

“Ye Are Come to Zion”

A message preached at Coweta Particular Baptist Church
Lord's Day morning, March 25, 2012
Church Constituting Service

*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:
Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;
Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.
For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.
For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,
And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more:
(For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:
And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)
But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,
To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.
See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven:
Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.
And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.
Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:
For our God is a consuming fire.
Let brotherly love continue.*

Hebrews 12:14-29, 13:1

This text, as with all of the book of Hebrews, points us unerringly to the better things of the better covenant established upon better promises that all those who have trusted Christ possess. Yet in order to properly fix the text within its context, a few words about that context will be helpful to our understanding.

Throughout this epistle, the author has drawn a series of great contrasts between the shadow of the old and the substance of the new, between the deficiency of the type and the perfect sufficiency of the fulfillment. Here our heavenly prophet, priest, and king,

the Lord Jesus Christ, is clearly demonstrated and proved to be infinitely superior to all – to prophets, to angels, to men, to Moses, Joshua, and Aaron, to the Levitical priesthood and the whole of the sacrifices of the old covenant, and even to the very tabernacle itself, the center and sphere of worship under that covenant.

Then, after establishing in chapter 11 the absolute necessity and the active quality of true and saving faith, the inspired writer in chapter 12, brings before the minds and hearts of those persecuted and wavering Hebrew believers one final, blessed contrast, and that is the clear distinction between what they are NOT and what they ARE come to.

In verse 18 of this chapter we learn that they, and we, “are NOT come” to that which is characterized by its earthliness and its visibility and its touchableness, and thus by its very nature that which is ultimately temporary. Even in the author's day, it was ready to pass away. For these Hebrews, however, there was a great temptation in these visible things, because their religion was chiefly expressed in the outward and external.

But more specific to our text, the inspired writer is, as we said, drawing a contrast. And he begins with this - “ye are NOT come” to the covenant of Sinai, which covenant was only a schoolmaster, set up until the fullness of time was come. That covenant which could never make the comers thereunto perfect (Heb. 10:1), but could only cry, “*cursed is everyone that continueth not in ALL things which are written in the book of the law to do them*” Gal. 3:10.

The Scripture reminds all believers, “ye are NOT come” to that mount Sinai, to the law and the impossibility of justification by it, and every true saint may rightly rejoice that we, like Mr. Bunyan's pilgrim, have been delivered from that mountain that seemed would fall on us and have had our feet set on the way to the wicket gate. “Ye are NOT come,” and how glorious in its own way is the truth of the negative here set before us.

But then, there is the contrasting statement of verse 22, “But ye are come...” And beginning with those words, the Holy Spirit then portrays to us in a series of Biblical images the infinitely superior and eternal estate of which every blood-bought saint partakes.

We shall only be able to touch the hem of the garment of the fullness of this passage, but by these few thoughts I hope that we shall be enabled to fix our hearts and minds upon the great seriousness and the surpassing privilege of that for which we have assembled ourselves together uniquely on this Lord's Day. Every Lord's Day should be the “day of all the week the best” to the believer, but there are some that will be particularly sacred to our memories because of the singular events of that day. I trust that this day will be just such a day and that it will long dwell with great delight upon our minds, for, on this special day we have come to give up ourselves to one another in the constitution of a Gospel church in this place, and surely few things, if anything, upon earth can rival such

an event for glory this side of heaven itself. This, my fellow saints is, as the inspired writer describes it, what “ye are come unto.”

Certainly verses 22-24 are speaking most directly of that estate which is Christ's mystical body composed of all the redeemed of all ages both in heaven and on earth, but may we not also apply these exalted themes to those local and visible expressions of that great, eternal reality? The church local and visible is the bud of which the heavenly Jerusalem is the full flower, and we partake in a measure here, in our earthly assemblies, even now of those things which God has prepared for them that love Him and which we shall enjoy fully when His dwelling place is finally with men.

So we come to ask the question, what is it that “ye are come unto?” And we give the answer in two parts. First, our text calls us to consider that ye are come unto **a privileged and blessed estate**, verses 22-24 - “*But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, (23) To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, (24) And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.*” Just reading the words is enough to thrill the heart, but let us consider somewhat of this great estate.

The church in its visible, local manifestation, this church which we today come unto, is nothing less than the true temple of God on earth, according to I Cor. 3:16-17 – “*which temple YE ARE.*” It is the place where true, spiritual worship is offered by the redeemed to the Father and the Son. The essence of the Old Covenant even in the service of the tabernacle and the temple was characterized by this one thing – distance...distance from God's holy presence. Then, none could enter freely, not even the high priest himself, but now, in this temple, this church ye are come unto, “*we draw near in full assurance of faith because we have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus*” – Heb. 10:19, 22.

