

“Strange Fire, the Consuming Fire, and Our Worship”

Hebrews 12:28-29

Introduction:

- As we saw this morning – worship matters! It matters a great deal who you worship, and it also matters how and why you worship. That is the crux of what I am going to say tonight. It does not just matter who or what you worship, but it matters how and why you worship.
- I say this based on the last two verses of chapter 12 in the book of Hebrews. Now, it is incredibly difficult to parachute into a text in the middle or end of a book of the Bible and get it all right without having built up to it through a consideration of the context, so I am going to ask you to muster up all that you know about the book of Hebrews as we consider these verses tonight.
- Hebrews is a book written to a group of believers who were facing all kinds of persecution because they had abandoned the Judaistic faith and had professed faith in Jesus of Nazareth. They had professed Christ, and because of this profession they were being attacked for their faith. This pressure that they were under was tempting some of them to return to Judaism. The author knew of their faltering steps and so he writes this sermon-like letter with the intent of settling the issue once and for all for these believers. He makes clear to them that Jesus of Nazareth is so much better than the angels, and so much better than Moses, and so much better than the earthly priests and the Levitical system of approaching God. Jesus has won for us so great a salvation through his once for all sacrifice upon the Cross. His blood has been shed and we are cleansed by this blood and so therefore these things that were shadows of the things to come have now passed away because the true has come. The altars and the lambs and the sacrifices and the priests all pointed to this Jesus who was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. So, the author is calling them to persevere because Jesus is so much better and this salvation that has been provided must not be neglected.
- In our immediate context in chapter 12 the author is pointing them to the kingdom that cannot be shaken. He reminds them that they have come to Mount Zion, the Heavenly city of the living God, not to Mount Sinai, where the people of God couldn't endure the orders of God. He reminds them that they have come 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 the righteous made perfect and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. Therefore he tells them in verse 25 that they must be sure to not refuse the one who is speaking, because refusal will lead to condemnation. Failing to persevere will lead to eternal damnation by proving that it was not true faith that occupied the heart in the first place. So, they must persevere, they must not turn back, they must heed the word that is being spoken to him.
- There is another word that is coming, and it is a word of judgment. Yet once more everything will be shaken through God's powerful judgment upon all created things, and the things that are shaken will be removed. Like Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3 this coming day of Judgment is sure, even though our world scorns this prophetic word. There is coming a day with fire will consume the creation and they will pass away and then they will be made anew according to God's promise. And so we are not looking to things that can be shaken and will pass away, but we are awaiting the promised day of the Lord when the New Heavens and the New Earth will be made in which righteousness will dwell. It is in this context that the author of Hebrews now says this:
- What I want to point out to you tonight from this passage is that it does not just matter who or what we worship, but it also matters how and why. We saw very clearly from Jeroboam's life this morning that he had no interest in worshipping the one true God of Heaven. He originally stated to the people

that his golden bulls were the gods that brought them up out of Egypt, so maybe he had a connection in his mind with Yahweh God and the idols he made, but this connection quickly melted away as he progressed the nation in this wicked idolatry. Because he had no interest in worshiping the right God, he was dealt with severely by the right God. So, who we worship matters. I am assuming for the rest of the sermon that we all understand that and agree wholeheartedly to that. But my question of concern is, does it matter how or why I worship the one true God of Heaven. So, I know I am supposed to worship Him, but is that the only parameter – just worship God? Well, I think our passage tonight would direct us to an answer to that question. We must not just worship God, but we must worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe, because our God is a consuming fire. We are going to see this by looking at the text and seeing the call to worship, the qualifier for worship, and the reason for worship.

