

# Why We Gather

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I believe that most of you recall that coming out of our week of corporate consecration, I shared with you on behalf of the eldership team, five pastoral burdens for our church.

! And we shared these pastoral burdens as areas in which we want to grow this year, areas in which we want to ask the Lord to help us to grow.

I have some of them church resolutions and they are on the front of the bulletin, but I'd remind you of them again. The first one is prayer. We want to grow in praying together. The second is gathering. We want to grow in gathering together.

The third is community. We want to grow in living in community. And fourth, evangelism. We want to grow in reaching the lost. And number five, discipleship. We want to grow in being disciples. And you might also recall that I indicated that what we will do to keep these goals before us, these church resolutions before us, that what we'd be doing is every second month, we'd be bringing a message on the first Sunday of the month, and we're all together on one of these areas. And the first one we did was on the 7th of February, which was on prayer.

[ 1 : 24 ] And so this morning, I want to take some time and talk with you about the value of gathering and our desire to grow as the people of God who gather in this local church.

Now, just to be clear from the very outset, the concern this morning is that we as a local church need to grow in living out the value of regularly and consistently gathering with brothers and sisters, as we're doing this morning, as we will do tomorrow night when we gather for corporate prayer, and as we will do on Wednesday when we gather in care groups.

And from the outset, I want to say that I would be remiss if I did not say that there are many of you who hold this value of gathering highly, and you do it well, and you are examples to follow. And I commend you for that, and may that only increase.

But on the other hand, there would be those of us who have not yet embraced this value of gathering. For some of us, it remains optional, and our participation and our attendance is not as consistent as it can be, and indeed, as it should be.

And the result is that when we do not gather together, what happens is we personally suffer spiritually, but also the church suffers, because there is a dynamic that God has built into the local church that is to happen when we gather together.

[ 3 : 09 ] And I believe this morning that even as I introduce this message, in our heart of hearts, we all know where we stand. We all know whether this is a value we hold, and we also are aware if it is a value that we do not hold.

So I pray that we would all posture our hearts as we need to to hear God's word this morning. So with that introduction, would you turn with me to the book of Hebrews, chapter 10.

And this morning our attention will be directed to verses 19 through 25. Hebrews 10, we begin at verse 19.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

[ 4 : 45 ] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for the privilege we have to gather in this place. We thank you, Lord, for the ways you have already met us as we lifted our voices in song, as we came to the Lord's table.

And Father, we ask that you will continue to meet us as we sit under the preaching of your word. Lord, we desire to grow as a church in gathering together as the people of God.

Lord, we know that you're the only one who can bring lasting change and growth in this area.

And so this morning, Lord, I pray that you would use your word to build your church in this area.

Lord, use your word to encourage us, those of us who hold this value, to continue to hold this value, and even where we might grow to grow.

[ 6 : 14 ] Father, I pray for those who are aware that the value of gathering is not a priority. And I do pray, Lord, that this would be more than an awareness this morning, but you would bring each one to a place of conviction and then, Lord, enable them to have lasting change.

And Father, I pray especially for those who need to grow but don't see the need to grow. Would you open eyes and would you bring conviction?

And then, Lord, would you bring change? And Lord, do it for your glory and do it for the good of this local church. Would you speak to us now as we sit under your word.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, here's my goal for this morning's message. I pray that we would all see and embrace the truth that regularly gathering with fellow believers is an essential part of the Christian life.

Regularly gathering with fellow believers is an essential part of the Christian life. It's not an optional part, but it is an essential part. It is normal to do so.

[ 7 : 43 ] And it is subnormal not to do so. But the truth is, many times we can draw comfort when there are many people who go in a certain direction.

And I think we would all agree that there seems to be a trend in the culture just because of entertainment and distractions and even some who would choose to participate in sitting at home and viewing a church service and believe that that is a viable substitute for what we are doing here this morning.

It is so easy when there's a trend in that direction to believe that that is okay. But brothers and sisters, that is subnormal. That is not what God has called us to.

And so this passage that we have come to this morning is found in the book of Hebrews. And the book of Hebrews has a central focus on the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

It has a focus on the great salvation that Jesus has purchased for his people through the shedding of his blood. And the author of the Hebrews reminds us that through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, Jesus purchased a better covenant established on better promises.

[ 9 : 16 ] And what we see throughout the book is that the author compares and he contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant. He contrasts the old covenant over which Moses was mediator and the new covenant over which Christ is the mediator.

