Grace Under Fire - Part 4

# A Consuming Fire

## (Hebrews 12:18-29)

I’m so glad that you joined us this morning because we’re going to be studying from the letter to the Hebrews today. And I really love this epistle because it takes the words of the Old Testament, a people under the Old Covenant, and contextualizes it within the framework of the New Covenant. And so, if you’re familiar with the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you know that the Lord Jesus would often do that same thing and he would say,

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago… But I tell you…” (Matthew 5:21-22).

In other words, “You know the law, but let me tell you about grace.” And in the same way, through this series, Grace Under Fire, we have been digging into the Old Testament, because that is literally the foundation for the New Testament. And so, we have been looking at illustrations in the Old Testament so that we are better able to understand New Testament, New Covenant grace in Christ Jesus.

Today, as we begin, we’re going to turn our attention first to Hebrews chapter 12, because we are going to look at the better things to come. In other words, taking the Old Testament and understanding it from a New Testament perspective. And I want to warn you, this is going to be deep, it’s going to challenge us as we reflect on it, and so we want to seize this opportunity to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Beginning in verse 18 of Hebrews chapter 12, the writer tells us, “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear” (Hebrews 12:18-21).

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24).

And so, we want to hear a better word, because we can worship and praise God anytime, but at this moment, in this time, in this generation, we must come to Jesus. Coming to the sprinkled blood of Jesus, through the blood of the New Covenant, so that we hear a better word.

In the text before us today, the writer of Hebrews contrasts the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai with the heavenly Mount Zion and the blessing of New Covenant grace in Christ. He describes the solemnity of the occasion and the terror of the people as they heard God’s voice from heaven. The people trembled in fear and it’s in that context that God is speaking to us today through his Word so that we hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Now, before we begin, let’s go back and review where we have been in this series. If you remember, in part one, we began with David wrestling with the consequences of his illicit affair with Bathsheba. We saw the prophet of God confront him about the contradictions in his life, warning him of the consequences of the choices he had made, and we saw how the Word of God gets into your business, it goes everywhere,

“It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

And so, David came face-to-face with the discrepancies and the contradictions in his life. And he came to understand that his faith required him to live at a higher level, because he discovered…

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

And so, David found out that God can judge you like he does, because he gets down into your thought life and knows the intents of your heart. He understands the why and not just the what, and he gives you the grace to get back up.

And then, in part two, we met Joseph whose brothers had stripped him of his garments, his dignity, and sold him into slavery. But God is faithful and he had a higher purpose, and so we discovered that he was working behind the scenes all along. Many years later when a great famine came over the land, Jacob and his sons were reunited with Joseph, but this time his brothers were on their knees begging for his favor. Joseph was their man on the inside, second in command, ruling over the storehouses of Egypt, and his brothers trembled in his presence. But because he was kin to them, Joseph understood them, and he was able to sympathize with their weaknesses. And so, he extended grace to them saying,

“Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:19-20).

Then, last week, we read about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Three young Hebrew men who were persecuted for their faith, condemned to face judgment by fire, because they would not bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. In spite of the dire consequences of their decision, they held firmly to their faith, trusting that God is who he says he is, that he can do what he says he can do, and that he would rescue them from the flames. And so, even as they were being thrown into the fiery furnace, they kept their focus on things above. Even as they were falling down, they kept talking right when everything was going wrong. They were faithful in tribulation and discovered that they had a companion in the fire.

Nebuchadnezzar looked down into the furnace and saw them walking around in the fire unharmed and was even more surprised to see that there was a fourth man in the fire. Jesus the Son of God,

“One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Even though the flames burned away the ropes which bound them, the Lord protected them from the flames, and he gave them a testimony.

“When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze” (Isaiah 43:2).

As we come to the conclusion of this series, Grace Under Fire, I want you to understand the value of faith when facing fear, because faith and grace are interconnected. Faith is the hand and grace is the glove that covers it. The apostle Paul said it this way,

“We have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:2).

And so, we must hold on to faith, regardless of the threats, regardless of what we see, and in spite of the fact that we don’t seem to possess that which we profess. And it’s within that conflict, that inconsistency, between possession and profession, these two polar opposites, like faith and fear, that we profess something that we have not yet fully possessed.

It’s from that position that the Lord says to keep talking. He says don’t stop professing it because…

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

And so, while I may seem to fall short of possessing that which I profess, God says keep on talking about it. Even if you don’t see it, even if you’re not feeling it, keep talking because,

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21, NKJV).

