

The Church and It's Present Privilege

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[0 : 0 0] We're in a series, The Church That Jesus Builds, and it's been awesome. I've really appreciated this series. I'm kind of the resident church planter here at St. John's, and so you would think as a church planter I would know something about the church.

And what I'm coming to find week after week is that the church is something so much greater than what I hold in my heart. And that church planter is just a terrible title because I'm really not planting the church.

God builds his church, and it's just been a wonderful series. And so today we're looking at the church and the present privilege of the church, what the privilege it is to be the church here and now.

And our text, Hebrews 12, 18 through 24, this is a really important part of the book of Hebrews. Let's dig into the context of Hebrews really quick before we jump into the sermon.

And this is the climax of Hebrews, and some people think Hebrews might actually be a sermon, an ancient sermon. I fall into that category. And this is the pinnacle of the sermon. This is like the take-home point.

[1 : 0 5] And Hebrews is a book of contrasts. And the author of Hebrews is constantly moving from lesser to greater. You know, he begins in verse 1, God's spoken through Jesus in a greater way than God has spoken in the past through his prophets and through the Old Testament.

Jesus, he's greater than the angels. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus is greater than the Levitical priest system. Jesus is the greatest high priest.

Jesus is the greatest sacrifice. And he keeps building this case. And so that's what's happening.

And we find ourselves coming to the pinnacle of this case of the greatness of Christ and how he is the new thing that God is doing that makes everything in retrospect look old and lesser.

And in this passage, we see the privilege that it is to be the church. And we see that in three ways. We see it by looking to what we have not come to. This will be our first point.

What we have not come to. And then by what we have come to, which will be our second point. And then how we got from the place we have not come to to the place we have come to.

[2 : 1 2] How did we get there? So what we have not come to, what we have come to, and how we got here. Ready? First, what we have not come to. Verse 18 begins with, for you have not come to.

And he lists a bunch of stuff, right? Verses 18 through 21. And this is describing the Sinai experience for Israel. This is full of imagery that takes us back to when God brought his people out of Egypt to the base of Sinai, revealed himself to them, gave them the Ten Commandments, built a covenant, made them his people.

And this is their identity-defining experience with God. This is the God who had saved them, who had brought them out of oppression, and was now showing them what it meant to be his people.

And so you think, you know, after this great deliverance, this would be a party at the base of Sinai. But if we're going to describe it in one word, the word would be terrifying.

This was a terrifying experience. It was tangible. It says, you've not come to what could be touched. You know, this was an earthly experience. It wasn't just some spiritual reality coming down to earth, but it was heaven bending and touching earth in a tangible way.

[3 : 3 3] And it's described as blazing fire, darkness, gloom, you know, a tempest, which is violent winds, a trumpet sounding.

When you think of the trumpet, think more like a siren sounding. When you put these images together, it sounds more like a battlefield. It sounds more like a disaster.

It sounds terrifying. Right? And this confronts us. It confronts a few things that our culture holds dearly in its heart. It confronts our goodness. If I can put it crassly, there's this thought in our culture

where people say, you know, I don't know if there's a God or not, but I'm a relatively good person. And if I get to heaven and I meet God, he will see that I'm a pretty decent person and will be okay. Right? Have you ever heard anyone say that? Absolutely. And our generation, you know, us postmodern people, we kind of think, well, it's hard to know what's the absolute truth.

And so as long as I'm living diligently to the truth that I hold to myself, I'll be all right. I'm a pretty good person. God will measure me by that. Or maybe you're in the baby boomer generation and, you know, it's the life that you've carved out for yourself and succeeding in the world.

[4 : 52] You've got the house. You've got the job. You've got the retirement package. You know, so you've done well and that will justify you before God. Or even older generation is your morality, how well you've stuck to your morality.

And ultimately, this is all a relative goodness, relative to whatever guidelines you set for yourself and live by. That's what makes you a good person.

And that ultimately is your hope of standing before God and being justified. And it's just a sham, if we can be honest. It's just dishonest. Let's take something as simple as the golden rule.

Do unto others as you would have done to you. I mean, how have you done that today? Like, has that been at the center of your every thought?

Has that been at the center of every interaction? How can I treat this person? How can I see them as more important than myself? How can I absolutely care for them?

[5 : 51] You see, the truth is, if we actually look at the values we even place on ourselves, we never actually live up to our own values. We're always falling short, and we just blanket coat with this statement, like, I'm doing pretty good.

But when the moment you actually look at your life, you fall apart, even by your own standards. And so, this passage tells us that we have not come to a situation where we can justify ourselves before God.

We have not come to a situation without a mediator where we can enter into God's presence without being terrified. Let's think about what Scripture says about this.

If you look at Moses in this situation, Moses, he was a spiritual elite to these people. He was their mediator, and he trembled with fear. Think about Isaiah, when he encounters God in his vision, and he sees God as holy, holy, holy, and he says, woe is me, I am undone.

It says he's unraveling. Peter, Peter in the Gospels, when he encounters Jesus, begs him to depart from him. An authentic encounter with God often reveals that we're not nearly as good as we think we are.

[7 : 08] Because we are entering into the presence of otherness. We're entering into the presence of true holiness, true goodness. And no matter how good you may be by your own values, you do not measure up to this holy, holy, holy God.

And so, this challenges a few of the ways that we approach God, doesn't it? You can't just buddy up to God. There is no such thing as buddy Jesus.

God is not your bro. When you throw out any reverence and awe in your relationship with God, you're not truly encountering, delivering God.

God. On the other hand, there's people who think they're holier than God. Sam Harris, he's a neuroscientist, atheist, philosopher. In an interview, he said, you know, the Ten Commandments, they're not really all that great.

It's not that hard to improve upon them. But if this experience tells us anything, it tells us that if we enter into the presence of God, we're not going to be offering corrections to his moral law.

[8 : 14] The other hand, it says that, you know, there's people here who say, well, I would believe in God if he would just show up. But this passage tells us that you would actually beg him to leave.

You would beg him to leave. Look at verse 19 and 20. They heard a voice and words that made them beg no further message be spoken, for they could not endure the order that was given.

If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. They beg God not to speak another word. They beg him. They couldn't endure the message. They couldn't endure these Ten Commandments.

They couldn't endure the reality that if even an animal came too close to the presence of God that the animal needed to die. How much more humanity in their sinful state if they entered the presence of God without a mediator?

It was too much. It was an absolutely terrifying encounter because you have an unholy people in the presence of a holy and just God. So fire, darkness, gloom, trembling, begging for God to go away.

[9 : 30] This is what the passage describes. And this is not what we have come to as the church. This is not what we have come to. But for some of you, this might be your conception of God.

That God is terrifying, that he is angry at you, that he wants nothing to do with you, and that that is it. That is all you have is this picture of God.

For our fourth anniversary, Julia and I had just moved back to Vancouver, and I took her out to a romantic dinner, wearing this very coat, I realize, at Shambar.

Have any of you been to Shambar? No, you need to go to Shambar. It's in Gastown. And I've had food before. I'll be honest. I've eaten food before.

Lots of food. But if you say to me, Alistair, what is the best meal you have ever had? I would say February 9th, 2012, Shambar.

[10 : 40] I had the spiced, rubbed duck breast with herb goat cheese, roasted hazelnuts, nochi, and this amazing sauce. And I'm telling you, I was lifted up into the heavenly places while eating this meal.

Well, it was so good that I vowed I would never eat it again. I will never go back to Shambar and order this meal again because I can't, I don't want to like taint that first experience. I savored every bite, right?

I made sure that every ingredient was on the fork. And the most impressive part of all of this is that I usually finish a meal in about five minutes. This took 45 minutes for me to eat.

And, you know, I have had lots of food, but then I had a better experience that I didn't know was possible. I had food that was heavenly. Which leads us to our second point.

What we have come to, verse 22, but you have come to. You haven't come to this. You've come to something much greater. And here's where we start to see what the privilege of the church is.

[11 : 49] So first, you've come to access a better place. Look at verse 22. You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels and festal gathering.

Mount Zion, city of God, heavenly Jerusalem. These are all pictures of God's future city. And if you were to name the Bible something other than the Bible, like if you're going to put a different name on the front of the Bible, you could call it a tale of two cities.

It is often the tale of the city of man and how man tries to build his own city. That's an opposition to the city of God, which will ultimately come. And so at the end of the Bible, we see the fullest picture of this heavenly city.

And it uses all these names, Mount Zion, city of God, heavenly Jerusalem. They're all synonymous with this future city of God where there will be no injustice, where there will be no death, where there will be no crying, where there will be no pain, no suffering, only love and light and freedom. And this is the picture of where all of God's intention is heading. And it says, you have come to this place. It's in the perfect tense.

[13 : 07] It means that something happened in the past that gave you access to this place so that in the present, you are currently accessing this place.

So the implication is that this future city of God is something we actually experience here and now. We are not just biding time and holding tight until we die and then get to go to a heavenly city.

That we actually get to live as sojourners or as pilgrims here and now, experiencing glimpses and parts of this city as the church gathers.

It's available here now. That's amazing. Second, you've come to great joy. It says, you've come to angels in festal gathering.

It's a very particular word in the Greek. It only occurs in this instance. And what it's really describing is a great party. In a way, we become co-partiers with God.

[14 : 12] If you think of this new city, don't think of it as boring. Don't think of it like someone inviting you over to play Trivial Pursuit, unless that's your thing. Which is great.

Maybe it'll be a great Trivial Pursuit corner for you. But think of it as the combination of like the best wedding, the best New Year's party, the best Halloween party, like all of the best of the best of human celebration, broken, sanctified, made right, filled with so much more joy, so much more imagination, so much more creative love, so much more satisfaction.

This is the sort of joy that is happening in New Jerusalem. And it says, you have come to access this now. You've come to access the very joy of God's heart.

Here and now. You can have tastes of this. God's not some cosmic buzzkill. Christianity is not some gloomy Eeyore type walk with God.

If you think God is just about rules and regulations and there's no joy, there's no enjoyment of Him. You've completely misunderstood the message of Jesus.

[15:34] Jesus comes that you might have life and joy in its fullness here and now and ultimately in His new city. Third, you've come to an amazing identity.

Look at verse 23. You've come to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. So that word assembly, it's ecclesia.

It's the church. You've come to the church. And so it's actually talking about this gathering here and now. When the church gathers, we are the people who are enrolled in heaven as the firstborn.

It helps for us to understand firstborn. A firstborn in ancient culture would automatically inherit everything the family had. Everything.

In other words, they were already rich if they were born into a wealthy family. It was theirs. There was no distinguishing between the father's good and the firstborn's good. Like it was simply theirs.

[16:38] To be the firstborn children of God, it means that all that God has for us in this city is already ours.

And although we have not fully inherited it yet, we can start living from that identity. It means that we no longer have to live from sources that give us a sense of worth that are shaky.

Let me give you an example. Maybe you were the person in high school who lived for the grades. Straight A's. And you got into a really great school.

And then you learned that not everyone in this really great school can get straight A's. And suddenly you found yourself in the presence of people who are smarter than you. And your sense of identity started to crumble because your sense of identity was based on how smart you are.

Maybe it's your career. You strive after the perfect financial portfolio. You think you're doing so well. And then you come into the presence of someone who has tripled what you have done in less time.

[17:44] And all of a sudden your identity crumbles. You can imagine what this is for yourself. You know what it is for yourself. All these false ways we get a sense of identity. But in heaven, being enrolled in heaven, that's what matters.

That's where identity comes from. An identity that can't be shaken. There's this story in the Gospels where the disciples are sent out by Jesus and they cast out demons. And they come back and they say, Jesus, how amazing is it that the demons actually listen to us?

And Jesus gets really serious. He gets really stern, if I may say. And he says, Rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven.

Because one day you'll point at the demons and they won't come out. It happened in the Gospels. One day you won't be the smartest person anymore.

One day you won't be the best looking person anymore. One day you won't be the best in your career. And if that's where your sense of identity lies, it's shifting sand.

[18:53] It'll never give you a sense of your true worth. You are enrolled in heaven if you're in Christ. You have access to everything God intends for you.

Pure joy. Pure freedom. It's amazing. No need to prove ourselves. No need to strive. Fourth.

You have come to perfection. Verse 23. You've come to God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect. The spirits of the righteous made perfect.

I think this is talking about the hall of faith in chapter 11. The list of all these ancient people of God who followed him in faith, not quite seeing everything that God had done in Jesus.

The people of the Old Testament. And I think it also talks about Christians that have passed away now. It's all of those who are gathered in heaven right now, worshipping God, completely made whole.

[19:57] Completely perfected by God. That our hope, although we are in the process of being changed, that God treats us as if we are already perfected.

God doesn't look at your flaws anymore in the sense of condemnation. He'll sanctify them. He'll refine them. He'll smooth them out because his ultimate goal for you is to perfect you.

So let's step back for a second. If we look at what we have not come to, and if we look at what we have come to, I think it's safe to say that these two pictures are so radically different.

The contrasts between death and life, fear and joy, you know, trembling before God to a beautiful and bold new identity, you know, not touching the mountain to living in the heavenly mountain, begging God to leave to complete access to God's presence, distance from God to intimacy with God, condemnation to righteousness.

I mean, these are the things being contrasted. This is what we have come to. But the question is, how do we get from this first picture to the second picture? I mean, what changed?

[21 : 17] Why is it that an unholy people suddenly can have this amazing access? How is it that an unholy people who beg God to go away can suddenly be counted as firstborn, suddenly counted as God's beloved people?

What changed? How do they get there? How do we get there? When Julia and I got married, we went through premarital counseling prior, and recommend that for everyone who's thinking of getting married.

