

Hebrews 12 (18-29) – When Jesus Worships, pt.1

People talk a lot about being in the presence of God, especially when it comes to a worship experience at a church, or a special meeting, or in some private moment. They might say the experience was transcendent. The word transcendent means extraordinary, beyond the physical realm. When we speak of transcendent worship, we are saying it is heavenly, in touch with God, or that the presence of God was with us in a special way.

Now, we know that everything is already in God's presence. God is omnipresent, and that is to not to say that he is hidden inside everything, but rather, that nothing is hidden from him. He is present everywhere. And so, God is present, with everyone, and everything, at all times.

Still, when we talk about the presence of God and worship, we are speaking of a special manifestation of his presence. This is often thought of as God coming down from Heaven to meet with us. You see this type of language in Isaiah 64:1-3. *Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.*

That passage in Isaiah is pointing to the events at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the God's Law, and the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 19-20. And this language is also referred to in Hebrews 12:18-21. You might also think of the audio-visual events of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), or the fire come down from God to light the brazen altar at the dedication of the Tabernacle (Leviticus 9:24), and once again at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1).

Today, the idea of God's presence in our worship is often thought to be the power of the Holy Spirit manifesting in some way that makes for authentic, heavenly worship. People might say things like Heaven came down, or the Holy Spirit is in this place, or things like that. There are times when our

experience seems extraordinary, and otherworldly. So, of course we try and describe it. And the Bible does describe transcendent worship as a real thing. But it may not be what you think it is.

Here is what it is: Hebrews 12:18-29 teaches us that when we gather for corporate worship, even though we are physically on Earth, we are spiritually brought up into Heaven. We enter into the Holy City, and into God's Temple, and inside the Holy Place, and in audience with God's very presence. The Tabernacle and the Temple were copies of the design of Heaven. But it was only a shadow, and we are brought up into the substance. Our reality far surpasses the pictures of the Old Testament.

Look at vs.18 – *For you have not come to what may be touched.* In other words, the physical. And this is speaking of Mt. Sinai, and when the people received God's Law, and the Ten Commandments. They were not allowed to draw near to that mountain. And instead of all that incredible, physical spectacle, we have been brought into something greater. Look at vs.22 – *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.* And as Hebrews continually tells us, now we can draw near, without fear.

For some, what Hebrews 12:18-29 pictures as transcendent worship may not seem like it's enough. They want something that seems livelier, a more physically tangible experience, like the events of Sinai, or the detailed ceremony, ritual, and spectacle of Old Testament worship. To them this is the mark of true and transcendent worship. But Hebrews 12:18-29 is contrasting the audio-visual, physical spectacle with something far greater. You just need to discover it, and exercise your faith to enjoy it.

Lively worship can be good, if it is founded rightly and focused rightly. We have every reason to celebrate. And God wants you to use your mind, your body, and your emotions in worship. But feelings should be the result of faith. They are not supposed to be the fuel. And perhaps the reason some people may be confused about this is they don't yet understand how New Testament worship far surpasses Old Testament worship.

Look at vs.24 – *the blood of Abel* refers to the institution of worship grounded in sacrifice, but the blood of Jesus is the substance of what the OT symbols were. The New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant, and New Testament worship is superior to Old Testament worship. Some have not yet been taught the full truth of this. But we will endeavor to do that.

On the other side of the worship divide, the biblical idea of transcendent worship may seem a little too fanciful for some. Perhaps this is because they don't yet understand or appreciate what's really going on. Some might say this is just emotionalism. But people who truly understand where Jesus is leading us to, and what Jesus is leading us in, will be excited and emotional. Again, it just needs to be founded rightly and focused rightly.

Transcendent worship is very clear in the book of Hebrews. And understanding this teaches you to move forward, instead of romanticizing the past. The point of the book of Hebrews is to demonstrate that Christ is superior to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6), the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:6-13), and New Testament worship is superior to Old Testament worship (Hebrews 12:18-29). Amen.

Now, it wasn't as if all those privileges and all of that ceremony, ritual and spectacle they had before were not incredible things. They were. And it's not that God didn't prescribe that form of worship in the Old Testament. He did. It was great. But all of this was pointing to something greater, to *someone* greater. And to a greater form and experience of worship. God's people need to learn this, so as to appreciate and enjoy the greater blessings we have in the New Covenant and New Testament worship. It is truly transcendent.

And this is what the sermon series, *Jesus Our Worship Leader*, is all about.

Our first sermon in the series was taken from Hebrews 8:1-2, entitled "*When Jesus Sings.*" We talked about how Jesus is not only the worship leader in Heaven, but also in our local congregations. And all Christians are part of the eternal choir led by Christ, who sings along with us.

The next sermon in the series was taken from Hebrews 2:12, entitled “*When Jesus Preaches.*” And there we see that Jesus not only leads our singing, he also leads our preaching, in Heaven and on Earth. When a sermon honors God and his word, Jesus is the one who is really preaching.

