

Whatever Happened to Reverence?



Hebrews 12:18-29

¹⁸ For you have not come to ^zwhat may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and ^athe sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words ^bmade the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, ^c“If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, ^dso terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² But you have come to ^eMount Zion and to the city of the living God, ^fthe heavenly Jerusalem, and to ^ginnumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to ^hthe assembly¹ of the firstborn who are ⁱenrolled in heaven, and to ^jGod, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, ^kthe mediator of a new covenant, and to ^lthe sprinkled blood^m that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For ⁿif they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time ^ohis voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ^p“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates ^qthe removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving ^ra kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus ^slet us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our ^tGod is a consuming fire.

When I get mail sent to the church, it is often is addressed to Rev. Maurer. I understand that this is a title that is used instead of Mr., but I really dislike the title. In some high church circles they not only have the title reverend, but they also have, in ascending order of importance, Very Reverend, Right Reverend and Most Reverend. Just to give me a hard time, this is often Rod Lysne's preferred way of addressing me—the Right Reverend Rich or the Most Reverend Maurer! If you are an adult, I prefer you call me Rich and if your parents are teaching you respect for other adults you will probably call me Mr. Maurer or Pastor Maurer. I can tolerate the title of Pastor because it is a functional title. Biblically, a pastor is the same thing as a shepherd, which I what I

am and want to be, but reverend is rooted in the word revere and I don't it is appropriate to revere any man.

But reverence is vital in our response to and worship of God. So our question this morning is, whatever happened to reverence? When I look around I am not seeing an over abundance of reverent attitudes toward our Creator, Sustainer and Savior. I am old enough to start saying things like, “back in the day” or “when I was young we used to...” but it does seem like there was more reverence among Christians when I was younger. Now I realize we have to be careful about how we define what reverence looks like. A generation ago reverence was often defined by the kind of clothes you wore to church. You dressed up when you went to church. Coming to church in shorts or jeans would have been unthinkable.

This reminds me of a funny story about Ryan’s basketball team. A few weeks ago they were playing in a tournament sponsored by a Baptist church and because it was a more fundamentalist type church, one of the requirements was that all of the players had to wear long pants when they played—no shorts on the basketball court allowed. In the evening all of the teams attended a youth rally at the church and one of the players had chosen a nice shirt and nice pair of shorts to wear. His coach saw him dressed like that and said, “Think about it. If they don’t want you to wear shorts on the basketball court they are not going to want you to wear shorts to church!”

Fancy clothes is not equivalent to reverence because a few generations ago, unless they worked in a factory, people dressed up wherever they went and it had nothing to do with reverence. However, a generation ago, most churches at least implicitly taught that wearing nice clothes to church demonstrated an attitude of the heart that was reverent. The nice clothes were not reverent in and of themselves but they could be an outside indicator of an inward heart attitude.

In order to have a good definition of reverence, we need to understand the opposite. You could say that the opposite of reverence is hatred or abhorrence but a better description would be “over familiarity”. Let’s say that I met a new person at church on Sunday morning and then Monday night this same guy pulls in my driveway. Then he proceeds to walk right into the house without knocking, comes into the kitchen, opens the frig and takes a long swig of orange juice from the carton, plops himself down at the kitchen table and says, “What’s for dinner?” That would be an extreme example of over familiarity. But if Ryan came in the house and did the same thing—except for drinking juice out of the carton 😊—it would be perfectly normal, right? If you know the person that would be an example of *intimacy* but if you don’t know the person that would be *over familiarity* and disrespect.

Now let me apply these terms to our relationship with God. God desires that we be intimate with him but we never want to fall into becoming overly familiar with him. In a metaphorical sense, we want to sit down to dinner with the Lord and fellowship with him but we don’t want to drink from the orange juice carton. We want to become enraptured with the joy of our fellowship with Jesus but we never want to assume he is just the big daddy in the sky waiting to fulfill our every wish.

Contrast this over familiarity with the experience of a pastor named “Jon” who is ministering in the Muslim nation of Malaysia. He shared this incident when he was arrested and sent to an

“Islamic Purification Center.” “They got so mad they started kicking me and beating me. But I didn’t feel any pain of humiliation. I believe the Lord came, and I could hear angels and the prayers of my friends. When they stepped on me and kicked me, that when I felt the prayers: that’s when I felt the presence of God.”¹

The book of Hebrews offers one of the most powerful descriptions of intimacy in all of Scripture. *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:15-16).

