

Let Us Worship God

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 12:18-29

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Gracious Father, we long for the day when this earth will be full of your glory as the waters cover the sea but we thank you that this very day you are surrounded by worship and praise that is so sweet, so full of melody, so captivating to the heart that we can scarcely imagine the joy of those who see our Lord Jesus face-to-face and who live in the burning light of your presence and sing the song of Moses and the Lamb and praise you without end and without sin. We thank you for the taste of it and for the security, for the relative cleanliness of the gatherings of your people where we feel ourselves to be more normal, where we discover the delights of being the worshiping servants and children you have called us to be and where we see etched in one another's faces the joys and sorrows through which, by your grace, you bring us. We thank you, our Father, for the immensity of our privileges but we are hungry children and you have promised to feed us out of your very mouth and taught us not to live by bread alone but by every single word that comes from your mouth and is given to us in the Scriptures and so we pray that you will feed us this morning that we may be satisfied with the food of the gospel and the bread of life that you have given to us in Jesus Christ. So, Lord, as we come in our many needs to this one word of Scripture, we pray that you will so shine upon the Lord Jesus that each of us may know that he is all-sufficient for our needs, even for our needs, to be our Savior, Lord and friend so we wait upon your word in his gracious name. Amen.

Please be seated.

We have been studying together, may I say for those of you who are visitors, in the letter to the Hebrews and we've come now to Hebrews 12 and verses 18-29 and to a passage that essentially constitutes the end of the exposition of the gospel in the letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 13, to which we will come, Lord willing, is full of all kinds of practical advice and counsel for our life together as a church. You notice, those of you who were at the former lectures, isn't it striking that chapter 13 begins, "Let brotherly love continue"? But we've come to the peroration of this sermon of encouragement, this written sermon of encouragement and we are reading in chapter 12, verse 18 to the end of the chapter and if you've not already found it, that's page 1,009 in your Pew Bible and for our children, another 500 pages on, 1,503.

So, let us hear God's word.

“18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.' 22 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, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and 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 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. 26 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.' 27 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. 28 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, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.”

Many years ago, the wife of a friend I have, an American friend, was sitting at the end of public worship in a great ancient cathedral. Her husband, my friend, was serving for a time as the Assistant Minister. It was one of those cathedrals in the United Kingdom to which tourists flock in large numbers and revel in sitting on a 600+ year old site for worship hearing a fine choir sing and process in very distinctive, possibly unique, cassocks, building with a history almost second-to-none as cathedrals go and not the least of the experience is listening to a mellifluous Scottish accent as the sermon was preached. The tourist sitting next to my friend's wife turned to her at the end of the service and asked a question. She said, “Are the services always like this?” And my friend's wife said with a groan, “Yes,” she said, “every single Sunday.”

It was, of course, a social faux pas. The tourist had been at least in one of the lower ranks of emotional heaven, my friend's wife was groaning because of the service. What was the difference? You should have spotted it, I think, from the description I gave: the great cathedral, the great history, the marvelous robed choir, the mellifluous Scottish accent that might not be quite a Welsh accent but it's not a bad accent at the end of the day. Did you spot what was missing? Jesus was missing. Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. And yet, as the tourists flock, they see the grandeur, they feel the history, they love the music, the accent intrigues them and they don't know what they're missing. From time-to-time, people come among us from other places and will say to us, I'm sure many over the years have said this to many of you who have been here over the years, “I didn't know what I was missing.” There they have been in churches where Christ is not exalted and,

therefore, where the worship is not Christ-centered, where the fellowship does not love to speak of Christ and to serve Christ because he is a living Savior, Lord and friend.

