

Worship Shaped by God's Holiness

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[0:00] Hebrews chapter 12, reading from verse 14 to the end of the chapter.! Make every effort to live in peace with all men, and to be holy.

! Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

See that no one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.

And now he wants us to notice as New Covenant believers what we do not come to and what we do come to. You have not come to a mountain that can be touched, and that is burning with fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, to a trumpet blast, or to such a voice speaking words, so that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded.

[1:21] If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear.

But 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, to 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, to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

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? 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.

[2:46] The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken, that is, created things, so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

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.

I ask you to open your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12, if they're not already open there. In the front yard of a certain church is a big banner in blue, and it reads, casual worship.

And so I look up my thesaurus and find the word casual, and the synonyms of it are informal, unfussy, laid back, relaxed, carefree, careless.

And worship today in many churches is just that. Casual. A casual feel-good thing. And it's even advertised as such.

[4:13] Casual worship. Now churches, admittedly, have a problem today. People are not committed to church as they once were. They come and go as they please.

Membership numbers are down. The younger generation are turning off to church. These were some of the concerns listed by the largest denomination in the world today, the Southern Baptist Church, in an article that ran in the South Bend Tribune this week.

And so there are problems. And many church growth experts are ready with their solutions that say, in order to bring more people in, you need to have a more casual worship service.

And so worship is being designed, thoughtfully, purposefully designed, to be casual, to make it feel better, less confrontive, less preachy, more relaxed, and laid back.

And it goes for everything, from what is worn, the dress, the music, the preaching, the praying, the whole atmosphere must be laid back.

[5:25] And relaxed. Formal is out, casual is in. And in many cases it works. And attendance numbers rise. And the change is regarded as a success, a move in the right direction.

But before we tamper with the worship of God, a crucial question needs to be asked. And it is not, what do most of the people out there want in worship?

But what does God himself want in worship? After all, is he not the one whom we are worshipping, to whom we bring our worship?

Should he not then be the one to tell us what kind of worship he accepts? And he does precisely that. In the scriptures.

And here in our text, Hebrews chapter 12, verses 28 and 29. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

[6:27] And worship, so worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. Now let's not miss what God is telling us here.

He's telling us that not all worship being offered today is acceptable to him. That there is acceptable and non-acceptable worship. There's a widespread, faulty assumption today that God ought to accept any kind of worship that people bring to him.

After all, we cared enough to get out of bed and come here to worship him. Why then, he ought to be pleased with the worship we bring. And such an attitude inflates our own importance and diminishes the greatness and holiness of our God.

Did you know that from the very beginning you had those two categories of acceptable and non-acceptable worship? Cain and Abel both brought an offering in worship to God.

Abel's offering was offered in faith and so it was accepted. Cain's offering was offered without faith and was not accepted. And that's just one of many examples throughout the scriptures.

[7:41] Here in Hebrews 12 we have a text that tells us the kind of worship that God accepts is worship with reverence and awe. And we only worship God acceptably when our worship is marked by reverence and awe.

Oh, but shouldn't we worship with joy and gladness? Absolutely. But never without reverence and awe.

Psalm 2 blends these two together as they call us to rejoice with trembling. Psalm 2 in verse 11. So we sing in that hymn we with trembling joy we take the pardon of our God.

Pardon for crimes of deepest dye. A pardon bought with Jesus' blood. Trembling joy. Our highest joys in worship are never less than reverent joys.

Reverence is that special respect we give to God because of His holiness. Awe is wonder and amazement. It's adoration at who He is.

[9:02] It's godly fear. But I'm getting ahead of myself. We're going to return to this passage later just to set the context. We're in a study on the holiness of God and we've come to its applications in our lives.

If God is holy what difference should it make in us? And we've seen that the application of scripture is you be holy because I am holy. And then last week we asked what does that holy life look like?

And we saw that it was a life shaped by the word of God. A life conformed to Christ. A life of killing sin. A life of sexual purity. And now today another application of God's holiness.

And there's three points and I'm going to give them to you right up front. Number one God is to be worshipped for his holiness. There's the next application.

If God is holy then we must worship him. Secondly the holiness of God is to shape our worship.

[10:06] Our worship is to be shaped by the holiness of God. It is to leave its footprint on all that we do in worship. Thirdly when God's holiness shapes our worship reverence and awe is the result.

When our worship is shaped by God's holiness reverence and awe is the result. Now that's where we're going and we're going to see those three points made repeatedly along the way.

