



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Holy is He!

Reverend Scott Johnson | August 3, 2025 | Exodus 15:1-21

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 through 25, and this is the infallible, the inerrant Word of God. Let's give our attention to God's Word. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and very loud trumpet blasts, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 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. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look, and many of them perish, and let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them." And Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" And the Lord said to him, "Go down and come up, bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them." So Moses went down to the people and told them.

New Testament Reading

Let's turn now to Hebrews chapter 12 for the New Testament reading. We will turn back to Exodus. That is our sermon text this morning. Hebrews chapter 12, verses 18 through 24. And in this passage, the author of Hebrews compares what took place in Exodus, what we just read about, with what takes place when we, as the church of Jesus Christ, gather for worship.

Hebrews 12:18-24: "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

The Importance of Worship

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. There is nothing that you and I do in this life that is more important or more consequential than what we are doing right now today in this room. And that is worship. Worship, giving praise to God, the Father, the Son, the Spirit, exalting Him, magnifying His name. This is the reason why God created us. He created us to worship Him. And as Christians, we know that this is the reason why God has redeemed us, so that we would be His worshipers, to glorify Him, in praising Him, in magnifying Him. And we will spend an eternity doing this very thing: worshipping God, glorifying His name.

And so for all those reasons, the question of how we are to worship God, the question of what we are to believe concerning the worship of God, these are among the most important questions that you and I face in this life. And these are the kinds of questions that our passage this morning from Exodus addresses. There is much for us to learn here in this passage concerning the worship of God.

In this passage, Moses describes for us what took place when the Lord led the Israelites to Mount Sinai. If you recall, the Lord commanded the Israelites through Moses that they were to consecrate themselves for two days. And then on the third day, the Lord would come down on

Mount Sinai. He would come in the sight of all the people. And so in verse 16, we pick up with the third day, the day that the Lord comes down on Mount Sinai. The people, they consecrated themselves. However, no matter how faithfully they may have consecrated themselves or prepared their hearts, clearly they weren't truly ready for what was about to take place when the Lord would come down on the mountain.

No matter how much they may have looked forward to and anticipated the Lord's coming down, perhaps seeing him in a way they have never seen him before, hearing his voice, they looked forward to that. The experience is quite different from what they may have imagined, because the whole experience left them absolutely terrified.

And we'll look at this passage and as we do, what can we learn from this passage about worshiping God, about the worship that we bring to the Lord when we meet and gather like we are now for worship? Well, two lessons. First of all, we must worship God with reverence and awe. So that's the first lesson. Secondly, and this lesson comes from reading this passage in the light of New Testament teaching, and that is this: that in Jesus Christ, you and I, we can approach God in worship despite our sin. We can approach God in worship with perfect confidence, knowing that in Jesus Christ, the Lord receives us and he receives our worship. So those are the two lessons.

Worship with Reverence and Awe

First of all, you and I must worship God with reverence and awe. You've heard of the expression, a mountaintop experience. Maybe some of you have had an experience like that when you've been to a camp or you've been to a conference and you left with such a renewed zeal and passion for Christ and for serving the Lord. When we speak of a mountaintop experience, it's an entirely positive thing. It's a good thing. For the Israelites here, this was the opposite of a mountaintop experience. You could say that this was their mountain bottom experience. Their encounter with the Lord here was anything but exciting. Rather, it was a terrifying, it was a dreadful experience.

When I was a young boy, our family lived in Southern California. And of course, we had to make our visit to Disneyland there. And I can remember the first time that we went to Disneyland. I was probably nine or ten years old, something like that. And there was a ride there that was almost brand new. It was called Space Mountain. And at the entrance to Space Mountain, there

was a sign there. The sign, as I remember it, Just a little bit of what the Israelites must have felt when they came to Mount Sinai that day as they stood at the foot of the mountain. When the Lord descended on the mountain, their hearts were filled with dread. They were nearly overcome with fear and terror.

Even before they got to the base of the mountain, while they were still in their camp, the text tells us that the people trembled at the thunders, at the lightnings, at the thick cloud and the trumpet blast. Hebrews 12 tells us that the sound of the trumpet and the voice of God was so terrifying that the people of Israel begged Moses that no further messages be spoken to them.