And he continues to do this in chapter 10 where our text is found. He begins in chapter 10 by continuing this comparison between the old and the new covenants and how the new covenant is superior to the old covenant.

And the author, in light of that, calls us to respond in three very specific ways. We find those ways in verses 19 through 25 which we just read.

And when we consider the exhortations or these calls, these calls from the author of Hebrews, we notice that they really are collective calls.

They are corporate calls. He encourages the people of God as he encourages himself to respond to this better covenant that we have in some particular ways.

[ 10 : 43 ] And I believe you will see this morning that these exhortations, these three exhortations that he gives us are best understood in the context of the gathered church.

They're best understood in the context of the gathered church as we are this morning. And these three encouragements that we find in verses 19 through 25 are really spiritual privileges that are available to God's people when they gather together to worship God in Jesus' name.

And so in our remaining time this morning, I want to consider these three privileges that the author of Hebrews reminds us of and calls us to when we gather as the people of God.

First of all, when we gather as God's people, we have the privilege and the opportunity to draw near to God. We have the privilege and the opportunity to draw near to God.

And that is not to say that we do not or we cannot draw near to God on our own as in private devotions when we are by ourselves and we pray to God or we sing to God.

[12:02] It's not to say that we aren't able to draw near to God in a personal way. We can and we should do so. But the author is pointing us to corporate worship, not individual worship.

And in order to see this, that he is calling us to draw near to God in a corporate way and not in an individual way, let's pay close attention to the author's words in verses 19 through 21.

Notice, first of all, he begins with this word, therefore, so he clues us into something. He clues us into the fact that he's making a conclusion on what he wrote earlier. And as I said, earlier he makes the point that the old covenant was based on laws and sacrifices, the sacrifices of animals that could never make the people perfect.

And so they were offered again and again, year after year. And they could not cleanse people from guilty consciences as well. And the worship that the author is referring to under the old covenant was a corporate worship.

The people gathered together and the priests would go in to the holy places. And he would take blood and he would offer that blood on behalf of himself and on behalf of the people.

[13:31] But the priest tells us, sorry, but the author tells us that this all changed through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, a new covenant was inaugurated.

And that's where the author is concluding in verse 19 when he says, therefore, brothers, since we have confidence confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God.

This is the basis for the privileges that we have as we worship God as new covenant believers.

Notice also the corporate nature of the words that he uses.

In verse 19, he says, since we have confidence. And then in verse 20, by the new and living way that he opened for us. Verse 21, since we have a great high priest over the house of God.

So the author is addressing us collectively. He is calling us to draw near to God together. He says, let us draw near to God. And that is what we are able to do as the purchased people of God.

[14:53] God has saved us individually, but he puts us in a family. He joins us to brothers and sisters. And so corporate life is really the central part of the Christian life.

The author is reminding us that we are assured of these new covenant benefits that are provided for us by Jesus Christ.

So he tells us how we are able to come by the blood of Jesus, not on our own merits. He tells us we have been washed. We have been cleansed from sin.

And on this basis, on the basis of these realities, we are able to draw near to God. And so we draw near to God as we sing together.

We draw near to God as we pray together. We draw near to God as we sit under the preaching of his word as we are doing together. In verse 20, the author refers to what we do as a new and living way.

[16:04] He says, by a new and living way. that he opened for us through the curtain. And we must not forget this. No longer do we have a system where only the priests can go into the holy places while the rest of the people remain on the outside of the tent or the temple and they aren't able to approach God.

That thick curtain that separated the holy place, the most holy place, from the rest of the tent has been torn in two from top to bottom, symbolizing that now the way into God's presence is open to God's people.

Now we know that scripture teaches us that that tabernacle that was in the earth represented the true tabernacle that really was in heaven.

And so what the author of Hebrews is saying to us is that there is this spiritual access that we have as the people of God to enter into the presence of God based on what Jesus Christ has done.

We have direct access to him. And since this is a new and a living way, we should embrace it. I mean, think about what we have this morning under the new covenant, what we get to participate in under the new covenant, and we would take it lightly that we don't embrace it, to join in with brothers and sisters when there are opportunities for us to gather.

[17:44] Those under the old covenant longed and desired that they would be able to come into the presence of God. But it was a shadow of what was to come, and so they never realized that,

and so we should not this morning lose sight of this incredible benefit that we have.

When we gather together with God's people, that we are able to access the very presence of God because of the blood of Jesus Christ, because he is the mediator who has made the way open for us and given us direct access before the throne of God.

