

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS

Message #36

Hebrews 12:25-29

Back in the year 2000, sixty-two year old James Montgomery Boice, the famed Presbyterian preacher of Philadelphia, was told by doctors that he had six weeks to live. He was dying of cancer and the doctors gave him forty-two days to live. In the last two weeks before he died, he was bedridden and extremely weak. The cancer was zapping the strength out of his body. Dr. Boice wanted to keep active all the way to the end. What Dr. Boice did in his final hours of life was to muster all of his strength to lay the framework for a book called *The Doctrines of Grace*. When you read this book it is a book that does nothing but elevate and exalt God. In chapter eight of the book, there is this statement: “The goal of theology is the worship of God. The posture of theology is on one’s knees. The mode of theology is repentance” (*The Doctrines of Grace*, p. 179). James Montgomery Boice had the kind of attitude and mind the writer of Hebrews wanted all believers to have. He ran his race and finished his course all the way to the finish line and he won.

Some people have the idea that since we are under grace, our theology just doesn’t matter. What we think about God and the Bible is not really significant. We can just live life our way and have fun. Forget being serious about accurately understanding God’s Word. Forget being serious about really applying God’s Word. Just live life in a happy, jolly way in this Age of Grace and never take anything too seriously. Unfortunately, however, we cannot support that idea from any true interpretation of the Scriptures.

Last time we were in Hebrews, the writer wanted to drive home the point that award-winning believers run away from the law and run right to grace. They run away from Sinai and run toward Zion. This grace relationship guarantees that we are already in eternity enjoying the wonderful blessings of God.

The writer of Hebrews also wants to challenge believers to never get sloppy when it comes to our theology about God. As he will say right in this text, don’t forget “our God is a consuming fire.” As Kent Hughes said, God is the same God of two hills, Sinai and Zion (*Hebrews*, p. 199). Even though we are now wonderfully connected to Him by grace, we do not want to allow our life and theology to lose track of a “reverence and awe” that we need to have of God.

Kent Hughes tells a story of a friend of his who visited a church one Sunday morning. He said, to his amazement the worship prelude was the theme song from the Paul Newman/Robert Redford movie “The Sting.” The congregation was supposedly preparing for worship with cinematic images of Paul Newman and Robert Redford in 1920’s garb. Hughes said this “absurd...buffoonery” took place in a Bible-believing church who claims to worship God (*Ibid.*, p. 202).

Ladies and Gentlemen, there are churches that are making worship nothing more than a man-centered vaudeville act and performance. They have lost track of the fact that “Our God is a consuming fire.” You do not ever want to go into His presence to worship Him irreverently or you are setting yourself up for serious judgment.

This is another warning passage and it is the final warning text in this book of Hebrews:

The first warning was a warning against drifting from the Scriptures (2:1-4).

The second warning was a warning against disbelieving the Scriptures (3:7-14).

The third warning was a warning against not developing in the Scriptures (5:11-6:20).

The fourth warning was a warning against demeaning the Grace of God (10:26-29).

The fifth warning is a warning against downplaying the Word of God and the greatness of God **(12:25-29)**.

Frankly, this final warning is a warning that is being neglected right now by most who claim to know Jesus Christ. The fact is most people who go to church do not have a reverence for God. Most people who go to church are only interested in themselves. Most people do not stand in awe of God, and most people do not really believe “our God is a consuming fire.” **But this writer of Hebrews says the amazing grace of God must never demean or downplay the amazing greatness of God.**

EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE AN ETERNAL GUARANTEE OF HEAVEN THROUGH GRACE, WE MUST NEVER LOSE SIGHT OF THE FACT THAT WE NEED TO REVERENCE GOD AND BE IN AWE OF GOD FOREVER.

Just because we are already seated in the heavenlies and are, positionally speaking, already at Zion, does not mean we can just live our lives in some haphazard way. It is critical that we govern ourselves in a way that pleases God. This passage is designed to communicate this very point to us.