What the people of Israel had already experienced up to this point. They were familiar with God doing mighty works in their presence. These were the people that saw God accomplish all his signs and wonders of the land of Egypt and all of the incredible ways that he brought destruction upon the people of Egypt. They had witnessed God's almighty power in the parting of the Red Sea and bringing them across the sea safely. They saw the Lord as he appeared to them in this pillar of smoke and fire as he led them through the wilderness. But none of that prepared them for what took place here. None of that really was like what happened here on Mount Sinai, that God himself came down on the mountain. They heard the voice of God speaking to them from the mountain, and what they saw and heard left them in abject terror.

Even Moses himself was frightened by what he saw. Again from Hebrews 12, Hebrews 12:21, "Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.'" And part of the fear that the Israelites felt And so this mountain was engulfed in smoke. The Lord was on top of the mountain in a blazing fire. The whole mountain trembled. The ground shook under the feet of the Israelites and the noise, this piercing trumpet blast from heaven, it got louder and louder until God finally spoke in a voice that sounded like thunder. That would be terrifying for anybody to experience.

But as dreadful as those signs were that accompanied the Lord's presence, what made them really awful, what made the whole experience truly frightening was this: that those signs all pointed to an even more awful reality, and that is the holiness of God. The holiness of God, that was what was being revealed to the Israelites on that day.

Now the Israelites knew something about the holiness of God. We saw back in chapter 15, after they were brought through the Red Sea, that they lifted up this song of praise to the Lord, the song of Moses. Exodus 15:11, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you,

majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" But when they sang that song, did they have any idea of what they were saying? Do they have any idea of just what it meant that the Lord was majestic in holiness? What they saw on the mountain was something that gave them a true understanding of what the holiness of God is all about. And it left them in fear.

At Mount Sinai, God gave the Israelites a revelation of who He is, His character, His nature as God, the Creator, the Holy One, the One who is supremely holy. And because God does not change, what was true then is still very much true today. That Almighty God is the same God. He is the same God today whose presence then inspired such fear in the hearts of His people.

We know this to be the case because throughout the Bible, God is made known to us. He reveals himself to us as a God who is holy. In the last book of the Bible, in Revelation, as the Apostle John is given a vision of God in heaven, he describes what he saw in this way in Revelation 4:5. "From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder. And before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God." And then the Apostle John saw the four living creatures crying out day and night, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come."

And that same holiness, that perfect righteousness, the purity of God that is God's and belongs to him that inspires such fear in the hearts of men. This is the same holiness that the Lord Jesus Christ himself possesses as the incarnate Lord, as God in the flesh. Again in Revelation, when John sees the exalted Christ in heaven, he says that his eyes were like a flame of fire, his voice like the roar of many waters. In other words, John describes Jesus in much of the same way that Moses describes the Lord here in Exodus. And the reason for that is because they're one and the same. The Lord who came down in this, with all these dreadful signs, with the trumpet and the thunder and the lightning, and inspired such fear in the hearts of the Israelites, this is the very same Lord who has come in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

But that raises the question, why is this holiness of God so terrifying for us? We know that God is good, and yet why does the perfect righteousness, the purity, the holiness of God fill our hearts with dread? Well, it's for the same reason why it was so terrifying for the Israelites. It's because of our sin.

God is infinitely righteous. He has a purer eyes than to behold evil. His holiness is like a devouring fire that utterly consumes all that is unholy and unrighteous. And we in ourselves,

apart from the grace of God, we in ourselves are unholy. And therefore, in our sin, we know that we cannot come into the presence of such a God without being consumed, without being destroyed by his perfect righteousness.

In this passage, the Lord tells Moses to warn the people that they are not to break through. They are not to go further than what is commanded in order to get a closer look at the Lord, as it were. Because if they do, they will perish. And that's exactly what Isaiah thought would happen to him. You know that passage from Isaiah 6? When the Lord made himself known to the prophet Isaiah, he beheld the glory of the Lord in the temple. He heard the seraphim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." And Isaiah was overcome. He said, "Woe is me, for I'm lost! For I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." And so there is for us as sinners the sense that if we come into the presence of God in all of His holiness and righteousness that we are undone, that we are lost.

