

The Gathered Church (1)

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

- [0 : 0 0] Begin our worship now. We're going to sing firstly today from Psalm 122, and that's on page 416, singing the whole psalm to the Tune Free Church. I joyed when to the house of God go up, they said to me, Jerusalem within thy gates, our feet shall standing be. Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together, and to that place the tribes go up, the tribes of God go thither. Back to the days of Israel in the Old Testament, when they used to go up to the temple to meet together there, various festivals and times of worship. And the emphasis in the psalm is one of great joy, which should characterize us as we come before God, to be joyous in His presence, to rejoice in His salvation, to actually have our hearts stirred as we come to realize the privilege that is ours every time we come together as worshipers together. So, Psalm 122, we stand for the singings. If you're able to stand, I joyed when to the house of God. I joyed when to the house of God.
Go up, they said to me, Jerusalem within thy gates, our feet shall standing be.
Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together, and to that place the tribes go up, the tribes of God.
Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together, and to that place the tribes of God. To Israel's testimony, where to God's name come to pray, for thrones of judgment came the thrones of the of David's house first day.
- [2 : 3 5] Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together, and to that place the earth has been filled with us and filled with us. And the land of Jerusalem has been filled with us, and the land of Jerusalem may have peace and felicity. Let them that love thee and thy And thy peace have still prosperity.
Therefore I wish that peace may still within thy walls remain.
And ever may thy power see, prosperity retain.
Now for my friends and brethren's sakes, peace be in thee I'll say.
And for the house of God our Lord, I'll seek thy good always.
- [4 : 1 4] Now we're going to join together briefly in prayer. And prayer at this point is particularly for the young folks and for the Sunday school.
So let's bow our heads to pray. Our gracious and eternal God, we give thanks today that we're able to meet in this way here, in this place of worship.
And we give thanks that as we do so, we have our young people with us. We thank you, Lord, for the valuable place they have in the congregation. And we pray for them today as they meet together in Sunday school and other activities.
And we thank you for all who come and for all parents who bring children and grandparents to be joined together with us in worship and to meet together in the Sunday school.
Bless, we pray, each and every one of these young lives. And we pray as they begin a new session that you would help those who teach them and lead them as we give thanks for them too.

[5 : 15] We ask, O Lord, that your blessing will follow them, that they may come to be more and more rooted in your truth, that their lives may be developed and be shaped by your word, that they may be able to resist the many different ways in which the world around us seeks to pull us away from those things that are important, those things that are conducive to our growth in righteousness and holiness and the biblical morality.

And, Lord, we ask for your Holy Spirit to bless all of these young lives today. Be pleased now, we pray, to go before us in the remainder of the service, hear this, our prayer, and pardon our sin for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Amen. Right, before you go through, I'm just going to say a few words to you, for the young folks especially. It's for the older ones too, I'm sure, but it's for the young folks especially.

Right, hands up, children, all of those of you who like spiders. Whoops. Nobody likes spiders. Oh, there's some of the backs, eh?

Yes, they like spiders. Well, we should like spiders. You know why? Because spiders are really good to remove things like flies and other beasties that come into our houses and actually might be carrying some disease or other.

[6 : 32] You never know where flies have been before they land on your bread or on your food or whatever. So spiders actually kill flies. They actually, as you know, they weave webs. The flies get stuck in the web.

The spider then eats them. Not very pleasant, but it's good to know that spiders actually help us in that way. Well, there's a story about a spider or a man who really was protected by a spider's web.

Long ago in Scotland, this happened, a man was being chased by his enemies. The enemies were soldiers. And they were chasing this man and he was running away from them.

They weren't really in a great hurry. They knew they probably, they realized they probably would catch him eventually. But he went off at great speed. And when he was out of sight, where the soldiers couldn't see him, he came across a very small cave, a very low entrance cave that you needed to crawl into in order to get inside.

So he crawled into the cave and laid down there as far in as he could and just waited to see what would happen. And he was pretty sure that the soldiers, as they chased him, would actually find him eventually.

[7 : 39] So he began thinking about what he was going to do when the soldiers actually discovered the cave and saw that he was inside. But as he was waiting for quite a long time, a spider began to weave a web across the mouth of the cave.

And pretty soon, most of that entrance was covered by the spider's web. And a while after that, he heard voices. And these were the soldiers looking for him. And they came to this cave and he heard one of them shouting to another soldier nearby.

He said, there's nobody here. Nobody, there can't be anybody in here. But if anybody had gone into that cave, he was thinking, it would have broken the spider's web and given the clue that he was inside.

So that spider's web protected that soldier, protected that man from the soldiers. And off they went to look for him somewhere else. And somebody wrote, when they heard about that incident, somebody wrote this.

If God is on your side, a spider's web is as good as a stone wall. If God is not on your side, a stone wall is no better than a spider's web.

[8 : 55] We're talking about protection. How God looks after his people and how believing in Jesus brings us into the protection of God. It doesn't mean protecting from everything that's going to happen to us in life, but protection especially from the result of our sin, where God's own anger, where God's own displeasure is directed against us till we come to believe in Jesus.

And when we come to believe in Jesus, then we're protected from that by being safe in Jesus. Paul, when he wrote to the Romans, said, there is now therefore no condemnation.

Teachers can explain that to the young ones in the Sunday school. What's condemnation? There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

When we come to believe in Jesus, we come to be taken into the protective care of Jesus. And therefore we are safe. We are saved.

We come to belong to God's people. And whatever happens to us in the world, we're safe because we're then on the way to heaven where we're safe forevermore.

[10 : 09] So next time you see a spider or next time you see a spider's web, remember that story. Remember to ask yourself, am I living a safe life?

Do I believe in Jesus for my protection forevermore? Or am I still not one of those who are in Christ Jesus?

Now we're going to say the Lord's Prayer again together. So let's just say the Lord's Prayer before you go through to your rooms. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen. Let's sing once more now.

[11 : 10] We're singing this time from Psalm 42. Psalm 42. Again, it's in the Scottish Psalter, page 262. And singing to the tune, Glencairn.

And in this psalm, we find the psalmist who wrote the psalm. We find him longing for God. He is actually away from the people of God at that time.

In verse 4, you can see when he's thinking about what happened in the past, for whatever reason, he's not able to join with God's people, the multitude, when he went with them to God's house.

That would be to the temple with voice of joy and praise. So he's thinking back to that and he's longing to be back again with those people of God as they come together to worship him.

So it's like us, the heart for water brooks and thirst at pant and bray. So pants my longing soul, O God, that come to thee I may. The heart for the young folks, the heart was a kind of deer.

[12 : 08] And the deer, when it's out in a desert area, especially at times, longs to get water if it's thirsty. And so the psalmist is comparing himself to these deer and he himself is longing to take a drink of God's word in worship with his people.

Let's sing verses 1 to 5 to the tune Glencairn to God's praise. Like as the heart for water brooks, in thirst doth pant and bray, so pants my longing soul, O God, that come to thee I may.

My soul for God, the living God, that first when shall I near, and to thy countenance approach, and in God's sight appear.

My tears have unto me been meed, both in the night and day.

While unto me continually, where is thy God they say?

[14 : 02] My soul is poured out to me, when this I think upon, because that with the multitude I here tofore had gone.

With them into God's house I went, with voice of joy and praise, yea, with the multitude that kept the solemn holy days.

O why art thou cast out my soul, why in this soul is laid?

Thus God, for I shall praise him yet, his countenance is mine.

Now if you turn with me please to Matthew chapter 18. I'm going to read God's word there at Matthew chapter 18, the Gospel of Matthew.

[15 : 44] And we're going to read the first 20 verses of this chapter. Matthew 18, verses 1 to 20. At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Woe to the world for temptations to sin. For it is necessary that temptations come. But woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

[17 : 05] It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. See that you do not despise one of these little ones.