And so, you have got to hold onto faith, hold firmly to the faith you profess, because there is something about this profession, your witness, that God wants you to keep talking about.

In other words, you may not be feeling well, the doctor may have given you his diagnosis, but don’t keep rehearsing, speaking over yourself what the doctor said, instead declare what the Lord said,

“By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

And so, we’ve got to hold firmly to the faith we profess, even when we’re in the fire, even when the furnace is heated seven times hotter, because there is something about declaring it that has power.

You see, the words we speak, the faith we profess releases something into the air, into the spiritual realm, and Satan is the prince of the power of the air. And so, we can’t keep it a secret, we’ve got to speak about it, and that’s why the Bible,

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so” (Psalms 107:2, NKJV).

You see, the Lord doesn’t need any more undercover agents, and so let’s hold firmly to the faith we profess, even if what we profess contradicts what we possess, because we are looking forward to something greater. In fact, the Bible says it this way, that our…

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, NKJV).

And so, when Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he sent his sons boldly to Egypt, boldly to a people that he didn’t know, boldly into a country that he didn’t possess, and yet he sent them believing that they would find favor.

Now, what he didn’t know was that he had a son on the inside, the son who had been rejected by his own, sold for 20 pieces of silver, had now been exalted as Lord over Egypt’s stockpiles. Of course, that story sounds familiar, because what happened to Joseph was a shadow of what happened to Jesus. And so, because of Jesus we are able to approach the throne of grace with confidence,

“So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Today, we have access to a dimension of grace that we would have never known without Jesus. Through him we receive mercy. Through him we find grace to help us in our time of need. And so, our confidence in approaching is simply an expression of our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

We have access to this grace, but we must understand that if our confidence is not built on the foundation of the Old Testament, our confidence can become arrogance. In other words, as you read the New Testament, without the foundation of the Old Testament, you may begin to feel a sense of entitlement. You may begin to feel like you can do anything you want to do, just living like the people of the world, and still come with confidence before the throne of grace, but that’s a dangerous place to be because the Bible says,

“By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1-2).

And so, this sense of entitlement, this arrogance is what happens when you embrace the promises of the New Testament without context or without understanding the principles of the Old Testament.

You see, it’s in the Old Testament that we learn about respect, honor, and discipline. It’s in the Old Testament that we are taught reverence and awe for God which is why the author of Hebrews warned:

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (Hebrews 12:25-27).

In other words, he says that we had better listen, because there is a shaking in the earth, things are being shaken today, and it is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. And so, he says listen, don’t refuse him, because God is still speaking through his Word, through his still small voice, and through his sovereign will in the world. Therefore, the Bible says,

“Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29).

And if God shook things on Mount Sinai, if he came down with fire on the mountain, how much more responsible are we today who have experienced the New Covenant of grace in Christ Jesus?

You see, the Lord God is the same yesterday and today and forever. And so, we must listen, because the same God who gave Moses the Law on Mount Sinai, also instructed him how to build the tabernacle, and how the priests should serve in the tabernacle. In fact, there was absolutely nothing left to chance, which is why God said over and over and over again,

“See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain” (Hebrews 8:5).

The problem with many contemporary churches today is that they have replaced the Word of God with the ideas of man. Churches are run like corporations, promoting musicians, entertaining speakers, and all sorts of religious novelties, because increasing attendance is more important than preaching the gospel. And so, today, we need more leaders in the church like Moses who will spend time on the mountain and find out what the Spirit is saying to the church.

You see, God hasn’t left us in the dark as to what his church is, how it is to be led, and what it is supposed to do. And so, we must see to it that we don’t refuse him who speaks, because in the past,

“God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son…” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

And so, we can’t ignore him who warned on earth, or turn away from him who warns us from heaven, because…

“If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we” (Hebrews 12:25)?

And so, are we listening? Moses was given a pattern for worship and the institution of the priesthood and some of you have considered the military, local or state police or some other sort of first responder as an occupation. For some of you it was just a brief thought because you had second thoughts about running into burning buildings and ducking bullets. But did you ever consider it to be a dangerous calling to be in ministry, much like running into burning buildings, painting bridges, or washing windows on a skyscraper.

Did you know that the Israelites looked upon the priesthood as a very dangerous occupation? In Leviticus, where we find the institution of the tabernacle and the priesthood, we actually find that God instituted the draft. He said to Moses,

“Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests” (Exodus 28:1).

