



Pastor Steven Billings

Sermon for Pentecost 11

August 21, 2022

Consuming Fire Hebrews 12:4–29

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² 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, ²³ 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, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

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. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once



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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.²⁸ 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.

In today’s epistle, the Writer to the Hebrews addresses believers. He demonstrates this by quoting from Proverbs 3:(11-12) – “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (vv. 5-6). So, he’s writing to children of God.

He has much to say to us in this text, beginning with a discussion of God’s discipline. Israel had seen times of discipline throughout its history, but for what purpose? There’s a difference between discipline and punishment, isn’t there. Punishment is intended to inflict pain and suffering as a consequence of behavior that’s considered unacceptable. Discipline, however, is not principally concerned with punishment. Discipline is an educational tool. It’s intended to teach and to train, to improve behavior. To discipline is to make a disciple. When God disciplines, He’s helping us, leading us, guiding us, *teaching* us what actions are not in keeping with His will so that we will amend our sinful lives and follow the pattern His discipline reveals to us. No one likes to be disciplined. I didn’t care for it as a child, and, quite frankly, I don’t much like it now. As the Writer says, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (v. 11).

What should our attitude be when undergoing discipline? We should recognize, first of all, that, when God disciplines us, He’s showing us that we are His children. We ought to rejoice rather than complain, for God is treating us as sons. This is what good fathers do; they discipline their sons. So, the Writer uses this reasoning to encourage his readers. “Lift your drooping hands,” he says, “and strengthen your weak knees” (v. 12). Don’t be discouraged; you’re a child of God! Now, let this discipline straighten your path so that you may follow in the direction your Father wants you to go.

What direction is that? The Writer mentions a few key things. “Strive for peace with everyone.” Strive for “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (v. 14). “See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble” (v. 15). See to it “that no one is sexually immoral or unholy” (v. 16).

But, most importantly, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God” (v. 15). The grace of God is foundational here, shading everything said before and everything that follows. How else do we obtain holiness? Purely by the grace of God. The Writer reminds the Hebrews of how things were under the Law. When they stood at the base of the holy mountain following the Exodus, God thundered from that mountain. The earth shook; the people were terrified. They were warned not even to touch the mountain. If an animal wandered too close to it, it was to be killed. Moses, too, trembled in fear. Later, he



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admonished them, “Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you . . . For the LORD your God is a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:23–24).

He’s still a consuming fire, by the way. But, what does that fire consume? It consumes sin together with whoever the bearer of that sin happens to be. If you’re bearing your own sin, you’re going to be consumed by the never ending flames of God’s wrath. Why do you think hell is described as a lake of fire? Because God’s wrath is a consuming fire. Yet, the souls in that torment will be like that burning bush Moses once encountered – ever burning, never being fully consumed. How long does that go on? Forever. That’s a reality we need to consider, and not just for ourselves, but for our friends and loved ones. Those who bear their own sins will bear the fire of God’s consuming wrath.

The Writer to the Hebrews mentions this as a caution to anyone who would take God’s grace for granted or think that their right relationship with God is of their own making. Of course, that’s impossible! God has set the bar higher than any of us could reach. Righteousness before God simply can’t be accomplished by sinful human beings, which we all are. But sometimes people forget that.

There were those in Israel who forgot about grace. They thought being a child of God was something they received as a birthright or something they could earn by their keeping of the Law. But, anyone who thinks that, anyone who believes that God ought to accept them on their own merits, is bearing their own sin and will by their own unbelief be subject to the consuming fire of God.

How much better – by far! – to recognize your inherent unrighteousness and let Christ be the bearer of your sin. The truth is, He’s already borne it. Jesus carried your sin – all of it – in His body on the cross. There He suffered the flames of God’s wrath in full force for you. Now you don’t have to. Because of Jesus, God’s wrath has been appeased where you are concerned. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. But Jesus has. Because of Jesus, your sin has been atoned – paid for. Because of Jesus, you are now God’s beloved child according to His grace. Because of Jesus, you now stand before God forgiven, washed clean, and covered in the righteousness of Christ.

You and I, beloved, together with all believers in Christ, have approached a different mountain. This is not a mountain of wrath wherein God demands perfect obedience from His subjects. This is Mount Zion, which we can approach without fear on account of Mount Calvary and the sacrifice of our Savior that covers all our sin. This is the city of the living God, where innumerable angels gather for the feast. This is the assembly of those who are enrolled in heaven, the spirits of the righteous made perfect. We have not made ourselves perfect, mind you; God has made us perfect by the blood of Jesus, which has mediated a new covenant between us and God, a covenant of peace.

What ought to be our response to this? Faith, surely. But the Writer to the Hebrews enjoins us, also, to offer God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe. Many churches these days seem to have lost all sense of reverence and awe. How easy it is to lose our sense of the sacred. How easy it is to forget that we stand before the same God who



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shook the mountain with His thunderous voice, who opened the earth so that it swallowed up those who opposed His servants Moses and Aaron, [the same God] whose face no one can see and live. It's fitting that in our worship we remember who we're dealing with. But, because of Jesus, we can also remember that this God is a God of grace and mercy toward those who cling to Him by faith in the sacrifice of Christ.

It all comes down to grace, beloved, grace obtained for us by the shed blood of Jesus. By this grace, we've been made recipients of a kingdom that cannot be shaken, the kingdom of God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. By the grace of God we are citizens of that kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem. *That* is our true homeland, *that* is our ultimate destination, and we await an eternal future there among the righteous made perfect, where we will sing praises of thanksgiving to our blessed Savior. Glory be to God! In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen