

Gathering Nick Freestone

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[0 : 00] It was my daughter, actually, who helped me figure out where to start this sermon. This week, when I picked her up from preschool, she presented me with a hand fistful of yellow autumn leaves.

She saw something so special in them, but I saw work. And I'll tell you why. Because we live in a townhouse surrounded by deciduous trees.

Because every April marks this perpetual leave tide, and it just rains down into our backyard. And the leaves go brown and die quickly, and they stink unless we're consistently cleaning them up quickly.

And even if we keep up with the mess, the leaves still clog the downpipes and drains. And it feels like whenever I see autumn leaves on the ground, it just reminds me that they serve no good purpose anymore.

But up on the trees above our house, they're beautiful. The colors changing from green to yellow to orange to red.

[1 : 13] They're also giving life to their tree. They're way better up there, serving their purpose. Leaves are better on a tree. But then they fall down, and they're blown about by the wind.

They're dead, and you can see as their colors fade day by day. I mean, even by the time we got home, that little fistful of leaves that had gone into the bag, when we pulled it out to chuck them in the bin, they were brown already.

It's the wind that makes them look alive and move about like they've got somewhere to be. And I can tell you that somewhere is my backyard.

All the leaves in Sydney have got somewhere to be, and that's in our little courtyard in Marsfield. So as I sweep my yard this autumn, or I watch my kids do it for me, I wish the leaves were back on their trees, better serving their purpose.

But as I sweep, I'm going to consider my own purpose, and consider what I should be doing to better serve my purpose. Because before I knew God, I was just like an autumn leaf blowing about in the breeze.

[2 : 35] I had purpose for my life. Purposes which I thought were good. Work to do, people to see, places to be.

But then God showed up in my life, and by grace, He took me, this dead little useless leaf, and He breathed life back into me.

Now I've got an eternal future because of God. No breeze can bring an old dead leaf back to life. And the world or myself couldn't breathe life back into myself.

God acted in love to save me. And God wishes that all would be saved, and be led and guided on the journey back to Him, through confession, of sin, through the Bible, through prayer.

These gifts of the Christian life that we've been talking about for the last three weeks. And the great and glorious news in our passage today is that God has another gift to help us on this journey.

[3 : 46] And the gift is each other. He gathers up these living leaves, people who He has breathed life back into, and He grafts them back into the lifeblood of a tree, altogether beautiful again, contributing to the mission and the purpose of what God has saved us to do, together.

And when we're together, we're better, because we serve that purpose. And just like the beautiful trees above my house, before those leaves come down, God's people, these people, look around, these tired Sunday morning people, are your gift for the journey home.

A Christian's purpose is to glorify God. And we discover that purpose through what Jesus did on the cross.

And to see that, and to find out more about this gift that I'm talking about, this gift that we are from God, open up Hebrews 10.

If you don't have a Bible, people in red vests can frisbee one to you. This one, most of the New Testament is falling apart, so I won't frisbee this one to you. It will fly over the room like autumn leaves.

[5 : 18] Open up to Hebrews 10, verse 19. 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 to us for us through the curtain, that is, his body.

Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and a full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

father. When I hear that and hear what Jesus has achieved on the cross, I imagine myself as that little leaf being grafted into a tree like the cross.

The gift of faith and peace comes through the cross of Jesus. And that brings with us a desire toward God.

Let us draw near to God. We no longer rely on the world or ourselves glorifying the wind for blowing us about.

[6 : 44] No. We now glorify God. The Christian purpose is to do whatever it is that glorifies God. God. So the one key way we can pursue that purpose is gather together and like this passage says, spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

So gathering together is a key thing for Christians and that's why we're here right now. That's why we do community groups. That's why you catch up for coffee and actually connect with one another and hear about what's going on in each other's lives.

It's through gathering together that helps this purpose of glorifying God thrive. So let me say four things from our passage today about gathering.

First thing, take note that in verse 25 the Bible commands that we not give up meeting together on this journey.

while we might be saved individually we confess to God and we read and we pray and we can do that on our own we're told to do the journey home together.

[8 : 00] We need to read this and obey it and here's why. I can't read this and obey it and show up to church and gather together on my own.

I need you. You can't show up to a community group excited to gather together and pray with one another and hear God speak and do life together and be the only one who shows up.

We can't obey this passage without each other. We need to obediently commit to meeting together together. Second, take note of that scary word there in verse 25 straight after as some are in the habit of doing.

People have in this passage here it says people have habitually given up meeting together. Now habits are really hard to break.

