

Heart of Worship

Lesson 9: Reverence and Godly Fear -- Hebrews 12:28–29

The writer of Hebrews has just painted two mountains, and he wants us to feel the difference between them. The first is Sinai, where Israel met God in the wilderness: a mountain blazing with fire, wrapped in darkness and storm, trembling at the sound of a trumpet and a voice so terrible that the people begged it would stop. They could not even touch the mountain and live. It was an encounter with the holiness of God so overwhelming that Moses himself said, “I tremble with fear.” That is where the old covenant met its God, at arm’s length, behind boundaries, in dread.

Then the writer turns to the other mountain, the one to which Christians have come: Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Here are angels in joyful assembly, the church of the firstborn, God the judge of all, and Jesus the mediator of a new covenant whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. We have not come to a mountain of terror that keeps us away, but to a city of grace that welcomes us in. The contrast could not be greater. And yet, and this is the surprising turn, the writer does not conclude that we may now be casual with God.

Just the opposite. “Therefore,” he says, “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.” Notice the logic. Because we have received so great a salvation, an unshakable kingdom, access to the very throne of grace, we should worship with gratitude, yes, but also with reverence and godly fear. The God we now approach so freely is still a consuming fire. Grace has opened the door; it has not made God any less holy.

We live in an age that has largely lost the fear of God, even in the church. We can grow so comfortable, so casual, so familiar in our approach to worship that we forget whom we are addressing. This passage will not let us. It holds two truths together that we are tempted to pull apart: the warmth of grateful, confident access, and the trembling reverence due to a holy God. True worship lives in that tension, glad and reverent at once. Read these two verses slowly, and let them recover something our worship may have lost: the holy fear of a God who is a consuming fire, approached now through the blood of Jesus.

Group Discussion: The writer says we should worship “with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire,” even as we come gladly to a kingdom of grace. Why do you think reverence and the fear of God have grown faint in much of modern worship, and what is lost when we approach God casually rather than with holy reverence?

Personal Reflection: This passage holds together grateful confidence and trembling reverence. When you come to worship, which do you more naturally feel, glad familiarity or holy awe? Be

honest about whether your approach to God has become casual, and consider what it would mean to recover a genuine reverence without losing your confidence in his grace.

Read Hebrews 12:28-29

Study Questions

1. The writer urges us to worship “with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (vv. 28-29). What does it mean that the God we worship is a consuming fire, and why does that truth call for reverence even under the new covenant of grace?
2. It is easy for familiarity with God to slide into casualness. Where has your own approach to God in worship become too casual, treating the holy as ordinary? What might it look like to recover a fitting reverence in the way you come to him?
3. The command to reverence comes right after the reminder that we have “received a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (v. 28). Why does the writer ground our worship in gratitude for an unshakable kingdom, and how does grateful joy actually belong together with reverent fear rather than against it?
4. The passage calls for both gratitude and awe at the same time. Which of these is more lacking in your own worship right now, a glad thankfulness or a holy reverence, and how could you grow in the one you tend to neglect?
5. The wider passage contrasts Mount Sinai, where Israel trembled and was kept at a distance, with Mount Zion, the city of grace to which Christians have come (vv. 18-24). How does the new covenant change the way we approach God, and yet why does it not lessen his holiness?

6. Under the new covenant we are invited to draw near with confidence, yet many believers swing to one of two extremes: cowering dread or careless familiarity. Which extreme are you more prone to, and how does this passage call you back toward a reverent confidence?
7. The writer says our worship is to be “acceptable” to God, offered with reverence and awe (v. 28). What does it tell us that worship can be more or less acceptable to God, and how does reverence shape worship that pleases him?
8. Reverence is not only a feeling but a way of approaching God that affects how we prepare, how we behave, and how we engage in worship. What is one concrete way you could show greater reverence for God in the assembly and in your private worship this week?
9. This passage holds two truths together that we are tempted to separate: we worship with grateful confidence, having received an unshakable kingdom through Christ, and we worship with reverence and godly fear, “for our God is a consuming fire.” Why is it spiritually dangerous to keep only one of these, either a fearful God with no grace, or a gracious God with no holiness? How does the new covenant give us both glad, confident access and deep reverence, and why must true worship hold them together?
10. Look back over the two mountains and the call that follows: an unshakable kingdom received with gratitude, and a holy God worshiped with reverence and awe. Name one specific way Christ is calling you to recover reverence in your worship without losing your confidence in his grace, and one concrete step you will take this week to approach God as both your Father and a consuming fire.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 12:18–24, the contrast between Sinai and Mount Zion, the city of the living God; Hebrews 4:16, drawing near with confidence to the throne of grace; Isaiah 6:1–5, Isaiah undone before the holiness of God; Psalm 89:7, God greatly to be feared in the assembly of the holy ones; Revelation 1:17, John falling as though dead before the glorified Christ, who lays his hand on him and says, do not fear.