

# Acceptable Worship

By Brad Allison on 5/15/2005

Scripture Reference *Hebrews 12:18-29*

## INTRODUCTION:

It's very clear that our passage this morning is about worship. The author makes explicit mention of worship in verse 28, where he talks about acceptable worship. And there is a lengthy section that contrasts the worship of the Old Testament on Mt. Sinai with the worship of the New Testament on Mt. Zion, or Jerusalem. But I had a difficult time understanding how to put the whole passage together until I paid attention to the first word of verse 18, the little word "for". This conjunction ties together this passage on worship with the command preceding it. It is a command not to be like Esau, "who sold his birthright for a single meal" (v. 16). Do you remember that story? Esau was the oldest son of Isaac and Rebekah, and stood to inherit the blessing of the firstborn. This birthright was that of blessing from God. But one day Esau came in from being outdoors all day, and he was famished. Jacob had been cooking some stew, and Esau asked for some. "Jacob said, 'Sell me your birthright now.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me now.' So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright." (Gen. 25:31-34). The author of Hebrews looks at that and notes that Esau made a very bad decision. He looked at all that God had to offer, his promised blessing to Abraham given to the firstborn of future generations, and Esau weighed that against satisfying his hunger for one day. And he made a terrible decision. He said, "Give me the stew; you can keep God's inheritance."

Illustration: I grew up not far from Graceland, Elvis Presley's Memphis home. Shortly after he died, I remember hearing an interview with someone who knew Elvis at East High School, where he graduated. This person said that Elvis' hope after graduation was to sing in a gospel quartet and to drive the group's bus. Elvis couldn't imagine anything being better than that. Though it's obvious to us that Elvis' post high school future was much grander than his high school ambition for that future, it is perhaps not so obvious that we do the same thing when we behave like Esau. We take a good look at what God offers to us, our heavenly inheritance and the joys of a life that leaves everything behind in order to follow Jesus, and we say, "I'd rather have that career that others will respect." We've made the same decision as Esau.

Notice the tragic results of making an Esau decision. "For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears" (v. 17). I take this to mean that even though he later came to regret his decision, his heart was too hard to repent. So we are told not to follow his example, and the passage before us today gives us the motivation to avoid such a decision. Interestingly, the motivation not to make the Esau error lies in the area of worship. What Esau needed, and what we need, is to see God as the ultimate good, as the one worth forsaking all in order to have. That's what worship is. We worship what we believe to be the greatest treasure. So the way we avoid Esau's error is to worship God. It is worship that will help us avoid the kind of hopeless regret we see in Esau's life. I want us to note three features of acceptable worship.

### I. We Listen to God's Voice.

If we are to worship God in an acceptable way, we must listen to him. The author makes that point by contrasting Old Testament worship at Mt. Sinai, with our worship in the New

Testament. Mt. Sinai was the place in the wilderness where the law was given to Israel through Moses. It's described in Exodus 19, and the summary of the whole experience is given to us in our passage. It produced such overwhelming fear that the people begged that God stop speaking to them. They were told not to come too close, lest they die. If they or one of their animals just touched the mountain, they would die.

Our worship now is characterized by joy instead of fear. The verb here is significant. It is in the perfect tense, "You have come." Though it seems to be describing the worship of heaven, it says that there is a sense in which we have already entered such worship. It is a gathering in which is present innumerable angels. In Daniel 7:10, the Bible talks about "ten thousand times ten thousand" angels. That's a large gathering of angels, but this must be larger still because their number is so vast as to be beyond numbering. And these angels are gathered in "festal gathering." The atmosphere is one of joyful exuberance. If angels have the capacity to smile, they are doing so at this worship service. And present there is the assembly of the firstborn. The firstborn is a name given to all Christians, because we inherit the blessing of Abraham, the same one that Esau spurned. And we come to God, the judge of all. Also present are the spirits of the righteous made perfect. This refers to believers who died in the past. But notice again, this describes something of our present experience in worship. He is saying here that when we gather for worship, we are entering into something much bigger and more glorious than appearances would indicate. In worship, we come by faith into the very presence of God.

The next two statements are even more glorious. If you think about entering the presence of God when we gather for worship, then you can't help but feel somewhat out of place. How can a sinner possibly enjoy being in the presence of a holy God. It is so easy to feel a little like the boy who snuck into the ballgame and hopes that he won't be asked to show his ticket stub. So we read that we come to Jesus the mediator. We have one who stands between us and our holy God. He makes it possible for sinners to enter this grand worship service. He does so by his blood, which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. This is a compelling image. It refers to the slaying of Abel by his brother Cain, after which we read that the Lord said to Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). The blood contained a message that reached all the way to heaven, and the message was that of cursing for the one who had shed it. In a similar way the blood of Jesus contains a message that reaches to God himself. This message is unambiguous and effective. It says, "Forgive those for whom I have died. Their sins have been pardoned and now they are clean." So we can worship with boldness and confidence, feeling not like we hope no one will ask for our ticket stub, but rather like we hope they do so in order that we can pull out the ticket given us by Jesus that says we have every right to be there based on his blood.

Now here's the point the author makes from all that. He tells us that we need to listen to God, and he points out that we New Testament worshipers have even greater motivation to listen to God than the Old Testament worshipers. This is a bit surprising when we remember that God spoke at Mt. Sinai through a thunderous voice. We imagine that we would more readily listen to God if he spoke to us in that way. But they didn't. Just days after God spoke to them, they fell into sin and disobedience. So we are those who received God's clearer revelation through Jesus, and we have heard of his mercy. If we neglect to listen in spite of having even clearer revelation, our guilt will be greater.

