

Church

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews 12. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festival 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.

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.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens. 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.

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, for our God is a consuming fire.

Well, good morning everyone. Good morning everyone.

[2 : 2 2] today, please. Good morning. Good morning everyone. Good morning everyone.

Good morning. Hey, fun. We're pré Ultimately.

easily superimpose our own thinking, our own framework on these key words. Now, it may be for some Christians and some Christians in this church that we do that because we actually haven't taken the time to listen to what God says about these important issues. But more sadly, and I think also a reality in our church, is that sometimes we superimpose our own views because we actually don't like what we hear God saying. We actually want to superimpose a view until we have something that we're comfortable with, that sits easily with us in these key areas. And that's particularly obvious, I think, when it comes to the word that's our focus this morning, the word church. So what do you think of when you think of church?

Perhaps, like Don discovered this morning, perhaps you don't think it's just something that's there. And most Christians, I think, would believe that church is linked to being a Christian. Last week, Rob took us through the word salvation and looked at what God says clearly about salvation. And out of that, then I think most Christians would say, well, once you're saved, that has an inseparable link to the idea of church. Don brought that out in a stone, saved Christians, church. Now, after that, there might be huge variance as to what that connection looks like and what it means in practice. Is it just a nice theory? And I know so many Christians who are in this camp. Well, they say the idea of church as the body or family of Christ, it's a really lovely theory. But of course, it doesn't work in practice. Just look around.

And so out of that, then people often really sit loose to church and have as little to do with the organism here, the community here, have as little to do as possible. Because after all, they say, it really is just a collection of really annoying people. Even hypocrites.

[5 : 27] Others will say, well, church is something I think is really important. I personally can take it or leave it depending on whether it overlaps with my desires, my interests. Others again will say, well, actually, I suppose to me, church is like a club.

I get involved in it because it reflects my personal interest in life. It puts me in contact with nice people. I like to hang out with nice people, people who are like me. It actually offers some enjoyable benefits when it works well, and so on and so forth.

So those are fairly common views, I think. Perhaps more common than we'd ever care to admit. Or is church for you something that is at the heart of God's purpose for you as a Christian?

Something you would say is absolutely essential to your health and spiritual growth as a believer. To your maturity as a believer.

Well, friends, once again, God has spoken very clearly about church. And we need to listen. We need to listen and we need to follow.

[6 : 51] We must see God's church with God's eyes. So let's jump into these verses from Hebrews. There's any number of passages we could have gone to in the New Testament.

I opted for Hebrews. We'll see how we go. Any of these passages describe God's church in all its glory. And that's a word that is appropriate to describe God's church.

It's glorious. But let me give some background context to Hebrews chapter 12, without which we'll actually not be able to see the beauty of what's being said here in these verses.

The letter was written to encourage small groups of Christians who had then, having been converted, abandoned into little churches, scattered around the Roman Empire.

Most of these people to whom it was written had a Jewish background, converted out of Judaism. And what they discovered was, and quite contrary to expectation perhaps, that their newfound faith in Christ had actually made life harder, had actually made life more uncertain for them on a day-to-day basis.

[8 : 01] Because it brought persecution from both Jews and Romans. And so as a result of that, many were tempted to give up their Christian faith and resume their old Jewish religion.

Because they knew that the Jewish religion was actually accepted by the Roman Empire. So it would mean an end to their persecution and suffering. Because when they looked around their little churches, their little groups of Christians looked so pathetic, so insignificant, compared to the status enjoyed by the Jewish synagogues and by so many other pagan religions around the Roman Empire with their massive temples and their holy days and their holy people and their special rituals.

The church just didn't look to be worth anything. And so they were tempted to turn back to what they had once been part of.

And the encouragement of this letter as a whole, leading up to chapter 12, is this. To recognise that Jesus has established the salvation community which God had planned from eternity.

And which Judaism had only ever been able to point to. So the encouragement of this letter is to say this.

[9 : 25] In spite of what it might appear like, how it might feel on a day-to-day basis, these Christians were part of God's eternal community.

The church. And in fact, we'll see here in these verses that the writers say, indeed, the church is the only secure eternal community in our broken and decaying world.

And that's a really big rap for the church, isn't it? It's a really big rap. But that is God's word on the matter. And I would venture to say that unless we're seeing the church with the same centrality, the same certainty, the same security, the same glory, then we're not seeing the church with God's eyes.

Because the church has been central to God's purposeful gathering of his people into community. The Greek word is *ekklesia*.

