

Worshipping a Holy God (Hebrews 12:18-29)

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[0:00] I want to start off with just kind of an observation and a question that maybe some of you can relate with or at least have heard. Has anyone ever heard someone say something along the lines?

Now again, I'm not saying you have said this. I'm saying maybe you've heard somebody say this. Something along the lines, well, I don't really care for the Old Testament. There's too much violence there. I prefer the New Testament.

In the New Testament, God is more loving than the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, He's quick to judge and swift to justice. In the New Testament, He's much more lenient and forgiving and patient with us.

Has anybody ever heard somebody say that? I think we've all heard people say that. A lot of times we start comparing God of the Old Testament to the God of the New Testament as there's somebody different.

And we start thinking of it kind of along the lines of our parents when they become grandparents. You know, as parents, they didn't let us get away with very much.

[1:01] But for some reason, my kids can get away with so much. I don't know how many times I've said, I would have never gotten away with that. I would never have been able to do that.

And if we're not careful, sometimes when we start reading God's Word and we start hearing other people say things about God, that's where our mind can often go.

We start telling ourselves these different things. The problem with this thinking when it comes to God is it's not true. In fact, it would be heretical to say that God is changing through our time.

We believe the Bible clearly teaches the immutability of God, meaning that He doesn't change. His character never changes. His promises never change. His nature never changes.

His love never changes. He is perfect. He is God. That is who He is. In fact, when we look at different passages, for example, in James chapter 1, we're told, Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

[2:04] Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Next week, when we get into Hebrews chapter 13 and finish up the book of Hebrews next week, we're going to see Hebrews 13:8, where it says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

However, understanding the immutability of God will be very helpful as we take a look at this week's passage, as we understand the tail end of Hebrews chapter 12 here, making our way into the final chapter.

And so if you have a copy of God's Word, I want to invite you to follow along with me. Open up to Hebrews chapter 12 and follow along as we read verses 18 through 29.

This is what the Word of the Lord says. It says, Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear.

[3:34] 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, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteousness made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised. Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.

This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken. That is, things that have been made in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

[5:05] Now I believe the main idea the author is trying to communicate to us from this passage is that we serve a holy and just God. His holiness and justice prevents sin from coming into his presence, but Jesus makes a way.

And so my hope and prayer, the main thing that I want us to see today is that God is still holy and perfect. Our sin still separates us from him, but Jesus still makes a way.

And so this understanding will lead us to a heart of thankfulness and a heart of worship. And so to help us understand this this morning, I want us to begin by answering a very important question.

I want us to start by answering a very important question that we must all be able to answer in our lives, and it is this. How can we confidently approach God?

How can we confidently approach God? And we see this from verses 18 through 24 that we just read. And in here you have the tale of two mountains.

[6:17] You have this understanding of Mount Sinai, and then you also have the understanding of Mount Zion. And Mount Sinai, to understand this, to understand what the author is trying to communicate to us here in Hebrews chapter 12 about Mount Sinai, we really must go back to Exodus chapter 19 to understand this.

In fact, I would encourage you this afternoon, as we leave here, go back and read Exodus 19, and then in light of that, read through Exodus 12. But as we read in Exodus 19, Moses was going to Sinai, and he gave strict rules as to what should take place when God appears there.

They were told, do not go near the mountain. Don't even approach it, not even to the edge of it. And if someone does, then they will be put to death. Also, there will be an earthquake.

A thick cloud will circle it, and there will be thunder and lightning, the sound of trumpets, and the Lord will descend as fire with great smoke. And so there was much to do about this.

In all of this, God was explaining and establishing very clearly in their hearts that he is a holy God. He is righteous.

[7:37] He is perfect. We don't treat him casually. We don't talk about him flippantly. We come to him understanding who he is, that he is God and we are not.

They caught a glimpse of his glory, and it caused them to better understand his holiness and their sinfulness. It says, if even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.

What we are to see from this is that because of our sin, God is unapproachable. Because of our sin, God is unapproachable.

In our sinfulness, we cannot come into the presence of God. We, because of our sin, can't approach a holy and perfect God.

But there's another mountain in this story. There's another mountain that we must consider, Mount Zion. And the author has let us know that they are coming to a different mountain.

