

# Living Church: Gathering as God's People

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 12 February 2012

Preacher: Jonny Grant

[ 0 : 01 ] Reading Matthew chapter 27 verses 45 to 54 which is on page 999 of the Church Bibles.

Page 999 of the Church Bibles, Matthew 27. Starting from verse 45.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, he's calling Elijah. Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick and offered it to Jesus to drink.

The rest said, now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him. And when Jesus has cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

[ 1 : 14 ] The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs. And after Jesus' resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, surely he was the Son of God.

For the second reading, we'll be looking at Hebrews chapter 10. I don't know if Johnny has the page in the church Bible.

On page 1208. Hebrews chapter 10. Starting in verse 19.

I'll read 19 to 25. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

[ 2 : 43 ] Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more, as you see the day approaching. Thanks very much.

Well, let's pray and ask for God's help. Our Father God, we thank you for the church family.

Thank you that we can meet and gather together. Thank you for the provision of this building.

Thank you for the gifts of all the people here who serve in so many different ways to make this gathering possible.

Thank you for all. Thank you for all that we've been able to do together so far, for being able to sing, to read, to pray, to talk over tea and coffee.

[ 4 : 01 ] Thank you, Father, thank you, Father, that we can meet in this way in freedom, without fear of authorities, without persecution.

And we ask that you would help us to better understand what it means for us to meet together and to gather as your people.

Teach us then, through your word we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, meeting with God's people or gathering as a family, I want us to start with a question.

And it's simply this. Why bother with church? Why did any of us bother to get up this morning to come and meet?

Why did we do that? Is it really worth all the effort? Rushing around, trying to get the kids sorted, in and out of the showers, getting the lunch organised before you leave?

[ 5 : 10 ] Or is that just our house? Why bother? Why don't we just stay at home? After all, it is a lot warmer, and so much more comfortable, to be in our own living rooms.

We could just stay at home and listen to the sermon online, in our own time, or you could choose whoever you wanted to listen to, online. What's the point of gathering together like this?

Well, to be a Christian person, is to be a church person. Because the Bible's view is this. If you are committed to Christ, you are also committed to church.

You can't have one without the other. It's two sides of the one coin. You are committed to Christ, and you are committed to church. You can't separate them. In fact, if we are to experience Christ in our life, the Bible says we must participate in church life.

Because the way in which the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, gets worked into our hearts, and the way it gets worked out through our lives, is in our involvement and participation with and in the church family.

[ 6 : 29 ] The church family, the gathering of God's people, is God's means of enabling us to experience the full effects of the Gospel.

So why bother with church? Why bother getting up and coming together? Well, without the church family, we are never going to grow, we are never going to change as people, and we're never going to know Christ in all his fullness and all that he has to give us.

Because it is through the church family that he works so that we experience the full effects of the Gospel. So it's essential that we are gathering together.

But let's try and unpack this a little bit more and get the connection between Christ on the one hand and church on the other and see how they are integral and fit together.

First of all, our faith in Christ. Look at verse 19 of our reading from Hebrews 10. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

[ 7 : 46 ] Now, verse 19 is almost a summary of all of chapters 1 to 9. In chapters 1 to 9, it goes into great detail, looking back through the Old Testament, to show us that without Christ, without his sacrifice, we can't come to God.

In the past, people couldn't get close to God. But now, again, look at verse 19. Since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain, that is his body.

And we've got all this religious language through here. We've got this most holy place, the blood of Jesus, and the curtain. Strange language. But it's taking us back to a miraculous event of when Christ died on the cross.

we read about it from Matthew's Gospel. The most holy place was a room in the temple which marked or symbolised the presence of God.

And blocking the way, the entrance into that room, was this large curtain. It acted as a barrier, an enormous signpost that was telling everybody, stop, no entry.

[ 9 : 05 ] It's a little bit like this room here. If you could imagine that we here are the people, and in behind that screen is the most holy place which symbolised where God's presence was, where God dwelt.

And the screen here is an enormous curtain except for it would have gone from top to bottom. And it was this great big sign that meant we couldn't enter, we couldn't get to God.

God was making it clear that our sin means we can't enjoy God as we are meant to. We've been shut out. We're here. God is there. Denied access.

Barred from coming to God. Just like Adam and Eve were shut out of the garden and it was barred from re-entry. And it has been ever since.

