

Obeying and Worshiping a Holy, Loving God

Hebrews 12:25-29

Kent Hughes

Kent Hughes is pastor of The College Church, Wheaton, Illinois, where this message was first preached. He is the author of numerous volumes, including *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, *Disciplines of Grace*, and the extremely popular *Preaching the Word* series.

During Christianity's second century, a notable heretic by the name of Marcion came to power in Asia Minor. Though he was excommunicated early on, his destructive teaching, which focused on the total incompatibility of the Old and New Testaments, lingered for nearly two centuries. Marcion believed a radical discontinuity existed between the creator god of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, the Father of Jesus. Marcion created an alternate canon for his followers that had no Old Testament and a greatly modified New Testament. This "Bible" consisted of only one Gospel (an edited version of Luke), and ten edited Pauline epistles (excluding the Pastorals). Marcion's views were spelled out in his book *Antitheses*. Thankfully, neither Marcion nor his teachings went unopposed. He encountered his strongest refutation in Tertullian's five-volume *Against Marcion*.

Marcionism never completely disappeared, however, and in the nineteenth century it was revived by some who wished to separate what they considered to be the crude and primitive God of the Old Testament from the civilized and developed portrait of him in the New Testament. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century father of liberalism, said that the Old Testament has a place in Christian heritage only by virtue of its connections with Christianity. He felt that it should be no more than

an appendix of historical interest. Adolph Harnack also argued that the Reformers should have dropped it from the canon of authoritative writings. Intentionally or unintentionally, thousands today have similarly rejected the Old Testament, either formally or in practice.

Albert Schweitzer, himself a liberal, demonstrated that such thinking amounts to choosing aspects of God which fit one's theology. He concluded that men create a god of their own making. They do so by confusing their own unbiblical views of God with God himself. Of course, anyone in touch with modern culture knows this kind of Marcionite reasoning is alive and well.

So why do I bring up Marcion? Because Marcionism is very much alive in evangelical churches. Certainly the New Testament gives us a fuller revelation of God than the Old Testament because it tells us about Jesus Christ. It is true that we do not live bound by the Old Testament ceremonial laws. *Nevertheless the God we worship is still the same God...* "yesterday, today, and tomorrow" (Heb 13:8). Sadly, many Christians today are so biblically illiterate that they have a tragically sentimentalized idea of God. This is especially fueled by a lack of familiarity with the Old Testament. It treats God as little more than a deity who died to meet their psychological needs. Consequently, we have the incredible paradox of evangelicals who "know Jesus" but don't know God. They

are unwitting Marcionites.

The remedy for this travesty is biblical theology. More specifically, we must grasp the significance of the Old Covenant's Sinai and the New Covenant's Calvary. Each of these paradigms offers a means for understanding God.

In the Mt. Sinai text we learn that God is a consuming fire: "To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain" (Ex 24:17). The scene is stupendous: a mountaintop blazing with fire framed by deep darkness. Lightning illuminated golden arteries in the clouds. Rams' horns pierced the thunder with mournful blasts. The ground shook, undulating as God's voice intoned the Ten Commandments (Ex 19:16-19). This scene reveals that God is transcendent. He is "other." Perfect, good, and holy. In his wrath, he judges. The sinful people are afraid to approach God.

Every believer must catch this vision. "God is a consuming fire." This realization is needed in today's church, where worship has been shamefully trivialized. Indeed, worship has been turned into a self-assured farce. This picture must grip our imaginations. Flaming Mt. Sinai represents God!

The second mountain, Mt. Calvary, completes the picture. There we see God's love as God the Son becomes sin for us (2 Co 5:21; cf. Gal 3:10,11). On Calvary, God the Son died for our sins and extended forgiveness to all who believe in him, to all who trust in his work alone for salvation. Mt. Calvary represents God!

Sinai and Calvary cannot be separated. God is not the God of one mountain, but both. Both must be held in blessed tension within our souls—consuming fire and consuming love. An understanding of God as consuming fire and consuming

love will save us from the damning delusion of Marcionism!

