

Disciples: Gather

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Date: 19 May 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, do keep your Bibles open there to Hebrews chapter 10, verse 19 to 25. Well, we're about to start a new gathering or congregation next Sunday at Blackburn, so I think it is appropriate to be looking at this topic tonight.

Right? There is something, isn't it, about belonging that makes us desire to come together, to be in each other's company.

And having lived through a pandemic, most of us have, yes, yes, where we were deprived of this freedom, that has really made us appreciate, right, what we may have taken for granted for all our lives until then.

You know, celebrating a birthday online or Christmas, it's just not the same, is it? Nor was live streaming church service, by the way. For you guys trying to sing or share the Lord's Supper in your own lounge room, and me standing here with just three people down the back and looking into the camera, it's not quite the same as what we do have right now, is it?

And yes, thanks to COVID, we can now use Zoom for work. And, you know, we like that because it allows us to work from home, right?

[1 : 3 0] Why? Because then we can be with the people that we truly cherish. Not that we don't like our colleagues, but it's really family and friends that we want to be close to, isn't it?

So we all get the importance of gathering physically. It's a very human desire and need. But today I want to focus on a very special kind of gathering, that of Christians, because while all other gatherings, and including ours today, have a social dimension to it, you know, we want to have sort of interaction afterwards, maybe share some food or whatever, fellowship.

A Christian gathering or church is much more than that. When we gather as a church, we're actually participating in something so significant that once we realize the full extent of it, we would not want to miss it.

We would not give any thought to missing it, unless we really couldn't help it. And you know, there are Christians around the world, and even here in our own country, who know this loss deeply, because whether it's for health or age, or if it's overseas because of persecution, they are prevented from doing so regularly.

And they know exactly what they're missing. So I'm going to use Hebrews chapter 10, verses 19 to 25, as the basis for our reflection today.

[3 : 0 0] And the words which speak explicitly of meeting together, actually only come right at the end in verse 24. But let's see just how the writer arrives at that point.

For he begins in verse 19 on the screen in your Bibles. Therefore, brothers and sisters, 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 high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

And for those of you who have been following along in Leviticus, this is all familiar language, isn't it? You will recall that on the Day of Atonement, it's only the high priest, Aaron, that could go behind the curtain, enter the most holy place with the sacrifice of the animal's blood.

And you will remember how only certain priests, that was two to three weeks ago, only certain priests that were clean, able-bodied, or undefiled could actually draw near to bring and offer the food offering.

And then I also said that really, if you reflect on it, no one was good enough. Not even Aaron, actually. God was just making a concession so that he could come.

[4 : 32] But of course, when Jesus finally comes along, he is the perfect high priest, that now, through him, we all are able to draw near.

All of us. Whether we're able-bodied or not, we can draw near because our guilt is washed away by his blood and our consciences cleanse by his blood of all unrighteousness.

And so, now we can approach God confidently, with full assurance, as it says. Boldly, almost.

Not because of who we are or what we've done, but only because of faith in Jesus, our great high priest. And so, as Christians, this is an amazing spiritual reality.

We're able to draw near to God and come into his presence. Now, of course, we're not coming anymore to a temple or tabernacle, but we're coming to God's eternal throne, where Jesus is seated at his right hand.

[5 : 41] And so, the moment you become a Christian, the moment you are a Christian, this is where we draw near to God. All the time.

We do this spiritually, not physically. But as Christians, we live every moment of our day, all our lives, in God's presence.

And God's given us his spirit as proof of this. Each time we pray, each time we pray, we draw near to God at his most holy place.

Every time you open your Bible, even if you're sitting on a train or a bus, you do so in God's presence. He's there to hear you and to speak to you.

And just because we can't see or touch anything doesn't mean it's not real, is it? Because many of the things that we consider so important in life, essential, like love, hope, and faith, are not things that we can see or touch, is it?

[6 : 45] And yet, there are no less real. So I want us to pause and just take in that reality, this amazing reality of now being able to do, actually what the Israelites longed for for such a long time.

But they couldn't. They had to rely on Aaron, but only in a very limited way. Aaron, when he approached God behind the curtain, had to do so cautiously, tentatively.

But now, when we believe in Jesus, we can come to God boldly and confidently. And this is something we do as a church when we gather each Sunday.

So you see, when we're gathering, we're not just a group of like-minded people coming together, sharing a common interest, enjoying each other's company, which I know is true as well. But no, when we come together as a group of believers, we are giving tangible expression to this spiritual reality of gathering around God's throne, drawing near to His presence, and doing so confidently and boldly as an expression of that faith in Jesus.