And where do we begin? Well let's begin in the book of Psalms the Old Testament book of worship. It has very much to say to us about how to worship this great God.

God is telling us how to worship him and he here tells us and calls on us to worship him in reverence and awe and does so especially by calling us to worship the Lord for his holiness.

Psalm 99 is a psalm from beginning to end that pounds two notes especially hard.

[11:14] Worship and God's holiness. And I want you to notice the connection between worship and God's holiness as I read these verses from Psalm 99 verses 2 and 3.

Great is the Lord in Zion. He is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise and praise is an element of worship. Let them praise your great and awesome name.

He is holy. Verse 5 Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool. He is holy.

Verse 9 Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain for the Lord our God is holy. You see it three times he says worship is due to God because he is holy.

And here is then our application of the holiness of God. Worship him. God is to be worshipped for his holiness. The fact that there is none like him in all the universe calls forth worship.

[12:28] He deserves to be worshipped. He's in this category all of his own. His holiness is awesome. It is awe-inspiring.

Now there's three other texts that connect God's worship and his holiness. Psalm 29 2 says worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. Psalm 96 9 says worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.

Tremble before him all the earth. And 2 Chronicles 20 and 21 God gives instructions to the God-ordained singers.

Praise him for the splendor of his holiness. All three of those texts tell us that our worship is to be carried out in the splendor of his holiness.

In the beauty, in the outshining, in the majesty, in the transcendence, the glory of his holiness. holiness. And that's our second point then, that our worship is to be shaped by God's holiness, by the holiness of God.

[13:40] The brilliance, the majesty, the beauty of his holiness is to have an effect upon all that we do. It's the splendor of his holiness that we're to worship in.

So if here's a beam of light and that's the splendor of his worship, then we are to do everything we do in the splendor of his holiness. We're never to be without thought. This is our great God that we're worshipping.

Everything in worship is to be influenced by his holiness. That means we sing to a holy God. We must not forget that in our singing. We pray to a holy God.

We must not forget that when we pray. We preach about a holy God. We listen to the word of a holy God.

Worship him in the splendor of his holiness. We listen to his word as listening not just to a man but to the holy one.

[14:45] Isaiah 66 2 says, this is the one I esteem, him who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at my word. Not the one that's kicked back as my words being talked about.

No, he's one who trembles at my word. There's a sense of reverence when God's word is being spoken. We give our tithes and offerings to a holy God.

We take communion. We observe baptism, remembering how a holy God has reconciled guilty sinners. We worship in the splendor of his holiness, never forgets, forgetting that he is holy.

So it's worship shaped not by a survey of what people want, but a worship service shaped by the holiness of our God. Now, can you see then why casual and laid back are out of place for the worship of God?

We're not going to the beach. We're not going to the movies. We're not going to the ball game.

We're coming to worship the holy one. We're coming to appear before him. The Bible speaks of drawing near to him in worship.

[15:58] We are coming to draw near to him in worship. We're not coming here to be entertained. We're not coming here as if no one special is here.

We're coming to meet with the most holy one. And his holiness is to leave its stamp, its mark, on everything we do as we worship him. It strikes reverence and awe upon our hearts and worship. Listen to Isaiah 29 verse 23. It's in that chapter that God has a complaint against Israel because they were drawing near to God.

They were worshiping God with their mouths but their hearts were far from him. But he talks about another day, another day that is coming when not just with their lips but with their hearts they will worship.

And this is what he says in Isaiah 29 23. They will keep my name holy. They will acknowledge the holiness of the holy one of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

[17:02] Do you see the two lines that are parallel to each other in that verse? They will acknowledge the holiness of the holy one and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

Acknowledging God's holiness is parallel to standing in awe of him. You only acknowledge God's holiness if there is reverence and awe about him.

God's God's God's and awe of God in heaven. We go to heaven and we see how are they worshiping God there? Well, we're struck with this that it's the same there as he requires here. It's God's holiness that especially marks the worship of heaven. We've seen that from Isaiah 6 and the angels, the seraphs and in Revelation chapter 4 and verse 8 we read day and night. They never stop saying holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was, who is, and is to come. Holy, holy, holy.

[18:10] There's nothing casual kicked back about their worship. Rather, sinless seraphs are covering their faces at the splendor of his holiness.

The church of the Old and New Testament fall down, prostrate before him, verse 10. They worship in the splendor of his holiness. God's holiness shapes their worship and controls the atmosphere, the whole emotion of worship.