For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

[18 : 21] Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. May God bless to us by reading anew of his word to his own praise.

Before we come back to look at the final verse that we read there, verse 20, we're going to sing again this time in Psalm 87. Psalm 87 from the Sing Psalms version this time on page 115.

We're singing to the tune, in Sussex. On Jerusalem's holy mountain he has founded his abode. More than all of Jacob's dwellings, Zion's gates are near, are dear to God.

Glorious things of you are spoken, Zion, city of the Lord. Many drawn from all the nations, as your people I record. When you find Zion in the Old Testament referred to in this way, it refers to Zion as the church of God gathered in different places, especially here.

[19 : 37] He's talking here about Zion gathered together, and how the blessing of God accompanies the gatherings of his people, and how God delights in Zion's gates, it says there in verse 2, more than all of Jacob's dwellings.

That's generally been interpreted as how the Lord delights in the gatherings of his people, even more than to meet with them individually.

So we'll sing these verses, Psalm 87, to Tune Sussex, on Jerusalem, Jerusalem's holy mountain. Amen. Glorious things of you are spoken, Zion, city of the Lord.

Many drawn from all the nations, as your people I record.

I will name as those who know me, Egypt, Tyre, and Babylon.

[21 : 22] Eilestine, along with whose sight, I will count as Zion born.

Yes, it will be said of time, this and that on here belong, and on earth the highest blessing will descend and make her strong.

Born in Zion, what will enter? Then the peoples register, they will sing our family music, all my pountains are in love.

Amen. Well, let's turn now for a short time to Matthew 18. Matthew chapter 18. I'd like us to consider verse 20 of this chapter.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. This is, of course, Jesus speaking to his disciples.

[22 : 52] Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Now, as mentioned in the intimations, I want to begin a short series of studies today, maybe some 10, 11, 12 studies the most, and it's going to be on the theme of the gathered church.

By the gathered church, we're going to be looking specifically at the church gathered as we are today in a congregational setting, and some of the important aspects of how we gather together and why we gather together, particularly in worship, though there are other activities for which we gather together as well.

And, of course, God is gathering his church from all over the world. According to the promise of the Bible, God is busy all the time gathering his church together, different denominations, different countries, different backgrounds, all of that, and building them into the one church of God, the one people of God, wherever we're based, and however much we may differ from other different parts of the world.

So that's one aspect of gathering, but here it's specifically referring to the gathered church in a congregational sense, which two or three, where they are gathered in my name, there I am among them.

And so we're looking at the gathering of the church. We're actually very conscious of the benefits we've received ever since the pandemic of having online services and having live stream services.

[24 : 25] I don't want to minimize that. That's a real blessing from God. But it can actually be something of a drawback as well, because we can come to rely on the fact that we don't need to actually physically attend in order to join with a service that's live or that's taking place.

And what we want to see through these studies is the importance of actually gathering physically together and the benefits that accrue to us from doing that compared with actually watching a service or taking part in a service virtually without actually gathering with the Lord's people.

A pastor in Atlanta called John Onwuchekwa, I think that's how you pronounce it, but this is what he said at one time of his own experience as a youngster.

He said, I thought I hated baseball. I watched it to cure insomnia. Then one day in elementary school, my friends came to the door with aluminum baseball bats and tennis balls.

We used cars and landposts in our cul-de-sac as bases, and we started playing baseball. And you know what? Baseball wasn't all that bad.

[25 : 39] In fact, baseball was great. It was suddenly engaging and enjoyable. We played for hours, and the time just flew by.

It wasn't baseball I hated. It was just watching it. What made the difference? Participation, he says.

The worth of the sport shouldn't be judged by spectating, but by participating. And I want to change that last sentence a bit just to swap the word sport for the word church.

The worth of the church shouldn't be judged by spectating, but by participating. And that's what we're really about in thinking of the church as gathered or the gathered church in the different ways in which we can see the importance of that.