Now, slightly later on in Hebrews, just a couple of chapters on, chapter 12, which I've got on the screen, this is what we continue to read. And this is a picture, a comparison really, of this very gathering.

[8 : 11] And so the writer says, You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, to a trumpet blast, or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it bag that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded, what was being said, that even an animal touches that mountain, it must be stoned to death, the sight of which was so terrifying that Moses said, I'm trembling with fear.

No, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And so here the writer's comparing Israel when they were gathered at Mount Sinai, where yes, God was present, but there the people were met with an awesome and fearful sight of God, so much so they trembled in fear.

But by comparison, now we as the church are doing the very same thing, coming to God's presence, but at a far better and awesome place. Now I don't know about you, but many of the people in the world today have a travel bucket list, don't they?

[9 : 36] I don't know what's your number one destination on your list, and some of you may have already been there and done that, but whatever that destination is, it's nothing compared to this

destination, isn't it?

Coming into God's presence at the heavenly Jerusalem. But notice that the writer talks about it as a single location, albeit spiritual one, where all believers gather.

It's not multiple cities, but one city of Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. There is only one universal church of the firstborn. And church, incidentally, simply means gathering in Greek.

So all believers across time and space are gathered in one single joyful assembly because there's only one God. There's only one throne.

But now, instead of trembling in fear, where even Moses was trembling in fear, we come with joy. Instead of begging God to say, no more, don't speak anymore, no, we say we are eager to hear God's voice.

[10:42] We are able to because of Jesus. And so really, the physical gathering of believers, what we're doing right now, is unique because we give tangible expression to the spiritual assembly, which we cannot express another way.

You listening to a podcast sermon in your home does not express that assembly. When you watch a live stream service, that's not being gathered.

Yes, you are joining, but you're not gathered. You do not give expression to them. Doing a prayer walk along a beach, beautiful as God's creation is, is not an expression of that assembly.

And so that's why last week, if you were here, God commanded, didn't He, Israel back in Leviticus to hold sacred assemblies because that was a foreshadowing of God's ultimate objective of gathering around Himself, His people, for eternity.

And note here as well that God is the one who commands this. If you recall, He said, these are my appointed festivals. It's He who initiates this gathering.

[11:54] I remember some years ago now, being a fresh student attending Ridley Chapel in my first year. And all of us freshies, you know, we were enthusiastic, but slightly naive.

And someone made the mistake at the start of chapel of inviting the Holy Spirit into our presence. I'm sure it doesn't happen anymore, right, at Ridley? Is that right?

But I remember, and I think it was our principal then, Peter Adam, gently chastising us and saying, that you know what, it was actually presumptuous to be inviting the Spirit into our gathering because the truth is actually the opposite.

God invites us and allows us into His presence, not the other way around. And when we come, we come humbly and reverently, isn't it?

It's just like having an audience with the King, you know, King Charles. We don't set up shop in the throne room at Buckingham Palace and then we invite King Charles in. Instead, He's the one, isn't it, that's seated on the throne.

[13:05] And then when He's ready, He summons us into His presence. Now, you may not want to go and see King Charles, that's fine. But that's how it is, isn't it? Each time we gather on a Sunday, we're coming into God's presence.

That should make us think carefully how we do. Yes, with boldness, but also with humility and reverence. Now, that doesn't mean we're all silent and solemn-faced.

We come joyfully with warm hearts, and yet we shouldn't be doing so lightly, should we? Or without thought. Because we're giving expression to drawing near to God's heavenly presence.

So, let me encourage you, come prepared, come expectant. So, for example, make an effort to be here on time, to start well.

You know, I've heard it said that some churches talk about the opening songs as the warm-up. And you know, it's so optional. And some churches even have more songs, right?

[14:07] Just to give people more time to settle in, to come, if they're running late. Now, I'm not trying to be critical of them, but I don't think that's the right attitude, is it? I mean, sure, we can sing more songs, that's fine, but it's not to allow people to warm up, is it?

That's not how we approach God's throne of grace. And I know that life's complicated, and I want to get to some practical implications later, about just some of the limitations that we face.

But for now, let's bear in mind that our physical gathering together is important because it expresses the amazing privilege that we have of drawing near, of being gathered as the church of God's Son, church of the firstborn around God's throne.

And so really, the first and foremost question that we ask when we come is not, what is in it for me tonight? What's in it for me when I come? Rather, the first response is really to be one of

thankfulness and praise because we realize just what we already have in Christ.