I. The Call to Worship

- a. The Gk. In the book of Hebrews is difficult, and these two verses are no exception. If we took time tonight and had people read from different translations you would get a sense for how tough it is to communicate in English the same thing that was communicated in Greek. And believe me, I am no Gk. Scholar, I just simply know enough to be dangerous.
- b. Verse 28 starts out with a wherefore, which simply bases the current thought in the past argument. In other words, based on what he has just said, now he is going to tell them something else that flows out of those thoughts. So, in light of our unshakable Kingdom, and in light of the impending judgment of all those outside of the Kingdom of God, “therefore”.
- c. The next phrase is where it gets a bit more tricky. The Greek says let us have or hold xarin, which is a form of the word xaris – which you know to be grace. This word is an often used word and most often it refers to the grace that we think of as unmerited favor given to us by God through the work of Christ. But sometimes it also can mean gratitude or thanksgiving or gratefulness. So, just think of saying “grace” before a meal. What does that mean? It means to give thanks for the food.
- d. So, in light of the context of being given an unshakable Kingdom through the grace of God, most of the English translations have understood this use of xarin to be referring to gratitude or thankfulness. But there are a few translations, like the King James that translated it as grace. Either way, in light of the kingdom that cannot be shaken this is now what we are supposed to do. I would lean towards understanding it as being that we should have grateful hearts because it couples nicely with the next phrase.
- e. The next phrase is the call to worship that we are concerned with this evening. On account of this unshakable kingdom and our response of a grateful heart we ought to offer to God acceptable worship.
- f. This word for worship is not the same as the common word for prostrating yourself before that is used in passages like John 4 where Jesus is interacting with Samaritan woman about true worship. Rather this word is a bit more specific of a term and it can be translated as worship or as service. The idea being that this is a worship in action. This is not just worship in the philosophical or worship in the mind, but worship in action and deed. It is used in the New Testament to speak of the religious activities that surround the public acts of worship. But more than that it is used as a descriptor of what saints do with their lives in response to the grace they have been given by God. This is worship in action, or worship in shoes so to speak.
- g. This worship that we are to offer with our lives is to be a worship that is acceptable. It is not just any kind of worship, but it is acceptable worship. This would seem to indicate that there is a kind of worship that is unacceptable.
- h. The classic Old Testament example of this is Nadab and Abihu when in Leviticus 10 they offered unauthorized fire and laid incense on it and offered it before the Lord. They didn’t do as God had

commanded and so their offering, though an act of worship, was not an act of acceptable worship, as was seen in God's response. Fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died there because of their unacceptable worship.

- i. So, in light of our standing in Christ who is so much better and who has secured for us so great a salvation, we must have grateful hearts, and we must offer acceptable worship to God. This is the call to worship in the text. It is a call of life-enveloping worship by which our whole lives are directed and shaped in accordance with worshiping God in an acceptable way. So, what is this acceptable way? Of the many Biblical answers to this question, let's limit our answer to the text as we see the Qualifier of this worship.

II. The Qualifier of Worship

- a. The text goes on to say that we are offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe. Both of these words are somewhat explanatory in and of themselves. They are both pointing us to what should guide our acceptable worship. We should be constantly consumed with reverence and awe.
- b. Hebrews 5:7 – Jesus was heard because of his reverence. – The God who is able to save.
- c. Hebrews 11:7 – Noah obeyed and built an ark out of reverential awe of God. – The God who will judge.
- d. ⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, ⁷ a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? (Psa 89:6-7 ESV) – A God who is unlike any other, without peer or equal.
- e. ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, (1Pe 1:17 ESV) – The God who is holy and who judges impartially.
- f. ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. (Rom 11:20-22 ESV) – The God who saves, but also who judges those who disbelieve.
- g. ⁴ Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Rev 15:4 ESV) – The God who is holy and righteous, who finally judges the wicked who have killed the faithful.
- h. Therefore, we are to worship God in an acceptable way with fear and awe. I would argue that worshiping God in a way that encompasses your life in an acceptable way must have as its trademarks fear of God and reverential awe of God.

III. The Reason for our Qualified Worship

- a. For our God is a consuming fire. This is a statement of fact. This is pure theology. This is a part of who your God is. This is a restatement of an Old Testament verse and it is telling us who God is. He is not only a consuming fire, but he is not less than a consuming fire. But what does this mean?
- b. Deuteronomy 4:23-24; vs. 25-31 go on to tell us what this means that God is a consuming fire.
- c. Exodus 24:17 – the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the presence of all the people.
- d. Numbers 11:1 – the complaints of the people kindled the anger of the Lord and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outlying parts of the camp.
- e. Numbers 16:35 – fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.
- f. Deuteronomy 9:3 – the Lord who is a consuming fire will utterly defeat the inhabitants of the Promised Land.
- g. 2 Thessalonians 1:8 – Jesus is coming with flaming fire for his enemies.

- h. In other words, our God is a jealous God and how we approach him matters. He is not our buddy or our pal or our chum. He is a consuming fire. Yes he has condescended unimaginable distances to come to us and to save us. He did this primarily because he was a consuming fire. His wrath against our sin had to be quenched, and so in love he provided a way for Him to meet His own wrath so that we did not have to.

Conclusion: At the end of the day, I long for us to grow in our sense of the holy, righteous, and jealous nature of our God. It matters how and why you worship Him. Because He is who the Scriptures say he is, your life should reflect that you believe this reality by being filled with acts of service that are actually acts of worship. Your fear of the Lord should inform your service to the Lord. He is a consuming fire, therefore offer acceptable worship to Him with reverence and awe because we have an unshakable Kingdom that will never pass away. This following of Christ thing is not a joke, nor is it light and fluffy, nor is it all about how it can serve you and help you. This Christianity thing is about God – so worship Him!