

The starting point: Seeing the church with God's eyes

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to have the Bible reading. Hebrews chapter 12, verses 18 to 29. 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 the innumerable angels in the 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.

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.

[1 : 36] 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, for our God is a consuming fire.

Well, there's two things we crave as people, more than other things. That is, one's identity, and one's community.

So, identity is a sense of who I am, and how I fit into the world. But because we're relational beings, we also crave community.

And these two things actually create a curious tangle for us, as we try to pursue both of them.

See, our sense of identity is oftentimes very individualistic. It's often expressed in what I do. So, I'm a mechanic, I'm an engineer, I'm a doctor, I'm a pastor, and so on and so forth.

[2 : 39] Or even more individualistic these days is that my own expression of who I am. That is, I am me. What more is there to say?

I am David Calderwood. And coming with that, then my individualistic notion is that I have a sense of entitlement to be what I want to be, and expect others to respond to me as I should be responded to.

But here's the problem, you see, because that sort of individualism doesn't fit easily with community. Because community is about being part of something bigger than self.

It's not easy to be part of something bigger than self when you're driven by your own sense of entitlement. And so we're torn. We really are torn.

We want to be in a relational community, but we don't want to do that which is necessary to protect and build the community we crave in the first place.

[3 : 44] Because to build community, that calls for loyalty and commitment, and putting others ahead of our own sense of entitlement. And so I think we get ourselves, as I say, in a curious tangle.

We speak, and as Christians, we speak very loudly about the importance of community. What we are here this morning. But, we act individualistically.

And so, I think oftentimes, community just becomes a tool to get what we want, or to get what we think we deserve, as we engage in that community.

And, I think so many Christians are caught in the same tangle in thinking about church, which is what we're going to be doing over the next nine weeks. And, at the heart of this series on the church, which we're calling the Fortes of Heaven, at the heart of this series is identity in community.

So, there are those two words. We're going to have to work out how they fit together. Identity in community. You see, as a Christian, I am an individual.

[5 : 06] I'm using the word individual as opposed to individualistic. The two are quite different. As a Christian, I'm an individual. I'm saved and renewed entirely by God's grace to me in Christ's death and resurrection.

And so, therefore, my identity is now entirely shaped by relationship with Jesus. I am his died-for person, and he is my Savior and Lord.

Lord, but then much of the language of the Bible is plural and corporate. And so, I have to say, I am a died-for person as an individual in a died-for community.

The family of God. What we're calling Christ's church. And here's the heart of this series.

God's word doesn't allow for identity in Christ individualistically with only lip service given to identity in Christ's community, the church.

[6 : 19] I'll say that again. God's word doesn't allow for identity in Christ individualistically with only lip service given to identity in Christ's community, the church.

And that's hard for us, I think, to grasp that because we are naturally inclined to individualistic thinking. You can reference the second page of the bulletin.

We're naturally inclined to what's called their solo flying as Christians. While God's word is constantly pushing us to community or formation flying.

And as it says in the bulletin there, and I think rightly, even our stints of formation flying as of this morning, even that can be very individualistic.

That is, I will fly loosely associated with formation because at that moment I perceive some benefit to me in doing so. Otherwise, I will just naturally do my own thing, fly solo.

[7 : 33] So, what that means is that this series is going to be hard to hear and engage with, I think, for many of us. But before we get there, let's jump into the text.

Let's jump into the series by asking, what picture or idea, therefore, do you have in mind when you think about church? Now, picking up some of the pictures, most Australians would say that the church is that weird old building down the road that's got a cross stuck on top of it.

or they might say, well, actually, the church is just a really outdated institution in our society, well past its use-by date even though it doesn't realize it.

Or perhaps even more viciously, people would say, well, the church is just a hunting ground for pedophiles. What about you?

What would you say? Perhaps you might say, well, actually, church is, the church is the place you go to worship God on a Sunday.

[8 : 42] So you think of the church as a building. It's a location. I'm going to church. You might think church is about identifying with a particular doctrine or denomination.

So I'm a Baptist or Presbyterian or an Anglican or a Charismatic or an Independent Reformer or so on and so forth. Or perhaps church for you has just been a lifetime habit or something you learned to do when you were a child.

Your parents always say that's what you do on a Sunday morning. You go to church. That's what our family does. We go to church. So therefore, after a lifetime, you turn up on a Sunday morning but don't really think too much about it.

You don't see it as a family community. You don't think of it as something really good but costly because it requires loyalty and commitment and engagement at every level.