This church ye are come unto is the pillar and ground of the the truth – II Tim. 3:15, eternal, everlasting, divine, glorious, Biblical truth is here held up and manifested forth in its proclamation and in our practice week by week and year upon year.

This church is one of the golden lampstands of Rev. 2 among which our blessed Savior Himself walks and because He walks among them He knows their works and their labors and their patience and tribulation and poverty and charity and service and everything about them. He knows His flocks, every one, intimately because He is the good Shepherd and is always among them, He walks in the midst of them. I trust this is both a glorious and a fearsome thought to our souls. He knows His church as only piercing omniscience can know her and He knows this church, brethren.

This church to which ye are come is, as the text has it, “mount Sion” - that place which Jehovah chose and which He desired for His habitation, Psm. 132:13. That Zion which the Lord loveth the gates thereof better than all the dwellings of Jacob, Psm 87:2. That mount which the psalmist says is beautiful for situation, Psm. 48:2. O saints, do we see its beauty this morning? Are you ravished with it? It is, in fact, the perfection of beauty, out of which God hath shined, Psm. 50:2.

This is what “ye are come unto” as we are gathered this morning in this place to join in covenant bonds with Jehovah's people – this “mount Zion.”

Dear old Mr. Bunyan has drawn for us the memorable picture of this mount Zion, this Church, in his description of the pilgrim's resting place after his climb up the Hill Difficulty. “He lift up his eyes,” says Mr. Bunyan, “and behold there was a very stately palace before him, the name of which was Beautiful, and it stood by the highway-side.” What better name could be given to this stately palace, as Mr. Bunyan so distinguishes it, than the Scripture adjective “beautiful”? No more apt word picture could be found to capture our imagination than this, for this is our Lord's Church and He has indeed beautified her in His own eyes, for He has clothed her with the garments of salvation and covered her with the robe of righteousness, and given her beauty for ashes. However despised by the world and scorned by her detractors, she remains “the Church our blest Redeemer saved with His own precious blood,” as President Dwight has put it in his hymn.

Mr. Bunyan further tells us, and that not once but three times over, that “This house was built by the Lord of the hill, and he built it for the relief and security of pilgrims.” What a word to weary sheep! Comfort and safety given by Jehovah Himself in the family of the saints. Have you known that relief and security?

Mr. Bunyan had evidently known such bliss in the company of the redeemed for he says of his pilgrim that “they laid him in a large upper chamber, the name of which was Peace, where he slept till break of day, and then he awoke and sang,

“Where am I now? Is this the love and care
Of Jesus, for the men that pilgrims are,
Thus to provide that I should be forgiven,
And dwell already the next door to heaven!”

Mr. Bunyan also informs us that from this House Beautiful pilgrims are enabled to catch a glimpse of the Delectable Mountains that lie within Emmanuel's land where all manner of spiritual delights await, and having arrived at that land the pilgrim may, though imperfectly, see all the way to the gate of the Celestial City. What was he saying? Just this - it is within the communion of the church that we are enabled to see and to enjoy every species of spiritual pleasure, and it is here that we may view Emmanuel's land

through her teaching and her ordinances, from which high prospect we may then see all the way to that city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God.

Mr. William Cowper has also given us an unforgettable image of that incomparable communion which the saints share within the walls of the visible church when he wrote that here, in the church, we “spread the sacred treasures of the breast,” that is, of the heart, “we spread the sacred treasures of the breast upon the lap of *covenanted rest*.” Covenanted rest, Mr. Cowper calls it. What a glorious description! Have you ever considered the church under this aspect, the place of covenanted rest where His saints unite in covenant communion and where our great Shepherd has provided a rest for His sheep. Oh, here it is that we share the highest delights of spiritual joys, here we may unburden our souls of our deepest sorrows, here we confess our weaknesses and know we shall have the sympathizing tear from the hearts of those who themselves feel the same, here we find comforting and refreshing rest with our God and with His people amidst the unrelenting turmoil and unceasing opposition of the world. As Mr. Cowper goes on to describe it,

Where souls drawn upwards in communion sweet,
Enjoy the stillness of this close retreat:
Discourse, as if released and safe at home,
Of dangers past, and wonders yet to come.