Because the Bible tells us that it's as gathered together, especially as gathered together, that we grow in our understanding of the Bible, that we grow in our appreciation of each other.

[26 : 48] It's as we gather together that we actually come to grow spiritually in our development in a spiritual and moral development. It's as we come together and grow together and be together and meet together and discuss together and worship together that we find ourselves using the gifts that God has given us for the growth of his kingdom.

All of that is packed into the important matter of being gathered together. And you'll notice all the way through the Bible that you have many times plurals used to describe what God's people do.

If you go through the letters of the Apostle Paul, even when he's thinking of such things as being sanctified, being made holy, which we tend to individualize perhaps too much.

Of course, we all need to develop individually. We all need to grow spiritually as individual Christians. We all need to be sanctified individually. All of these things are important in an individual basis.

But if you go through the letters of the Apostle Paul, more often than not, you'll find him saying, these things are done together. You are sanctified as you meet together, as you actually gather together, as you are seen together and appreciate being together.

[28 : 12] All of that, that's why he uses the pronouns they and we and you in the plural. Pronouns. Well, they're important in today's society and for all the wrong reasons.

But the Bible's use of plurals is itself significant for us because it's one way in which it reminds us that we are a plurality, that we meet together not as disjointed individuals, but as a spiritual body of people, as the gathered church of God.

And in a world where individualism has for so long been a feature of people's thinking and people's behavior, the church in this world, the church on earth, the gathered church, should be the least individualistic body on earth.

There should be no room for individualism here in this congregation, any other congregation of God's people, because individualism, as you find it all too often in the world out there, really says, I'm in charge of my own life.

Nobody needs to tell me how to run my life. I'll do this because it feels right for me to do it. I'll think of my identity the way I want to feel about my identity.

[29 : 33] I'll see to my genders, I'll see to all the things that affect me as an individual. It doesn't matter what anybody else says, and especially it doesn't matter what the likes of the Bible says or the church says, I am the boss of my own life.

And as you meet together as a church, and as we seem to meet together as a church, the gathered church is one of the main ways in which we counter the worldly culture of the world.

That's so important to us as individuals but also collectively. So that's where we're coming to this theme from the gathered church.

And if you come now to this verse in verse 20, Jesus saying, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. And two things really strike you.

We'll use these just as our headings briefly from that verse. First of all, he talks here about being gathered in his name. As many as two or three are gathered in my name.

[30 : 36] So they're gathered in Christ's name. And the second thing that comes across strongly is the fact that he in these gatherings is there among them. Christ's presence in his church, in the gatherings of his church.

And the two things are very closely connected. Look at the context here. It's to do with the church. We're not going to go through the various parts of the passage, but you can see how it goes step by step from what he looks at as a matter of pastoral importance or even discipline.

A brother sins against another. How you go and try and gain that brother, reconcile to your brother or sister. And if he refuses to listen, then you take with you some witnesses.

You try and do it in that way, first of all. And if that fails, then you tell it to the church. You get the church to come in. In other words, this is a passage that's always been regarded as a passage important regarding the discipline that ought to be taking place in the church.

Now, don't think of the word discipline as just punishment. Discipline is a matter of order, keeping order, keeping good order in the church.

[31 : 49] And it's an important feature of the church described in the Bible. I'm not going to go into that, but it's the context. That's the context in which Jesus is speaking these words. And then he widens it out by talking about those who ask God, the Father in heaven.

And verse 19, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. And that takes you into the area of prayer and of being together in prayer and of having God's people sharing in prayer to God the Father and seeking His blessing.

And then it widens out even further, I think, in verse 20, where two or three are gathered in my name. In other words, it's moving out of the area of just looking at the discipline of the church into all kinds of gatherings, especially worship gatherings of the church, where two or three people are gathered together in my name.

I am there in the midst. And that word gathered is very close, actually, to another passage we'll look at, God willing, in the course of these studies, in Hebrews chapter 10, where the writer to the Hebrews was aware that some people were just drifting away and falling away from being gathered together or didn't want to gather anymore with God's people.

And he says to them in terms of their hope and their faith and all the rest of it, don't, he said, neglect the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some.

[33 : 20] But all the more as you see the day approaching, he means by that the last day, the day of Christ's return, all the more as you see that day approaching, meet together, gather together, be together, share together.

And it's very close, that word in Hebrews, to this word gathered here. It really means gathered in a sense of worship. And one thing we need to remember is this. When we gather together in worship, we're not just following a decision on our own part, although that's involved in it.

We meet together today by Christ's appointment. And that's important. We meet together by Christ's own appointment. Not just that he's foreseen it or appointment in that sense, but appointment in the sense that he wills it.

In fact, he orders it. It's a command on his part to meet together. And so by Christ's appointment, that's why he says here, meet together in my name.

In other words, we're meeting together under his authority, by his leave and by his express command, by his appointment, under his authority as the Son of God, the Savior of his church.

[34 : 37] And in relation to that, there's something very important. And that's the visibility of God's church in this world.

The visibility of the church in this world. We are a visible body of people, but we're not visible if we individualize everything. Yes, our individual lives should show that we're committed to God, that we're committed to Jesus, but it's as people come to see us gathering together and as we do so regularly, as they see us gathering together, then that makes an impression upon their minds, doesn't it, that why are these people meeting together?

What is it that draws these people to be together? What is it that they actually have as they come together to worship this God that they claim is their God? That's the way of the world, but they're seeing, they're noticing it.

Jesus, remember in John chapter 13 in verse 35, he says, by this shall all people know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.

Now, you can't love on your own unless it's love for yourself. When he says, by this shall all men know that you're my disciples if you have love one for another, that's love made visible.

[36 : 01] And how is love made visible? Well, especially in God's people actually coming to gather together from time to time to share together in the worship of God, in the exploration of God's word, in listening to his voice, speaking to us from the scriptures.

Yes, you can do that individually. Yes, you can do that online. And I'm not taking issue with those who simply cannot for various reasons meet together with others. That's where online services are truly appreciated and beneficial and good.

But when we can, when we don't have reasons like that not to gather together, then the blessings of gatherings are blessings that are noticed and make their mark to others around us.

By this shall all men know that you're my disciples if you love one another. And if you love one another, then you'll love to be together is really pretty much what Jesus is saying.

And there's a question for us today, there's a challenge for us today, here. Do we love to be here on an individual basis? Is our presence here today with others just on a personal sense, just for what I might get out of it or what I might contribute to it?

[37 : 17] Or do we just simply love to be with God's worshiping people? That's how it should be, isn't it? And I'm sure that's the case, I'm sure, I hope, for all of us here today. We love to be here because we love to be with other people who worship God.

We love to be with like-minded people for whom it is so important that we gather together to worship God together. For whom it's important that the world out there sees that we do love God and that we love Him to the extent that we love to worship Him together.

You see, all of that's behind this emphasis on gathering together. We're gathered together today by Christ's appointment. we're gathered together in His name.

He's laid the responsibility of gathering together on us. And it's not just a responsibility. I want us really to think, as we go through all of these studies, indeed all the time, to think that yes, it's our responsibility by Christ's appointment to come together, to share together in the things of worship, but it's also our privilege.

privilege. It's our privilege. Because the nearest thing you get to heaven is not when you're worshiping God on your own, great though that is, and you might have very heavenly thoughts and heavenly experiences from the blessing of God while you're on your knees, when you're reading your Bible, just yourself and God.

[38 : 45] But the nearest thing to heaven is when God's people are gathered together to worship Him, to sing His praises, to listen to His voice, to admire His beauty.

That's the nearest thing to heaven you can get in this world. As we sang in the psalm, the Lord delights in Zion's gates and the gatherings of His people more than all the dwellings of the individual Jacob.

