
"The Hows and Whys of Worship"
(Hebrews 12:18-29)
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Introduction:

NIV Hebrews 12:18-29

¹⁸You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

²²But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our "God is a consuming fire."

When you and I want to tell the upcoming younger generation of how good they have things today, we offer them some helpful comparisons. For example I remember having a conversation with my kids a little while ago and we were talking about music. And then it dawned on me that they had absolutely no idea what a record was. I felt it was my parental obligation to enlighten them about the history of music recording. So I jumped onto Google and showed them a picture of a black vinyl disk. And I began to explain to them...there used to be a day when we used to listen to music on these things. We called them records. They were played on something called a phonograph. Then of course I mentioned Cassettes, 8-track cassettes. Surprisingly, there were no ooohs and ahhhs. In their typical youthful manner, they gave me that blank, speechless stare which was equal to saying. "Uh, and dad, your point is?"

So why do we do that with younger folks? Why do older people, no matter how old you are, feel it is your God-given obligation to inform the younger generation of how life was when you were growing up? So no matter how old you are...you'll do this. "When I was your age...I didn't have FM radio or cassettes or cds or mp3s in my car. It was only AM baby, with 5 push button manual station memory." "When I was your age, we didn't have the Internet, and instant messaging, we just talked using our voices. We picked up the phone." "When I was your age, we didn't have video game systems, we went to the arcade." And we do this to younger people for a couple reasons. To remind them how spoiled they are; how good they have it now; how they have no right to complain. And of course to tell them how much you, as the older person, suffered and somehow they should feel bad for us or envy us, that we lived in a much simpler time. Of course that rarely works and they rarely feel that way. But we do it anyway.

And in a way the author of Hebrews is doing something similar. He is comparing two ages. Two ways of life. Two ways of approaching God. And he has the same purpose for us. He wants to motivate us. He wants us to appreciate how good we have it now. Because for all of us when we have no point of reference, then it becomes very difficult to understand the blessings and privileges we have today. And even if we do have a point of reference, we tend to forget and when we forget, we begin to grow apathetic or complain.

For example, how many of us have complained while sitting in front of our high speed DSL or cable connected computers with super powerful processors and graphics cards and super crisp LCD screens, and have said. "Oh my goodness, why is this so slow? Why isn't this free, HD quality, pre-theater release movie streaming smoothly?" Even if we've never used dial-up Internet, and all we've known is high speed, we still complain. That's just how we are. So what do we need? We need reminders, especially when it comes to the spiritual blessings we have in Christ—so we don't forget and continue living, not in complaint, but in the richness and fullness of those blessings.

And that's what this passage is about. The author's point is to tell every New Testament, post resurrection follower of Jesus, that you guys have it good, really good. When it comes to approaching God in worship, we have it really good. We have it really good because of Jesus.

So here's the comparison. The author compares two different eras. One is Old Testament, one is New Testament. One is pre Jesus. One is post Jesus. And he uses the imagery of two mountains to represent the two ways in which people of these two eras approached God. In Old Testament, pre-Jesus times, this is how it was.

-The mountain of the old era was Sinai. Sinai is not mentioned by name, but perhaps because it's so obvious from the description that it didn't need to be mentioned, but it's Sinai. What was Sinai? Sinai, as a location, was one of the most important locations in the entire bible. It was the mountain of God. It was the mountain where the whole community of Israel gathered after their exodus from Egypt. It's the mountain that represented the meeting place with God. It was the place where the Law, the Ten Commandments, the words and wishes of God were given, written by God himself to Moses, to give to the people that God cherished and loved. This was Sinai.

But it was also a scary and foreboding place. It was a place of the holiness of God. It was a place of danger. It was a place of inapproachability. It was like living in the shadow of an active volcano.

Exodus 19 is the passage to visit to get a better glimpse into how it was. Can we look there together? As we read this look for the images? What are your emotions?

¹ In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ² After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you ^[a] will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

⁷ So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. ⁸ The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you." Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.

¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹ and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' **Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain.**"

¹⁴ After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵ Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain ^b trembled violently, ¹⁹ and the sound of the **trumpet** grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. ^c

²⁰ The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up ²¹ and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. ²² Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

²³ Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.' "

²⁴ The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

So what do we find here?