Now there are three ways we need to govern ourselves in this Grace Age:

GRACE GOVERNING WAY #1 – We need to always accept the Word of God. **12:25-27**

I want us all to understand something that is so important; when God sends someone to open up His precious Word in a proper way, it is very rare. Back in the O.T. when King Asa did good and cried to the Lord, God sent him a prophet named Azariah who said this: “...for many days Israel was without the true God and **without a teaching priest and without law**” (II Chronicles 15:3). Now Israel had the law and Israel had a bunch of religious leaders, but what she didn’t have for many years was someone called by God who actually could teach.

Now in this context, the writer of Hebrews compares the response to God’s word of those of the Old Testament with those of the New Testament, those of the old dispensation with those of the new dispensation. The main point is, **regardless of the dispensation, God’s people need to take God’s Word very seriously and always seek to obey it and never refuse or reject it. The same God who spoke His Word in the O.T. still speaks to His people through His Word in the N.T.**

When God actually sends someone who can rightly handle and unravel His Word, we need to pay careful attention to it. In this dispensation of grace, God still speaks loudly through His Word through gifted preachers and teachers; and when God’s people hear His Word, they need to take it just as seriously as those who heard God speaking at Mount Sinai.

Back in 1944, W. H. Griffith Thomas said, “Grace though free and full is nevertheless inextricably bound up with seriousness and faithfulness of life” (*Let Us Go On*, p. 167).

In **verse 25** the writer uses Israel as an illustration of God’s people who did not take His Word seriously. They refused to listen to God’s Word when He spoke directly to them on earth, and as a result God punished them.

Israel saw an incredible display of the majesty and power of God, and they actually heard God speak His Word, and they still dared to disobey God’s Word. In fact, they actually said they didn’t want to hear anymore of the Word of God (Hebrews 12:19/Exodus 20:19).

In the years that followed, Israel treated God’s Word loosely. They didn’t care if they were accurately taught and accurately applied the Scripture; and they so angered God that God said you will not enter the Promised Land, and ultimately about a million corpses will litter the desert (Numbers 14:29).

Now the point that the writer of Hebrews is making here is, just because you are under grace does not mean you can treat God’s Word lightly. In fact, God is not speaking anymore from this earth, but He is speaking through His Word directly out of heaven; and if He judged His own disobedient people in the O.T., He will also judge His own disobedient people in the N.T.

Look carefully at what is implied here. God still has a Personal encounter with His people. He is in heaven and His people are on earth, but He is still monitoring how they are responding to His Word. It is a thrilling and intimidating reality that God knows every person here right now who wants to know His Word so that they may have a better relationship with Him.

In **verse 26**, God shows the seriousness of His Word by contrasting His shaking of the earth in the O.T. with the eschatological shaking of the heavens and earth that are yet to take place. The point of this is that God is a God whose Word needs to be taken very seriously and literally regardless of the dispensation.

We may notice in **verse 26**, Haggai 2:6 is quoted and in **verse 27** it is interpreted. It is designed to present a contrast presented between “then” and “now,” between “earth” and “heaven.” Now God says I am going to shake “the earth” and “the heaven” one more time. If we compare this to what Peter reveals in II Peter 3:6-13, we conclude that this is a prophetic reference to the time when God will literally shake up and ultimately burn up the heavens and the earth. The point is that God is going to shake things up and what will remain will be those who believed Him and took Him and His Word seriously.

When God spoke at Sinai, it was fearful and scary (Exodus 20:18). God says, “I intend to physically speak one more time, in a fearful and scary way.” It will start in the Tribulation in which God will shake the heavens and the earth; and after the 1000 year reign of Jesus Christ, He will burn up the heavens and the earth.

The point being made here is that God’s people better take God’s Word seriously in view of pending judgment.

