

The Church and It's Present Privilege

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[0 : 00] Please sit down and if you would turn to Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 to 24 on page 1009.

Welcome back to Songs Till Midnight. I'm David Short and I'll be taking you through the next session. Actually it really doesn't matter whether you hear my voice or not.

What's important is you hear the voice of God this morning which is why we turn to the Bible. And in light of that, next Saturday we're going to have a teaching day which is really for everyone.

But if you're in a small group you'll know that our Bible study booklets work a little bit differently during this fall term. And if you'd like to come along and learn how they work and get some fundamental skills for reading the Bible that's what we'll be doing this next Saturday afternoon registration outside the back during coffee.

Now over the past three weeks we've been trying to come to grips with what it means to be the church that Jesus builds. Remember we started with Jesus saying I will build my church and the gates of hell or the gates of death will not overcome it.

[1 : 19] And I was going to get Aaron to give charades, act out the other two passages but he told me that his limit is two a week. So I'm sorry about that.

And I heard Simon Winchester recently. He's a well-known author, Brit, speaking about the earthquake in San Francisco in 1906. I think he was in San Francisco speaking to the audience there.

And after explaining plate tectonics and fault lines for earthquakes on the Earth's surface, he explained the certain and inevitable fact that an earthquake would again happen in San Francisco relatively soon, he felt.

And so he did an unusual thing. He finished his hour and a half long talk with some advice. This is his advice. He said, The old cities in Europe, Moscow, Paris and London are not built on fault lines. He said, Throughout history, through the millennia, they have learned not to build on fault lines. Far outside those cities, there are the ruins of other cities destroyed by earthquakes.

[2 : 33] And so his advice was this. If you live on a fault line, move now. It's quite serious. And they still paid him after this talk.

He said, You live on a fault line, you in San Francisco. The only sensible thing is that every city on the west coast of the United States, he did not include Canada, you'll be glad to know, ought to be abandoned.

That was his way forward. Which is all very fine if you're a best-selling author and you come from England. One of the most popular shows on English television right now is called Location, Location, Location.

And each week, the hosts try and help one couple to find the perfect house. Sticking to the golden rule, location is everything. This little passage in Hebrews chapter 12 is the high point of the whole letter.

And from this pinnacle passage in Hebrews, we get to see the true location of the church.

[3 : 44] This is a one-point sermon. And it's about the true location of the church. And the simple truth is this. The true location of the church is in heaven now.

As we gather here this morning, we gather in heaven at the same time. That's our present privilege. You know that the letter was written to a small church in Rome that were in a bit of a funk.

They had started well and followed Jesus gladly. And then they'd faced some pretty vicious opposition. They had had, some of them had their properties confiscated. Some of them had been imprisoned simply because they were following Jesus.

And the temptation was to slink off to some more respectable religion like Judaism. At least Judaism has real priests that you can see and real sacrifices. And wasn't, it was legitimate. It was a legal religion. It's an absolutely beautiful letter. And the writer is a real preacher. And through a series of contrasts, he shows that there is nothing better, there is nothing better than Jesus Christ himself.

[5 : 03] And neglecting what he has done and drifting away from the truth of the gospel is spiritually fatal. There's some very stern words in it.

He says, if you've tasted of the power of the life to come in Jesus Christ and you turn away, you drift away from that, your only prospect is facing the judgment and fury of the living God.

But his aim is positive. He holds up the person of Jesus Christ and he says, Jesus brings us a better hope through a better sacrifice. He is a better minister who mediates a better covenant with better promises of life in a better city.

And this capstone passage, that little passage, verses 18 to 24, gathers all this privilege together and says one thing. It says, you have come to the heavenly Jerusalem.

As it was read, you can see the passage divides in two halves very neatly. If you just look down there at the bottom of page 1009, verse 18 begins, you have not come and then he describes the experience of Sinai, verse 22, but you have come and he describes the local church, something that is true for every congregation.

[6 : 29] And when he says you have come, it's not a future thing. This is not something for the future. The tense of the verb is it's something that's happened in the past and now has ongoing, permanent, eternal results.

If you are a member of the church, you have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. It doesn't matter whether you meet in a cave or a cathedral. Just look down at verse 23, please.

You have come to the assembly, that's the word church, gathering, of the firstborn, which is a Bible way of speaking about the fact that all Christians have the privileges of inheriting what Jesus inherits.

There are no second class citizens. We all share an equal status. The assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, literally, whose names are permanently inscribed in heaven.

Remember, Jesus said, rejoice that your names are written in heaven. This is something that comes up again and again in the New Testament. That's who we are. So when that little church in Rome gathered, at the same time, the apostles, the writer says, they are part of the assembly and gathering of the whole communion of saints in heaven, all who believe in Jesus Christ throughout all of history, you have come.