They are a dependability pattern in our lives. But God can break bad habits. He has the power to break any habit. But note here in this passage that there is no space for personality or preference to get in the way of obeying God here in his call for us to meet together.

[9 : 30] Whatever our habitual rebellion against meeting together is then it's unhelpful and a spurning of a critical gift that God gives us for the journey.

Now I've spoken to Christians professing Christians people who I love and care for who have literally said to me and I'm quoting them here they've said that they're not Bible study people. And another I'm just not suited to church going. I've even heard Christians explain themselves by saying we prefer doing church on our own.

How is there room for those attitudes to stand if we want to bother reading this verse and obey it? if that's you or you know a Christian who habitually avoids gathering with God's people in whatever way that is then you or they are really missing out.

Be ready to be wrong about how you approach meeting together and just because it's a habit doesn't mean that habit is a good thing.

[10 : 51] So here's why obedience and breaking that bad habit of avoiding meeting together are important because the day is approaching.

Look at the end of verse 25 there. It says meet together and then all the more as you see the day approaching. This is point three.

God wants us to be meeting together more frequently as the day approaches. Now that day is Christ's second coming.

That day is drawing near. But how do we know? How do we know that we're nearing the day? It's a pretty good question because I needed help answering that and I got some help from John Piper this week that was really helpful and he would send us to Matthew 24 verse 12 where Jesus is describing in that chapter what is going to happen before he comes again.

What the coming age that before his coming is going to look like. And it says there in the second half of verse 12.

[12:09] The love of most will grow cold. Do you look around? Maybe around this room?

Do you look at Christians around the place? Do you look in your own life and see love for God and love for people growing cold? I look at when I was first saved and I first knew Jesus and I wonder where that excitement and love for other people has gone in my life.

I'm really challenged because I feel like my love is cooling off. And to add to that I'm over 30 now so I feel like I'm able and old enough to kind of look at the friends around me and see a trend.

And the friends of mine who I knew who were gunning for God when they were 20 have a frozen love of God when they're 30. Not all of them but some of them.

And I see the cooling of Christian hearts all over the world around me. And I see it in some of the members of this church. I've got to be honest. I think the day is drawing near.

[13:24] I read Matthew 24 verse 12 and I agree. So we need to be meeting together more frequently.

As the passage implies it's the benefit of meeting together that we actually need as the day is drawing near. And the benefit is this.

Have a look back in our passage at verse 24. the culmination of meeting together will be our collective growth in love and good deeds.

That's why we meet together. That's why we need to meet together more frequently. We need to heat up our cooling love for God and for each other.

How does gathering with other Christians grow this active visible love for God and for each other?

Let me explain. We fight unbelief together.

[14:34] Beneath that target of love that we want to grow in, that we want to continue in, is the target of faith.

And the opposite of faith is unbelief. Unbelief infests our heart and chokes our faith. Without faith we have no reason to desire to love one another or love our saviour.

Creeping unbelief turns our love cold. But out of faith, love grows. Our faith fuels courage for good deeds, to serve, to act, to be selfless, to love others.

love our faith. We must help each other fight unbelief. It's the one-on-one, it's the small group, or it's the big gathering, where we get to eyeball one another and remind one another of God's good gospel and his promises toward us, strengthening one another in our faith.

Look back at the passage, verse before what Jimmy read. Have a look what it says. It says, let us together, let's get together and hold unswervingly to the hope that we profess.

[15:51] It's together that unbelief can be defeated and so our love can grow. And ultimately, so that God is glorified.

We want to obey God. We want to defeat and denounce the habitual sin of not wanting to meet together and meet more and more frequently together and fight against our love growing cold.

This is the last point I want to share from this passage. We need to be intentional to gather together.

I can tell you we cannot accidentally meet up enough.

Just, oh, hi, hi, just meet up at the shops. Enough, as Christians, for this to work. So, more frequently means planning, effort and time and shared commitment to meeting together, for love to flourish amongst us.

Now, I just want to pause here and say that I'm not someone who is good at this intentional bit. I once had a friend of mine who came to me at this point where their love was growing so cold that anxiety and depression and doubt, they felt like their faith was being pulled away from them.

[17 : 21] And I said some helpful things. I said, go to God's word and build your confidence in God. I said, invest time in prayer that will help you assure you of God's love for you.

He will meet you there. You go do that. That's pretty much what I said. And they probably tried. But boy, did I miss the encouragement of this passage. You see, while I said good things, I could have prayed with them.

I could have opened the Bible with them. I could have offered reminders of the promises of God with them. Gone with them to community group.