It was such a good process. And in the process, they start digging, you know, in your life, you know, meddling, I would say, stirring the pot. And it came out that I was a bit of a shady fellow prior to being a Christian, that I was kind of a deviant, that I had done things that I should confess to Julia. And the advice I was given that I should actually tell her all of my misdeeds with other women prior to her. This was the advice. And so I took it.

And so one night, Julia and I were alone, and I said, okay, I want to tell you just what you're inheriting here, you know, what my past is. And I listed it all out.

[22 : 29] I'm not going to list it to you, because that would be disturbing. But it was heavy, and I thought, best case scenario, Julia will say, well, I'll still marry you, but I'm not entirely thrilled about this part of your life.

Best case scenario. Worst case scenario, call off the wedding. She didn't do that. We got married. But here's what happened. She got up and walked out of the room. And I was terrified.

I did not expect that response. And she came back with a basin of water and washed my feet. And I remember just experiencing grace enacted.

I never thought that I could enter into that sort of relationship. My picture was, at the very best, she'll tolerate me, not love me and serve me and wash me clean.

How we go from this terrifying experience of fearing God to receiving the words that come out of his lips so many times, don't fear, is grace.

[23 : 35] How we go from this picture at Sinai of trembling people to this picture of New Jerusalem of radically accepted people and full of joy is grace.

Let's look at verse 24. You've come to Jesus. You have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

The mediator at Sinai was Moses and he trembled with fear. He couldn't mediate. He said, I can't help you guys.

I'm one of you. Jesus, he's our mediator. In a very real way, Jesus stretched out his hand on behalf of humanity and touched the mountain and experienced that condemnation.

poured out on him. And he was broken. He was shaken on our behalf. And he was judged so that we could be pardoned.

[24 : 41] And the question is, well, how? How are we pardoned? Verse 24. You've come to the blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. God, there's this theme of speaking in this passage.

God spoke at Sinai and they begged him to speak no more. You know, Abel's blood speaks out. If you look back to Genesis, there's a story of Cain and Abel, the brothers, and Cain murdered Abel and God says, your brother's blood has cried out.

And the result was that Cain was judged, he was exiled, and he was distanced from God. That the blood that cries out against us is usually for our condemnation.

And then Christ's sprinkled blood gives life. It speaks a better word. The author of Hebrews says, a better word. Christ's blood speaks a better word.

It speaks the word of forgiveness. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Father, have mercy on these people.

[25 : 48] You've come to Jesus. That's how you enter into the new city. Because he, elsewhere in Hebrews, it says, he gives you boldness and confidence to enter to the throne of grace that you might receive mercy in your time of need.

The confidence Christ gives us is not self-confidence, like we're suddenly so confident in ourselves. The confidence we have is in him. That he is the one who can actually pass into the heavens and say to God, forgive these people because of what I have done for them.

He mediates so that the holy wrath of God is satisfied so that God can both be just and the justifier in our lives. So that he can make us right in a very true and honest way.

So let's sum it all up. Let's bring it back together. What is our present privilege as the church?

There's a lot of things I could list, but I say it starts with this.

Our privilege is that Jesus is our mediator. And he gives us access to enter into God's city with boldness and confidence that by his spirit we get to experience heaven here and now.

[27 : 11] We get to live as citizens of that city here and now and although we don't fully see it yet, the reality is no less true. And it's a great mystery.

I want you to think about that as you take communion. When you take communion, you are, we sing, you know, we join archangels and angels singing.

You are joining in the heavenly worship. You are joining in in what is always happening around the throne. When we worship here together, it is much more than a great group of people coming together to sing some songs.

We are coming together and living out our identity as citizens of this new city. Jesus gives us joy. We become co-partiers. That doesn't mean that we never have struggles, but it does mean that a deeper satisfaction is available.

Something much more satisfying than the fleeting pleasures of this world. Jesus gives us a great identity. Citizens, co-inheritors made perfect and righteous by his blood.

[28 : 23] So when we gather here as the church, our great privilege is Jesus. And our great privilege is that this gathering because of him becomes something so much greater than we realize.

Because we're joining in the celebration in heaven because our names are enrolled in heaven.

That's our present privilege. And so if you're here and you're thinking, is Jesus really who he said he is?

I could give you a bunch of really good reasons, but I would just simply say tonight, just say all I know of me to all I know of Jesus.

You might not have all the answers. I don't have all the answers. But what I do know is that this privilege of belonging to the church is something so much greater than any avenue I've ever pursued in my entire life.

And for those of you who are gathered here and you are the church, look to Jesus. Look at who you've come to and look at what he has done and celebrate that tonight as we participate in communion.

[29 : 36] Amen? Amen?