And that's why today as we come together, here is one of the great privileges we have in life, to be able to gather together willingly and under Christ's disappointment and by Christ's authority to come to be here together as the gathered church in worship.

Secondly, we have the reference there to Jesus being in the midst. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Of course, you know that Jesus is God.

He's the second person of the Trinity that God is. And in that sense, Jesus is everywhere, just like the Father and the Holy Spirit. The one God is everywhere in the creation.

[39 : 59] And as they are everywhere in the creation, so it's true of Jesus that He is as the Son of God, as the divine person He is, and in that sense He is present more than just in one locality.

But this is a specific presence that's keyed into the gatherings of God's people, where two or three are gathered in my name there.

There. Wherever that is, there am I in the midst of them. I am actually there present with them. The church on earth is God's dwelling place.

The church on earth is God's people. We sometimes refer to this building as the church on Kenneth Street, the free church, and it is that.

But that's not what the Bible means in the highest sense by the church. The church is not a building. The church in the highest sense is the people of God, the worshiping people of God, the people who gather together and are gathered as the people of God from time to time to worship Him.

[41 : 08] That's the church. That's where Jesus dwells. That's where His presence is made known. There am I in the midst of them. There's a sense in which all who are God's people, all who are saved people of God, come to gather together with others and take Jesus with them.

Why do I say that? Because the Bible tells us that when we come to trust our lives to Christ and trust in Christ and believe in Him and look to Him for our salvation, we're told that the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts and our souls.

Now, we can't see that physically, but the Bible tells us it's a truth, it's a fact. And therefore, every one of you today who is in Christ, every one of you who lives by faith in Christ, everyone here saved has come to this building carrying Jesus with you.

Jesus lives in you. And when you come together with other like-minded people, you bring Christ with you as you come together. I'm not saying that that is a complete definition of how Christ is present in the gatherings of His people.

What's really important is not to be able to necessarily understand all the various aspects of that or be able to explain all the various aspects of how can God be with His people, how does God live in the hearts of His people?

[42 : 36] The important thing that Jesus is saying is, I am there. I am there. It's not to be questioned.

It's not something that's spoken of as something in the future. He's not saying where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be among them. Or I will come and go from amongst them.

I am there. It's a statement of fact. The Lord's also, in a sense, a promise as well, of course.

He promises that that's what is true when we gather together. He is there. But it's a statement of fact that that is where He is. And it's actually true here and now.

Just pause for a moment. Think how amazing that is that God, that Jesus, is in this building, in this gathering, in these hearts, that where we are gathered together today as we are, this is a fact.

[43 : 52] I am there, He says, in the midst. And you know, that's something that should give us pause for thought, for reflection, for appreciation, for thanksgiving.

As we come through these doors and take our place in the pew or in this pulpit, it affects all of us, whether we're preaching or listening to the gospel. It should be something that gives us pause, cause for thought, and just to pause for a moment, reflect upon how this is true always when we come together.

How this amazing fact is actually true as God Himself, as Jesus Himself says it truthfully to us, there I am in the midst. There I am in the midst.

And if we haven't thought too much of that in coming to church today, think about it now. Think about it as you leave and as you go back home or wherever you're going to go.

Think of where you've been and that you've been part of a gathering in Christ's name and by Christ's authority where He was present. Where He, according to His promise and His fact, is there.

[45 : 06] And you can say to people quite honestly, quite sincerely, I was in a gathering today and God was there with me. Jesus was in our midst.

Because that's His own word of assurance to us. Is there anything better than that? Is there anything more privileged than that?

Is there anything that you would put above that? Well, John Calvin, that great reformer whose teachings based on the Bible, of course.

The Bible was so important to John Calvin. And in his writings you find his emphasis constantly, his emphasis is, is that what the Scripture says?

Is that what the Bible says? This is what he wrote. He's talking here about this promise, where two or three calls it a promise, there am I among them.