That's well beyond you. You just go to church. Or perhaps maybe church is your social club and your attraction into a group like this is common interests, perhaps similar likes.

[9 : 56] You want to be around nice people and you perceive that well at least there's some nice people in a group like this. Or you might have similar needs. So I want my children to be exposed to the values that this group holds or whatever.

similar stages in life. Similar causes to fight. And the danger of those sorts of things is that sometimes people can be drawn into a community like ours through those things and they're far, far more important than the hearing of God's word or the gospel.

And so they could be in the community, the gospel could be removed but as far as they're concerned the community continues. And perhaps you're already writing off this series, this teaching series because of the name Church, A Foretaste of Heaven.

I wouldn't be at all surprised if some here are thinking, seriously? That is so out of touch with reality. My experience of church has been anything but A Foretaste of Heaven or if it is A Foretaste of Heaven I don't want to be part of Heaven.

So some are so hurt by their experience of church that the whole notion of the church as a family of God is just, well, at best a nice theory but it sure doesn't work in practice because your experience of church has left you disappointed disillusioned and seriously wounded and damaged and fearful because some of the most nasty behavior you've ever been subject to has been from church-going people.

[11 : 54] And so I think what that does for people and there's a huge community like this in Newcastle we have lots and lots of people who wander between churches, between church communities longing for community, longing for a place to belong but keeping people at arm's length, not willing to be committed except in their own terms and in response to their own fears and ideas of what will make them happy.

And so people drift in and they drift out again, always searching for that happy community. Friends, that's a long introduction but let me say this, if we're to have a correct picture of church in our mind and correct practice and commitment within this local church family then we need to see church, the church with God's eyes and through God's eyes and that's what we're about this morning.

And as I said before that might mean I think that this series will be hard to hear and engage with for many here this morning. it may require a massive change in your thinking and priorities and behaviour especially when we jump into passages like Hebrews which in spite of its difficulties has actually a fairly simple message and the simple message is that God's church is something that God has established and it is glorious.

as God sees it and so the gap opens up I think between what we might think of church how we might see it through our eyes and what we're going to hear from God's word about how God sees it through his eyes and there's our challenge over the next weeks to realign our thinking to God's thinking but first let me give you some background before we jump into Hebrews 12 and have a look at the details in there the background context to the letter with which we won't understand the beauty of what's been taught in these verses so the letter as a whole was written to encourage Christians who had been converted from a Jewish heritage they'd been converted into small church family units scattered variously around the Roman Empire and the letter was written to assure them of this that to be in Christ as an individual believer was to be in his church which was to be in community with all believers and that was very much a foretaste of heaven beautiful precious to the Lord and totally secure now why was that necessary well because for these

Christians having become Christians with the joy of being freed from sin and been renewed into wonderful new relationship and the good life with God it seems that many were totally shocked to find that having become Christians life became heaps harder not easier and it became heaps harder because they were facing persecution from the Romans and from the Jewish authorities as well and the result of that was that so many of these Christians were being tempted to go back to the old Jewish faith the old Jewish way of doing things with its system of priests and temples and sacrifices and holy days it had served their ancestors well and even more importantly it was accepted by the Roman authorities so that would mean going back to that would mean an avoidance of any more persecution and suffering their little church families their little church communities looked insignificant compared to the

[16 : 28] Jewish synagogues compared to the other pagan religions with their massive temples and their holy days and their holy people and their fancy rituals the church just didn't look as if it was cutting it and how does the writer encourage them then in their daily experience of awful persecution and suffering from Jews and Romans alike well he presents a picture of God's church as seen through God's eyes beautiful precious built around Jesus and unshakable so diving into some of the points then I want to make this morning primarily from these verses primarily the church is God's gathering of his saved or redeemed people and the

Greek word for church is ekklesia now if you look at some of these verses 18 and then verse 22 the passage is put together with lots of Old Testament pictures to describe things but essentially the passage is just a series of really strong contrasts verse 18 powerful contrast between God's gathering or assembling or churching of his people at Mount Sinai and verse 22 his gathering assembling or church of his people in the heavenly Jerusalem it's a before and after picture but before we get into the detail I just want to pick up then the fact that churching is about gathering that's the essential concept of the church it's God gathering or assembling or calling out or congregating that's where we get the idea of the word congregation from it's