Ekklesia. The primary notion of church is God calling out or gathering, congregating. That's the word we get congregation from. God congregating or assembling his people before himself.

[10 : 42] And that notion is right across the whole breadth of the Bible. The first picture of church is actually in Genesis 1 and 2.

Having created the universe to his own satisfaction, what does God do? He immediately gathers, as it were, Adam and Eve from the world as a whole place into a special place, the Garden of Eden.

Into a special relationship with God. God was determined to enjoy what he'd created with his image bearers. And he was determined to do that for eternity.

In response, Genesis 1 and 2, particularly Genesis 2, God's people were to worship him. A whole of life, whole of being response of love and trust and honor and obedience.

That was a picture of the church as God meant it to be. Of course, sin wrecked everything, didn't it? Forcing God to disperse his people.

[11 : 51] But even in Genesis 3, as God disperses his people, that dispersion happened with the promise that one day God would act to fix the problem of sin.

And one day, once again, gather his people to himself in special relationship for eternity. That's, we move into chapter 12.

That's what's been spoken about here in verse 18 to 22, 23. It's the picture of Sinai. We see that at Sinai. Where God assembled or churched his people at Mount Sinai.

He gathered them from slavery in Egypt. Gathered them to himself in relationship, in new relationship. A relationship when he said, I will bless you. I want you to worship me with whole hearts.

But rebellion and judgment still plagued the relationship. And so, what we know as we look across the spread of the Bible is that Sinai was a great progression in God's purpose to gather his church.

[12 : 59] But it wasn't the final entity. It wasn't the final reality. And for that, we need Jesus. And we see that in verse 22, 23, and 24. Let me just read them to you.

So, he says, you've not come, verse 18, you've not come to Sinai. Right? There's a contrast. You've not come to Sinai. But you have come. This is speaking to Christians. You've not come to this.

But you have come to Mount Zion. 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. There's the connection back to Genesis. Jesus is now the fulfillment of that which God promised. God's purpose has been fully realized.

[14 : 01] With God's people gathered around Jesus. That is a picture of the church. That is God's purpose in eternity.

It is the death and resurrection of Jesus. That achieves finally God's purpose.

Dealing with sin. Restoring relationship with God. Renewing from the inside out. And thus qualifying sinners for heaven. For eternity.

For the abundant life we heard of from Rob last week. The abundant life that God intended for his image bearers. Right from the get go.

Heaven itself. So it's God's purposeful gathering. And it's a permanent display. The watching world. Of God's wisdom and glory.

[14 : 58] One writer said this. That the church is God's verifying data. Of his grace and salvation. I think that's a lovely term. It's God's verifying data.

Of God's character. God's grace. God's actions in salvation. We see this again in the strong before and after contrast. In these verses. Verses 18 to 21.

Before Christ. 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. See before. When God gathered his people.

[15 : 55] The context was always. God's holiness. And therefore. Fear of judgment. Proper fear of judgment. God's holiness.

Their unresolved sin. God's holiness. Their debilitating fear. As they stand gathered before this holy. Just.

All saying. God. God's holiness. God's holiness. And before the scrutiny. God's word. That exposes sin to the depths of our hearts.

And promised justice and judgment. God's holiness. but now look what God has done in Christ verses 22 to 24. We see a whole list of just descriptions here piled upon pile upon pile. The writer's struggling to grasp it and so he's just describing he's pulling out all these pictures and just stacking them up one on top of the other to try and capture the glory of what God has done for us in Christ in establishing the church.

God's church is in perfect personal relationship with God. No more is sin a barrier because of the work of Christ. God's words no longer create fear but bring forgiveness, renewal and comfort to God's people. The church is God's temple. The church is God's place of rule. The city where his family resides in safety and security. It's even party central for as it says here innumerable angels.

[17 : 39] What's the source of the big party the joyous occasion? These innumerable angels are looking out over uncountable. Not being able to count whatever that right word is. Sinners who've now been qualified for heaven and have been signed up for heaven secure, locked in. And they're just stunned.

How could God do that to bring all these sinners safe home to heaven to be with them forever? And who's front and central to accept the credit? Well we're told here. It comes to God, the judge of all.

God the father, the just judge of all, has acted and found a way to save those he rightly could have condemned.

Wow. God the son with the marks of slaughter and blood on him. Showing evidence to the great cost, the cost that the father asked the son to pay and the cost that the son gladly paid to establish the church, the community of God's saved people. And God the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling of each and every believer is a guarantee that that relationship, that new relationship, will last for eternity and will actually make us like our Savior.