[8:35] Mount Zion, that represents God's dwelling. The difference now is that this mountain, at this mountain, he is approachable. He is no less holy, no less just, no less righteous.

But here on this mountain, there's a picture of joy. There's a picture of singing. We're told that the angels are in festal gathering. There's now a picture of celebration.

Celebration for those who are enrolled in heaven, it says in verse 23. There's a role written in the Lamb's book of life. And because of Jesus, our names can be written on this role.

That's why we sing, when the role is called up yonder, I'll be what? Be there. If our names are written in the Lamb's book of life, then we will be there with Jesus. We can come into his presence, not on our own doing, but on Christ's doing.

The contrast of these two mountains is not given to paint a picture of a changing God, but rather to show how God and God alone can make a way.

[9:48] If a person ran back to Sinai, as opposed to running to Christ, then they would be left with only animal sacrifices to stand between them and a holy God.

And we already know from what the author has told us in Hebrews that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. And so Michael Kruger, reflecting on this notes, he says, in

effect then, to reject Christ and return to the old covenant would be attempting to draw near to God in one's own strength and one's own merits.

This would enslave a person to law keeping as a basis for their acceptance, which inevitably would lead to a lack of assurance and peace.

We don't go back and try to do this on our own. We don't look back and say, you know what?

Jesus, what you did was great, but I need to add to that a little bit.

We don't look back and say, you know what? Thank you, Jesus, for what you did, but I need to make sure that I keep doing this and keep living this life so that I can keep having acceptance.

[10:55] acceptance. That's not understanding the gospel. What this is very clearly showing is there's only one way to the Father, and that is through Jesus, by placing our faith and our trust in Him.

And if we're trying to do this on our own, if we're trying to live a good enough life to be accepted, it will never, ever work. And so what this does, Mount Zion, I may remind you of how unholy you are, but Mount Zion is where you find that you have been made perfect.

And so how is it that the same God can be so terrifying and unapproachable at Mount Sinai and be so welcoming and approachable at Zion?

Well, the answer is found in verse 24. The answer is found in verse 24. In fact, all of this, what we're talking about, comes to a head as we look at verse 24.

All of this is possible in Jesus because He is the mediator of a new covenant. And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[12:02] The reason that we, sinful people, can come into the presence of a holy and just God is because Jesus is our mediator.

If we are believers, if we are followers of Christ, He is our mediator, and that is the only way that we can come into the presence of a holy God because He, Christ, has given us His righteousness.

And so that when God looks at us, He no longer sees that sin and that shame, but He sees His Son's perfect and holy life given in our place.

And so how does Jesus' blood speak a better word than the blood of Abel? How does Jesus' blood speak a better word than the blood of Abel? Do you remember the story of Cain and Abel?

Going back to Genesis chapter 4, in this story, Cain and Abel are both making offerings to the Lord.

Abel gives of the first fruit, the firstborn.

[13:02] He gives the very best that he has as an offering to God. And Cain gives some of the leftovers. He still gives the offering there, but he gives out of the leftovers, not out of the first.

And so God, in this, He accepts Abel's offering and He rejects Cain's. Well, of course, this makes Cain upset. And so Cain goes out and then kills his brother Abel.

And so right after this takes place, in Genesis chapter 4, we're able to see God's interaction with Cain. And he comes to him in verse 10 of Genesis 4, and he says, And the Lord said, What have you done?

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And so what we see here is that Abel's blood is crying out to God from the ground, is crying out to him.

Abel's blood cried out from the ground for vengeance, for judgment, for justice. But now Jesus' blood cries out that the judgment, the wrath, the justice of God has been perfectly satisfied.

[14:13] And we hear clearly the love, the grace, and mercy of a God who is perfect in His love, who is perfect in His justice, who is perfect in His mercy, who is perfect in His righteous wrath.

At the cross, we see God's justice, His wrath, His mercy, His grace, His love, all coming together.

And so the voice we hear calling from the cross is one of God's riches at Christ's expense.

The message we hear at the cross is of God's grace and mercy. The question we must all answer is this, have we received this call?

Have we put our faith and our trust in this call? Are we still going to try to do this on our own? Are we trying to be good enough? Or are we boldly and confidently coming before God not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us?