God congregating or bringing together assembling his people and God's commitment to churching his people is evident right across the Bible the Bible starts and finishes with God speaking about gathering his church around him it starts the first picture of churches in Genesis 2 Adam and Eve were gathered from the world in general as it were into God's special place at the Garden of Eden into special relationship with God which was the good life the good life that God intended but of course then we know from Genesis 3 that sin wrecked all of that forcing God to disperse his people but as he dispersed his people from the Garden he dispersed them with the promise that in the future he would act to gather them back into that same condition again as in

Genesis 2 2 that he would fix the problem and once again call or summon or gather his people into a special place in new relationship with them and with the internal inheritance of heaven and that's exactly what we see when we jump across then from Genesis 2 and 3 to Exodus 19 God gathers his people out of Egypt where they'd been in slavery and he brings them to himself at Mount Sinai.

Gathers them to himself, new relationship, I will be your God and you will be my people. And once again, it's a picture of the life of blessing. The life that God intended his people to have as they were gathered around him and enjoying his blessing.

[20 : 27] And that means then also that God's gathering of his people has always been central to his purpose and finally achieved in Christ.

If you look at verse 23, this is the verse that Matt helpfully focused on and made me really nervous to start with. Verse 22, you've come to Mount Zion unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, unto innumerable ages in festal gathering, unto the assembly of the firstborn, and so on and so forth.

Now there's a lot of remote pictures in there that are Old Testament pictures coming from the time of the Exodus. But the main thing, just start with the main thing and then we'll say a couple of things about the other, the detailed pictures.

The main thing is that the focus of that verse is on what Jesus has done to establish the church, to gather God's people. God's purpose has never changed.

Right through the Bible, his purpose has been to gather his people, but now the end point has been achieved. God's people are now gathered, are now churchied, are now finally and completely around Jesus.

[21 : 53] It is what he has done that has actually brought God's purpose to fruition. What he has done through his death and resurrection.

The rest of those things in there, I don't have time to gain to, but I can talk to anybody who wants to talk about it. They're just pictures, different pictures from the Old Testament of what Christians are as viewed through God's eyes.

The main point being that Jesus is the one who has finally brought this assembly, this church in God's people to completion. And verse, the end of verse 22, second part of verse 22, it's a festal gathering.

That is, it's a joyful, triumphant celebratory. Gathering and community. Why is it that? Because it's complete.

Because it's finally, it is the end point that God has been working for right throughout history. His people are gathered now in Jesus around him.

[23 : 02] It's Christ's death, verse 24, that achieves God's purposes because it deals with sin and restores his people to perfect relationship with God and secures the ultimate community or inheritance of God's people which is heaven.

Heaven tested now in Christ died for resurrection community of church families. Now, that's complicated in the way it's put there but it's exactly in line with what Jesus himself says back in Matthew chapter 16, verse 18.

So, if you want to turn back, if not, just mark it and check it at home sometime for yourself. We looked at that a few weeks ago when we were looking through Matthew. It's a very, very profound statement of church in Matthew chapter 16, verse 18.

The first 16 chapters of Matthew has been given over to establishing and nurturing, Jesus establishing and nurturing disciples into that final point of saying, okay, who am I?

And they get to that point where the disciples say, wow, you are God. You are Messiah. You are God's King and Savior. The one who had been promised. The one who had been promised to come and bring God's people back into relationship with him, into community with him.

[24 : 31] And with that, now that it's been established who he is, Jesus immediately goes on to say what he has come to do. Verse 18, he has come to build his church, establish and build his church.

In Matthew chapter 4, it was saying that he had come to establish and build the kingdom of heaven. The two are interchangeable. Jesus has come to build his church.

And it would be a precious, unshaggle community. The means to that end, Matthew chapter 16, verse 21.

Jesus then goes on to speak about his death and resurrection coming up in Jerusalem. The order is very important. The end point that Jesus comes for is the establishing of the church.

That's the community. The means to that end is people being saved individually through the death of Christ. So the church, my friends, is God's big idea.

[25 : 57] The notion of the church spans the whole of the Bible, the whole of biblical history, the whole of world history. Now, why do I say that?

Well, you might think I'm being a bit defensive here, but I've come across it so many times that Christians think that the notion of church is just a notion that's been beat up by pastors as a means of controlling people and getting them to be committed to things.

Now, I'm sure pastors have used it that way. No question at all. Perhaps even I've done it. Hopefully I haven't. If I have, come and tell me afterwards. Don't stand up and wave your hand now because that would be terribly embarrassing if you all stood up.