I think I find no better phrase than this in all the words of men with which to frame this blessed estate – it is indeed *covenanted rest* which the Lord gives His people in the assembly of His people. Do you know, have you known, the surpassing sweetness of that rest with the saints in covenant with our God and one another? To know and truly experience it is to dwell, as the Pilgrim found, already the next door to heaven.

In sum, this mount Sion, this church “ye are come unto” and which is established in this place today, is the enfolding of a little flock. It is the gathering of two or three in Jesus name upon His promise to be in the midst of them. It is the establishing of a Gospel witness, a light to shine in the darkness. It is an adding to the laborers upon the wall, working with one hand and with sword in the other. It is the infallible fulfillment of our Lord's command to “go and teach all nations” empowered by His omnipotent promise “lo, I am with you always.” It is a picture, small though it be yet still it is a clear picture, set before the watching world of “the bride, the Lamb's wife”.

All this and infinitely more is that to which ye are come as we come today to establish this small *corner* in the city of the living God, this *outpost* of the heavenly Jerusalem, this *embassy* of the general assembly, this *emblem* and *earnest* of our eternal occupation – the worship of our God and of His Christ – beside and among our fellow saints. And beyond all else, ye are come, in our coming to this blessed Gospel church and estate, ye are come to *Jesus*, the mediator whose blood has sprinkled round the throne of grace and

has purchased for each of us our place in this church below and the church above.

O saint, think upon your privileged and blessed estate of this mount Zion, and never forget, never forget, that in this life its blessings are chiefly experienced and enjoyed in the visible, covenant assembly we call the church!

Well, we could dwell on these thoughts far longer than our time permits this morning, but we come to consider the second part of that which ye are come unto, and it is this - ye are come unto ***awesome responsibility***. Yes, ye are come to a privileged and blessed estate but ye are come as well to awesome responsibility, and we need to rightly appreciate those obligations, especially in a day when, by the vast majority of those who make a profession of religion, they are counted a light thing.

Ye are come to take upon you voluntarily and, I trust, gladly the most solemn and weighty covenant engagements – toward God and toward one another. In the days of the patriarchs, at the making of a covenant between men an animal was slain and divided asunder, the covenanting parties walking between the pieces of that slain beast to signify by the most powerful and graphic imagery what they agreed should happen to the one who broke the terms of that covenant. So it behooves us to weigh carefully the covenant vows we shall hear and make this day and consider with whom we make them.

Our text sets before us two great responsibilities. The first of these is found in verse 28, *“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear;”* This first responsibility describes our duty Godward. It is nothing less than that we are to serve Him acceptably. A simple word but full of meaning. How are we to understand this? We must note first that even under the types and shadows of the law and the sacrifices, that mere formal, outward obedience was unacceptable to Jehovah. Hear King David upon this matter: *“thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”* Psm. 51:16-17. Our Lord Himself denounces the Pharisees for this very thing, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”* Matthew 23:23. What immeasurably greater obligation lies then upon us who have not come unto the shadows of mount Sinai, but to the eternal reality of mount Zion and all its privileges and blessings?

This word “serve” in verse 28 is the word which is used in Scripture almost exclusively to signify the corporate worship of Jehovah by His people. Having blotted out the handwriting of ordinances against us, nailing them to His cross, the King of the Church seeks those who will worship Him in the fullness of the Spirit and truth, and He gathers such together into called-out assemblies that His praise may be all the greater in the

congregation of the saints.

We are already under as individual believers, and we will shortly vow and covenant to be under together, the most solemn obligation to worship acceptably Him who sits upon the throne and the Lamb. Mr. John Owen has warned, “the obligation unto the duty here exhorted unto is evident and unavoidable. Those on whom this duty hath no effect or efficacy, have no real interest in this privilege, whatever they pretend.” How then are we to perform this service of worship acceptably? The answer of our text is “with reverence and godly fear.” These words have in them the ideas of abasement of soul and a holy carefulness and diligence in our approaching of so great a God as He is.