And so as we answer this question, how can we confidently approach God, we see the author giving us a very important warning here.

[15:27] We see the author bringing this home for us for just a moment where he says this.

Basically what he's saying, after understanding this, he says, don't miss this.

Don't miss this. Don't miss the gospel. Don't miss God's grace. Don't miss this understanding. Verse 25 says this. He says, See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. This passage is giving us a strong word of caution. The warning lets us know that we must not neglect the gospel of Christ and refuse to hear God's word. is a direct warning that we must take to heart. That we must not dismiss but genuinely take to heart. You see, throughout Hebrews, as we've noted, the author has been clear that God has spoken through his son. [16 : 32] In the very first chapter of Hebrews, we're told very clearly that God has spoken to us through his son. And this saving message is not one that we can ignore.

And so why is this so important? Because if this is ignored, if we don't take seriously what God has done for us, if we fail to understand that we are all sinners and that we need Jesus, then judgment will come.

To help us see this, the author brings our attention back to Mount Sinai another time. Despite all of the frightening sights and sounds that the people experienced there as God descended on Mount Sinai, the people refused.

It says here, they refused him who warned them on earth and God was faithful to his promise and they did not escape his judgment.

He then brings this home for the original audience and I think for us today as well. His argument is simple. If God held people accountable when on earth, when they were warned here on earth, how much more will he hold us accountable when warned from heaven?

[17 : 48] You see, the passage tells us there will be a time when our faith is made very clear. It says in verse 26 and 27, At that time, his voice shook, but now he has promised, yet once more, I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.

This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken, that is things that have been made, in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

He is saying that there was a shaking at Mount Sinai, but there will be a greater shaking when we must make sure that our foundation, what we are building our lives on as believers, is secure in Christ Jesus.

There was a shaking at Mount Sinai. There's going to be a greater shaking where we must make sure that our salvation, that our foundation in this life is built on Christ Jesus.

But here's the thing about foundations. Foundations. Foundations are not easily seen. Foundations are hard for us to see at times.

[19 : 02] In fact, nobody goes into a building of historical nature like the Biltmore House or the Sistine Chapel or Buckingham Palace. Nobody walks into these iconic places and says, wow, look at the foundation of this place.

Nobody says that because you can't see the foundation. You can't see what it's built on. You see the fruit of what it's built on. You see the building that it's built on. But you can't see the foundation itself.

It's hard to tell. It's hard to see the foundation. Yet, without a firm foundation, the building will never last. And the truth of the matter is that this is often the case in our lives as well.

Each and every one of us, if enough people are looking at our lives, if enough people are watching us, each and every one of us can probably do the right thing most of the time.

We can look the part if everybody's looking at us. We know the right things to say. We know how we should act. So, if everybody's looking at us, we can look the part.

[20 : 09] But that's not what we're talking about. Salvation doesn't come from fooling everyone around you by looking the part. It comes from placing your faith and trust in Jesus to do what you couldn't do.

You see, Jesus gave a very similar warning at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was giving this message to a group of people that were showing interest in Him.

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is preaching to all of these that are gathered there to listen. And all of these people are interested in Him. All of these people want to hear what Jesus has to say. There's a lot of interest that they're showing in Jesus. And so, He was speaking to a group of people that claim to love Him and His words, that on the outside, everyone's looks the same.

And so, He doesn't look in one direction they're preaching and say, you know what? This group of people, y'all built your house on the firm foundation. You built your house on the rock. You're the ones that when the storm comes and when everything happens, your foundation will remain secure. [21 : 17] He doesn't look out at one group of people and say this and then walk over to another group of people who are living sinful lives. And I'm not saying you're living sinful lives over here. I'm just making a distinction. He doesn't go over to another group and say, well, you're building your house on the sand.

Your foundation is not secure. When the storm comes, your house will fall. He's looking out at a group of people that on the outside, everybody looks the same.

Everybody appears to be the same. He does what every preacher in the world does every week. He looks out at a group of people that are there because they choose to be there.

That listen to the words of God and on the outside, they look identical. And He says, the wise person hears these words of mine and does them.

And the foolish person hears these words of mine and does not do them. Both have come to hear the word, but only one actually does them.