Friends, this is no small privilege that we have. And so the author is in essence saying to us, let's take advantage of this. Let us draw near to God.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from evil consciences and our bodies washed with pure water.

This is the reality for us right now as we are gathered this morning. We look around this room and we're able to see brothers and sisters who have experienced this cleansing, this washing, this salvation through Jesus Christ.

[ 19 : 13 ] And together we're able to approach God. Together we're able to approach a holy God and not be consumed because we come in the name of Jesus, we come in the righteousness of Jesus.

Every single time there's an opportunity for us to gather, that is the privilege that awaits us. And it's a privilege that we should not count lightly and it is a privilege that if we bear in mind we would be more likely to embrace each time and every time we have this opportunity to gather.

together. So let us remember that that is what it is. It's not just like another rotary meeting or another Kiwanis meeting or another whatever social group meeting it is.

No, this is an opportunity to gather with brothers and sisters of like precious faith and come before the God of our salvation. salvation. And we get to draw near to him.

In addition to drawing near to God, when we gather with God's people, it is also an opportunity for us to strengthen our hope.

[ 20 : 39 ] Look at what the author says in verse 23. He says, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful.

Again, still in the context of this new and living way that we have by which we're able to worship God together, he says, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful.

In these words, the author points to something that is foundational to the Christian life. He refers to it as hope. The word hope is used in the Bible in many different ways, but one of the primary ways it is used in the New Testament relates to God and his saving purposes, his salvation that he extends to lost humanity.

So hope really is a salvation word. It is the expectation for the fullness of God's saving purposes to be realized in our lives.

Yes, we have been saved, but there is an aspect of future salvation which we still await. And the writer to the Hebrews says that when we gather together as the people of God, we have this opportunity to strengthen our hope.

[ 22 : 13 ] He says to us, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful.

The author is connecting our hope to the promise of a faithful God. And he's getting at the issue of wavering or giving up.

He's getting at the issue of somehow losing heart in the promises of God. Becoming disheartened and losing our grip on our hope, on this expectation that we have about God consummating, about God bringing to a full and final conclusion our salvation.

confession. The author wisely recognizes that that is one of the realities that we all face. When we gather, we are strengthened in our confession, in the hope of eternal life, beyond this life that God has given to us.

We have a hope of eternal life that when we die, or should Christ return, that God will receive us to himself. And the truth is, when we are left to ourselves and by ourselves, we tend to waver.

[ 23 : 39 ] We are bombarded by life and the circumstances of this life, and we lose heart, and we can lose faith. But when we gather together with fellow believers, and we pray about our hope in Christ, and we sing about our hope in Christ, and we hear God's word preached, we can draw strength.

our hope is actually strengthened. And perhaps even at this very moment, for many of us, this is happening, that our hope is being strengthened.

Our grip is tightening, our resolve is growing as we are gathered here this morning. and I want to ask, even as we, this morning, came to the Lord's table, did you not find yourself strengthened, strengthened in your heart as you came to the Lord's table, as you were reminded of what Christ has done for us on the cross?

As you're reminded that though we are aware of our sinfulness, that we can have an assurance that we are accepted by God through Jesus Christ, that our finishing the race is really not dependent upon us, but it is dependent ultimately upon him.

And isn't your faith strengthened even as you look around and you see brothers and sisters who are still continuing on the journey, brothers and sisters who are gathering faithfully to sing and to hear God's word preached and to pray together.

[ 25 : 22 ] we draw strength from that. And the writer to the Hebrews recognizes that and so he addresses this issue of us holding fast the confession of our hope without wavering.

Because the one who promised is faithful. We get to renew our minds on the word of God as we hear God's word preached. discouraged. You know, one of the biggest reasons that we do not gather, and we oftentimes are tempted to stay away from gatherings, whether it's a gathering like this morning or prayer or care group, and the biggest reasons is discouragement.

we grow weary. We face trials and tribulations in this life.

We meet with hard circumstances, and they drain us spiritually, and we lose hope. And we just don't desire to gather as we ought to.

And I can tell you that there have been times over the years, and this would be the most consistent response that I've gotten. From time to time, I would follow up with various ones who we may not see at a gathering.

[ 26 : 50 ] And there are obviously those times when they are hindered in legitimate ways. But one of the regular responses that I get is, I just wasn't up to coming out.

I was discouraged by this, or this wasn't working out, and I was really down about this, or down about that, and so I decided not to come. I didn't want to be around people, I've heard.

