

Heavenly Worship

If I asked you where you had come to this evening you would probably have answered “ To Turun Vapaakirkko”. The passage I want us to look at shows us where we have really come though it begins by telling us where we have not come. Heb. 12v18-23.

For me in the past year this passage has become an important part of my worship. I want to share with you why.

Let's start by looking at the context of these verses, because we will only understand the teaching of the Bible correctly if we look at verses in their context. They are part of the letter written to the Hebrews. We don't know who wrote this letter, it might have been Paul or it might have been Apollos. It was anyway some person who had a deep understanding of the Old Testament and Jewish beliefs and practices. It is a book that contrasts old and new. To the writer, the “old” is the way the Jews believed and practiced before Jesus the Messiah came and the “new” is the way since Pentecost. He is concerned that Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is Messiah are going back to their old beliefs and practices. He wants to show them how much better the new is than the old and to warn them not to go back.

In the passage we read, the author contrasts the experience of Israel at Mt Sinai with the experience of Christians at another mountain, Mt Zion. He tells that, if Israel needed to listen very carefully to what God said to them at Mt Sinai, we need to listen even more carefully to what God is saying to us now at Mt Zion. They were coming to an earthly mountain where God was visiting them; we are coming to a heavenly mountain where God actually lives. This is the main message of this passage: it tells us that we should not take worship of God lightly. Read Hebrews 12v28,29.

But this is not my main message today, I want us to think about what the author had in mind when he was writing these words. When we come to church to worship, often our minds are occupied with the people around us, who they are, what they are doing, what the building is like, what the music is like, what the preacher is like. If we are having a time of prayer alone at home we might be thinking of how much time we have got, what we have to do next, what our neighbor is doing outside etc. In other words, our attention is on what is happening around us. The writer of Hebrews has something very different in mind. He is telling us about a dimension of reality that is happening in parallel with our life here on earth.

He is telling us of a place where there are angels, Christians, God the Father, Old Testament believers, Jesus our savior. It is also the place of the sacrificial blood that cries out to God to have mercy on us, not vengeance like the blood of Abel described in the first pages of the Bible. Most of us will say, “Yes, he is describing heaven, the place I shall be going one day when I die”. This is correct, but the author of Hebrews does not write “You will come to this place one day in the future” but “You have come now”. I wonder how many of us understand that Christian worship is an invitation to join in with the worship of heaven now?

Heaven is a place of worship. It is described in Revelation especially chapters 4 and 5. (Reading chapter 4 and 5v6). The focus of all the worship is God, the Father. He is surrounded by a huge number of heavenly beings praising him. There are people from before the time of Christ and people after Christ joining in that worship. Jesus is the Lamb who was sacrificed who gives people the right to come to the Father. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps them do it. We need to read passages like this and fill our minds with pictures of heaven. But we should not just imagine the worship of heaven, we should join in. How is this possible?

We get the answer from another discussion about two mountains that took place some years earlier. This was between Jesus and the Samaritan women as described in John 4. The woman said that the Samaritans say God should be worshipped on Mt Gerazim in Samaria and the Jews that he should be worshipped in Jerusalem. Jesus' answer was that both these options were wrong. "God is spirit and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." John 4v24. Jesus explains that since God is spirit, the worship of him is not going to be linked to one place anymore. But what did he mean by the expression "in spirit and in truth"?

When the Greek language uses a term like "in spirit" it does not mean that we should turn inside ourselves. This is the way of thinking of Eastern meditation. The meaning of the Greek is to point to the source of something. "In spirit and in truth" means that the source our worship comes from spirit and from reality. Our worship is not meant to be an external ritual we perform but it must come from the depths of our being and it must be based on us being real in what we are doing and saying. God will not accept worship that is just from our lips but inconsistent with our lifestyle. John's first letter deals with this issue a lot. He tells, for example, that if we do not love our brother who we have seen then we cannot be loving God who we have not seen, 1 John 4v20.

So coming back to Hebrews 12 – we are told that we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem where we can join in the worship of heaven, and we have been told by Jesus that this worship must come from within us. The question is "How does it get there? How do we find out what to do and say?" The answer is "the Holy Spirit". That is why this sort of worship could only begin after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit had come.

Let's take an example most of us are familiar with these days – the Internet. The world of the Internet is like a parallel world to our own with almost limitless possibilities. For example, it includes the sermons preached in this church in the past few weeks. You can listen to these sermons by downloading them onto your computer and then letting them run on your computer or mp3 player. First you have to request the download and then you have to run it. In a similar way, if we want to share in the worship of heaven, we need to let the Holy Spirit download it into our spirits and then we need to give it space to affect our lives. How do we do this?

We begin by understanding that our Father wants us to share in the worship of heaven. But understanding this is not enough. We must look to the Holy Spirit to put worship in our hearts. I do this by a short prayer in which I ask the Holy Spirit to help me worship the Father. Then I close my eyes and focus on the scene in heaven: especially the Father on his throne with his wonderful Son beside him. Then I wait to see what comes up in me. It is important that we expect the Holy Spirit to help us. This is our first step of faith. The next step of faith is to express what comes up from within us.

If you are in a praise meeting then the most natural thing will be to begin to join in with the music of the praise leader but there are many other possibilities, especially if you are alone. Instead of singing –

- you might just tell the Father how much you love him
- you might find tongues starting up inside you and pour out your praise in tongues
- you might start quoting or reading scripture e.g. Rev. 4
- you might want to lift your hands, or dance, or bow down to the ground
- you might just be silent and focus your whole being on the One on the throne

Just express what the Holy Spirit gives you on the inside but do it in front of the throne in heaven.

I have been doing this for the past year both in my private prayer times and when I come to church and I have found that my prayer and worship has been greatly enriched. I invite you to make this part of your own worship. It is not the only way to worship but I think it is a Biblical way. Let's join with the angels, the church and the saints of the Old Testament and give our Father praise and worship through his Son with the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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July 2008