1. mediation by Moses (3,7 et al)
2. close but not too close. Base camp, sure; summit, no.
3. God reveals himself by cloud and fire.
4. The utter holiness and separateness of God. The *mysterium tremendum*.
5. The waiting for the trumpet before we are allowed to approach.
6. An audible voice speaking from a cloud.
7. Consecration of the people was necessary to approach the mountain.

Not the most inviting place. Try decorating your living room with those images and see how many people come.

Throw on top of all that, the rituals and the complex system of sacrifices—grain offerings and animal offerings. As well all our worship had to be mediated by imperfect priests. This is how worship was back then.

That was then...this is now.

²²But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

How are things different now?

1. Well it's not Mount Sinai. It's Mount Zion. The mountain is called Zion is another name for Jerusalem. Under the rule of King David, the locus of worship shifted from Sinai to Jerusalem. Jerusalem then became the city where the first temple was built. For the first time, worship wasn't done in a portable tent or tabernacle, it had now become a permanent place. And so throughout history Jerusalem becomes the center of Jewish religion and worship.
2. It's heavenly, not earthly. Sinai is on this earth. Zion is in heaven. And we become participants of this now, not later.
3. Before it was just a mountain. Now it's not only a mountain, it's a city. At the mountain, only God dwelled. Cities on the other hand are filled with people, lots of people. But because it's the city of God, God is there as well. So the author of Hebrews describes it this way.

You're not at the basecamp of an inapproachable mountain any more; you are standing at the gates of a welcoming city. Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the **city** of the living God, where thousands upon thousands of angels are gathered in joyful assembly.

Now follow the next connection. This Mount Zion, this Heavenly Jerusalem, this city of God, is also the place where the church is. "You have come to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven." This is a reference to Christians, those saved by Jesus. And the gathering is a joyful one, a celebration, a community, where the angelic and human are gathered together to worship God. And of course God is there, who is the judge of all men. Jesus is there too. Jesus didn't stop being Emmanuel after he ascended to heaven. He remains Emmanuel to this day and forevermore. He's the mediator of the **new covenant**, which is the means by which we can be a part of this incredible worship assembly. It's by his blood, his death on the cross, that all of this is possible. Abel's blood, when it was spilled at the hands of his murderous brother Cain, brought a curse upon Cain. Jesus' blood, also spilled violently and innocently, brought about not curses, but blessings. It's obviously 'better'.

Now, let's skip down to the last couple of verses that brings us back to worship.

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our "God is a consuming fire."

All of the above, that describes our promises, blessings, and reality in Christ is the reason why we worship.

And because of that we should worship God acceptably or offer acceptable worship to God. What does acceptable worship look like? Shouldn't we all want to know this? How can we as a community worship God in a manner that he will accept? Those are very important questions.

1. **Content:** Our worship should be filled with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for what? First and foremost for Jesus. All worship is “in the name of Jesus.” We are thankful because this worship is only possible because we are Christians. And we can only be Christ—ians because of Christ. We are thankful for his death and resurrection. We are thankful that we have been forgiven.
In addition, He is not only the means of worship, he is as well, the goal of worship. Worship is not a trivial thing.
2. **Attitude:** worship should be done with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. What these words are saying is that God hasn’t changed. The God of the church, of the New Testament, is the same God of Sinai. God was holy then, he is holy today. He was a consuming fire then, he is still a consuming fire today. What’s different then? The approach. The way we approach God is now possible, easier even, because of Jesus. But God is still the same, which means that our attitude in approaching God should remain the same. There still should be reverence and awe. Revering, respecting, honoring. Awe, wonder, amazement, thrill that we can approach the consuming fire and not be consumed. That is truly amazing.

When we come to worship as God’s community, these are the two attitudes that should exude from our hearts. Reverence and Awe. John Piper says it like this. Gladness and gravity.

Conclusion:

If you and I were able to meet our Old Testament Fathers and Mothers today, (Moses, David, Samuel, Solomon, Isaiah) and if they see us not worshipping with zeal and passion, getting bored, taking for granted, criticizing the song list or how the drums were too loud, what would they say to us? When we were your age we had to climb up a mountain, both ways, to worship. When we were your age worship was so hard and so ritualistic. When we were your age worship was scary. Don’t you guys know how good you have it? You are so lucky to be living on the other side of the resurrection. You have the Holy Spirit living powerfully in and through you. Please, don’t take worship for granted.