But you know what? And I always say this to them, that's the exact time that you need to come. The time when you don't want to come, the time when you feel that you want to be isolated, no, that's the time when you need to be in the presence of God with brothers and sisters, having your hope renewed, being reminded that the one who promises faithful, the one who promised cannot deny himself, and he will hold true to every single promise that he has made.

And I think there are many of us who have lived long enough and served God long enough to know that this is one of the strategic ways in which the enemy keeps us away from the context in which we can grow and the context in which we can be strengthened.

And so we need to embrace it. A very good case study for what we're talking about this morning is Psalm 73. When you read Psalm 73, it's about Asaph.

[ 28 : 21 ] And Asaph is giving his testimony about what happened to him, how he had this skewed view of life, how he was envious at the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked.

And he thought that the wicked had everything going for them. He saw the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering. But as you read that Psalm, Asaph comes to a transition when he says, but it was when I went into the sanctuary of God, that's when I saw.

It was when I went into the house of God, I was able to see clearly, I saw them as they really were, not as I thought that they were. And brothers and sisters, I think the same is true for us.

But many times, and I can testify to it with what Asaph has said, many of you can testify to it. where you've come on a morning like this morning and your heart was distracted and perhaps discouraged.

And maybe an interaction with a brother or sister, maybe a song that we sang, maybe a scripture that was read, or maybe the message itself gives us a new perspective. And we wonder, how could I have been seeing things in that way, which is so wrong?

[ 29 : 36 ] And what happens is our hope is renewed. And we get a firmer grip on the hope that God has given to us. Brothers and sisters, this is one of the privileges that we have when we gather together.

We have the privilege of having our hope strengthened. And so the author says to us in verse 23, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.

And the reason we can do that is, he who promised is faithful. And then third and finally, in this passage, we see that when we gather together as God's people, we have an opportunity to encourage one another.

In verse 24, the author writes, and let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works.

And then in 25, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

[ 31 : 06 ] I think it's important for us to see that we are called to stir one another up and the way that we do that is through encouragement.

But when you read the structure of the words the author writes, what he is really driving at is that the stirring up of one another to love and good works comes through encouraging one another to do exactly that.

And the author is implying that this encouragement is to come when we gather together. The encouragement is to come when we meet together, and this is why he warns against neglecting to meet together.

So we're called to specifically and intentionally consider how we are to stir one another up to good works. And we are to do this when we meet together and when we neglect meeting together, we lose the opportunity to stir up one another and we also lose the opportunity to be stirred up ourselves.

Now when we think of the larger context of the book of Hebrews, it is likely that the people in the original audience who were ceasing to gather together were those who had been lured back into Judaism, or those who had become discouraged because of the persecution they faced and they just didn't want to identify with the people of God and so they were staying away.

[ 32 : 57 ] They fell into this habit of neglecting to meet together with the people of God. And again, while I would acknowledge that there are definitely times when we have reasons, legitimate reasons that we aren't able to meet together, I think the larger reason, though it may come from discouragement, the larger reason is that we don't see the value of gathering together.

We don't see it as we ought to see it. For many, it becomes an optional thing. And so I believe that when we lay a hold of what becomes possible when we gather together, when we see that we are actually in this context where we can be stirred up to love and good works, we can stir one another up to love and good works, then we are more likely to embrace this.

Now, I'm sure that the question must be in some of your minds whether it's okay from time to time not to, you know, to miss a gathering.

I'm sure that question arises in many minds this morning. I think we all are okay with the idea that there are times when we are providentially hindered. Circumstances come up and we just aren't able to gather.

Work commitments or family commitments or health issues, we just aren't able to do so. What about, you know, I attend a lot, I attend almost every time we have a gathering, you know, what about an occasional casual day, kind of like what you have at work sometimes, a casual day off, you don't have to say but the reason is you just have a casual day off.

[ 34 : 51 ] Well, here's what I would say. I would caution us, I would caution us from the point of view that those who make a habit of neglecting to meet together began with one day.

They didn't begin with 20 or 30 years, just began with one day, just began, it began at some point and then it leads to something else. I was reminded this morning as I greeted Pastor Blundell and his family and being aware that this was the message this morning, I was just reminded of the wonderful example that they're exhibiting for us this morning as a church to be on vacation, but to find themselves with God's people.

You see, it's so easy to say, well, we're on vacation so we can just enjoy the vacation. We are always in church and I'm sure as a pastor and pastor's family, they're always in church. But here they are this morning placing a value on gathering with the people of God and making an effort to be here this morning and that is, I think, just a wonderful visual for us to see.