So the first thing he says about acceptable worship is that we need to listen to God. Why do people not do so? I think there are two principle reasons. One is that we don't want to submit to him, because that would require that we admit we are wrong and trust him for the grace to change. I heard a commentary on the radio a couple of weeks ago in which the

commentator was describing a bet he had made when he was a high school student. He had bet a friend two dollars that Reno, Nevada was further west than Los Angeles, California. His friend was sure that Los Angeles was further west, but the truth is that Reno is the correct answer. When this man tried to collect his two dollars, his friend refused to accept that Reno was further west. Even when shown an atlas that pictured it as such, he would argue that the atlas was wrong. When it was pointed out to him that the lines of longitude clearly showed Reno to be further west, he questioned whether those lines were straight enough. The bottom line is that he did exactly what you and I do with God. We listen to him only when he agrees with us, but find some reason to question him if we don't agree.

The second reason we often fail to listen to God in worship is that we don't understand that God speaks to his people through the very plain manner of a fallible preacher standing up to speak for God. Someone told me once that they found the sermon part of the worship service a great time to plan their week ahead. But if you believe God speaks through this time, then you ought to listen for God through him. The reason you ought to listen to the sermon with a keen sense of expectation each week is not that your preacher is so great. The reason is that God is so great that he can speak through the most common and even crude instruments.

Illustration: I used to play basketball with a guy who won a good bit of money playing two on two basketball with his wife as his teammate. They would challenge two men to play to play against them, and the men were confident they could beat a team with a woman on it. But my friend was a really superb player, and he almost never encountered a player who could stop him one-on-one. So the other team would double team him, in which case he would simply dump the ball off to his wife, who was a very good shooter when left unguarded. God is so great that he can speak his word even through people like me. So don't be fooled and think that this is only Brad Allison speaking here. God speaks through his appointed spokesmen, and he often chooses the plainest of his instruments to do so, in order that he might be seen as great. So listen to him.

## II. We Are Filled with Gratitude.

The second feature of acceptable worship is gratitude. "Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (v. 28). Did you notice how much shaking there is in this passage? God's voice shook the earth when he spoke from Mt. Sinai, and he says that shaking will be the way he ends this world. In other words, God will end the world through an earthquake. Californians talk about "The Big One", but the really big one is the one God will use to bring this world to its conclusion. Isaiah spoke of this in graphic terms centuries earlier. "The foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is rent asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again" (24:18-20).

Not only will the earth end through an earthquake, but its very nature prior to that ending is insecurity. The affluence of our culture almost isolates us from this insecurity, but not quite. You don't have to look far to know that collapse is always more than a remote possibility. The list of possible calamities is too large to itemize, including either personal or global calamity. We've all read warnings of global warming for years. Widespread use of antibiotics makes the emergence of some resistant bacteria inevitable; it's only a question of time. And if you needed further proof of the basic insecurity of this world, this past Friday's paper included a front page story of a 350-yard asteroid that could strike the earth on April 13, 2029. If it should strike, scientists say that no matter where on the earth it hits, "it would be

the greatest natural disaster in all of recorded history.” Jesus taught that these calamities will increase just prior to his return, like the beginning of labor for a woman signals that the time has arrived for her to give birth. And then it will all end with this giant earthquake described in our passage as a shaking of the earth and heavens, “in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.”

What do you do when one part of your world is shaken? You instinctively take refuge in another part. So if your child gets sick, but you have the money to pay for the treatment that will bring healing, you seek refuge in the money. If your work life is falling apart, you may take refuge in another part of your life that is relatively stable and prosperous, like your family. But what if everything is falling apart at the same time? There is only one place that will never fall apart and that's the security of God's kingdom, which is entered by faith in him. We have such security, and our response ought to be that of gratitude. That's why gratitude is so significant. It is one of the best indicators of a true faith because it means that you have seen that everything else is insecure, but that you are secure because of God's gift to you of his kingdom. And note that we *receive* this kingdom rather than earn it.

### III. We Come to Him with Reverence and Awe.

Finally, we are to worship God with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. In other words, God hasn't changed since Sinai. The author is not saying that the worship at Sinai was bad or wrong, only that it was incomplete because there was no mediator. Since there was no mediator, anyone who came close died, including animals. God was then a holy God and he still is. Our worship must continue to recognize his holiness.

Illustration: Did you read the story in this week's paper of the evacuation of the White House and Capital when a small plane violated the restricted air space around those buildings. The authorities feared it may have been a terrorist coming to destroy something. But it turned out only to be two lost pilots flying visually with the aid of outdated maps. For a long time, they could not be raised on their radio. When they finally were, they were told to change their flight path immediately. At first they refused, confident that they were exactly where they were supposed to be. It was reported later that they were only about three miles from the White House and were seconds from being shot down. Many people are just like that pilot, violating God's holy nature and absolutely sure that they are within their rights, and that God will do nothing about it. But he is a holy God, and the only thing standing between us and certain destruction is our mediator.

There is an appropriate narrowness to Christian worship in that it is focused on Jesus as the only Mediator between a holy God and sinful man. Some criticize us for this narrowness, but we must hold to it tenaciously. It is the narrowness of the brain surgeon who is cutting out the brain tumor and wants to get all the tumor and as little of the brain cells as possible. It is the narrowness of the driver who keeps his car between the lines on the road in order to avoid an accident.

### CONCLUSION:

There is a hymn that includes the following line to describe Jesus. “He has hushed the law's loud thunder, he has quenched Mount Sinai's flame: he has washed us with his blood, he has brought us nigh to God.” So Jesus is the center of our worship, because he is the mediator through whom we are able to listen to God, to be thankful to him, and worship him with reverent hearts. May God open your eyes to see him, to treasure him, and to avoid Esau's

error!