As our High Priest, Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses. He has been tempted in every manner as we have. And then he invites to come boldly and with full confidence to his throne. Without the blood of Jesus his throne would consume us but covered by his blood his throne comforts us with grace and mercy. This is intimacy with God.

But it is far too easy to become overly familiar with the Lord and fall into disrespect and irreverence. The antidote to this problem is to live with a balance of intimacy and awesome reverence. This section of Hebrews gives us a clear picture of reverence—*let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,* ²⁹ *for our God is a consuming fire.*

What we need is a full-robed picture of God as both desiring our intimacy and demanding our reverence. If you have intimacy without reverence you end up with over familiarity and disrespect but if you have reverence without intimacy you end up with a cold, sterile view of God. Both extremes are dead wrong, therefore we need both intimacy and reverence.

I think that this section of Hebrews has this balance in it, so let’s look at some of the details. In verses 18-21 the author is thinking back to the experience of Moses and the Israelites on Mt. Sinai. There was thunder, lightning, smoke, darkness, blasts on the trumpet and an earthquake. Exodus 19 reads, *Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.* ¹⁹ *And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.*

Moses was terrified. The people were terrified. And they were right to have felt this way. It was a terrifying experience and God was literally a consuming fire to them. All of this, of course, was a precursor to the giving of the Law. This is Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Law. This was reverence—holy and pure reverence before the consuming fire of the Lord.

However in the midst of this recounting of the terrifying presence of the Lord, in verse 22 the author promised *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.* Everyone living under the new covenant—as the readers did and as we do today—did not have to tremble in fear at the foot of Mt. Sinai because we can ascend to the top of Mt Zion. Mt. Zion became synonymous with Jerusalem which in turn is a metaphor for God’s dwelling place. And why can we climb Mt Zion to be with the Lord when the Israelites were forbidden to

ascend Mt. Sinai? Because of the cross of Christ. Jesus has opened the way so that everyone who trusts in him does not have to tremble in fear but rather rejoice in fellowship. This is intimacy.

The author goes on to describe the scene on Mt. Zion in great detail. There will be *innumerable angels in festal gathering*. There are numerous times throughout Scripture where large gatherings of angels are mentioned. As we learn in Hebrews, angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation. In other words, they were created in order to help us walk with the Lord and reach Mt. Zion. But angels are also worshippers par excellence. They live and breathe worship because they have lived in unbroken fellowship since the moment of their creation. Furthermore, they know full well what happened to the angels who rebelled against God. Unlike humans created in the image of God, angels are not redeemable. Angels will never inherit salvation.

The next group we see on Mt. Zion are *the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*. The word assembly is the same word for church, which is why the NIV uses the word church. It is a gathering of people. But who is gathered together? The group that is gathered as a “church” are those who are “enrolled in heaven”. The word *enrolled* is used for being added to an official document. An official document, like the one decreed by Caesar that led to the birth of Jesus in Nazareth. *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered* (Luke 2:1). All of the names of the people in the Roman world were added to the official register—the Roman census. Therefore, those enrolled in Heaven is everyone whose name is written in the Book of Life. From the perspective of the author, this group would include everyone he listed in chapter eleven from the “great cloud of witnesses.”

We are also gathered to *Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*. The blood of Abel was an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord but like all animal sacrifices, it was temporary. The blood of Jesus speaks a better word. It is a once for all, complete and sufficient sacrifice. And when will this gathering to Mt. Zion take place? Did you notice the past tense—we *have come* to Mt. Zion. In the spiritual realm, we have already entered into this gathering. This is what Paul wrote in Ephesians.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6).

Therefore, Mt. Sinai represents the Law and holy reverence but Mt. Zion represents grace and intimacy. And since we have come to Mt. Zion and not to Mt. Sinai, this means that intimacy rules under the new covenant, right? We don’t have to fear. We don’t have to tremble, right? Well almost... You see, built into this description of Mt. Zion is a phrase from verse 23 that I skipped the first time through--*to God, the judge of all*. This phrase is important for several reasons.

First it reminds us that even though we live under grace in the New Covenant, God is still the judge. Although God allows injustice for a time, he has not left his throne and justice will be served by our righteous judge.