And we find the victorious saints in heaven are singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. It's the song you're going to sing, saints, when you get to heaven. Victorious song of Moses and the Lamb. What will you be singing? Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God almighty. Just and true are your ways, king of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All the nations of the earth will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. Revelation 15, 3 and 4.

[19:21] It's the song of Moses and the Lamb. It's the song of the saints victorious in heaven. And they cannot imagine anyone not worshiping him with fear.

Who will not fear you, O Lord? For you alone are holy. Worship with reverence and awe, you see. We return to life on earth, for that's where we worship now. And we find back in Exodus chapter 3 a shepherd. And he's on the backside of the desert and he's taking care of his father-in-law's sheep. And he comes to Mount Sinai and he wasn't planning to worship God at that moment. But all that changed when he saw a bush on fire. And the bush was not consumed.

It just kept on blazing and blazing. And so Moses draws aside to look closer at the bush. And then something even more amazing happened. God himself spoke to Moses from within the burning bush.

[20:25] Moses, Moses. And Moses said, here I am. And God said, do not come any closer.

Take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground. And he goes on to identify himself as the God of his fathers.

and Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. This is the first time the word holy is used in the Bible. What was it that made that spot, that otherwise ordinary spot in the desert, holy ground?

Why did God say this is holy ground? It's because the Holy One was there to manifest himself to Moses. The revealed presence of God.

God made himself known. He was there to meet with Moses, and therefore the ground became holy, even as God was holy.

[21:32] And so he's told, don't come any closer and take off your sandals. In other words, humbly acknowledge that you are in the presence of the Holy One. Pause with reverence for his holiness.

Now, we don't take off our shoes when we come into the door, but men do take off their hats, don't they, to show reverence. We sometimes stand, we sometimes kneel, we have our ways of showing reverence for God.

This was the way they showed reverence for God, one of the ways, taking off their sandals. It's still in Asia, a mark of worship today.

It's a way of showing reverence. And so Moses is being stirred to greater reverence. This is not a time for just casual curiosity, just moseying up to a bush to see why it's not being consumed.

No, God is here. God is manifesting himself here. And so you must pause and recognize his holy presence with reverence.

[22:43] Calvin says, Moses is commanded to put off his shoes that by the very bareness of his feet, his mind might be disposed to reverential feelings, to remember who it is that is here.

And so when the holy God comes to meet with us, laid back and casual is not the fitting response that he seeks. This is something special. This is something of the highest privilege known to save

sinner, to meet with our God.

And he wants it to be with reverence and with awe. Forty years later, Moses is dead, unable to enter into the promised land because he did not uphold God's holiness among the Israelites when he struck the rock twice instead of speaking to it.

But Joshua would be the one to lead the next generation of Israelites into the promised land. And now they've come to the promised land. They've crossed over the Jordan River and the first city to take is the walled great city of Jericho.

And the night before, Joshua is laying plans. How are we going to do it? And he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand.

[23:56] And Joshua went up and asked him, Are you for us or for our enemies? Neither, he replied, but as commander of the army of the Lord, I have now come.

And then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked him, What message does my Lord have for his servant? And the commander of the Lord's army replied, Take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy.

And Joshua did so. So here's a spot of ground. It's under the pagan influence and control of the Canaanites. And yet, for this moment, it becomes holy ground and Joshua must therefore take off his sandals, pause, realize the holiness of God who is here.

The sign of reverence is demanded when the holy one makes himself known to man. So brothers and sisters, whenever we come together for the worship of God, we're standing on holy ground.

The holy one draws near to us. Wherever two or three are met in his name, there he is in the midst of them. He's come to speak to us. He's come to listen to us, to receive our praise, our worship.

[25:17] he's come to have dealings with us and we dare not casually just traipse into his presence as if nothing important is to happen here, as if it's no big deal to meet with God.

Brethren, it's a far greater deal than any of us have come to realize for us to meet with the holy one. Reverence and awe becomes us. It's fitting for us. Stop. Take off your sandals. Pause and ponder this God is holy and then proceed with reverence and awe.

That's why we take the trouble if you will. That's why we pause before worship service and say let's prepare to meet with God.

Let's take off our sandals as it were. Let's pause and ponder a while who it is that we're meeting. that he is holy. There's no greater privilege than for me to come into his presence.

[26:25] And no amount of emotion in worship is to obscure the fact that he is holy, holy, holy. Leviticus 10 verses 1 through 3 could be a passage of scripture that you put a banner over out in the margin and right there casual worship.