That to be able to even approach is something that God has already given and done for us. That should be our first and foremost aim when we gather, to be filled with praise and thanksgiving, to remember already what God has done through His Son, Jesus.

[15 : 31] But of course, God is not a miser, is He? Because as we gather in joyful assembly, then God will continue to pour out His blessings as we gather. And so the second thing that occurs when we gather, and that's the second point of our outline, is to reap or to receive the spiritual blessings of being in God's presence.

Now what are these blessings? Well, let me read it first and then just explain a bit about the text. But in verses 23 to 25, I think we have three points there.

There may be other blessings that come when we meet in God's presence, but this passage here I think has three. And so as we read, verse 23, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for we who promise is faithful, and let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Now let me just first say I think that this passage here is not really about saying if you meet together, then these are the things that have, you know, these are the blessings that flow.

So in a sense, the text is not really focused like that. The text is more saying given that we now are able to access and come to God's presence, into God's presence, this is such a great blessing that we already have, let us hold unswervingly and on and on and on.

[16 : 57] Let us do all these things including meeting together. But I think as we meet together, good things do happen. And the three things that I mentioned here are first, we're sustained in the hope that we profess.

When we come together, we're allowed better to hold on unswervingly to the hope we profess, be encouraged to keep trusting God's faithfulness and promises. Second, when we meet together, there is now a natural context to spur one another on in love and good deeds.

That is, we are able to put our faith into practice and obey God's word together. But notice that it's not just that we do good and love one another, we are also able to spur each other on to do the same things.

So there's a double thing, isn't it? We do it and then we spur others to do it as well. And then of course when we keep doing these things, what it helps us to do is keep our eyes on Jesus, thirdly, so that we keep looking forward to the approaching day of the Lord.

It's just like when a big occasion is coming up, whether maybe it's your wedding or maybe it's a big holiday you've booked, the closer we get to it, the more anticipate we are, aren't we?

[18 : 13] And we're extra motivated to be ready for when the day comes. And that's the same with the day of the Lord, isn't it? Tomorrow will be one day closer when the Lord Jesus will come.

And so knowing that, we are expectant of it. We are getting prepared. We are ready that it could happen any time because when that day happens, we will enjoy face to face what we already have spiritually now.

That is to be in God's very presence. Amen. So I want to say again that these verses here don't really, it's not to mandate that meeting together is the only way where we can reap these benefits. And yet, I think the writer is saying that whilst you're hoeing unswervingly to these things and spurring one another on and looking forward to the day of the Lord, don't forget to meet together. It's almost a by the way comment, but yet again, it's not. He thinks it important at this point to encourage them to meet together. Why? Because I think meeting together, as I said already, provides the natural setting for these other things to occur.

[19 : 30] Now also, the passage doesn't tell us what to do when we meet, but I think we can look at other parts of the Bible to get a sense. So Acts chapter 2, for example, when the early church met, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship.

to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Elsewhere in Colossians chapter 3, verse 16, Paul also wrote, let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach, admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

And as you can see, many of the things that we do now in church mirror these things, isn't it? And both passages, in particular, have the hearing of God's Word or the message of Christ, the same

thing, devotion to the apostles' teaching as a key element that happens in our gathering together. And that's important because it's from God's Word that we're reminded of God's faithfulness to His promises. And we're taught how to spur each other on to love and good deeds.

Well, I did say at the end that I've lost my place, sorry.

[20 : 45] I wanted to get on to some practical implications of this and particularly some of the challenges we face. Now, ideally, I think, hopefully, up to now, if you're a Christian, then you sort of, you didn't really need me to persuade you of the importance of gathering.

That maybe, like me, your response would be very, like what the psalmist said, David said, in Psalm 122. Because earlier, we read in verse 1 that David said, I rejoice with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

David's saying, well, are we going to church? Great! Count me in. That really ought to be our attitude, isn't it? Each week. Why? He says in verse 4, that is where the tribes go.

The people of God, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house, there stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

And of course, David has now been superseded by Jesus. When we know what enables us to draw near to God, then ideally, we would see it as not an obligation, but a joy and a privilege to come.

[22 : 02] So I think that ought to be true, and yet the writer of Hebrews did keep urging believers not to give up meeting together. And he even says that some were in the habit of doing so.

Now, why is that? Well, you know, we all know how habits develop, don't we? how things become part of the routine of our lives.

And I wonder whether you've ever realized that bad habits are very easy to pick up, isn't it? It happens without you really trying. Like me, slouching, bad posture, doesn't take practice, just happens.