Gone with them to counselling. Gone with them to help build peace in a broken relationship. If I'd been with them, it would have been better.

[18 : 26] We're better off when we're together. We're better off when we get together and sing, when we pray together in song, to proclaim the good news loudly together for all to hear, for people out there and for us to hear, encouraging our hearts with the sounds of many others in agreement that God is worthy of our praise above all things.

We're better off when we get together and pray and we bring our needs and our petitions and our unbridled hearts cry together to God. We're better when we get together to hear God's word, discovering God in the Bible, discussing truths that unwind the deceptions of this world, and working together to read this road map.

I don't know about you, but I often need help figuring out a map. I'm pretty good, pretty good, but I don't know Sydney very well, and I need a lot of help. We need help to figure out the journey home. And at St. Paul's, our gatherings look like this. That's one way of gathering together. We're every age group, including the youngest this week. Every generation, every language, every culture, every gender, anyone can come together and celebrate God.

In our community groups, which are even more than just Bible study for us here at St. Paul's, where we live it out together, where we live the Bible out together and pray and carry one another's burdens.

[20 : 03] And the list goes on. Whether it be catch-ups or dinners or coffees or funerals or lunch breaks, in the battle against unbelief, doing that together.

Whatever that looks like at St. Paul's, we do that. We meet together in whatever way that is. And we call this treasuring Jesus together.

If you've been around St. Paul's long enough, or even more than one week, you've probably heard treasuring Jesus together, you might be tired of hearing it. This is what it says on our website.

In St. Paul's, we believe that the people whom Jesus has called into relationship with himself are his church and not an institutional building. For in an age of individualism, we value vigilance and accountability in treasuring Jesus together.

We are convinced as a church that in this time, we need each other all the more, like Hebrews 10 says.

[21 : 13] So let me encourage you to go find that core value outside, to go read it on our website, pursue love and good deeds, pursue love that's active together as we encourage each other in faith and foster a community of love that we can see and that the world around us can see.

guys, gathering in this way glorifies God. Matthew 5, 16 says, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Can you see that the gathering together to fight this unbelief serves the purpose of bringing glory to God? God, the light of our gathering, whatever way that is, helps us fulfill our purpose as Christians as we encourage one another in faith and grow in our dependence and our glorying in our God who has saved us together.

As we do that, we are a light to our community and they see God and glorify him too. I think that's a picture of a tree in full bloom in autumn as the leaves change that makes people go, oh, wow.

So that's why we gather as Christians at St. Paul's and ultimately that we grow in faith and glorify God and that many more would too. As we grow in faith, let me say also that three incredible things are going to increase in your life if we're treasuring Jesus together more and more.

[23 : 05] I can promise you these. First, you are going to encounter God himself regularly in ways that you can see as easily as the people sitting right next to you today.

God's Spirit is given and stays with you when you become a Christian and that will never change. Jesus promised that he will never leave you an orphan in John 14, one of my favorite chapters of the Bible, that his Spirit would stay with us. Christian, he is with you.

Look at verses 19 and 20. We are welcomed into God's presence through the death and resurrection of his Son in our place and we enjoy that presence of power in the person of his Spirit. And that's incredible. And, and there's a mysterious problem in Matthew 18, 20 and elsewhere in the Bible that says, when two or more are gathered in my name, there will I be with them.

[24 : 21] Two or three or small or large number, there Jesus will be. This is mysterious considering God has already promised that with every Christian he will be in them.

So what is this extra thing? What is it? On the simplest reading of it, and I'm good at simple. And the simplest reading that I can understand from that extra promise that when people meet together, Jesus would be there, I think Jesus is saying something like this.

I might be putting words in his mouth, but I think these would be true. I think Jesus is saying, I am living and working in each of your lives, and when you were together, you will see me in each other. When your brother shows up and hugs you, when he hears your nan has passed away, I am there. When your sister forces you to take a home-cooked meal because she wants to take one thing off your infinite list because your husband's away and you've got three kids at home on your own, I am there.

Whenever you see the love of God displayed in each other, I am there. Guys, when we fight sin together, fail and grow together, rebuke and restore one another, as Jesus shapes us and we gather, then we see him in each other.

[26 : 02] Jesus isn't promising some second level, a second phase of the presence of God. Rather, we see the evidence of his work in each other and he is more present and more visible in each other.

We encounter God when we get together, when we gather, as we see Jesus' work in each of our lives, in a way that we can't if we're on our own. The second incredible thing that I want to promise you guys is that when we gather, we're going to be stronger and sharper together.