Once you and I have believed in Jesus Christ, we have God's Spirit within us and that Spirit convicts us to understand God's precious Word so we may apply it to our own lives. When God's Word is accurately taught, we need to hear it and respond to it.

GRACE GOVERNING WAY #2 – We need to always show gratitude to God. **12:28a**

We are headed to a wonderful eternal Kingdom by grace and we had better thank God for this. By the way, this verse, when compared to other eschatological verses, pretty much proves a pre-Tribulation Rapture position, because we are heading to a Kingdom that will not be shaken, which means we are not going into the Tribulation. During the Tribulation everything on earth will be shaken (i.e. Revelation 6), but we are not destined for that.

However, in view of this terrible judgment of God, those of us who have experienced God's grace had sure better show God gratitude. The actual Greek words mean "let us have grace." We need to cling to grace and we need to thank God for grace.

GRACE GOVERNING WAY #3 – We need to offer acceptable service to God. **12:28b**

The actual word "service" (λατρευωμεν) is one that refers to Divine service and worship (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 265). Now this worship is to be done "with reverence" (ευλαβειας) and "with awe" (δευος).

The word "reverence" means to have a godly reverence and fear; with great caution (*Ibid.*, p. 187). The word "awe" refers to a fear and a reverence that is needful for due and proper awe of God (*Ibid.*, p. 102). **Combined, these words clearly instruct God's people in the Grace Age that we need to be very reverent and worshipful and we need to have a fearful awe of God in any worship service in which we are involved.** Many churches feature people hopping around on a stage that does anything but promote a fear and reverence for God.

It is more than just interesting to observe that Jesus Christ, God the Son, had this very attitude toward His own Father, God the Father. We read in (**Hebrews 5:7**) - "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. **That word "piety" is the same word translated "reverence" right here.**

Now what we see here is something that most churches never see. **A reverent attitude of God takes priority over every practical Christian activity.** Do you understand this point? There are many people who think the more active and involved they are, the more pleasing to God they are. They think that all their activity is really acceptable to God. That is not necessarily true. What is actually acceptable to God is an attitude of piety and worship that reverences Him and fears Him.

Psalm 2:11 says, "Worship the LORD with reverence." Psalm 5:7 says, "I will enter Thy house, at Thy holy temple I will bow in reverence for Thee."

As most of you know, I just returned from doing a lecture series on Daniel. Again, I was so moved by Daniel's reverent attitude toward God. To Daniel, God was a "great and awesome God" (Daniel 9:4). He would kneel down facing Jerusalem just to pray because He revered God.

We need to think very seriously about how we serve God. Under this New Covenant of Grace, we have the responsibility to offer acceptable service to God. We need to serve God in an attitude of "reverence" and "awe." As W. H. Griffith Thomas so eloquently said, "The freeness of grace is perfectly compatible with the fullness of awe" (*Ibid.*, p. 170).

As I understand the New Testament, there are three areas of acceptable sacrifice and service that we need to offer to God, and every one of these sacrifices needs to be carried out in an attitude of reverent awe toward God:

Acceptable Sacrifice #1 - We need to offer a sacrifice of our own person. Romans 12:1-2

Acceptable Sacrifice #2 - We need to offer a sacrifice of reverent praise. Heb. 12:28; 13:15

Acceptable Sacrifice #3 - We need to offer a sacrifice of our possessions. Heb. 13:16

The reason why we need to serve God in reverence and in awe is because our God of grace is also a God of consuming fire.

I want you to carefully notice what **verse 29** says. **It does not say "our God WAS a consuming fire"; it says "our God IS a consuming fire."** This fact about God was true in the O.T. (Deuteronomy 4:24) and it is true in the N.T. (Hebrews 12:29). God's character remains unchanged in the O.T. and in the N.T. He is a consuming fire. He is a God who will judge and He is a God who will punish. He is Holy; Holy, Holy, and God's people who are wise realize that fact.

Growth in grace will always grow in fear and reverence for God.