[22 : 18] You see, there's going to be another shaking. A storm where our foundation will be put to the test. If we reject the message of the gospel, then we will rightly experience the wrath of God.

And so as your pastor, I urge you to clearly hear the message of the gospel. But not just hear it, but believe it.

To trust it. Don't try to look the part. Don't try to fool yourself or fool those around you by looking the part. Because here's the thing, you're going to be able to fool me pretty easily.

You're going to be able to fool others around you pretty easily. You may even at times be able to fool yourself. But what we're saying is if you're putting your faith and your trust and doing enough, being enough, going back to living a good enough life and trying to do it yourself and not looking to Jesus, then this warning is for you.

You've got to put your faith and your trust in Him. So the question we must ask, do we believe this? If this is something that you need to get right and get done, then make sure that it happens today.

[23 : 33] None of us are promised tomorrow. So let us put our faith and our trust in Jesus. But in addition to this warning, we see the results of a life that is fixed on Jesus.

And so we're answering the question, how can we confidently approach God? And the only answer to that is if Jesus Christ is our mediator. The author says, hey, don't miss this.

Don't try to skip this part. Don't miss the gospel. But then what we finally see is worship is the result of a relationship with Jesus.

Worship is the product of a relationship with Jesus. Listen to verses 28 and 29. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire.

[24 : 33] The first thing that the author tells us here in this passage is understanding who Jesus is and what he's done for us will lead to a life of thankfulness.

It will lead us to being thankful. And thankfulness is the mark of a believer. And a lack of thankfulness is a mark of an unbeliever. If you think about it, when we truly understand the gospel message that we are sinners and that there's nothing that we can do to save ourselves and that God left the glory of heaven, lived the life we couldn't live, died the death that we deserve, then we can't truly understand that without being thankful to God.

Without saying, praise God, you did what I couldn't do. I would have no hope outside of you. Thank you, Jesus, for the blood. Thank you for what you have accomplished for me.

And so, understanding this leads to a life of thankfulness. But the next thing the author tells us to do is to worship. And I also believe that the order is significant here.

We're thankful for this gospel message. We're thankful for what it means for us. And out of that thankful heart, we understand that we naturally move to worship God.

[25 : 48] And so, worship is the result of a relationship with Jesus. Worship is the result of a relationship with Him. And when you look at the creation, this all makes sense.

When you go back to God's creation back in Genesis, this makes sense. When God created Adam and Eve, we are told that He placed Adam and Eve in the garden to work it and to keep it.

To work it and to keep it. John Salehammer, a Hebrew scholar, he notes that these same words that are translated here as to work it and keep it are used in other places typically in the life of the priest in the temple when they are working and keeping in the temple.

And so, in those places, oftentimes, it's translated as worship and obeying. And so, what we see from the very beginning is that we were created to work it and to keep it to worship and obey God. We were all created for worship. Sin, however, destroyed our relationship with God and we began to worship other things.

[26:57] Now, we still did what we were created. We still do what we were created for. We worship, but now, the object of our worship changes. Romans 1, 25 says that we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

You see, we all worship. The question that we must ask is what or whom are we worshipping? And oftentimes, in our minds, we tend to think of worship in only terms of singing or what we do when we come to church church.

There's no doubt that when we sing, when we open up our hymnals and we sing praises to God, that is worship. No doubt about that. But worship should be an act of our lives.

We should be giving our lives to God in worship. Years ago when I was a youth pastor, and that's hard for me to say sometimes, years ago when I was a youth pastor, it seems like just yesterday, but years ago when I was a youth pastor, one of the things that we did every single fall is we took the kids on a retreat and we called this retreat Live to Worship.

And the whole point of this retreat was for us to see our lives as an act of worship. Sometimes I would have Clay come and lead worship, lead songs.

[28:29] Sometimes we intentionally didn't do that because we wanted to make the point very clear that life is worship. And so what we understand is that as believers, the way that we interact at work is worship.

The way that we do our jobs should be worship. The way that we love our spouse should be worship. The way that we raise our kids should be worship. The way that we honor our father and mother should be worship.

The way that we drive our cars, the way that we live our lives, everything should be worship to God. It's not something we turn on and we turn off.