So when we come in reverence to worship we are to come humbling ourselves by a sense of the majesty of God, with an understanding of our vileness in our own persons and of our infinite distance from Him who is altogether holy. Then we also come in godly fear mindful always of the great danger there is of worshiping coldly and formally, without the heart, and thus failing to worship Him aright. Were these things in themselves not enough to press this obligation upon us, the writer reinforces it with this most sober warning – “*For our God is a consuming fire.*” Again hear Mr. Owen - “We may not please ourselves,” he says, “that the worship we attend unto is by divine institution, not idolatrous, not superstitious, and not of our own invention; for if we are graceless in our persons, devoid of reverence and godly fear in our duties, God will deal with us even as with them who worship Him after their own hearts' devisings.” Sober warning indeed, “*our God is a consuming fire.*”

Let us never forget that our obligations to the right performance of every duty, and particularly that of right worship, our obligations under the Gospel estate are not lessened but strengthened. Why so? Because, as the text reminds us, we have been given grace. “*Let us have GRACE.*” All needful supply of divine enablement to perform that which is required is at hand through the grace dispensed from the throne of Him who received from His Father and gave gifts to men.

This is one of the distinguishing features of this new covenant, that we are come unto, that all which He commands He gives grace to do. Then let us have grace, abundant grace, grace from Him who is full of grace and truth, that we may indeed, in this church, as we gather week by week and every time we gather, serve Him acceptably with reverence and godly fear. This is our duty, yes, but it is also our greatest privilege, for we come to worship the one who has delivered us who through fear of death were all our lifetime subject to bondage and has delivered us into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. Ye are come, brethren, as we unite in one body, ye are come to the duty and privilege of acceptable, reverent, awe-filled worship of the Almighty One, who is our Redeemer and our God.

But there is another awesome responsibility that we must notice and press upon our

hearts and it is found in verse 1 of chapter 13. The words are simple enough for the child of tender years to understand and yet they speak such depths of truth that the wisest of men cannot begin to fathom. “*Let brotherly love continue.*” This exhortation is next unto the acceptable worship of God and forms with it a restatement of our Lord's own summary of the two tables – love to God and love to our neighbor. And how we need these exhortations to sound constantly in our ears.

How little is this grace of brotherly love found among those who bear the name Christian. It is a shame and a reproach to the blessed Savior's name that countless churches are rent asunder by hatred and malice and evil speaking, by those who bite and devour one another, or by that which is just as chargeable, by sinful neglect of stirring each other up unto this brotherly love. Once more, Mr. Owen writes in 1667 that in his own day such love was “neither known by many nor much inquired after,” and surely the state of affairs has not improved since then. He goes on, “there are only a few footsteps now left of it in the visible church; some marks only that there it had been. It is as to its luster and splendor, retired to heaven, abiding in its power and efficacious exercise only in some corners of the earth and secret retirements.”

What an indictment of his day, and of ours! Oh, may it not be so here. Whatever others may do, may this flock be one of those corners or secret retirements where brotherly love yet excels in strength. Mr. Owen makes bold to say, “where this love is not, there is no church.” Perhaps that is the reason the author of Hebrews uses this word “*continue*”. Literally it means “to abide constant.” Not only is this love to continue but we are to take care that it be preserved among us.

This brotherly love is the soul and life of all of our comfortable relations with our covenant-neighbors. It demonstrates itself in pity, compassion, mutual joy, prayer, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, readiness to suffer for, and if needed to die for, one another. This love to which we are called is the first of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), the greatest of these which abide (I Cor. 13:13), the sum of the second table (Matt. 22:39), the substance of our Lord's new commandment (Jn. 13:34), and the practical measure of our love to God according to I Jn. 4:20. Every duty to which we are exhorted and commanded by our Lord and by His apostles toward one another can be summarized in and must be energized by this of brotherly love. It is no less than the bond of perfectness (Col 3:14).

What manner of persons ought we to be then, my brethren, in love to one another? “Ye are come” to this duty of brotherly love. Let it never fall to the ground nor lie in the streets. Provoke one another to it constantly is the admonition of Heb 10:24. And where this love is and abides constant, it beautifies a people and gives evidence to a world full of skeptics and scoffers that we are indeed Christ's disciples. The world waits to see, brethren, a church that has girded itself with love as its serving garment, laying hold of every opportunity to serve one another by love.

Ye are come, fellow saints. Ye are come this day to all of this – to mount Zion, to acceptable worship, to brotherly love - in our coming to the covenant of church communion one with another. She is indeed a glorious church, to be made infinitely more glorious at the coming of the bridegroom for her. Is she not worthy of our solemn vows, our sincerest devotion, our faithful service? Can we say with the hymnwriter –

for her my tears shall fall
for her my prayers ascend,
to her my cares and toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.

I trust it is so for you this day. Ye are come – to a privileged and blessed estate and to awesome duties. May we rightly esteem that privileged estate, and may we rightly fulfill our responsibilities. May our vows, by God's grace, unite us in ceaseless praise and service until His church once more is made *“fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.”*