Today we are talking about “*When Jesus Worships*”, and how Jesus brings us up to God, and oversees our transcendent worship. The truth about transcendent worship is that when we gather for corporate worship, we are spiritually in Heaven, even as we are physically on Earth. In a very real sense, transcendent worship is not simply God’s presence come down to us, but our presence come up to God. True worship is transcendent worship. And corporate worship is a “full body” (of Christ) experience.

People have asked about whether or not our loved ones in Heaven can see what we are doing down here on Earth. The response has often been no, they are too busy delighting in God’s majesty and worshiping the Lord. And this is true. But in light of Hebrews 12:18-29, we can say that there is a time when they can see us, even if we can’t yet see them. In transcendent worship, they don’t see us down on Earth, they see us up in Heaven.

So, in order to make sense of all this, we are going to look at our passage like an investigative journalist. That is to say, we are going to use the time-honored method of asking the questions, who, what, when, where, why, and how. We will take two messages to do this. Today, we will ask who, what, and when. Next time we will ask where, why, and how. Then you will see what transcendent worship is all about. And Jesus as our worship leader.

Who is involved? Let me ask you, how many are with us in church today? Well, before you start to count, or estimate, or think about all those who are watching online, let me say this; there is an innumerable number with us today. The answer of our first question, who is involved, is all of God’s kingdom. Look at vs.22. It says “*You*” are involved – this is all Christians here and now. Vs.23 says “*And to the assembly of the firstborn.*” Jesus is called the firstborn in Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 1:6, and Revelation 1:5. But this also

describes the saints in Christ – the assembly of the firstborn ones. The NLT says – *You have come to the assembly of God’s firstborn children.* We are called firstborn because we have equal status as heirs with Christ (Galatians 3:28-29, 4:7). So, *the assembly of the firstborn* are those *who are enrolled in heaven* (vs.23). This is everyone who is saved, past, present, and future, who is written in the Book of Life (Philippians 4:3 / Revelation 13:8, 20:15).

Of course, this includes both the saints of today, and those who have passed away. But this assembly adds those who are on Earth to those who are in Heaven. Those saints who are already in Heaven are described in vs.23 as *the spirits of the righteous made perfect*. So, this assembly is the universal church, of today, and eternity, gathering together. Here the saints of today worship with Abraham, Moses, David, the Apostles, and all God’s children.

Hebrews 12:1 says *we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*. Of course, this refers back to chapter 11, and all of those heroes of the faith mentioned there. It is reminding you of all those who came before you, who have been under pressure like you are, and so, as the rest of Hebrews 12:1-2 says, to *lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Here at the end of the chapter, Hebrews 12:18-29 adds even more weight, more wonder, more power and glory to Hebrews 12:1-2. You see, we are not only surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses as a past memory, but also as a present reality, and a future in eternity. When we gather in corporate worship today, we are actually surrounded by them and we are with them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian is part of the great cloud of witnesses to Jesus Christ, as we worship him in Spirit and in truth.

And with all of us are all of the angels (vs.22 – *innumerable* means all, and *festal* means celebration), God (vs.23), and Jesus (vs.24). This is a who’s who of God’s kingdom. And if you’re a Christian, this who’s who includes you.

What is going on? This is a gathering together for worship (vs.28). Vs.18-21 sets the stage. These verses are describing Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, in Exodus 19, as they were about to receive the Ten Commandments. It was a worship experience. And it was an exceedingly fearful event. However, even though we don't see the audio-visual manifestations they did at Mt. Sinai, we have come to Mt. Zion, which is greater. And unlike Sinai, grace is the compelling motive in the Christian's life, not fear. Still, as the hymn *Amazing Grace* says – 'twas grace that taught my heart to fear – this is the *reverence and awe* of vs.28.

Vs.25-29 speak of the similarities with Sinai, but the greater impact of Zion. There are words and warnings, the shaking of all things, and our grateful response for our inclusion into the unshakable kingdom of the redeemed.

When is this taking place? You might think that since Sinai was a one-time event, that Hebrews 12:22-29 is a one-time event. But remember that at Sinai, God gave the people the rules for worship. And after Sinai, the people followed that pattern when they worshiped. It was an ongoing event. So too, Hebrews 12:22-29 is an ongoing event. And anytime God's people on Earth gather for worship, they become part of that gathered assembly in Heaven.

Approaching Mount Zion as a congregation in corporate worship means that *we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus* (Hebrews 10:19). We can *draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith* (Hebrews 10:22). By faith, a congregation in corporate worship enters God's heavenly assembly. There, as those who *have been raised with Christ, we seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God* (Colossians 3:1). Ephesians 2:6 says that God *raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*. And as we worship together, we join together and draw near with all the Christians of all times. And we are drawing nearer to the day when we all will be both spiritually and physically in that throne room with God. No wonder Hebrews 10:25 says not to neglect the assembly, but rather encourage one another, since that day is drawing near. So, let me say, I'll see you here, there, *and* in the air. Amen.