You shouldn't have been laughing. That was a serious point. Yeah, okay, anyway, let's just move on. Yeah, so no doubt some pastors have used it like that, but the point is the church is God's idea, has been from the beginning, and it's been such a costly idea.

It cost him the life of his son, and that was what Jesus had in mind when he died, that he was establishing, he was doing that which was necessary to bring together a community of God's people as it had been in Genesis 2 and as God had promised it would be once again.

[27 : 21] God's purpose in his world has never simply been to save people from their sin as a solitary, individualistic experience.

Yes, every single person here as a Christian has been saved as an individual. There's no question about that, but God's purpose has never been to save people as an individualistic experience.

People are saved one by one, but ultimately this is God gathering his church, building the community of died-for people.

That is his end point. And the church, therefore, point three is also the display of God's glory or the verifying data of God's grace and salvation.

This is a, that's a quotation from somewhere, but I didn't write down who the quotation was from, so I have no idea where I got it from. I've stolen it from somebody. It's the verifying data of God's grace in salvation.

[28 : 28] Again, another strong before and after picture in these verses. Look at verses 18 through to 21. For you have come, for you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice whose words made the hearers beg, 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. Before and after picture.

It used to be, before Christ, it used to be that God's people gathered before him in the context of his holiness and their unresolved sin.

And so quite naturally, it was a terrifying context. And God spoke his word and his holiness became even more evident. If even a beast touches this mountain, I tell you, it will be burned, consumed.

Moses said, I tremble with fear. The scrutiny of God's word, threatening judgment for his sin, just left people debilitated before God.

[29 : 54] But now, verses 22 and 23 and 24, but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God. And then it goes on to speak about the gathering, the difference in the gathering now in Christ.

Because of the word of Christ on our behalf, God's gathered people, God's church, meets now in a totally different context. Now it's perfect.

Now it's personal. Now it's unbreakable. Now it's a family relationship with God that's governed by joy and assurance and comfort and confidence, not fear.

God's word no longer creates fear but brings grace and comfort and mercy to God's people.

And so therefore, the before and after picture with regard to church and church itself there becomes a wonderful testimony to God's grace, to God's character.

[31 : 02] It's in the church, this community here, it's in the church that we see God's delivery on his promise that he would act to undo the effects of sin and bring people into a special place in special relationship gathered around the Lord Jesus.

Perfect community that worships him. And when you look around this community and you see the ragtag bunch of people we are broken, dysfunctional in a hundred, thousand different ways, that speaks of God's grace, doesn't it?

God's character. And so the title of the series is right.

Church is a wonderful foretaste of heaven. And in this passage the writer moves seamlessly between heaven, which is the ultimate headquarters of God's church or God's died for community, and the immediate context of his writing.

These ordinary believers, men and women, boys and girls, scattered around the Roman Empire, suffering daily, bending under persecution, just struggling to get through one day after the next.

[32 : 41] What's said about heaven is said about that motley group of people. The community have died for people. God's church is expressed in the picture of God's church is expressed in local church families like this one.

But that comes in Ephesians 2 and 3, and as I say, we'll dig into that a little bit more next week. But the point I just want to make in passing this morning is that as the writer moves seamlessly from heaven, the ultimate headquarters of God's church, to the daily work-a-day world context of God's church, with all its failings, with all its fears, with all its imperfections, as the writer moves between those two, then what we can say is this, that church for us is not like a third-class waiting room while we wait for our first-class accommodation in heaven when we die.

I think that's how many Christians view the church. It's something I'd prefer not to be in, but this is the waiting room. But one day I'll be in the real place.

There's a sense in which that's true, but there's another sense in which it's terribly untrue. We are now gathered in this place, God's YouTube clip, God's YouTube video, demonstrating God's wisdom and glory in salvation as we live out in practice the life-changing power of the gospel.

That's what God, that's how God views his church. Do we do it well? No. Do we struggle to do it well? Well, I hope we do. Either of those two things are irrelevant because that's to God's view of his church.

[34 : 50] And the final point I want to make then is that God's church is a permanent gathering. In fact, it's not too much to say it's the only unshakable reality in this world.

Now, that's a big call, isn't it? But I believe that's what's been said here. If you look again at verse 26, 27, 28, there's a contrast.

Contrast in the imagery of shaking. So you remember back in Exodus, Mount Sinai is said to have shaken when God gathered his people.

Why? It was a sign of God's presence, of God's holiness, God's awesomeness in his world and among his people.