And so, God was putting something in place that was a shadow of our great high priest, Jesus the son of God, and we all know how that turned out for Jesus. But in the beginning, the Bible tells us, Moses and Aaron instituted the rites and ceremonies prescribed by God on the mountain, and they began offering sacrifices for the people according to the Word of the Lord. The Bible says on the first day, the inauguration of the tabernacle, at the opening ceremony,

“Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown” (Leviticus 9:23-24).

Suddenly, worship took upon a whole new meaning, there was a sense of danger, because fire came out from the presence of the Lord. And so, Aaron’s oldest sons embraced a sense of danger, like the teams of pyrotechnicians lighting fireworks on 4th of July, but along with that there crept in a sense of self-importance, feeling like they could do anything they want, bring anything they want to God, when they want, on their own terms, and he would accept it.

And so, they were ministers of God, their father Aaron was the high priest, and they had this sense of entitlement. We read that in the midst of the celebrations in Leviticus chapter 10,

“Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command” (Leviticus 10:1).

And so, they had the incense burning, the smoke was rising up before God, representing the prayers of God’s people, and he could smell it, but something was wrong. The Bible says, they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord. In other words, they got the fire from the wrong place, it wasn’t the fire taken from the brazen altar according to the command given to Moses.

Nadab and Abihu came right into the presence of God with this worldly fire, without respect to protocol, without consulting either their elders or the Scriptures. And so, they’ve got the energy of youth, but they don’t have the power of the anointing. They know how to wear the holy garments and how to walk like their father and talk like their father, but they brought unauthorized fire into God’s presence, because they were imitating something that did not originate from a genuine walk with God. And the Bible says, once again, in verse two,

“Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:2).

Maybe you’ve been to a worship service where there was a lot of shouting and jumping around. In other words, it was smoking, but it was a lot of hype, and you knew it smelled funny, it just didn’t smell legitimate. And I think that’s what happened here, they came into the presence of the Lord, and it didn’t smell right.

And so, God discerned their intentions, not only were they dishonoring him, but they were dishonoring the position. And so, they were fooling around, coming to him with their worldly fire, not being authentic, imitating what was holy, and God showed them what the real fire was like. Now, everybody is shocked, this is family, they’re devastated, and so Moses tries to comfort Aaron. He said,

“This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'" Aaron remained silent” (Leviticus 10:3).

In other words, God said, if you’re going to serve me and minister to me, if you’re going to get close to me, you’re going to have to take it seriously because I will be honored in the sight of all the people.

Aaron remained silent, because he knew that his sons had been out of order, they had done things the wrong way. And so, he remained silent because he knew there was a right way and a wrong way, and if you don’t learn the difference, you may find yourself approaching God with arrogance or a sense of entitlement, when God said,

“Approach the throne of grace with confidence…” (Hebrews 4:16).

The Holy Spirit is teaching us the attitude that he wants us to have like raising a child. He says, I want you to come before the throne, but Nadab you can’t talk to me or treat me like you do your brother Abihu, because I am your father. And so, he is saying, I want to be respected, but I don’t want you to be scared of me, because I am your father and I love you.

On one hand, we shouldn’t approach God with arrogance, we’re not entitled to his grace, because then it wouldn’t be grace. Nor are we to approach him presumptuously because God knows who you really are, he knows what you thought and what you did, and so he knows what you are capable of. But on the other hand, he doesn’t want you backing up in fear from his presence, and so he says,

“Worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29).

And so, there is an acceptable way of approaching God, and we can approach his throne of grace for one reason, and that’s because we have a man on the inside. The Bible says, we can be confident,

“Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Hebrews 4:14).

Therefore, we can come before his throne of grace with confidence, knowing that Jesus has gone before us, he’s able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but he didn’t fall where I fell, he didn’t stumble where I tripped.

And so, when you come into his presence, he wants you to come as his child, he wants you to respect them as your father, and he wants you to…

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

And it is that shift in attitude that makes all the difference in the world, because Jesus was victorious where I was defeated, he won where I lost, he was exalted where I was humbled.

In other words, Jesus got close enough that he can sympathize, because he relates to me, but he didn’t have the same experience. Jesus was without sin and for that reason we can…

“We may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

He’s given us the invitation to approach his throne of grace and I believe that we are here for just such a time as this. This is our time of need in America, right here in Emmitsburg, in your house and in your body. Let’s go to the throne together. I don’t care what you did, how you messed up, how you got off track, because I’m certainly not judging you. But would you come with reverence and awe, come and get your mercy, come and get your grace. Let’s pray.

Pastor John Talcott

Christ’s Community Church

303 West Lincoln Avenue

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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(301) 447-4224

[www.cccaog.org](http://www.cccaog.org)

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