But they don't know what they are missing. In some ways, that was the very common problem that the letter to the Hebrews was addressing. Here were these Christians, they had been brave Christians at the beginning, some of them had suffered a great deal of privation, even been imprisoned and days of persecution but it looks as though they had come through those days and now they were down to the hum-drum routine of living a day-by-day faithful Christian life, they were meeting in one another's front rooms and those of them who had in the past tasted the glories of Jerusalem worship, the wonder of the temple, those Psalms that sing so eloquently of what seemed to the people to be so magnificently beautiful about Old Testament worship with its choirs and its liturgy and its arrangement of days and its sacrifices and the ordering of the places in the temple, and the sight of the high priest and the Day of Atonement and all of that, all of which had gone either because they had left it behind to follow Jesus Christ or because now, perhaps if this was written after AD 70, the temple had been destroyed and it was gone. And in their hearts, they were feeling, thinking, this is why so much of this epistle has gone back to the wilderness wanderings, they were saying, "You know, just as the people had said when we were in Egypt, we had so much fish and cucumbers when we were in the old days, in the old covenant days. We had so much and what do we have now?"

The author has been saying right from the very beginning, "Listen to what God is saying. God is saying, You have Jesus and Jesus is greater than all the angels. Jesus is far greater than Moses. Moses was just a servant in the house, Jesus is the Son in the house. Everything that Aaron and the high priests did and the liturgy and in the sacrifices and in the great Day of Atonement, it was just a mere working model, a picture of what Jesus was going to be and do." So, he says, "You need to learn to think clearly. You need to fix your eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus and you will see these things that you wish you could go back to." It would be like a child on Christmas day playing with the wrappings and ignoring the expensive gift that the wrapping contained. He's saying, "Don't you understand? The scaffolding has been taken down and all of that was just the scaffolding. Don't you see that the scaffolding was shaped the way it was to show you the shape of the things that would come, the good things that would come through the Savior, Jesus Christ?"

And he's been saying this in many different ways and now he comes to a grand climax and he paints for us a series of contrasts. There are two of them I want us to notice. The first is the contrast in worship and the second is the contrast in response. What's the contrast in worship? Well, you'll see it begins in verse 18 and it goes right through to verse 24. It's the contrast between the earthly Mount Sinai worship and the heavenly Jerusalem Mount Zion worship. And he gives us a description of the worship of the old covenant and we need to understand that the people of God, you see this in the Psalms as well as in other parts of the Old Testament, the people of God thought of the congregating at Mount Sinai as the greatest worship moment there had ever been. It was the model for all future worship. It was the reason why the worship of the old covenant needed to be shaped the way it was. And you remember how in the early chapters of

Exodus, there is a refrain in what Moses says to Pharaoh. It's almost as if he's saying, "How many times do I need to bring this message to you? God says, Let my people go that they may worship me at this mountain." Eventually, after the plagues and after the angel of death, as the people are delivered, they congregate to the Lord, they are called out of Egypt and they are called together to the Lord to worship him, wait upon him, hear him, on Mount Sinai and it is a great moment in Old Testament revelation.

As those of us who were at the former lecture this morning or for that matter if this is the same time you've been in church this morning, remember the response to that as God manifested himself in physical ways, as he demonstrated elements of the majesty and infinite glory and power of his inner being and what that would mean for mere creatures of the dust and sinners to come into his presence. There was a glorious display of divine power and God spoke but immediately and instinctively, the author of Hebrews gives us a little hint of this, even if an animal touched the mountain it became unclean, it had to be stoned to death. This revelation of the inner being of God, this coming near to God, it was unbearable. Not because God is unbearable but because we are sinners. We cannot dwell in unapproachable light.

You know, Thomas Binney's great hymn alas not in our hymnbooks, "Eternal Light, Eternal Light, How pure the soul must be," if it is to reside before his searching sight, and not find itself instantaneously destroyed. Oh, to be able to bear the presence of God but the people said, "We can't take it anymore. His voice penetrates our souls. Moses, you listen to him." And in a sense, the whole of Old Testament worship is shaped around that request, isn't it? Nobody goes near the holiest place of all in the temple except one man after an extended purification ritual, once a year for a brief time carrying sacrificial blood to sprinkle it on the very earthly throne of God with these little bells around the hems of his garments so that those who are outside can hear that he is still alive, that there is hope that their one representative who has gone in once a year for a short time, will come out again and pronounce peace for another year in the great high priestly benediction.