[8 : 03] I need to say this has been perhaps the most influential passage from my own understanding of the church for the last 25 years. What is the location of the true church?

Verse 22, you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God to the heavenly Jerusalem. Now, Mount Zion was originally the name given to the hill in Jerusalem on which they, David, Solomon built the temple.

I have been there. it's a grotty little rock. Nothing significant about it, frankly, from a geographic point of view. But throughout the Old Testament, God promised a new Zion, a heavenly Zion, one where, which would be the joy of all the earth, where he would gather his people and he would come and dwell in face-to-face physical presence, putting away all evil and all death.

And that Mount Zion is taken over in the New Testament. It's the place where God now dwells. It's what we call heaven. It's called here the city of the living God.

It is a city because it's a society of God's people. It's all about relationships. It has a culture and community. There are social structures which we were made for.

[9 : 24] God himself is at the center. And it's filled with people who are enjoying in fellowship with God and with one another. And it's called the heavenly Jerusalem. And despite Simon Winchester's dual warnings, this city is described in chapter 11 as having permanent foundations whose designer and builder is God himself.

It is an eternal city. God himself conceived it. God himself has built it. God himself has built it. Many years ago, Bronnie and I took our boys camping with two families in the congregation down to the Olympic Peninsula.

We'd borrowed tents and it was raining heavily of course. If you want to time your holidays when it doesn't rain, don't go when we go. This is infallible rule. However, we set up the tents in the rain and

in the morning when I got up and looked at the boys' tent, they were lying in about an inch, two and a half inches, a puddle of water.

They were absolutely saturated. Well, there's only one city that has permanent foundation. Every other city in the world is like a camp of tents.

There's only one city that's built with the hands of God. And every other city in the end leaks because it doesn't have eternal foundations. And I know some of the tents around us are very attractive and beautiful and made to look permanent.

[10 : 55] But the heavenly city, the heavenly Jerusalem is the unshakable kingdom. It's the goal of our pilgrimage. It is the church that Jesus is building. And I don't know how else to say this is a shocking and wonderful truth.

If you follow Jesus Christ, you have come to that heavenly city now. And you may be thinking, how can that even be possible?

You know, here we are sitting on the corner of Bailey and 37th. How can you possibly say that we've come to the heavenly Jerusalem? And the answer is that we have come spiritually.

In the same way as we looked at last week that our life is hidden with Christ in God, we are now spiritually present with God in the gathering in the heavenly Jerusalem.

but I've got to say this is not Platonism. This is not Plato. The Bible doesn't have a metaphysical dualism so there's a dividing line between what is real and what is material or what is good and superior and what is physical.

[12 : 08] Listen carefully to this. the body and matter are not inferior to the mind and ideas. I know many of us were raised with the fact that spiritual is ideas, spiritual and physical are kind of mutually exclusive.

That's not the Bible idea. The Bible, in the Bible, spiritual is a much bigger category. it's never opposed to the material world.

I mean God made the material physical world and he said it's good, it's good, it's very good. Matter is not evil. Our bodies are not evil. That's a Hindu or a Greek idea.

In the Bible, spiritual is sometimes physical and material and sometimes invisible but always real. Take angels for example.

Angels are spirit, often invisible. sometimes they are very physical, material and scary. Jesus' death on the cross was entirely physical and entirely spiritual.

[13 : 20] Jesus' resurrection body, is it material? Yes. Remember Jesus says handle it, touch me, see. But it is also entirely spiritual.

so when the writer says you have come to the city of the living God, you have come, the New Testament uses this spatial and motion language to describe our spiritual relation with God and with one another.

This is, we know this. we have been brought near to God, we have access to God, we stand in his presence, we have been buried with Christ, we have been raised with Christ, we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem to the church of those who are enrolled in heaven.

And this is the primary way in which the New Testament speaks about the church. The church in the New Testament is primarily being built by Jesus around himself in heaven.

We participate in that spiritual gathering and have fellowship with God now, even when we are not here in this building. It's a privilege that belongs to all Christians.

[14 : 39] But the way we express that spiritual reality in our bodies is by meeting together and assembling together to hear his word and to sing his praise.

So you see, the local gathering, the local assembly of believers and the heavenly spiritual gathering are not two separate gatherings.

When we gather with one another under God's word, it is an expression of the reality that we are present there in the heavenly gathering now. As we gather here this morning, we are gathered with Christ in heaven at the same time.

That is the true location of the church. And the sign that that fellowship is real to us is that we long to gather physically, face to face, to worship and express this heavenly reality.

I think the only way for us to express the heavenly church is to join with others in our local church. How can it be true? Well, it all has to do with Jesus.

[15 : 45] And the contrast in this passage, verses 18 to 24, is not a contrast between what's physical and what's spiritual or what's less real and more real.