But something has happened, verse 20. A new and living way has opened up for us through the curtain. That is his body.

[ 10 : 10 ] You see, the moment that Jesus died on the cross, and you'll remember that from the reading in Matthew, the moment Jesus died, the curtain in the most holy place was torn from top to bottom, ripped open.

It was a divine intervention by God. The barrier that stood in the way was removed. And access to God was now possible. Entrance into the family of God was now open to everybody who had faith in Jesus.

Because Jesus, through his death on the cross, was taking the punishment for our sin. He was dealing with the wrath that we deserve. And we are forgiven. His body was the one that was torn

open.

His body, if you like, was ripped apart on the cross so that the way is open for us now to go through to meet with God. And now we can come, verse 19, with confidence, without fear of rejection, without God telling us, no, you can't.

We can come with confidence, and that's why we are gathered here today because of what Jesus did 2,000 years ago on the cross, his people gathering to God because of what Jesus has done.

[11:34] So the way is open for us to enter by faith in Christ. But not only do we have access to God through our faith in Christ, we also become part of the church family.

Look at verse 21. So we have access to God because of Christ, but not only that, we have access to the church family. Verse 21, and since we have a great priest over the house of God.

Now Jesus here is our ultimate priest. He's the one who makes it possible to come to God. But he also makes it possible to be part of the house of God.

And the house of God is simply another way of saying the family of God, the church, God's people. Hold your finger there in chapter 10 and go back to chapter 3, verse 6.

Where this is spelt out clearly for us. Chapter 3, verse 6. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house.

[12:58] And we are his house if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast. Do you see that?

Christ is the faithful son. He was the only faithful one who by his death has not only given us access to God, but he has welcomed us into the house of God.

And it says here that we, the people, are the house of God. We are in his family. Now it's crucial for us to make that connection. There is faith in Christ.

That's one side of the coin. But through our faith in Christ we are also part of the church family. That is the other side of the coin. And look how all of this works out back in chapter 10, verse 22.

Because of our faith in Christ we are now part of the church family so, verse 22, let us together draw near to God.

[14:04] It doesn't say let me. Our life with Christ is not an individual exercise that we sit at home and do our own thing. It says let us together.

Verse 23, let us together hold unswervingly to the hope. The Christian life is something that we do together. Verse 24, and let us consider how we spur one another on.

We can't do the Christian life alone. You need me and I need you. We need each other. Verse 25, let us not give up meeting together.

together. You see, the church family is God's means of enabling us to experience the full effects of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

And we're never going to know all that Christ has to give us apart from the church. church. That's why we bother with church.

[15:06] That's why we've gotten up out of our beds this morning and that's why we've gathered together. And of course, it's not just a couple of hours here, it's 24-7, it's throughout the week. But the emphasis here I want us to see is this, let us come together.

Because to cut yourself off from the church is like a deep sea diver cutting off his oxygen supply. we'll die spiritually, we'll drown, we'll not cope, we won't survive.

The church family is God's means for us to experience the workings out of the gospel in our lives. So we're going to look at four ways this works out in practice.

You know how we all need our greens to survive, don't we? Our vegetables. We need to have our four vegetables or whatever to have every day if we're to survive.

Well here we've got four lettuces. Okay? The lettuce of verse 22, lettuce of verse 23, and lettuce of verse 24, and lettuce of verse 25.

[16:15] Four good greens to get into us, to help us understand what it is to be in church family. The first one then, the first lettuce, experience grace together.

Verse 22, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Now because of Jesus' death, we can come confidently with absolute assurance. The invitation is open, it's given, by faith we draw near to God to experience his grace.

And coming to God, as the picture here in verse 22 is, is like stepping into a hot shower, or into a big deep bath, after a muddy day in the garden, or after rolling about in the rugby pitch.

Look at what it says in verse 22. Our hearts are sprinkled clean, our conscience cleansed, and the sin that ruins our life is washed away with pure water, the pure water of Christ's forgiveness.

[ 17 : 33 ] It's an invitation to tell us that there is no sin that is so great that God's grace cannot clean. So together by faith in Christ, it's an invitation to bathe and wash in God's grace.

But why do we have to do this together? together? Why can't I just come to God on my own and experience his grace without involving other people?