Second, immediately after giving the reassurance about coming to Mt Zion and this intimacy with the Lord, the author presented a stern warning.²⁵ *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.* Why would he have given such a warning right here, especially after having just reassured them of grace and mercy and the blood of Jesus? Because the author knew that not all of his readers were true believers. He knew that some would not listen. I hope you see that this is what is called an argument from the lesser to the greater. If the people in Moses' day did not listen and they were judged accordingly, how much worse will it be for us who are living in the days of the new covenant and have the complete revelation of God's word at our disposal.

But more than this, he reminded us, as almost every Biblical writer did, of the coming judgment. *At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."*²⁷ *This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.*

Let me offer a mere sampling of other judgment warnings, especially warning that speak of shaking, trembling and earthquakes.

I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. (Isaiah 13:13)

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. (Isaiah 24:18–20)

I looked and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood . . . The sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?" (Revelation 6:12–17)

A loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath. (Revelation 16:17–19)

The final judgment is coming and we should be grateful for this as it will demonstrate the justice of God. Yet this judgment is not for the believer, as we see at the end of this section. *Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.*

Let me summarize the flow of this passage.

- There was a mountain with trembling, shaking and holy terror and reverence
- But that is not our mountain. We have come to Mt. Zion where we dwell with Jesus in pure intimacy.
- Yet, God is a holy judge and judgment is coming and we should revere him.
- But that is not our mountain
- Yet since this is not our mountain, since we are grateful for a coming kingdom that cannot be shaken, we should worship God with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

One could argue that the author has a split personality here. It's almost as if he could not decide awesome reverence and sweet intimacy should define our relationship with the Lord. And that's just it. You cannot possibly define God in either category alone. It's not reverence or intimacy but rather reverence and intimacy. But we always get into trouble when we emphasize one characteristic of God over another.

Dr. D.A. Carson describes what happens when we are imbalanced in our understanding of God.

So which shall we choose?
Experience or truth?

The left wing of the airplane, or the right?

Love or truth?

Study or service?

Evangelism or discipleship?

The front wheels of a car, or the rear?

Subjective knowledge or objective knowledge?

Faith or obedience?

(And to Carson's list I would add: Intimacy or Reverence?)

Damn all false antithesis to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings whose oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ.²

Let me close by making this very practical. Why should you repent of your sins? I don't mean the repentance that leads to conversion, but ongoing repentance of sins. You can't lose your salvation, although if you live your life in unrepentance this is probably an indication that you are not saved. As Christians, we repent first because our God is a consuming fire. We must worship him in reverent awe and never treat our sins callously or

casually. But we also repent because we know that he will receive us when we do. Have you ever thought of confessing a sin to another person but you dare not because you don't think they could understand and may not forgive you? We should never have this fear with the Lord. Reverence and God's holiness drive us to repent and God's mercy and intimacy welcome us to repent.

Let me close with Isaiah 57:15.

*For this says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
And also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
To revive the spirit of the lowly,
And to revive the spirit of the contrite.*

Rich Maurer
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^{zzz} Ex. 19:18; 20:18; Deut. 4:11; 5:22; [2 Cor. 3:9]

^{aaa} Ex. 19:16, 19

^{bbb} Ex. 20:19; Deut. 5:5; 18:16

^{ccc} Cited from Ex. 19:12, 13

^{ddd} [Ex. 19:16; Deut. 9:19]

^{eee} Rev. 14:1

^{fff} See Gal. 4:26

^{ggg} Jude 14

^{hhh} [Ex. 4:22]

ⁱⁱⁱ Or *church*

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:20

^{jjj} Gen. 18:25

^{kkk} ch. 8:6; 9:15

^{lll} See ch. 10:22

^{mmm} ch. 11:4; Gen. 4:10

ⁿⁿⁿ See ch. 2:3

^{ooo} Ex. 19:18

^{ppp} Cited from Hag. 2:6; [Hag. 2:21]

^{qqq} See Ps. 102:26

^{rrr} Dan. 2:44

^{sss} ch. 13:15

^{ttt} Cited from Deut. 4:24; See 2 Thess. 1:8

¹ The Voice of the Martyrs magazine, February 2012, p. 4.

² D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 234.