And then there's different imagery in verses 26, 27 and 28. It's as if the writer's saying, look, this whole thing that we're seeing here, the church, is absolutely seismic in God's world.

[19 : 39] And that's the imagery of these verses. At that time, his voice shook the earth. But now he has promised, yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but the heavens.

Mount Sinai shook when God gathered his people as a sign of God's awesome saving presence in the world.

God's purpose would triumph, not sin. But that shake-up was nothing compared to the shake-up of our world when Christ died.

Quite literally, the verses are saying that the Lord shook the world so much and put a condemned sticker on all the apparently strong and lasting things in this world.

And on the other hand, he put an unbreakable sticker on his church, which is currently despised and appears weak and unstable.

[20 : 55] Testimony to God's glory. It may be hard for us to believe, harder even still to grasp, but the only really secure thing in this world is being part of God's glorious church.

This is the only community, the only entity that will span this world and eternity, if I understand scripture right.

And all this is given expression in local assemblies or church families. Clearly, verses 22, 23, and 24 are a picture of the absolute glory of heaven with all Christ's people from all generations, all time, past, present, and future, present and accounted for, and worshipping as they were created to.

But the language of these verses and the context in which they were written to little groups of Christians scattered all around the Roman Empire makes it clear that it also includes the Christians, those ordinary men and women and boys and girls in local churches to whom this was written as encouragement.

local churches are the visible expression of the reality of God's church in heaven. We here, this morning, are a visible expression of the reality of God's church in heaven.

[22 : 32] And that, in turn, then, has implication for us as a local church.

What is said about the church in heaven is said also about local church expressions here, such as we are. Because we are the church of Christ gathered here at Glendale.

What are the implications? Well, there are a couple, and then I'll drill down into them. Verse 25. Say to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

There it is. You see, God speaks. We need to listen and align our understanding, our thinking, our commitment to the church according to God's word, according to God's eyes, according to God's view of it.

And verse 29. Frame this whole paragraph. Therefore, let us offer to God acceptable worship.

[23 : 45] With reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. Same thing. Listen at the beginning of the passage, and heed. Align.

Respond. Practical implications are clear.

When a local church like ours listens and follows God's word on the nature and importance of the church, then, my friends, we will start to look like, and we should start to look like, the one we are following.

Reflecting his love, his commitment, his purposes. His holiness.

His glory. In some senses, I could stop there. Because that's a pretty searching point of application in itself.

[24 : 46] Can you find yourself in that statement? Do you believe that you, as an individual in this church, look like the God you say you're following, whose view of the church has just been expressed?

Together, do we look like that? Do we look like the God we are following? As a unit? Do people say, when they look at us as a church, something that's so radically different from what the world is?

They say, well, look, we don't actually know how to explain it, but these people are radically different. They've got something that we don't see out in the world. Or if they come in our doors, do they just hang around for a while and think, yep, yep, yep, yep, recognize all that sort of stuff, all that crap, all that nonsense.

Yep. Yep. Yep. Following God's word means gospel-shaped community.

That's what we need to be thinking about here as a church. And that, I think, means, and it's one of the big things in our society, it means rejecting individualism. You can't have a gospel-shaped community and also have strong individualism and me-ism operating in a church community, our church community.

[26 : 23] See, the church is God's big idea. Contrary to what some people think, it's not been dreamed up by pastors as a means of controlling people and manipulating people into doing what we want them to do.

Sadly, over the years, that's probably been used to that end, but that's not what the church is. It's God's idea. It's not something, therefore, we can sit loosely to just getting involved when we decide it's convenient or when we decide it's desirable or when we decide it's personally beneficial.

Yet, so commonly, that is our commitment level to the church. The reality of our being gathered in heaven as God's family is expressed practically in being organically integrated, gathered in a local church family.

The relationships in our world are so disconnected, so dysfunctional at every level. We're made for community. We're made especially to enjoy the eternal community at Genesis 1 and 2.

Enjoy eternal community with Father, Son, and Spirit. We long for connection. We long to be part of an organic whole, and that's what our whole society longs for. It isn't strange, therefore, that even as Christians, saved and gathered into God's eternal community here, in this place, we actually fear true community.

[28 : 12] We fear deep community, and we default back to individualism. Because individualism is safe in lots of ways. Meism allows a lot of freedom, a wrong sort of freedom, but it allows me to cherry-pick what I want from this community and what I contribute to this community.