Spending too much time on social media, they're easy to form, right? And once they do their heart to kick. Now, good habits, on the other hand, require discipline, don't they?

You know, I'm not trying to boast, but I think I have a pretty good fitness habit of cycling. Yeah? But even so, I still find it takes effort to keep it up.

[23 : 12] You know, particularly when the weather's like this, I mean, not wet, but just cold, to get in my gear to get out for a ride when the body's tired actually does take effort, doesn't it?

Good habits require discipline. And that's the case, I think, with coming to church. Sadly, with human nature, busy lives, societal pressures, it's easy to fall into the bad habit of not meeting together.

And so, for example, if we've had a tough week and, you know, mentally we're just not in the mood, we might give ourselves that, you know, permission not to come this Sunday, you know. And, you know, we live, I want to say again that we live under grace, not law.

So, yep, okay. But the thing is that once we've done it once, well, it becomes easy, doesn't it, for the same reason not to do it again. And then the next time around, the bar for not being in the mood gets lowered a bit.

And before you know it, it becomes a habit of not coming. It's the same with the live stream service that we've, technology that we've got, for example, that was a blessing during COVID.

[24 : 26] But what's the unintended effect? It's sort of made it easier now to stay home. And I do understand that some people can't come for good reason, for health or other reasons.

But for some of us, then, it gives us the option just to tune in because that's easier. And we're still here. We're still getting the feeding and all that. But what we're not doing, really, is giving full expression, isn't it, of this reality of being united in joyful assembly around God's throne.

Now, as a church, as pastors, Andrew and I, we could turn off the live stream and force people back to church. I'm not sure that that would work, but we could do that. But that's not what we want to do, is it?

Because we know that there are some people that, you know, and if you're watching live stream today and you're not able to make it, we understand. We still want to serve you because you can't, at least that's better than nothing, that you can't come.

So the whole point of today is not really to guilt trip anyone who's on live stream or not here or whatever, because I don't want you to hear that if you're not at church, you're less righteous than people who are here, and that if you're here every week, and we do take attendances by the way,

so we know who has been coming for the last 26 weeks.

[25 : 45] Steph and I look at it from quarter to quarter and it's not me actually. Last time we looked at it, there were three people who came for the last 26 weeks, so good on you.

But rather, we're not trying to, this is not to be done out of obligation, is it? But out of true desire to be here because what we want to do is to reflect this reality that we are really gathered in joyful assembly in the city of Zion, spiritually.

And therefore, it's inconsistent to be trying to find reasons not to gather. And I know that sometimes people would say, I already attend growth groups on Wednesday, so I've done my weekly gathering, or I've listened to my sermon podcast with my friend as a favorite preacher, you know, or I've got to my prayer group triplet.

Now, all these are good things to do, and please keep them up. I'm not saying don't do these things. But if you think about it, that's not really the fullest expression, is it, of what we are as a church?

And so when the opportunity does present itself in the form of a weekly Sunday gathering like we do now, then let's make a good habit out of it. And I want to say that specifically for those who are going to Blackburn, and applies for us here as well who are staying, any church really, when we gather each Sunday, when you go there next week, be mindful that first and foremost, it is an expression of who you already are, that you already belong to the heavenly gathering of the church of the firstborn.

[27 : 28] So it's not about how many people gather, it's not about the location, but it's the fact that as the church does gather, we are reflecting the heavenly gathering of the church of the firstborn.

It's a privilege. Please think about it. It's a privilege to be able to draw near, and so it is a privilege to gather to praise the name of Jesus. And that in itself, actually, is a powerful witness to others that we are the disciples of Jesus.

So again, don't think that I'm not rostered today, so, you know, I don't have to come, I wouldn't be missed. It's not about what you're going to get, neither is it about what you are able to offer.

But rather, your presence matters because it's who you are in Christ. You are part of the church of the firstborn. And of course, when we do that regularly and faithfully, good things will happen.

God will bless us as we gather, sustain our faith, spur us on to love and good deeds, so that one day, when that day comes, we will be able to do it for eternity, face to face, with Jesus in our sight.

[28 : 45] Let's pray. Father, thank you that we can draw near to you and approach your throne of grace confidently by the blood of Jesus.

Thank you that by your spirit we are gathered around your heavenly throne. Help us not to lose the habit of gathering physically each Sunday and to use our time of gathering well to hear and obey your word, to encourage and spur one another on in love and good deeds and to give thanks with prayer and song for the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

Help us to do that and we ask this in the name of our great high priest Jesus Christ. Amen.