[46 : 02] He says, therefore, this promise should stir us up not a little to grow into a godly and holy unity. For whoever either neglects the sacred assemblies or separates himself from his brethren demonstrates by this fact that he cares nothing for Christ's presence.

Those who desire Christ's presence will meet together in His name. Those who desire Christ's presence will meet together in His name.

In other words, if we today are thinking, or if people are thinking, I really want to have Christ's presence, but I don't want to go to church, you see, that's an inconsistency. Calvin is saying, if we really value God's presence and Christ's presence, if we want to have Christ's presence, if we want to experience what it's like to be aware of Christ's presence, then we must be, he says, regularly with the gatherings of God's people.

We cannot separate, you see, things which God has tied together. And where God has tied together, meeting in the name of Christ, with Christ being there, we can't separate the one from the other.

We can't say, well, I can have Christ, but I don't need to be in church. I don't need to belong to the church. church. That's taking apart what Jesus has joined together. And it's so important for you and for me always to remember that.

[47 : 37] There am I in the midst. I am there with them. I am there in their midst when two or three have gathered in my name. And you notice the emphasis there on two or three.

Where two or three are gathered in my name. He doesn't say two or three dozen. He doesn't say two or three hundred. He doesn't say two or three thousand.

He just says two or three. Supposing there was just myself preaching the gospel and two others here in this church today. This promise, this statement of fact would still be true.

That where they meet in his name, he is there. What an encouragement that is to us. Not only an encouragement, but a stimulus.

Because all of these empty pews that are still empty, we want to see them filled. Why do we want to see them filled? Because we want to see people experience what it is to share together in the kind of gathering for worship where Christ guarantees his presence.

[48 : 44] We want them to come to know Christ. We want ourselves to experience more of what it is to grow in the knowledge of Jesus. In our commitment to Jesus.

In experiencing the love of Jesus. All the things the Bible tells us are the privileges of God's people. We come to experience them, to sharing them together.

And as the gathered church, that too is our privilege today. That even if it's just two or three, we actually can use that as a matter before God that we seek his presence even as two or three.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I think this has been misused over the years as well. This emphasis on the twos and the threes. Because there are places, of course, where there are very, very small gatherings of God's people faithfully meeting together today.

And we pray for them and we remember them. Not just in our own country, in our islands, but throughout the world. But we mustn't take this verse and say, well, there's just the two or three of us and that really, that'll do.

[50 : 00] I'm satisfied with that. Because the promise of God is it's not about numbers. It's not about hundreds or thousands or dozens or whatever. It's just about the twos and the threes. As long as two and three are faithfully meeting together, that's really it.

That's pretty much all we need. Is it? Well, why do we evangelize? Why has Jesus said that he requires that he requires his worshiping people, his gathered church, to be gathered in a sense as well to think about evangelizing, thinking about how do we actually transmit the gospel and the privileges that we have as a gathered church?

How do we actually communicate that to the world in which we live? We go forth and we evangelize. Luke chapter 14, verse 23, part of that great passage that deals with the great banquet as Jesus described it.

Invitations given out to come to the banquet were refused. So then others were invited. Some of them refused. And then Jesus said, well, go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in that my house may be filled.

Now, don't misunderstand that. We don't compel people by forcing people. We're not in the business of trying to actually force our views upon others.

[51 : 25] We're not here because we're forced to come to church, but we're here because we're willing and because we want to come. And when God makes us willing, he gives us the mind. He gives us the mind that's made willing to come.

And so when Jesus said, compel them to come in, what he meant was use every reasonable argument you can to try and persuade people to come into the gatherings of God's people so that my house may be filled, so that my kingdom may be filled up.

And today, as we pray for that world out there, for those who don't come near a church, for those who would, if God wills it, fill these empty pews that we'd long to see filled, well, he is saying to us today, well, it's your business as well as the church of God.

As you gather from time to time, what you share together is not just matters of worship, but how we're going to actually get out there and bring the gospel to the world around us.