Why can't I just do this at home? Why is there a let us draw near? Well, it doesn't rule us out coming to God on our own.

It's important we do that. But the reality is, on our own, we are not always going to be people who are seeking after God's grace. You see, when we fail and fall, and we do it all the time, Satan is quick to remind us of just how bad and useless we are.

And the last thing that we want to do is come to God. When we've messed up and things have gone wrong, we don't want to get anywhere near to God. We feel too ashamed, we feel too dirty, too messed up, and we kind of withdraw and we hide from God.

[ 18 : 50 ] And if that cycle continues for long enough, we'll end up completely away. But when we come together, we are reminded that we are meeting with a whole bunch of messed up sinners and failures dependent on God's grace.

And that's why I love coming here on a Sunday, because I'm meeting a whole load of other messed up sinners, because that's what we all are, and we're all dependent on God's grace.

And when I come here with everybody else, everybody together is focusing us on the need for God's grace. Because when my sin is so great, and when I've lost sight of God's grace, meeting with other people who are talking about grace, when people are singing about grace, when they're preaching about grace, it encourages me to seek God's grace.

Just a personal experience. There are times, it doesn't happen all the time, but there have been times where the last place I want to be is standing here and speaking and preaching.

There's things weighing in my life. I'm conscious of sin, and I just don't feel good enough, I don't feel worthy enough, and I just don't want to do it.

[ 20 : 19 ] But as I am here, as I hear people singing, as we're focused in on God's grace, it lifts me, it encourages me, it builds me up, and it says, it's all been cleaned.

My sin has been washed away, my heart has been sprinkled, my conscience cleansed. That's why we need to come together, to experience grace together, because without each other, we will lose sight, and we won't do it.

So that's our first letter that we need to get into our lives. The second is this, experience support together, verse 23. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. You know, the reality is, as you and I go about this week, and it's probably been the experience of the past week, we face pressure after pressure, challenge after challenge, to let go and to give up of the hope of the gospel.

Because we live in a world where people live in opposition to the gospel, and they think that Christ is irrelevant. Think about it, how many times did somebody in your work or one of your neighbours come round and say, go on, keep going as a Christian?

[ 21 : 40 ] It doesn't happen very often. And if that's what we're facing every day, just the sheer struggle of being a Christian in the world, holding on to the hope is going to be very hard.

And of course, we can try and play the Lone Ranger and do it my way, but experience shows it doesn't work. That's why we need to hold on to the hope together.

Look at what it says. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope. we're to hold on to it for all that we are, everything that's inside of us, and everything that's inside of you together, we are to hold and grasp this hope.

Because on our own, we're weak. We give in and we give up. But with the support of other people, we are able to hold on and we are able to keep going.

people. In fact, that's what chapter 11 is all about, as it goes through all this great big list of people of the past and how they had held to the faith.

[ 22 : 47 ] It is encouragement for us. So when we gather together, as we do like this, when we come early, and that's one of the good reasons to come early, or whether we stay late, one of the good questions to be asking is this, of each other, how is your faith?

Nobody else is going to ask you that question. The only person who's going to ask you that is somebody within the church family. How is your faith? How are you getting on?  
And one of the greatest supports that we could give to help each other, look at the rest of verse 23. He who promised is faithful.  
You know what? We give up and we fail. We mess up and we let go. But here's encouragement. He who promised is faithful. God is faithful to us.  
He will never, ever let go of his people. And sometimes it takes one other person to remind us that he is faithful to us.  
[ 23 : 59 ] So we experience this support together. we hold on to the hope that we have. So we experience grace together. We experience support together.

And third, we experience compassion together. Verse 24. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

I'm summarising love and good deeds there as compassion. Compassion is responding to the needs and concerns of other people in active love.  
Not just words, but action, in deeds. So the church family is to be a place where we do experience compassion. compassion. Now there's a difficulty with that.

And that is because we're all naturally selfish people. Looking out for others, surprise, surprise, is not always the top of our agenda. We're looking out for me, for number one.

[ 25 : 02 ] In fact, the truth be told, we don't even know what the needs of other people are. We could maybe do a mental check of that right now for the person sitting beside you.