But that shaking back at Mount Sinai was nothing to the shake up that was experienced in the world when Jesus died and was resurrected. because in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God, as it were, has put a massive condemned sticker on all the apparently strong and lasting things in this world.

[36 : 12] And he's put an unbreakable sticker on his kingdom, the church. So Torah may think their youth are unbreakable, but they're not.

At least that's not true. Yep. The only thing that's unbreakable in this world is God's church. So there's shaking at Sinai, shaking when Jesus died and was resurrected, but there's another shaking to come in these verses at the end of the world.

And the picture there is one of, well, I don't know if you see, I've never been through a serious earthquake, so you see everything just jangling, buildings crumbling.

Well, that's the picture here. The shaking of God's world is going to be so severe and so continuous that when it finishes, when the dust settles, the only thing that's going to be left is God's church.

church. All the things in the world that look strong and lasting and worthwhile will one day crumble and fade.

[37 : 29] It's a big thing today to talk about being on the right side of history. I get sick and tired of hearing it. Everybody wants to be on the right side of history, but nobody has any idea of how to get on the right side of history. And here it is here.

If you want to be on the right side of history, be in God's church through salvation by grace alone in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ's church currently despised from those on the outside, apparently weak and unstable and even despised by those on the inside.

will last forever. Why? Because that's God's plan and purpose. When God has finished shaking his world in judgment, there will only be the church.

Maybe hard for us to believe, maybe hard for us to grasp, but the only really secure thing in God's world is being part of God's glorious church.

[38 : 36] So let me wrap up then by two or three questions. One question really in a couple of illustrations. The question then is, whose eyes are you viewing the church through?

Is it our society's eyes? Is the church past its use-by-date, as it is often portrayed? Well, I think the answer is yes. If we think of the church as some sort of antiquated organization, expression, or as buildings.

Yeah, absolutely past their use-by-date, if that's where people's confidence is. But if you're speaking about God's living organism, God's community, the gathering of God's people around the Lord and His Word, then nothing could be further from the truth.

in spite of appearances sometimes. So for my friends, the size of the congregation, the state of the building and the carpets even, has no relevance to the health of a church.

or working out how we think about and value the church of God.

[39 : 59] And can I say that even our own lived experience of church with its failures and hurts, even that is irrelevant to how we think about and value God's church.

Saying the church with God's eye is to have a great sense of privilege in being part of that which God has planned and acted to make glorious and permanent in heaven and which has given real visible expression in local church assemblies like ours.

Seeing the church with God's eyes, through God's eyes, is to act passionately, to show the watching world through how we relate together and live together here.

that we are God's renewed people, to show people the changing power of the gospel, that the gospel actually works, and that people who crave identity and community can find both in such a harmonious and meaningful way in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Seeing the church through God's eyes is recognizing that God has brought you into this local church family, and he has. If you're here this morning, God has brought you here. Why has he brought you here?

[41 : 22] Because it's a good and necessary place for you to be. And like any family community, it therefore requires, it will be costly, it will require loyalty and commitment and hard work, because family members always manage to annoy each other to varying degrees.

Now, seeing God's church through God's eyes doesn't mean we're blind to sin or the reality of failure. No, that's everywhere around us.

It's part of me, it's part of you. But it does mean that we'll see in Christ that we have far more in common than we ever have at odds, even when we fail one another and hurt one another.

Now, my friends, perhaps this is pretty new to you, perhaps you've never ever thought of church like this. Perhaps you have in the past, but you've just grown weary or just been worn down by hurt and disappointment, bad experience.

And perhaps you now have just been reduced to seeing the church through your own eyes of past experience and hurt, rather than seeing it through God's eyes.

[42 : 46] So I'll just finish by reminding you, the Lord views his church as his precious community. He's died for a community of those made new in Christ at great cost.

It's a good community that he has always wanted his people to be in because it's a testimony to his character and his grace. And from there, we can say that God wants us to have the same view towards one another.

We should have the same eyes for our brothers and sisters in Christ as God has for his church. others. And those eyes should be through the filter of by grace alone.

All right, let me pray and I'm done. Lord, so often your word is hard, not so much because it's difficult to understand, but Lord, because the concepts are inconvenient to our own personal thinking.

And so, Lord, I pray that we might not stumble over our own thinking, our own fears, our own past hurts, our own preferences, but we might be able to see what your word is saying and align ourselves, Lord, that we might also view this church family here through the eyes that you view us and have it revolutionize us, Lord, ourselves and revolutionize others here as well.

[44 : 25] I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.