It was Aaron's first day of ministry in the tabernacle as the high priest of Israel. He has just been consecrated for the office and on this day he loses his two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu.

They too had been ordained as priests. And Leviticus 10 verse 1 says they took their censers, that's what you burned incense in, and they put fire in them and they added incense and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord which he had not commanded them.

You see throughout, you read the book of Leviticus and you see that every detail is given to the priest of what he is to do and is not to do. He's to add salt to this offering and there's to be no yeast in that offering and he's to cut up this animal this way and he's to burn this part and save that part and give this part to the people and this part for himself and this part for God.

There is intricate, detailed instructions and it was the priest's job to carry out that instruction in the worship of God. He wasn't free to improvise on the fly.

[28:00] He wasn't free to get creative in his worship in the sense of well I'm going to do this. I think God should be pleased if I do this. He was to only do what God commanded him to do.

But we're told that Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire which the Lord had not commanded them. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord, verse 2, and consumed them and they died before the Lord.

Moses then said to Aaron, this is what the Lord spoke of when he said among those who approach me I will be sanctified or I will be treated as holy.

Among those who approach me in the sight of all the people I will be honored. They were consumed by fire for their lack of reverence for God.

Calvin says if we reflect how holy a thing God's worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Nadab and Abiyah who just had a casual attitude toward worship.

[29:11] Let's not get too fussy about things here now boys. Let's do it this way. They didn't think God was so holy that they must be very careful to only do what God had commanded.

They thought he ought to be pleased with whatever they brought to him. They underestimated the holiness of God and became an object lesson of what God thinks of those who approach him without reverence and awe.

Matthew Henry comments, it concerns us all when we come near to God to sanctify him, that is, to give him the praise of his holiness, to perform every religious exercise as those who believe that the God with whom we have to do is a holy God, a God of spotless purity and transcendent perfection. This consideration ought to make us very reverent and serious in all acts of worship. Pause and ponder the holiness of God and proceed with reverence throughout all your activities of worship. desire for something casual in worship is nothing new. Isaiah 30, the Lord complains a thousand years before Christ was born.

[30:42] He complains of the children of Israel in this way. He says, they say to the seers, see no more visions, and they say to the prophets, give us no more visions of what is right. Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions, with the Holy One of Israel.

Isn't that something? The worshipers then didn't like to be confronted with the Holy One of Israel. We'd rather have a casual, pleasant experience in worship.

None of this confrontation with the Holy One. Now folks, when we determine that the attitude in worship must be casual and laid back, we have thereby ruled out certain things from worship.

No confrontation with the Holy One of Israel. No serious confrontation with God's character as being holy. The seriousness of sin and the call to repentance and the call to be holy, that doesn't fit where casual is the must and worship is designed for pleasant things.

But who are we to tell the Holy One? The atmosphere of His worship when He comes to deal with us. We cannot push Him in a box.

[32:04] He's the Holy One. He calls on us to come before Him with reverence and awe. Now someone might say, well John, you've spent a lot of time in the Old Testament.

Surely the New Testament is a far more gracious covenant and worship in the New Covenant is different. Well let's come to Hebrews 12 then, the text that we began with.

Because here the writer has been contrasting worship in the Old Covenant with worship in the New Covenant. Does he not say in the book of Hebrews that worship in the New Covenant in Christ is a better covenant?

Yes, he says that. And does he not say that worship in the New Covenant in Christ is founded on better promises? Yes, founded on the realities rather than the mere types.

And does he not say that worship in the New Covenant is founded on a better priesthood? Yes, we have Jesus Christ as our great high priest rather than the Aaronic priesthood.

[33:10] Does he not say that we have better sacrifices? Yes, we have the finished sacrifice of Christ once for all offered, effective in taking away all of our sins.

Does it not give us a better hope whereby we draw near to God? Yes, the New Covenant has a better hope by which we draw near to God.

So then reverence and all required in the Old Testament is no longer needed in the New Covenant worship in Christ, right? Wrong. Some might think this way.

The writer to the Hebrews assumes that somebody is thinking that way, but he corrects their thought and argues otherwise. And so we have the comparison of Old Covenant worship at Mount Sinai verses 18 through 21 that was read for us.

And then we have the New Covenant worship at Mount Zion. We've come to Christ, to God, to the blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. But the writer to the Hebrews argues this way, that the greater privileges in the New Covenant that we have in Christ are reason for more reverence and awe, not less.

