn't going to be like a funeral, it's going to be more like a festival. When we get to Zion, we will join together in an enormous experience of worship. Today is a dress rehearsal for the heavenly worship in which we'll participate. Apathetic worship is an offense to a Holy God. How many of you have ever been in a boring worship service? No? If you raised your hand, that just means you were a bored worshipper. Worship of the living God is never boring!

D. God's children assembled.

The Bible calls this "the assembly of the firstborn." How many of you are the oldest sibling in your family? You received special status because of that. How many of you are the youngest child of your family? You also were treated special as the baby. If it weren't for middle children like me, both you would have been a lot worse off. But in heavenly Zion, we're all treated like the firstborn! If you are a child of God your name is written down there.

E. Jesus: The Mediator of a new covenant.

At Mount Zion, Moses and Aaron were the only ones allowed to approach God, not as mediators, but as representatives. They were priests—but they were sinful priests. The people could not approach God through them. We have a sinless priest in Jesus, but He is more. He is

a mediator 1 Timothy 2:5 (CSB) says, "There is one mediator between God and mankind; the man Christ Jesus."

One of the most beautiful places I've ever visited on earth is Zion National Park. When the Mormons arrived there, they really thought they had reached heaven, so they named it Zion. But the true Zion will be more beautiful than anything on planet earth.

In 1707 Isaac Watts wrote these wonderful words: "Come we that love the Lord and let our joys be known. Join in a song of sweet accord, and thus surround the throne." Sing it if you know it: "We're marching to Zion. Beautiful, beautiful Zion; We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God."

CONCLUSION

So here's the important question. Where are you living? Are you living at Mount Sinai, where you are still trying to obey a lot of rules and regulations, or are you living at Mount Zion where there is grace greater than all your sins? Don't miss that mountain.

Last week we showed a video tribute to Billy Graham. In 1972, I was a student at Samford University when Birmingham hosted the Billy Graham Crusade at Legion Field. Legion Field was the famous stadium where Auburn and Alabama used to play each year for the Iron Bowl bragging rights. At every Iron Bowl there were two fighting sides of rival fans.

But when we gathered for the Billy Graham Crusade, sixty thousand people showed up and the news said it was the largest interracial gathering in the history of Alabama. There was a choir of over 1,000 singers from local churches. And when Cliff Barrows led the stadium in singing "How Great Thou Art," I couldn't make it past the first couple of words before I was weeping. It was an amazing experience to hear that many people singing. I remember thinking that this was what heaven was going to be like.

One particular night, Paul Bear Bryant, Joe Namath and Coach Tom Landry all gave a testimony. Bear Bryant was the most revered man in Alabama, but he paled in comparison to the personality of Billy Graham. After George Beverly Shea sang, "I'd rather have Jesus," Billy Graham preached on "You must be born again."

I had gone through the training to be an invitation advisor, so when the invitation was given, I was supposed to walk forward to the playing field and look for people to counsel. I had been doing that every night. But on this night, I was in the upper level and something told me to stay in my position in the stands.

The choir was singing, "Just As I am without one plea; But that Thy blood was shed for me." And Billy Graham pointed in my direction and said, "And you in the upper level, you can come to Christ now!"

Just then, I heard the sounds of sniffing and weeping behind me. I turned around and there were about twenty high school football players all wearing their jackets indicating they were from Hartselle High School. They were all under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, but none of them was willing to move first. After a few minutes, I said, "Hey guys, don't you want to go down and give your lives to Jesus? I'll go with you."

They all nodded, and I said, "Follow me." We walked down the stadium steps until we were on the artificial grass of Legion Field where most of them would never set foot again. And as all of those guys huddled around me I shared the plan of salvation with them, and they all prayed to receive Christ.

They all gave me a big guy hug and said, "Thanks, man." One guy said, "I came to hear Bear Bryant and Joe Namath, but I got a lot more than that tonight." We gave them the follow-up literature and they left for their bus. I've never seen any of those guys again, but I believe that I'll see them again in the heavenly Mount Zion.

If you don't know Jesus Christ; if you think religion is still about keeping a lot of rules and regulations, you're at the wrong mountain. Don't miss the mountain! It's Mount Zion, not Mount Sinai.

And you know Jesus, you'll be at Mount Zion, but who do you know that needs to join you there? Don't wait. This week, ask them what they thought about Billy Graham; everyone's talking about him. And use it as an opportunity to be an invitation advisor and ask them, "Don't you want to go to Jesus?" We don't want anyone to miss the mountain!

OUTLINE

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- B. The fruit of bitterness is anger.
- C. The remedy for bitterness is forgiveness.

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Mt. Zion symbolizes:

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- B. Multitudes of angels.
- C. Heavenly celebration.
- D. God's children assembled.
- E. Jesus: The Mediator of a new covenant.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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