But during this retreat one year at Lived Worship, we had everyone take an idolatry detector test, an idolatry detection test. It went along with a Bible study that some of our youth were doing at the time and we thought it would be a great thing for everybody to do.

And so what we did was we had everybody in the room and we started asking some fill-in-the-blank responses and some questions that would help us to see what it is that we put an emphasis on in our lives.

[29:37] And so here's a few of those things that we asked them. The first was a fill-in-the-blank and it was this, the thing I'd be most worried about losing is blank.

The thing that I'd be most worried about losing is blank. What would you put in that blank? What would you put in that spot? The next was the thing I'd be most worried about never attaining is blank.

What is it that you're giving your life to getting? What is it that you're trying to attain in this life that you're spending all of your time and all of your resources on?

What would you put in that fill-in-the-blank? The question that we had them ask is throughout your life, what have you been most willing to sacrifice for?

You see, worship and sacrifice always go hand in hand. You're willing to sacrifice to gain whatever is most valuable to you. You're willing to give things up if there's something that you're going to gain that is better than what you're giving up.

[30:45] We're all willing to sacrifice in order to gain something that we see as more valuable. And so, how would you answer that question?

Another one, what has made you most bitter in life? Bitterness almost always points to something that has a great weight in our life that we've missed out on. What is it that we're holding on to saying, if this just hadn't happened, if this person hadn't said this, if they hadn't done that, then my life would be great.

Is there something that you're holding on to that is causing this bitterness? Or here's a tough one. What are you willing to lie for? What are you willing to lie for?

Most of us don't lie for the fun of it. Most of us understand that's not a good thing. Usually, when you lie, it's because you're protecting an idol, like your reputation or your comfort.

So what is it that you're willing to lie for? And then finally, a question to think about is this, where do you turn for comfort? comfort? Where do you turn for comfort?

[31 : 54] If the day has been long and hard and stressful and it's just one of those days, where do you turn to make it better? Where do you turn to take your mind off of the difficulties, the stress, and the heartache that you have been experiencing?

And so as we answer these questions, as we fill in these blanks, it sheds some light onto the things that are most important to us. These are all tough questions that ultimately are difficult for us to answer.

But really what this all boils down to is this, is you will worship, you will go after, you will seek, you will go and try to find whatever it is that is most valuable to you.

You will pursue, you will go after your greatest treasure. And so ultimately what this is showing us is that Jesus is our greatest treasure.

Understanding who he is, that he's the only one that can bring us into the presence of a holy and just and perfect God, understanding that there is no other way apart from Jesus, will help us to see him as our greatest treasure.

[33 : 04] And as we see Jesus as our greatest treasure, then all of a sudden our lives fall in line. All of a sudden we go after, we pursue, we worship him because he is of utmost value to us.

And so the question that we must all ask is, what is it that you're going after? Who is it that you're seeking? Have you placed your faith and your trust in Jesus to do what only he could do to save you from your sins?

Father, we thank you so very much for this passage, Lord, a passage that causes us to look to the past as we look to the future, a passage that calls us to look at what it is that you've done for us, how there's no hope on our own, we can't do this on our own, we can't live a good enough life, we can't do all of these things, Lord, but you made a way.

And so, Lord, I pray that there's someone here today, maybe it's their first time that they've ever been in this service, maybe it's their thousandth time, but maybe they're realizing today for the first time that they've been trying to save themselves, they've been putting their confidence, their trust, in being good enough, doing enough good, coming to church enough, tithing enough, praying enough, doing all of these things, and today they realize that the only hope we have in this life and the life to come is in the precious blood of Jesus.

So, Lord, help us to see that clearly today. Help us to not miss this. Help us not to just skip over this vital truth to our faith and to grow deeper into it.

[34 : 40] And, Lord, I pray that for the rest of us, as we clearly see who you are, as we clearly see what you've done for us, it will lead to a heart that desires to worship you with everything we have.

It leads us to a heart that says, Lord, here's my life, take it and use it for your honor and for your glory. And so, Lord, we ask all these things in Jesus' precious name.

Amen. Amen. I want to invite you to take your Baptist hymnal and turn to hymn number 363, let others see Jesus in you. If the Lord is speaking to you this morning, won't you respond as we stand together and sing?