Now as believers in Jesus Christ we know that our sins are forgiven. We know that we are covered with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ but nevertheless even as Christians, we are still sinners. We are justified sinners, nevertheless, we are still creatures. And God is the Creator. He is God. We are not. And therefore, when we come into His presence, when we come into the presence of God to worship, to worship Him, we must never forget this truth, that He is majestic in holiness. And so we come to Him in a spirit of reverence, humility, and awe.

And that's what this passage from Hebrews 12 is teaching us as the author of Hebrews reflects upon what took place to the Israelites back in Exodus. What we'll see in a minute that the author of Hebrews is really contrasting our worship today as Christians with the worship that took place or with the Israelites experience before the Lord here in Exodus. But he's also saying that there is a fundamental continuity between the people then and their experience and us today as the church as we worship the Lord. And that continuity has to do with the character, the nature of God. God always will be, He always has been, He is today a God who is holy, holy, holy.

In fact, when you read Hebrews 12, you might even say that there's even an intensification of the majesty, the glory of God as we come to Him in Christ compared with the Israelites' experience. The Israelites, they came to an earthly mountain, but we come to the heavenly mountain, Mount Zion, Jerusalem. And so if it was true for them, how much more true it is for us.

As Hebrews 12 says, "Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

And so that's how we must come here on Sundays. We come to worship God. We come not casually. We don't come into his presence irreverently, flippantly. But we come knowing that we are entering into the presence of a God who is called a consuming fire. So we come with reverence and awe.

In our passage in Exodus after Moses went up to the mountain, the Lord in verse 21 told Moses to warn the people not to come up to the mountain. But Moses had already given the people this warning. Last week we saw that Moses gave the command to the people of Israel from the Lord that if anyone even touched the mountain, whether man or beast, they were to be stoned or to be shot with an arrow. And so Moses figured that the people of Israel did not need to hear this warning again. And so Moses said to the Lord in verse 23, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" In other words, Moses was saying to the Lord, "Oh Lord, that's not really necessary that we warn the people again, because they've already been warned. They already know that they're not supposed to come up to the mountain."

But the Lord's response to Moses was not, "Oh, that's right, I forgot. We don't need to warn them again." The Lord's response to Moses was, "Do it anyway. Warn them again." And so we did.

Now why did God repeat these instructions to the Israelites? Why did He impress this warning upon them multiple times? I believe it's because God knows the heart of man. He knows that in our sin and in our pride, the first thing that we are likely to forget about God is that He is righteous and that He is holy and that because of our sin, we cannot come into His presence and live.

There are truths about God that naturally we love more and we tend not to forget them. We love that God is a God of mercy and grace and compassion, that he is a God of love and we should love these truths about God. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude and joy and wonder that God is merciful. He is compassionate and kind. But we quickly forget the truth that God is not like us. He is not just a compassionate and kindly person who is just like us, who happens to be almighty in power? No, He is the Creator. There is something absolutely distinct about God that makes him distinct from us. He is holy.

And we forget that. And we forget and we don't want to be reminded that in the light of the holiness and righteousness of God our own sin appears in all of its depravity and evil. And we live in a culture today, we live in a time and place in which the default understanding of most people and therefore what tends to be our default understanding as well is that God is not a holy God. But he is a kind, a tolerant, a non-judgmental God. We like to think of God as a God who winks at sin. A God who gladly accepts all kinds of people, all kinds of lifestyles. A God who wants us, above all else, to be happy and to have the things that our hearts desire. People like to think a lot of things about God, but the truth of His holiness, His righteousness is not one of them.

And for that reason, because generally speaking, as a society, we have no real consciousness of the holiness of God. Therefore, as a culture, we have profaned everything that God has consecrated and made holy. In other words, let me put it this way. In our thoughts, when God isn't holy, nothing is holy.

And so, we take his name in vain. We take the precious, the sacred name of God and of his son Jesus Christ and we use it as a curse. We drag it through the mud. We desecrate it. We've taken God's gift of sexuality and by our promiscuity we have cheapened it and trivialized it. We have taken the sacred institution of marriage and have degraded it. We have taken human life itself and we have desecrated its sanctity by elevating our own comfort and convenience over it.