The real contrast is before Christ and after Christ. So if you look down at verses 18 to 21, he describes the day when God gathered his people at the foot of Mount Sinai and came down on the mountain and spoke his word to them.

Do you remember a few weeks ago we saw that's, the Old Testament calls that the day of the church. And his basic point is that it was absolutely terrifying. Despite the fact that God had put a mountain between himself and the people he'd just rescued from Egypt, the whole, the mountain shook and the earth quaked and the mountain was surrounded by a deep, deep, deep darkness. As God came down in fire, the darkness got deeper with smoke and storm. The creator of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob comes as a consuming fire and it was very scary. And worse than the fearful sight were the sounds. The angels blowing trumpets were not like what Aaron did this morning.

[17:06] Trumpets were the loudest thing they had in those days and the sound is meant to be alarming, explosive. But worse than the sound of the trumpets was out of the darkness, God spoke.

And if you just look down at verse 19, you can see the emphasis on his voice. A voice whose words made the hearers beg no further words be spoken to them.

You can read this in Exodus 20. It's a wonderful, it's a wonderful read. Hearing the unmediated, direct voice of God from heaven is utterly overwhelming, undoing and unbearable.

And it doesn't make them happy, it doesn't make them calm, they couldn't endure it. So you remember what they do? They get Moses and they push him forward. Physically, they walk, they back away from the mountain.

And they push Moses forward and they say, you be a mediator, you speak to God and then you speak to us. I quote Exodus 20.19, you speak to us and we will listen but do not let God speak to us lest we die.

[18:21] And now we come to the point of the comparison. Moses, for all his faith and leadership, he's just a sinful man like the rest of Israel. And even though he did mediate for Israel, he was just as frightened, he quaked in his boots, he was just as in need as forgiveness as they were.

They needed a better mediator who could perfectly represent God and perfectly reveal God. But we have the great privilege to live this side of the coming of Jesus, his death and his resurrection.

we have a mediator who's opened a new and living way and who's brought us to God. And at Sinai we see some of the awesome majesty and holiness of God through the eyes of sinful people.

And the church of God in that day was one of fear and dread. Verse 22, but you, plural, you all, you've not come to Sinai, you've come to the city of the living God, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

And if you can take each of these phrases, they're beautiful, the description of the heavenly city. It's not marked by fear, it's marked by joyful fellowship.

[19:39] It's all about those who are there. In verse 22, the same angels who blew their trumpets at Sinai, they're gathered there and in the Greek, they're wearing party attire.

Party attire. And I don't know what that looks like but it'll be impressive. It's feasting and happy clothing. Next, we ourselves gather spiritually with all those who belong to God throughout the ages including the spirits of the righteous made perfect, which I think all faithful men and women who have died in the faith, which of course is why it's senseless to pray for those who've died.

God himself is at the centre and how is he described in verse 23? Judge of all. Does it surprise you that God is judge of all in the middle, in the centre of heaven?

It's because his character does not change. All that's happened has not altered God's God's basic commitment to justice, to righteousness, to holiness.

His commitment to destroy all evil. What is different is that as judge he is now our refuge, our safety, our hiding place.

[20:58] It was against God whom we sinned. It is God who has made us righteous through Jesus Christ. It's God who justifies, as you see, he's still there in the role as judge who is there to condemn.

And being in his presence through Jesus Christ will always be inspiring us, I think, a sense of awe and wonder, but he is the wellspring of life and of love and I think that life and love and wonder will be tinged with awe throughout eternity.

reality. And the writer waits till the end of the verses to give the reason why it's true and that is in verse 24. You have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that

speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Remember, Abel was the first man in the Bible who was murdered by his brother out of envy. And when he was slaughtered in the field, his blood called out from the ground for justice and for condemnation of his brother.

But the blood of the innocent Jesus calls out for forgiveness and no condemnation because we are made perfect in the sight of God. Do you see what it's saying?

[22 : 18] We cannot be any more forgiven than we are now. You know, when we finally, after this world is done, come to the resurrection and enter that city in our resurrection bodies, we will not be one iota more forgiven than we are now.

That's why our gatherings are not about worship style. They're really about our true location. Having come to the heavenly Jerusalem in our spirits, we worship here this morning with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Jesus is spiritually present with us and he's spiritually present with us as our leader and preacher.

Just hold, just keep your hand in chapter 12 and flick back to chapter 2 for a moment, please.

verse 12. These are the words of the risen and ascended son of God, Jesus Christ.

And he gathers his children around him as a church, verse 12, as a congregation, and he says, you can look down at the bottom of verse 13, behold, he says, look, I and the children God has given me.

[23 : 42] There's great joy in it. And then in verse 12 he says, I will tell of your name to my brothers in the midst of the congregation. I will preach. And in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.

So as you hear the word of God preached, if the word of God is being rightly preached, you ought not be hearing my voice, you ought to be hearing Jesus speaking with you.