Further, this understanding of God will shape our spiritual pilgrimage. How? By teaching us obedience to a holy God, who is a consuming fire, and worship of a loving God, who has died on the cross for our sins. By instilling in us an absolute commitment to hearing God speak in scripture.

Obedience to God's Effectual and Final Word (12:25-27)

We ought to obey God's word because it is effectual. That is, it will achieve its intended purpose. God's word cannot fail. As the author of Hebrews writes, "See 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?" (v. 25)

This verse employs an *a fortiori* argument, which is an argument that proposes that what is true in the lesser case will be even more true in the greater. In the lesser case, Israel explicitly disobeyed God's word through their repeated disobedience during their four decades of wandering in the wilderness. So grievous was their disobedience that God declares that everyone who is twenty years of age and older will die in the desert (Nu 14:29). Indeed, all died except faithful Caleb and Joshua.

As for the greater case, if such was the inexorable penalty for disobeying God's earthly message, how much greater will be the judgment for disobeying his heavenly message of grace through his Son? (cf. 1:2). Surely no one will escape! Of course, this has been the author of Hebrews' message all along. For instance, in 2:3a he warns, "How shall we escape

if we ignore such a great salvation?" Later he says much the same thing, emphasizing even greater punishment:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (10:28, 29)

The message is clear. We must obey God's word, for God's effectual word states that the disobedient will not escape God's wrath. God is a relentless consuming fire.

The second reason to obey God's word is that it is final. As the writer explains,

At 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." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain (vv. 26, 27).

At Sinai God's voice shook the earth when he called the people to the mountain. Imagine how terrifying it was to have the ground move under one's feet while God spoke. What a homiletical device! No one was asleep in the congregation at Sinai!

But there is an infinitely greater shaking coming, an eschatological cosmic shaking of the whole universe, which will itself be triggered by God's word. Here the author of Hebrews quotes Haggai 2:6, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens" (v. 26b), a text which indicates that every created thing will eventually be shaken to utter disintegration.

This threat agrees with what the Scriptures teach about the power of God's word. Genesis teaches that God spoke the universe into existence. Therefore, one "little word" from him can and will fell creation. Psalm 102:25 and 26 tell us that creation is transitory: "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment" (cf. Heb 1:10-12). Isaiah asserts, "Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger" (13:13). Peter claims that this shaking will occur on the day of the Lord: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Pe 3:10). Think of it: the whole universe will be shaken by God's word. Just one word from God and it will be done.

Hebrews 12:27b reveals the reason for this shaking: "so that what cannot be shaken may remain." The universe will be purged of all wrong and all wrongdoers. No sin, no imperfection will remain. Only God's people will survive. Then, God will create a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17; Rev 21:1).

The author encourages his hearers who were being persecuted by the Roman government. "Stand firm through the Roman tremors," he seems to be saying, "because the ultimate shaking is coming when Rome, and indeed the entire present evil order, will shake to oblivion. And you, as part of the new order, will survive. Take heart!" God's people will survive, but the wicked will perish.

These verses extend a powerful call to

obey God's *effectual* and *final* word. No Israelite survived the desert who disobeyed God's word revealed through Moses, his servant. How then can we survive if we disobey God's word revealed through Jesus Christ, his son? Thus, we must heed the admonition, "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks" (v. 25).

Are you refusing God? Has he been speaking to you? Have you been ignoring that word? What folly! His word is *effectual* and it is *final*.

Worship of a Holy, Loving God (12:28-29)

This text also calls us to appropriate worship. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (vv. 28, 29).

It is easy to forget the true nature of God. When God's nature is misunderstood, then erroneous worship occurs. The history of St. John the Divine cathedral illustrates this sad trend.

In 1896, the...planners of St. John the Divine in New York city envisioned a great Episcopal cathedral that would bring glory to God. Nearly a century later, though the immense structure is still under construction, it is in use—in a way that its planners might well have regarded with dismay.