That's how it was. The knowledge of the Lord, we might say, was real but it was relayed. You and I, if we'd been alive, we would most of us not even have had access to the high priest to say to him, "Tell us what it's like in the presence of God. What did you pray for us? What is it there in the very holiest place of all?" And so everything would be real but second-hand because, in a sense, we had all said at Mount Sinai, "We cannot bear to be in the presence of God. We're not fit to be in the presence of God. We need somebody to go there for us." And even he's not fit to be there. He needs a sacrifice. He dare not stay too long before the face of God.

There were moments, of course, when individuals had a taste of that experience. Job, you remember, when God speaks to him out of the whirlwind and he repents in dust and ashes and covers his face and says, "I spoke of things but I didn't understand. You're a grand and glorious God." And Isaiah in the temple who says that he has unclean lips. He sees the most amazing thing, this never ceases to amaze me that he saw perfectly holy creatures veiling their faces and their feet in the presence of God, perfectly holy creatures

sensing there is an intensity of passionate love in God for his creatures that they can scarce bear. Some of you had mothers who loved you so much you could scarcely bear it at times. And Isaiah, what a preacher. You want a preacher? You want to get Isaiah. But in the presence of God, "I'm a man of unclean lips. The very instrument for which people praise me. You're so eloquent. Your teaching is so clear. Your ministry is so penetrating to our hearts, Isaiah. You are the best prophet we've got in Jerusalem. I'm a man of unclean lips," and in the presence of God his whole being shakes. He feels himself to be undone. He's like a man who's heard his own death announcement.

That's what it is and he's saying, "Now, dear friends, you whose focus has been on all of these externals, these prototypes, these patterns of true worship, don't you see that they were all pointing to the Lord Jesus? You're like men to whom someone has said, Now drive and they can't believe their eyes and their ears when they see that you've actually put the car into reverse gear and you're moving away from your true destiny." He says, "Have you tasted this, seen all this and not seen that the Lord Jesus is where all of these signs and symbols and types and sacrifices and priests, they've all been pointing to Jesus? How many times do I have to tell you in my letter, they're all pointing to Jesus?"

That's why he says there is an enormous contrast between what they experienced and what we experience. Yes, they knew God. You can't read the Psalms without thinking they knew God. You can't read the prophets without knowing that they stood in the presence of God. But you remember how Jesus said about John the Baptist whom he regarded as the greatest of the prophets, the merest infant in the kingdom of God is greater than he is because of the contrast that Jesus has come, Jesus is here. And you see how he describes the worship of God's people in the new covenant then. He says, "This is not the worship of Mount Sinai. This is the worship of Mount Zion." And when we come and worship to Mount Zion, look at who is there.

Now, I hope you stop doing that as soon as you're called to worship but you do that, don't you? You can't sit here without noticing that people are looking around and saying, "Who is here?" You know, I've been in churches when somebody famous has walked in and then it's really exciting. "Pst, pst, he's there." And people, you know whisper, "Do you see who's there?" Well, who is here this morning? Look at what he says. He says, "You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem to innumerable angels in festal gathering." Now, you see what he's saying, he's saying: when the people of God gather, we don't gather at the foot of Mount Sinai, we gather at the foot of Mount Zion. We gather, as it were, on the low hills of the heavenly worship. We come, he says, it's as though the walls between heaven and earth have become so very thin that you can almost hear the echo of the praise of heaven and there in heaven, there are, look at it again, there are innumerable angels in festal gathering. Now, what do you think angels do in festal gathering? I don't know but they do festal things. What do you do on festal occasions? Some of you do things that people would be shocked if they knew, don't you, in your own home where it's safe, where you're with your own people and there you are, you are solemn and serious. In public you're the CEO of an organization or you're high up somewhere or another or you're there in court or you're a teacher with naughty children or you're a serious surgeon or physician and you're like a

little child at home, aren't you? Your funny party hat and your games. Don't you think angels can have fun? I don't know where we got our ideas from: Hallmark? I don't think Hallmark angels seem to have much fun, do you? But these angels are in festal gathering. Why? Because their King is there. Jesus is their king.