What are their needs? Do you know what they are? Do I know what they are? And that's why we gather together. That's why we come together as God's people, not just on a Sunday.  
That's why we meet in our home groups. That's why we encourage people to meet throughout the week. Because by meeting together, we get to know each other. We get to know what the needs are.

Not just about the weather or what did you think of the rugby and wasn't that disappointing that they did. Yes, important conversation, but it's not as important as knowing what are the real needs and what are the real concerns that we have in our lives.

And when we know what they are, then we're able to respond with compassion, love and good deeds. So again, before the meeting starts, or even over tea and coffee, that's why we have tea and coffee.

[ 26 : 06 ] an opportunity to talk to each other and to ask each other, how are you? And don't give the all too common phrase, fine, I'm sure I'm grand.

Hmm? Well, I'm sure we are grand and I'm sure we are fine, but how are we? Is there anything that I can do to help in that situation?

And one of the responses to that might be to pray for that person. Might be just praying quietly for them in your own time. If you know them well enough and you're comfortable enough with it, it might be to pray with that person right there.

It might be to arrange to meet up for coffee or for lunch during the week. We've all got to eat, haven't we? Why don't we meet at lunchtime or at a coffee time and meet up with that person?  
Read with them, pray with them, encourage them. We try to develop what we call one-to-one, which is simply meeting with another believer, another Christian within the church family, just to read 15 minutes, whatever time you have, to pray together.

[ 27 : 22 ] In some cases, there might be practical help that's required for people. There might even be financial assistance. Who knows? We don't know what the needs are, the concerns are, until we talk.

And let's be full of grace in all of this. We are sinful, aren't we? We are failures. We don't always look out for people as we ought to.

So look what it says in verse 24. Consider, think about, apply, work it out, how we can spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

I've got to be thinking, how can I motivate each other to be compassionate? How can I help us to do that more and more? Well, you know what?

The best way that we can spur each other to be compassionate is to be compassionate to one another. If you come and you're thinking, nobody shows me compassion around here.

[ 28 : 28 ] Well, demonstrate that compassion and maybe others will follow you. We're in it together. We're a church family. And this isn't a kind of beat us on the head.

Because there is compassion, there is support, there is grace, there is encouragement. It's just simply reminding us of why we are gathering together.

So, grace, support, compassion. The fourth lettuce that we need is verse 25.

Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

You know what? None of what we've looked at so far. Grace, support, compassion can happen. None of these things can be experienced unless we are actually meeting together.

[ 29 : 31 ] Sounds obvious, but that's the truth. So we've got to be encouraged to make our gathering together formally on a Sunday morning, through the week at home group, and at other informal times through the week, to make it a priority.

Now, I understand that it's not always possible. I am married, and I've got children, and family, there can be family concerns. Some people might even have to be working.

I understand all of that. There can be genuine reasons, but as verse 25 is saying, let's be in the habit. Let's set good habits. Let's plan our diaries.

Let's think about what we're going to be doing as a family, where we're going to be, who's going to be going out on Wednesday to home group. Let's make that effort.

Why do we need to make the effort? Well, life is tough, isn't it? We're going to face pressures at work. There's difficulties in relationships. We have the demands of family life.

[ 30 : 37 ] We might even be struggling with health. And all of these things can weigh us down, but in God's grace is given to us, the family, one another, a source of constant encouragement.

Let us encourage one another all the more as you see the day approaching. The day, capital D, is the day of Christ's return.

And it says it's happening soon. He's coming soon. As Christ is coming, be encouraging each other. Because the only things, or the only, all that's going to survive are people.

So we give our efforts and our attention to people. How do we encourage each other then when we do meet? Well, by bringing each other back to grace.

To have our hearts sprinkled, to remind each other of the depth of God's amazing grace. By getting alongside each other, giving that vital support to hold on to the hope that we have.

[ 31 : 49 ] By responding to the needs and concerns of each other with compassion. And by making it a priority to gather with God's people.

The church family is God's means of enabling us to experience the full effects of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

And we're never going to know all that Christ has to give us. We'll never explore the depths of the riches of Christ apart from the church.

He's given us the church so we can go deeper with all that he has to give us. That's why we bother with church. That's why we meet together.

Let's pray. This is a prayer that comes from 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 16.

[ 33 : 01 ] Just listen to this prayer. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us, and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope.

Encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. And all God's people said, Amen.