Ecclesiastes 4, verse 10 to 12, says, two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls down and has no one to help him up. Also, if two lie down together, they'll keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves and a cord of three strands is not easily broken. We are stronger together because when you, when you are doing well as a Christian and full of faith, you are able to extend your hand to someone who is not and together fight unbelief.

[27 : 41] And you, you are stronger because in your darkest hour, you're not alone. And you can rely on your brothers and sisters who will step into your mess with you and be there and remind you of God's promises and call you to keep the faith with them.

We're stronger together and we're sharper together. Proverbs 27, 17. As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

consider Sam Lowe, right? He's not here, so this is easy. He has an incredible gift for getting to the heart of a big chunk of a complicated section of this.

And this way of gently explaining it, there's never condescending or arrogant or self glorifying. He invites joy in the complicated passages and fosters our excitement in the Word of God.

So that the next time that I read my Bible, I have this renewed zeal and understanding in it. Now I can tell you that unlike him, I'm not good at that. I can tell you what I think, but I'm not sharp like Sam is.

[29 : 05] Because Sam's care for me, for you, for us, to know the God behind the words makes me want to do the same.

It sharpens me. When I get the chance to lead and encourage people in the Word, I want to do the same. When Sam explains the Bible to me, I'm rebuked and encouraged, but I'm learning and I'm glorifying God for him and I'm being sharpened so that when I do the same, his iron sharpens me. We're stronger and we're sharper together. And lastly, I think this is the most exciting thing. I can promise all of you that when you gather together, you are going to get a glimpse of heaven itself. We're headed home up this mountain pass where it looks like it snows because it's got a yellow dotted line. But we're headed home to heaven where we're going to be together with God.

Now, this is an amazing passage to read on a day like Palm Sunday. Revelation chapter 7 from verse 9. We're going to be gathered around his throne, singing and praising and worshipping and sharing our eternal joy and closeness to God, beholding his perfection, holiness and majesty

together.

[30 : 57] All peoples together, all preferences of worship, all together. I really do find it beautiful and humbling that I get to read that passage on Palm Sunday when we remember, like Jeevi said, that foreshadowing that one day Jesus, like when he rode into Jerusalem, is going to save and unite all the people as their king.

And while today we might not have palm branches, it's an amazing thing to look forward to. If we're going to gather together in heaven like that, that makes our little imperfect gatherings like right now an opportunity to get a glimpse, a sketch, a brief little flash of the gloriously bright future that's in store for us.

Now, I've got to say, our gatherings are not perfect and not anywhere near the hope we have in store for us in heaven. But I've got to say that everyone together singing wholeheartedly to God of his wondrous grace toward us, you can't tell me that's not a little picture of heaven, a little glimpse. The last few times we've had heartbeat and people have been praying, it's been impossible to stop you from praying. The night just goes on and on and on and on.

Those prayers are like an echo that bounce down this road, calling us on, showing us what's going to happen soon, reminding us of where we're going to go.

[32 : 37] And finally, let me just encourage you in this. Hebrews 3, verse 12, see to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Unbelief is fought together, daily. Christian gatherings of all kinds is our daily encouragement.

It's our daily goal. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning, in the pursuit of glorifying God and loving him, each other and loving the world around us. So here, Hebrews 10, obey, meet together, get out of the habit of going through life and doing it alone.

Chase more time together, because we desperately need it. Getting up every day with your purpose in mind and intentionally building one another up in faith.

[33 : 56] Fight your own unbelief with others. We're given this beautiful gift, guys, this mess of random, beautiful, purposeful people that I see here this morning.

We see God in these people. We're strengthened and sharpened by them. And we get a glimpse of heaven when we get together with them. So this week, every day, go and do one of all of these together.

Together. Celebrate. Proclaim. Praise. Pray. Preach. Confess. Change. Love. Serve. Grow. Enjoy. Feel. Share. Support. Disciple. Baptize.

Sing. Give. Honor. Sweat. Struggle. Weep. Care. Carry. Bow. Gasp. Laugh. Turn. Marry. Welcome. Commission. Hug. Dance. Eat. Drink. Cook. Clean. Build. Study. Discuss. Discover. Rebuke.

Restore. Light. Amplify. Paint.

[34 : 55] Design. Record. Retell. Treasure. Jesus. Together. And maybe as you see the autumn leaves changing colour or as you sweep them up this autumn and shake your head.

Remember that we're on this journey home together. And we hold unswervingly together to the hope that we profess. For he who promised is faithful to us.

Amen. Amen.