St. John's Thanksgiving service has featured Japanese Shinto priests; Muslim Sufis perform biannually; Lenten services have focused on the ecological "passion of the earth." ...St. John the Divine has ceased to be a house of the one God of the Scriptures, and has become instead a house of many gods. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr. wrote for the cathedral's centennial brochure that "the Cathedral is to this atheist...a suitable monument to persons of all ages and classes. I go there often to

be refreshed by a sense of nonsectarian community which has the best interest of the whole planet at heart...."

Dean James Morton has encountered opposition, but he defends it saying... "This cathedral is a place for people like me who feel constricted by the notion of excluding others. What happens here—the Sufi dances, the Buddhist prayers—are serious spiritual experiences. We make God a Minnie Mouse in stature when we say these experiences profane a Christian church."¹

The Scriptures would argue, however, that it is Dean Morton who has made the great God of Sinai and Calvary into a "mousey" deity whose only "virtue" is sub-Biblical toleration. It is difficult to conceive of how much farther one could depart from the awesome God of Scripture who tolerates no other gods before him, forbids idolatry, and demands holiness from his people. Instead of giving his people a golden calf, Dean Morton has given them a debased reflection of popular culture. This so-called worship is merely a profound, vapid idolatry.

Note our text well! It says that "[Our] God is a consuming fire." He *is*, not he *was*. God has not changed. To some of us, the worship troubles of St. John's and other churches like it may seem far removed. But sadly, similar problems are common in the evangelical churches as well. One Sunday morning a friend of mine visited a church where, to his amazement, the worship prelude was the theme song from the Paul Newman/Robert Redford movie *The Sting*, which is entitled (significantly, I think) "The Entertainer." The congregation prepared for divine worship while cinematic images of Paul Newman and Robert Redford in 1920's garb flickered in their consciousness!

And that was just the prelude, for an off-the-wall service followed. The "high

point” was the announcement time. The pastor stood behind the unfortunate person giving the announcements, making “rabbit ears” behind the announcer’s head and mugging, Bozo-like, for the congregation. This buffoonery took place in a self-proclaimed Bible-believing church that ostensibly worships the holy triune God of the Bible.

But what was in the pastor’s and peoples’ minds? How could anyone do such things and understand who God is? What did they really think of God? Very little, apparently, because they were modern evangelical Marcionites whose ignorance of Holy Scripture had so colored their understanding of God that divine worship had become man-centered vaudeville—and poor vaudeville at that!

Do not misunderstand me, Christians ought to laugh. In fact, they ought to have the best sense of humor on this planet. Christians ought to enjoy life. Still, they must know and understand that God remains a consuming fire and that acceptable worship only takes place when there is authentic reverence and awe. God’s word clearly teaches these principles.

Conclusion

When we come to worship we must keep both mountains in view: the unapproachable Sinai with its consuming fire and the approachable Calvary with its consuming love. Only then can we approach God in reverent boldness.

I desire such reverence for my church and myself. Everything depends on how we see God. If we have a biblical view of God, Sunday mornings will be occasions for awe and reverence. At times we will be overwhelmed with the mystery of God’s presence. I desire that the people raised in my church know Christ and have

a radical biblical vision of God that includes a sense of God’s holiness and transcendence. This worldview will inform every aspect of their lives: their worship, their sense of mission and evangelism, their stewardship, their affirmation and delight in creation, their relationships, their sexual ethics—everything!

My heart’s desire is that all members of God’s unshakable kingdom worship with thankful hearts. Our pulses should race with thanksgiving. Whatever we do or wherever we go we must be “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:20).

Theological balance is the key to appropriate obedience and worship. God is both transcendent and approachable. Both Sinai and Calvary represent God. As we move towards heaven, may obedience and worship characterize our lives. May we obey God’s effectual and final word. May we worship God with reverence, awe, and thanksgiving.

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987) 222-223.