When he was commenting on this verse in his commentary on Hebrews, Simon Kistemaker writes the following, one of the first indications of a lack of love toward God and neighbor is for a Christian to stay away from the worship services.

He forsakes the communal obligations of attending these meetings and displays the symptoms of selfishness and self-centeredness.

[ 36 : 51 ] Let me read that again. One of the first indications of a lack of love toward God and neighbor is for a Christian to stay away from the worship services.

he forsakes the communal obligations of attending these meetings and displays the symptoms of selfishness and self-centeredness.

things. Now I want you to hear the author is not saying that oh if you miss a Sunday and you could have come that you are turning your back on God and you're turning your back on the church.

He's not saying that at all. He's addressing a pattern but that pattern begins in some seed form and this is what we need to guard against.

we need to guard against this attitude where we would see the gathering in a somewhat optional kind of way recognizing that you know what if we give Satan just a scripture says we should not give him any place and that word for place in the original language could also mean a grain of sand that we don't even give him that because he will take it and he will work with it.

[ 38 : 15 ] But we need to see that God has called us to do this even though we are being exhorted in the language where he says let us and it doesn't sound like a command but brothers and sisters it is a command it is just an exhorting command that we are to do this.

We are to intentionally and regularly and faithfully gather together with the people of God and often times when we choose not to do that in some kind of an optional and the casual way it could very well be as we look at the heart of that that it has more to do with selfishness and self-centeredness but here again let me let me be very clear and say that the point is not oh if you miss a Sunday then you've just backslid it's not that at all the point of these words of the author my point this morning and raising them has to do with those who make a habit of neglecting to meet together he said it was the habit of some who did that but be aware again that how that habit actually starts so the author helps us to see that encouragement towards love and good works is not an automatic thing and this is why we are called in verse 24 to consider how we are to do this we are to consider how we are to stir one another up to love and to good works we have to be intentional we are to think about various ones in their varied circumstances and we are to consider how we can stir them up to love and to good works in our midst we have new believers and we have mature believers how can we stir them up some people are married and some are single some have children and some do not how can we stir them up what are the different ways in which we would seek to encourage them and to stir them up based on their circumstances and based on the season of life in which they're in some of us have young children some of us have adult children some of us are single parents there's some who walk through extended illness some of us have some who work in stressful jobs and to the extent that we are aware and then we have some who are unemployed and really the list goes on and I think what the author is calling us to do is to be intentionally considerate of one another and to be thinking about how we can stir one another up to love and good works and this should be on our minds in whatever setting we find ourselves in I realize that we can primarily be thinking about the Sunday morning gathering as we are gathered this morning but this applies also when we gather in care group and we gather for prayer even when we sometimes gather maybe in a less formal kind of way but we are with brothers and sisters be thinking how can I stir my brother my sister up to love and to good works and what we see below all of this is it is really a call to think beyond ourselves it is a call not to think about ourselves but to think about others and as we do that others would be thinking about us as well notice also in verse 25 that this is an increasing and an ongoing call he says that we are to do this we are to encourage one another all the more as we see the day

drawing near this is to be ongoing it is to be increasing as the day of the Lord draws near the day when Jesus will return in power and glory to judge the world and to usher in a new heaven and a new earth in which dwells righteousness so a key aspect of our gathering we come together is to remind ourselves you know what there's a coming day where the Lord will return and this world as we know it and life as we live it is not permanent it's not going to be forever that coming day is the day that we need to be fixing our eyes on we need to be preparing our hearts for and we need to be encouraging one another to grow in serving the Lord stirring one another up to love and to good works so we need to hear and we need to heed this encouragement to regularly and faithfully consistently gather with the people of

God I think we all know that change requires more than a personal commitment it certainly includes that it begins with that but true lasting change really ultimately comes from the Lord but this passage gives us three solid reasons why we should commit to gathering together as the people of

God in in Jesus name first we get to draw near to the God of our salvation we get to do it with brothers and sisters we get to do it by this new and living way that he has made possible through Jesus Christ and we get to strengthen our hope in God and in his promises and then we get to give and to receive encouragement and I pray for all of us this morning especially for those of us who would acknowledge that this is a habit and I was reminded even as I said those words that for some who need to hear it because of the habit of not gathering they may not be here this morning we pray nonetheless that

God would work in our midst and that at the end of this year and especially as we look at next year when we look back on this value we be able to say that we have grown!

[ 45 : 38 ] Let's pray