And when we do that, we actually then complain because we don't feel connected in the church. Isn't that a bizarre twist? We demand a freedom not to be connected, and then we complain that we're not connected.

Hmm. There you go. See, the Bible knows nothing of salvation as a solitary, individualistic experience. God's purpose in this world has never simply been to save people from their sin.

Rather, His purpose has always been to save people from their sin into a community of people who truly worship Him. So following God into church is to delight in being part of the community which God has planned and acted to make glorious and permanent in heaven.

My friends, it's the context of seeing this community as the community in which you will grow and which I will grow and thrive and come to maturity and be the person that Christ wants us to be.

[30 : 00] and recognizing we cannot do it in isolation, in individualism. Our church here should never just be an organization or a club that you belong to out of some sense of Christian duty.

And my friends, this organism, this gathering of Christ's people, therefore, hopefully you'll see, can never be irrelevant, can never be out of date, can never be reached its use by date.

The second thing that I'm nearly down to finish, following God's word means gospel revealing community. It's a demonstrated reality of the changing power of the gospel.

Now friends, I want to just say here that community of itself is not enough to shape us properly as God's church. Community of itself is not enough to shape us as God's church.

we must pray for and work towards and build gospel revealing community. Now what do I mean by that? Well let me try and explain.

[31 : 25] So many churches have really strong community at their heart. I think this church has a really strong community at heart. But it's not necessarily a gospel revealing community.

It's not a community that arises directly as a consequence of gospel change in our lives. So it's common to mistake one for the other.

In Ephesians 2 the church is described as a radical new humanity which is displayed in relationships freed from the normal divisions and distractions of our sinful world.

The picture in Ephesians 2 is enemies Jew and Gentile coming together in the wonderful new relationship where their identity of each is no longer found in their race or their national background but in Christ and that brings them together.

And the fact that you see a Jew and a Gentile Ephesians 2 sitting together in church is a gospel revealing community. It's a relationship that wouldn't happen apart from gospel change in each of the lives.

[32 : 37] in our church there are so many relationships centered on things other than the gospel.

That is we form relationships quite naturally because of similar life experience. Older people those with kids you know younger people young professionals who don't have kids we naturally gravitate to people who are like us similar life experience or similar stage of life or similar personal identity we actually orientate ourselves to people who like the things we like and dislike the things we dislike.

We orientate to people and form friendships with people who have similar causes to what we do whether political or social or economic causes. We orientate to people who have similar felt needs.

because we gravitate to people who understand our feelings understand our situation. All of those relationships are good things they're all community building things but they're not gospel revealing relationships necessarily because they would probably exist even if the gospel didn't.

We need to push further and demonstrate the wisdom and power and glory of God and relationships that exist only because of the gospel. That is relationships that happen across the age difference across interest difference across economic differences social differences racial differences divides.

[34 : 30] I want our church to be known and so obvious when people come in the door that our identity is in Christ and therefore we can fellowship with people that out in the world we wouldn't actually associate with let alone have a rich relationship with.

So what do visitors see when they come in to visit us? do they see relationships that are truly framed Ephesians 2 again by genuine reconciliation out in the world they'd expect people to be fighting the bit out standing on their dig and holding their crutches but when they come in here do they see that those things don't exist or do they say yep recognize them all do they see us pursuing relationships that are actually really costly to pursue because the relationships across such obvious human divides if I can call it that and do they see us then pursuing those relationships at all costs or do they again do they see the natural clicks you'd see at any other point in society surely my friends we often wonder why the church doesn't have a great deal of influence in our world surely if we had relationships like I've just described surely that would make the world sit up and look and say man oh man that's different surely that would be a compelling community at least to ask the question what drives them well perhaps you've never thought of church like this before this might be new to you or perhaps you've grown weary perhaps you've been hurt by bad experience of church and you're now seeing your view of church through your own experience your own feelings your own biases rather than seeing it through God's eyes so I'll just finish with this sentence the old saying I think remains true beauty is in the eye of the beholder so what do you see when you look around at our local church expression beauty that draws you in or just a collection of annoying people that allows you to be self righteous and sit on the sidelines and snipe let me pray

Lord help us to hear your word again as we've prayed this over the last five weeks help us to hear your word you've spoken clearly help us to listen and heed and respond radicalise us Lord in the truest sense of being servants of the Lord Jesus so we might be a compelling community gospel shaped and gospel revealing I pray this in Jesus name Amen Amen Amen Thank you.