Jesus ought to be dialoguing with you in your heart. And when we sing aloud, we are being led by Jesus. It doesn't matter how bad the tune is, or how great the tune is, or how bad your voice is, it doesn't really matter.

The true privilege of the church is our current location. The true location is in heaven with God now. That's where we are gathered. And the local congregation, no matter what it looks like, is the place of connection between heaven and earth in this world.

That is our massive privilege. And that's the point of the sermon. But I want to just point a couple of implications out. There are all sorts of implications that come from this.

[24 : 52] I think we only have time for two. I'm not going to take a vote on it. We'll just have time for two. The first implication, if this is true, is that we are pilgrims.

Because while we have come to the city, the city is still in the future. We enjoy the privileges of citizenship now, but we wait for the resurrection of our bodies, and so between now and then we are a pilgrim people.

Look over at Hebrews 13, 14, please. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Both are true. We have come, but we still seek the city. Here we possess nothing enduring, nothing lasts here.

We have nothing here that lasts. No earthly city, no culture, no society can provide security and salvation as the city of God does.

[26 : 04] Since we have a great high priest and access to the living God, we are able to hold our present securities lightly, and we're able to look to what endures. we are members of the heavenly congregation spiritually, but we long for and lean toward that city.

We've already begun to experience the fellowship, the heavenly fellowship, and that's what makes our weekly gathering so pivotal as we express that fellowship ongoingly to one another.

But we are now resident aliens. Just turn back to chapter 11 for a moment. chapter 11, I'm going to read a couple of verses from verse 13.

Speaking of the saints in the Old Testament, these all died in faith, Hebrews 11, 13, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed or acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak this way make it clear that they are seeking a home, the word land isn't

there. If they had been thinking of the land out of which they had gone, they would have had

opportunity to return, but as it is, they desire a better country, a heavenly one, and therefore God is

not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

[27 : 28] We are resident aliens in this world, not tourists, residents. We belong, we are residents here, we live here, but we belong there.

Our true native belonging is there. So we're sojourners, we're pilgrims, temporary residents in this world. We really don't own anything here, but we own everything there.

And that is all sorts of ways of showing itself. If we belong to the heavenly city, we don't put all our eggs in this basket. We don't have to have everything and experience everything. we've chosen a lifestyle which means we've chosen some form of marginalization.

That's what it means to be a parish. The Greek word for sojourning is the word *paroikia*. A parish is a group of sojourners, a congregation of sojourners who are journeying together, together, together, confessing our status to one another.

When we said the creed this morning, I believe, what do we say? I always go to the Nicene Creed.

[28 : 39] The holy Catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. We're confessing we're sojourners, we're outsiders, we're embracing a lifestyle that will bring us into the city.

That's the first implication. Though we have spiritually come, we have to make sure that we get there. And the second implication is that we have to get each other there as well.

Earlier in chapter 12, verse 15, this is the last text I'll read. In verse 15, the writer says, see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.

that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled. That no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau who sold his birthright for a single meal.

You know that afterward when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. To be members of the church of Jesus Christ means we have a mutual responsibility for the spiritual welfare of one another.

[30 : 01] We're meant to have a pastoral concern for each other. And the word there, see to it that no one misses out, is the word for bishop. It says, you're to bishop one another.

You're to do what you need to do so that no one fails to enter the city. In other words, the perseverance, the ongoing integrity of the Christian life of others in the congregation is your responsibility as well.

It means caring that no person falls into a pattern of any kind of unholiness. And he saw a tragic example in the Old Testament who had the blessing of God and traded it away for a meal because he was hungry.

Immediate gratification was more important than the heavenly city. And each week we thought about some of the effects of individualism, haven't we? This is one of the key areas I think that individualism erodes us as a community.

If morality is a matter of personal choice, the big rule that we have in Vancouver today is nobody should make anybody else feel bad. And therefore we have a sort of hands-off policy.

[31 : 10] It's just an inbuilt way of doing things now. We need to reverse that. We've got to reverse it. Two weeks ago we heard we have to treat one another as more significant than ourselves.

Last week we heard that you come to church to teach and warn one another and I know you've all come today prepared to teach and warn others in the congregation and are going to do that at coffee time.

And today God's word urges us to see that none amongst us fails to reach that city. It's a simple matter of love. This is our great privilege and it's a tragic thing to watch someone waste their privilege.

privilege. So I thought the way we'd finish this morning to give us something of a sense of privilege is I'm going to have Caleb read for us Psalm 84 which is a meditation on what it is to live in the city of God.

You don't need to look it up but as Caleb reads it slowly for us before David comes and leads us in prayer let's give thanks for our privilege and pray that God will enable us to live as pilgrims to get ourselves there and to get each other there on that day.

[32 : 17] Thanks Caleb.