Not only that, for some of us, what this means is beyond our grasp but there in the presence of Jesus, in the presence of these festal angels, are the spirits of justified men and women, many of whom sat in these very seats and some of them who sat in these seats very recently. And they're there in the presence of Jesus. They're part of that church as William Cowper teaches us to sing, that has been saved to sin no more. You know, there are times in our worship when it's thrilling to be here, isn't it? It's thrilling to hear the praises of God but we are a bunch of miserable, wretched, deficient sinners and yet we can still be thrilled praising him. What must it be like for them?

You know, sometimes I think that one of the comforts of the Lord when someone we love goes to heaven is that the Lord punctures a little hole and he lets some heaven fall down upon us in our sorrow, in our grief and we become very conscious that the one we loved has gone straight into the presence of the Lord Jesus. Straight into his presence. And in our pain, we are yet – for Christians there is this indescribable but real sense that heaven has come down to us to comfort us but what must it be like to be there? In that innumerable company of angels and those who have been made perfect in the presence of Jesus who is the Mediator of the new covenant best of all? Jesus is there and you've never seen Jesus. If you think you have, you were hallucinating. The Scriptures make it clear that Jesus is in heaven now and we never see him. That's what Peter says, isn't it? We never see him but we love him and even now we rejoice with a joy that we cannot express but to be there and Jesus to be there, to be able to see Jesus.

Well, he says, this is where you go to church. This is your church. You're in the enquirers class of this church. You have a long way to go but you don't want to go back to temple buildings and bloody sacrifices and high priests. You don't want to go back to Mount Sinai where you daren't go near, do you? If you'd only see the contrast or to put it a better way: if you'd only see the privileges that are now yours as you live on the lowlands around Mount Zion where you are gathered to this glorious congregation of the Lord and where there is blood that has been sprinkled, that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Interesting, isn't it, because he began Hebrews 11, you know, the great catalogue of the heroes of the faith. He began with Abel, didn't he? So, he's back to Abel now. He's kind of closing things out.

What did the blood of Abel say? The blood of Abel fell in the ground and cried for God's justice but he says, "There is better blood, richer blood that has dropped upon the soil of the earth, the blood of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ and that blood has cried out for mercy and forgiveness." The blood of Abel cried out for justice and the curse fell upon Cain. The blood of Jesus cries out for forgiveness and salvation falls upon those who come and trust in him. You know, I wish we could see this every Sunday. I wish you would read this next Sunday before you come to church. This isn't something that you just know because you're a Christian. You might taste it because you're a Christian but not know

what you're tasting. This is telling us what our privilege is and he's saying, "You don't want to go back, do you, to Mount Sinai?"

Then you see, and this will just take us a minute or two, then you see, he says, there's not only a contrast between the two mountains, between the two different seasons of worship, there is a contrast in the response. And you notice how he puts this because I think it's particularly challenging, he says to us, "Now listen, please, see that you do not refuse him who is speaking." I think that's my mother there, "See. See to it, that you don't refuse him who is speaking," because he knows they're in danger of doing that and that's why if we had sat and read this letter from the beginning, we would have noticed that he kept coming back to this, "Will you not listen?" That does sound like my mother. "Sinclair, will you never listen?" It was actually no, that's why I was in trouble. That's why she was saying it so often to me.

"But will you never listen? Will you never listen to the word that I'm speaking? Today, while it's called today, don't harden your hearts." He had quoted that three times from Psalm 95. "Listen. Listen. Listen. Listen," he says, "and when you listen, understand that if you have had a greater privilege then you also have a greater responsibility." I do wish we grasped this. There is a tendency, isn't there, to think, "Well, if we've moved away from Sinai, what a relief that is. We can just get on doing what's right in our own eyes." "But no," he says, "you've totally misunderstood the Bible and the gospel and Jesus Christ, if that thought even enters your mind. Greater privileges call for a full-hearted response," he says. "If they did not escape who refused him who warned them on earth how much less will we escape if we reject him who warns us from heaven?"