[34:28] More reverence and awe, not less. Verses 25 to 27, see to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they in the Old Covenant did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven now in the New Covenant.

His voice then shook the earth but now it's going to shake not only the earth that is coming but also the heavens to remove all that can be shaken all that does not bear the stamp of the eternal will be shaken and all that will last is his eternal kingdom and so we're receiving a kingdom that cannot be

shaken!

Isn't that as Christ returns and shakes this whole earth and everything that's not marked by Christ and the eternal will be gone and the only thing that will last and be ushered into the new heavens and new earth is the kingdom of God in Christ Isn't it wonderful to know that we belong to that kingdom we cannot be shaken oh therefore we don't have any reason to have reverence and awe in our worship anymore that's exactly opposite of the argument of the writer to the Hebrews he says it gives us all the more reason to worship with reverence and awe verse 28 therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe why for our God is a consuming fire our God is not was you know back in when Moses met him at the burning bush he was a consuming fire when Nadab and Abihu messed with his worship he was a consuming fire but he's not anymore in the new covenant in Christ that's not how he argues he says we worship acceptably with reverence and awe for our

God is present tense the same God a consuming fire what have we seen God's holiness is to shape our worship and worship shaped by the holiness of God will always be with reverence and awe yes it will be with joy and gladness with understanding but never without reverence and awe and that is especially true in the new covenant is what Hebrews 12 is telling us especially now knowing that we have been bought with the blood of Christ we will especially worship with reverence and awe remembering what it cost him what is the holiness of this God that he would damn his own son when he's bearing my sins to the place of judgment that I might be forgiven that I might become a part of this unshakable kingdom oh what a holy God what a holy savior what awesome wrath what awesome holiness what awesome love amazing love how can it be that thou my

God should die for me doesn't make me casual in worship doesn't make me kick back it makes me awe reverence amazing love the new covenant in Christ calls for greater reverence and awe now I'm not saying and let me say this before we close unless you misunderstand that we all ought to be all up tight as we come before God in worship no as I said the Bible tells us to come with joy gladness indeed the book of Hebrews tells us to come with confidence with boldness as a son to his father as we come to God who is reconciled to us who's at peace with us who is for us in Jesus Christ we don't come cringing to him we come with confidence we come with boldness but it's a reverent confidence it's a reverent boldness it's not a ride that by forgetting how holy God is but it's arrived at by remembering how valuable

[38:47] Christ our mediator is and how he has fully satisfied God's holy demands on my behalf as we close see how he puts it in chapter 10 verses 19 through 22 therefore brother since we have confidence to enter the most holy place you can't get any closer in worship than that confidence to enter the most holy place how by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body and since we have a great priest over the house of God let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water we draw near to God with confidence because we pause and ponder the blood that was shed to open up this new way the body that was given it's a confidence dipped in reverence and awe because it's a confidence dipped in the blood of the

Son of God how different that is from a forgetfulness of God's holiness that enables us to saunter into his presence so boldly thoughtlessly rashly lightly no God is so holy we are so sinful that we cannot draw near to him without a mediator and so we don't stroll into God's presence taking our acceptance for granted acting as if it's no big deal to come into God's presence to worship him rather we realize God is holy and yet we dare to draw near with the confidence because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf we say for me he died for me he lives and so we draw near consciously setting Christ before us father look on him and pardon me look on him and receive me in my worship as I bring it in Jesus name and I come with confidence that I am heard and my father's for me and he is this wonderful holy

God and he's mine in Christ great difference between a casual attitude that forgets God is holy and one that remembers his holiness and yet comes with confidence because of Jesus and so we honor God's holiness as we draw near in reverence and awe and when we worship God for his holiness the Lord Jesus himself becomes more precious to us therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe our father if people in the old testament viewing the shadows of the coming Christ stood in reverence and awe in your presence how much more should we now that Christ has come have we

ever seen anything more awesome than your holiness displayed at Calvary displayed in the coming of your son and living of a holy life and satisfying your holy demands that we might be forgiven oh forgive us for the times that we come into your presence so thoughtlessly when we thereby break the third commandment and misuse the name of the Lord our God wash us and cleanse us again in the blood of Jesus and do bring us each time to your worship with a sense of wonder the sense of awe renew it in us Lord awaken us the familiarity would not breed contempt but that we might be amazed that this God in Christ has redeemed us for himself bring sinners even this day to not refuse this Savior who calls on them from heaven to come to him and to repent of their sins we ask it in Jesus name amen amen