And for this reason, and this is just one reason, but for this reason, because the world has no conception of the holiness of God, the last thing that we want to do as a church is to worship God in a way that fails to acknowledge this truth about Him, that He is pure and righteous and holy. The last thing we want is a worship service that treats God lightly or irreverently, a worship service that is centered upon ourselves and our own experience, a worship that substitutes entertainment for worship. The worst thing about all of that is, of course, that we are failing to worship God for who he is.

But not only that, such worship fails to make known to a world, a world that profanes what is sacred, such worship fails to make known to this world that the God who created all things, the God who has revealed himself to us in his son Jesus Christ, the God who has created us and called us to be his servants and to worship him, that above all else this is a God who is full of glory, righteous and majestic and holiness.

And this really gets to the gospel, doesn't it? This really relates to the message of the gospel that we proclaim as a church. The gospel message is not, "God wants you to be happy. Therefore he gave us his son Jesus Christ so that we can be happy in this life and then we get to go to heaven when we die." But the message of the gospel is this: that God has sent his son Jesus Christ into the world to save us from sin and guilt because he is a God who is righteous. He is a God who condemns us for our sin. He is a God who cannot abide with us unless we are purified and cleansed and he sent Jesus into the world so that we as sinners might be made right with God. That is the message of the gospel. And that message is hollowed out of its meaning if in our worship of God we treat him in a way The first lesson that this passage teaches is that we must worship God with reverence and awe.

Approach God with Confidence in Jesus Christ

The second lesson is this: is that in Jesus Christ you may approach God in worship with the perfect confidence and assurance that he accepts you and your worship.

What happens right after this passage, and this is where we will camp out for many weeks, is that the Lord, he declares his law to the people of Israel. He gives them his Ten Commandments, and then he gives them all kinds of other laws that the people of Israel are to keep. And so, the giving of the law then comes in the context of the Lord's revealing himself to his people in this way in which he makes known to them his holiness, his righteousness with these accompanying signs that bring terror into the hearts of the Israelites.

And why does God do that? Why does he not simply give Moses the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone and he can deliver them to the people? Why does he do it in this fashion in which he shows himself in all of his frightful holiness? Well, he did so in order to impress on the hearts of the Israelites, to impress on their hearts, to impress on our hearts in the strongest possible way, that apart from the grace of God, the law of God only leads to death.

Now, the Bible does say that the law is good. Romans 7:12, "The law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." And as I said last week, and as we'll look at next week as well, God gives his law to a people whom he has redeemed, to his saved people, a people whom he first loved and saved, he gives them the law. However, however, the law in itself, when it meets us in our sin, it is not good. By that I mean, it is not good for us. Rather, the law, when it comes to us in our sin, it only brings condemnation and death. And that's because

the law demands perfection. The law demands absolute conformity to all that God commands, one slight deviation from the perfect, holy, righteous law of God, and we are condemned as lawbreakers.

And so all the terrifying signs that accompanied the Lord's descent on the mountain, all these signs that accompanied His giving of the law, the cloud and the thunder and the lightning, these were like the warnings that I spoke of earlier on Space Mountain. "If you have ever committed a sin, do not come near. I am a holy God. If you have entertained ever a single thought that was selfish or lustful or covetous, do not come near. If you have not loved God perfectly with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, if you have not loved your neighbor perfectly as yourself, do not come near, because if you do, you will perish."

Now this truth of the uncompromising nature of the law of God and of the holiness of God that stands behind it. This truth of the law's demand for perfect obedience on our part, perfect conformity to all that it says, this should convince us beyond all doubt that we could never hope to come to God on the basis of our own righteousness or goodness or works. And so Mount Sinai stands forever as a warning to all who would seek to establish their own righteousness before God. You cannot do it. You cannot do it. You cannot be saved. You cannot have any hope of heaven on the basis of your own goodness or your own decency or because you have such high moral standards, or because on the balance when you evaluate your life, you can see that you've done more good than you have done bad. No. The perfect law of God, that law that is the expression of his own intrinsic and infinite holiness, it demands perfection. And as sinners and lawbreakers, the only thing that the law can do for us is to condemn us to the judgment and to the wrath of God forever.