Now, my friend, are you doing that? Just before we go on. You actually don't need to make much effort to do this, you do this instinctively. Just refuse all this. He says, "Please listen: do not refuse him who speaks from heaven. At that time, Sinai, his voice shook the earth but now he has promised," and he picks up some words from the prophet Haggai in the Old Testament, "I am going to shake now not only the earth but I'm going to shake the heavens," he says. And this phrase, verse 27, "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." Now, older Christians used to think that this actually referred to what took place at Calvary and in the resurrection and at Pentecost and then in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction which has been in place ever since AD 70, the destruction of a religious system founded by God for a season in the days of the old covenant for which he now has no further use, namely, the ministry of the high priest and the temple liturgy and the sacrifices. Why has he no further use? Because Jesus has come to fulfill all that.

I think it's more common today that readers think this is surely a reference to what will happen when Christ comes, the kind of thing that's described in Revelation 6 when great men and generals will run to the hills and call upon the hills to fall upon them, to shield them from the wrath of the Lamb. But, you know, it's altogether possible that refers to everything in that stream of history because it's certainly been true, hasn't it? Kingdoms have risen, man-made kingdoms have fallen. In those days, the great Roman Empire that

no one ever dreamed would come to an end. Where is the Roman Empire now? Where is Italy now? Where is Rome now? Or the great empires of the modern age and the emperors and the dictators? And the great empire from which I have my birth? Land of hope and glory, rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves. The empire on which it was rightly said, "The sun never sets." There's never been an empire in the modern day like that empire, an empire on which the sun never set. The great British Empire, where is it now? Great Britain can scarcely govern itself. The kingdom's men make it tumble and fall and our own great empire, the greatest nation, we don't call it an empire but every President I have ever heard has told us we are the greatest nation in the world and we have just been hearing in our former lecture of the seeds of decay in that family institution, God ordained, that alone can make any nation great. And there are many Christians I know, multitudes of Christians, Bible-believing Christians who tremble with fear for what is happening but it's because they don't believe the whole Bible because what he says in our Bible is: we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. We have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

As I read these words this week, I was reminded, you would expect me to be reminded, of that magnificent poem by that less than magnificent man, Percy Bysshe Shelley, of Ozymandias fame. Some of you my age learned it at school.

"I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said – 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'"

That's where the great emperors are. That's where the great kingdoms are. That's where the great empires are. That's where the great dictators are. Shaken in God's providence and in God's judgment. But the thing about being in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is that you have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

People are being shaken all around you, families all around you and they've no idea how to bring up their children. Marriage laws shaken all around us. Basic ethical principles. A man's word is his bond, shaken. Our foolish world so ignorant of its own history assumes that once we get rid of the kingdom of God we will go back to being the decent citizens we were before and we don't know enough history to know we were pagans before the

gospel. And that's the reason why the kingdoms of this world will lie shattered at the feet of the kingdom the Lord Jesus Christ is building.

And we live in a day when we've seen it with our own eyes. We've seen it in great nations of empire status who have sought to destroy the Christian gospel and where are they now? The kingdom of God is being built and no matter what happens around us, no matter what happens to us, he is saying we have received a kingdom that can never be shaken. Are you in that kingdom? That's the great issue, isn't it? That's the great question for us. Are you in that? How do you get into that kingdom? Well, you come to the King, the King who has given his life-blood for us and for our forgiveness on the cross, risen again, building his kingdom throughout the world, that boys and girls and teenagers and grown men and women might have their first loyalty to King Jesus and to his kingdom and daily pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done in my life on earth as it is done in heaven." It's the only way to live. It's the only way never to be finally shaken. And all of this because we have come to Mount Zion and to Jesus.

Have you come to Jesus? That's it. You come to Jesus and the kingdom is built in your life.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the encouragements and power of your word. We pray that you would seal its truth in our hearts for our Savior's sake. Amen.