

“Mountaintop Experiences: Mount Zion”

What do you say to someone when everything goes wrong? How do you offer comfort to someone who feels like there is no hope? What message can you give to help someone who feels like nothing can possibly help? If you’ve ever been in that situation, you know how difficult it is to answer the question. “I hope things get better” is a nice thought, but it doesn’t really help. None of us knows whether tomorrow will be better than today, and it is always possible that it will be worse.

I know people, and you probably do too, who have felt this way. Maybe it was the fact that everything that could go wrong seemed to go wrong. Maybe it was that something in life went so wrong that it made them feel like everything was wrong. Maybe I’m no longer talking about someone you know; maybe you’ve been in that position yourself. The diagnosis has come, and it is terminal cancer. The accident has caused a permanent disability. Someone close, someone dearly loved, has passed away, and their company will be sorely missed. What do you say? What comfort could you give or receive?

Allow me to suggest that the message you share be similar to the message that John, God’s Apostle, shared with people nearly 2000 years ago. This was a message directed to people who were also suffering. In some ways, they were suffering worse than what we can even imagine. John himself was in exile from his people. The government at the time was persecuting Christians. What could the persecuted John say to people who were themselves being persecuted, whose livelihoods, and in some cases whose very lives were being threatened?

What he could say, and what we can say, is, “Look ahead.” This is not, “I hope it will get better.” This is the assurance that, one day, everything will be right. Everything will be the way that it is supposed to be. All that we suffer now will come to an end. John got to see it as part of a series of visions from God. Our sermon text from Revelation chapter 14 records how John received a vision of heaven itself, a glimpse ahead to when and where everything had been set right. And this vision is the final stop on our mountaintop tour as it is a glimpse of Mount Zion.

We’ve already been to Mount Zion during our Mountaintop Experiences worship series. Only it was called by other names when we stopped there. We referred to it as the “Mountain of the Lord” when we first visited along with Abraham and his son, Isaac. Abraham obeyed God’s Word and was ready to sacrifice his own son, the one through whom God had promised to send the Savior, until God stopped him and provided a substitute. We stopped by a few weeks later to see how God’s servant King Solomon built a beautiful temple on that very same mountain, also called Mount Moriah.

On this visit, it is called Mount Zion. That’s a name by which it was very commonly known in the Bible. This is one of the high hills of Jerusalem, and as God’s Temple was built there, it was a constant reminder that God was with his people. And because it was a constant reminder of God’s presence, Mount Zion was often used in a figurative way to describe God’s people, God’s Church, all believers. That figurative sense is fitting for this vision, for this Mount Zion is also where God is with his people. But this is no earthly Mount Zion. This is God with his people in the perfection of heaven.

On this heavenly Mount Zion are Jesus the Lamb and 144,000 people along with four living creatures and the elders. All of these have appeared previously in John’s visions. Jesus the Lamb has been a central figure there. He is the Lamb who was slain for the salvation of his people. He is the substitute provided by God sacrificed in our place, just as God provided a sacrifice in place of Abraham’s son Isaac. Jesus the lamb was slain because he took on himself the punishment for his people’s sins.

That’s the very reason that the people are with him on this blessed mountain. The 144,000 is not a precise enumeration as some suppose. It is a number full of rich symbolism. It is the number of all the elect. It is a complete number, reminding us that no one will be left behind. It is the Church, no longer striving in a sinful world, but now victorious in the presence of Jesus himself. These people have the names of God the

Father and his Son Jesus Christ written on their foreheads, and they sing a new song of praise and thanksgiving. This perfect song defies description as John searches for words to explain it: it is like a rushing water and loud peals of thunder, like harpists playing. This is the song of pure and complete joy, the joy of salvation.

This is just one glimpse of heaven that the Bible shares with us, but it is a glorious one. It is reassurance that this is what we have in store. To the persecuted Christians with whom John first shared these visions, this was encouragement to remain firm in the faith in spite of the pressures and dangers. Revelation describes the saints in heaven as those who have kept themselves pure for their marriage to the Lamb. They have not turned away from him, their heavenly bridegroom, for any other options that might have given them some temporary relief or joy.

In the same way, we now may have to face all sorts of troubles and trials. We still live in a world tainted and corrupted by sin. Our own sins and the sins of others bring difficulties into our lives. Our struggles are constant reminders that we have not yet reached the perfection of heaven. All that we suffer on earth ought to direct our eyes toward the promises of heaven, when we will finally and fully escape them. We have been redeemed. We have been purchased from among people and offered as firstfruits. The Lamb was slain for us and for our salvation! We will one day learn the heavenly song of salvation!

That is the same promise that Jesus offered to us in today's Gospel: "[The Son of Man] will send his angels and gather his elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens" (Mark 13:27). We don't know precisely when it will happen. We don't know all the suffering that might come before it does. We are simply told to trust in Jesus so that we remain ready for that day and that when it comes, all that we have suffered will have been worth it. All of our "light and momentary troubles" (1 Corinthians 4:17) will be completely overshadowed by the joy of being gathered in to heaven along with all the rest of God's elect. All of the challenges that we face now will fade away when Jesus returns to claim his own and to bring them to be with him forever on the heavenly Mount Zion.

In fact, the very difficulties that we deal with, the trials that we undergo, are constant reminders for us that the end is coming. The world that we know so well now is not our permanent residence. It is passing away. At the time of our departures from this life, or should God bless us to live until Jesus returns, at his appearance, we will leave this world behind and enter into eternal life. For this purpose, Jesus has given us his Word, that we might know and believe in him. That is why he makes us his own children through Baptism. That is why he feeds us with the sacrament of his own body and blood. That is also why he sets in front of us the work of sharing the good news with others.

The Christian life is not and never has been only about this world. The Apostle Paul even wrote by inspiration, "**If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men**" (1 Corinthians 15:19). No, our Christian lives have a focus that is beyond this world, an eternal focus. The promise of heaven changes and affects the way that we live our lives now, but without the hope for a blessed future, our lives now are without true meaning.

And so we make our last stop on our summer worship mountain tour at a very special mountain, one that we cannot fully comprehend now, since it is a heavenly mountain. And of all the lessons that we have learned from our Mountaintop Experiences, this one will one day blow them all away. This is Mount Zion. It is heaven itself, and one day soon our Savior will take us to be with him there, forever. We just sang these words of a hymn that describe this joyful truth: "I know not, oh, I know not what joys await us there, what radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare." To God and to the Lamb be praise and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The text: Revelation 14:1–5 (NIV84)

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. ³ And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. ⁵ No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.