And this is why, because the law comes to us in this way in our sin, this is why, at times in the Bible, the law will be spoken of in a completely negative way, even though it's also called good. But sometimes the entire Old Covenant, that is, all of God's dealings with his people before the coming of Christ, is spoken of in a negative way. And it's not because there was no grace under Moses. The people of Israel who truly believed in the Lord, who believed in the coming Messiah, they were saved in the same way that we are saved: by faith in Christ. But you see, the law was so central to the old covenant that the entire ministry of Moses is sometimes identified in scripture with the giving of the law and with the condemnation that the law brings to sinners. And so it's for that reason and in a similar way in the book of Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews tells us over and over why the new covenant that is given to us in Jesus Christ is superior to the old covenant given through Moses. That covenant could not save us if we hoped to attain righteousness by keeping the law. And so when we come to Hebrews 12, the author is saying, as those who belong to Jesus Christ by faith, you are in a far better place than were the Israelites under the old covenant when they came to the Lord at Mount Sinai. They came to Mount Sinai. They came to the law. It was foreboding. It was terrifying. But you, Christian, you have come to a far better mountain, to Mount Zion, which is nothing less than heaven itself.

Hebrews 12:22 and 23: "To the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels and festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." And the reason why you and I come to this better place, not to Sinai but to Zion, to heaven, the reason we come there is because unlike the Israelites in Exodus we have a better mediator, not Moses and his law. But our mediator is Christ, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Verse 24 in Hebrews 12 speaks of "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant."

Moses and his law could only bring condemnation and death, but Jesus came into the world to give us life by laying down his life, by taking our sin and guilt upon himself on the cross, so that by faith in him we might be forgiven, that we might come to God through him and join the worship at heaven with angels and saints. And so if your trust is in Jesus Christ, He is your Savior from sin and death.

And there is a warning here. If your trust is not in Jesus Christ, if you are not resting in Him, if you have not come to Him as your only Savior from sin and guilt, if you are still somehow trying to establish your own goodness before God on the basis of what you do or on the basis of how decent or good you are, the warning is, there is no hope for you in that. The law can only condemn you. The law condemns those who die in their sins. And so come to Christ. Come to Jesus, the new mediator, the one who offers his own life for you, that you may live.

And so as a Christian, by the grace of God, you have been given a wonderful gift. Again, God is the same God that He was in Exodus chapter 19. He is holy, and yet you come to Him covered with the blood of Christ. And so you can have perfect confidence, perfect assurance, that no matter how terrible your sin may have been, no matter how wayward and evil you may have lived, nevertheless, in Jesus Christ, you can come to God with the perfect assurance of knowing that He receives you, and he receives your worship as well.

And perfect though it is, Hebrews describes in this passage in chapter 12 this glory of our worship of God through Christ. I love this passage because it shows us what's really taking place here. You know, if anybody comes into our worship service what they see is pretty ordinary. They see a pretty ordinary worship service: ordinary people sitting in ordinary pews. You sing ordinary hymns. You pray ordinary prayers. You hear an ordinary sermon from an ordinary pastor. However, by the grace of God, what is actually taking place here when we gather together in the name of Jesus Christ is anything but ordinary. It is extraordinary because God, as it were, If you're a baseball fan, you know it's playoff time and you know if you've ever experienced in person going to a game, baseball or football, and there's thousands of people cheering and the home team wins and there's jubilation and rejoicing and it's just magnificent, but then an hour later everyone's gone home and the stadium is dead quiet.

But not in heaven. In heaven there is a sound of jubilation, exaltation, rejoicing that will go on forever and ever and ever as long as Jesus is in heaven. There will never be silence, but there will be praise and worship for all time. And by the grace of God, that's where you and I are when we come to meet with him in our service of worship. We are those that Hebrews 12 describes that come to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jesus said in John 4, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him." And here is the kind of worshippers that God seeks, those who worship Him in the splendor of holiness, and those who worship Him by faith in Jesus Christ His Son.

Let's pray.