You share together in discussing that and thinking about how we increasingly would want to do that. And, of course, Matthew's gospel ends like that, doesn't it?

[52 : 44] He talks, Jesus says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.

You see, he didn't say go and make saved Christians. He didn't say go and make converts. That's God's business. What he said was go and make disciples.

Gather people under the teaching of the Bible, under the teaching of the Word, into the worship of God, into the gathered church. Go and make disciples of all nations. And how did he finish it?

And I am with you to the end of the age. I am with you. I will be in your midst. I will be with you. I will not leave you as you go about the business.

of evangelizing in his name. I was reading a book just now by another pastor from America called Tony Marida. It's a book that I'm going to be using in some ways regarding these studies as well.

[53 : 51] But he talks about how as a congregation or as a church in America, they were supporting a church plant, new church, in Frankfurt, in Germany.

and the pastor of that church was a man, Stefan Poues. And he says that Stefan one time came over to America to spend time with him, with Tony and his people there in America.

And on a particular Lord's Day, he joined that congregation in worship. But then he was due to leave early next morning to go back to Frankfurt in Germany.

And Tony said, I had to apologize to him because there was no time for me. I really wanted to show him something of the city. I wanted to show him some of my favorite restaurants and eating places and other aspects of the city that were worth looking at, that people always went to see.

So he apologized to Stefan. Really sorry that it wasn't time to do that. He would have loved to have done that. You know what Stefan's reply was? He said this, There's nothing greater we could have done together than we've done.

[55 : 03] There's nothing greater that you could have shown me. I just got to worship with the saints at your church. We got to enjoy the end for which we are created together.

There's nothing greater that you could do today than to be here as a worshipping gathered people of God. There's nothing greater that I could show you.

Supposing if you are a visitor today I would take you around all the sites of the island, show you all these wonderful beaches, show you all these great sites of long ago, all these remnants of temples or brochs or whatever.

Remember what he said, There's nothing greater that you could have done for me and to have me join you in the worship of God.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst. Let's pray. Amen. Lord, our gracious God, we have so many privileges in gathering together as your word tells us.

[56 : 27] Forgive us, we pray, for the times when we fail to appreciate as we should to the extent we should, O Lord, how great our privilege is. And we pray that you would help us as we value these privileges, to be all the more concerned and determined to be together with your people as often as we can.

We thank you for worship. We thank you for congregational worship. We thank you for the benefits of fellowship together, for the ways in which you enable us to interact with each other, so as to share the experiences of life and to bring these also under the teaching of your word and spirit.

We pray, Lord, today as we begin what we anticipate to be, a series of studies and your word's teaching of the gathered church of God. O Lord, of God, help us, we pray, all the more to be visible in the world and to be seen as your people and to be concerned to transmit the gospel and its values and its teaching and its principles to this needy world around us.

We pray for any today who heard your word and have not yet come to give their life to you, to come to trust in you, come to receive you as you are offered in the gospel. We ask, O Lord, that your Holy Spirit will be active amongst us, teaching us, drawing us, bringing us more and more into that living fellowship with yourself through which we know we come to be saved.

And so continue to bless us in all our activities as a congregation. We acknowledge, Lord, we come together in so many ways, not only for worship but in other aspects of the congregation's life.

[58 : 13] And we pray your blessing today to follow all that we endeavor to do in your name. Be with us now as we spend time in fellowship. Blessed to us, we pray, refreshments provided for us.

Make us thankful also that you look after our bodily needs so well. Hear us, we pray, and pardon our sin for Christ's sake. Amen. Well, let's conclude our service this morning by singing to God's praise from Psalm 27.

That's on page 32. Psalm 27, verses 4 to 6. Here is the psalmist again talking about being in God's house in those days in the Old Testament so that he would gaze upon the beauty of the Lord as God made himself known to them in those times.

So one thing I'll plead before the Lord, and this I'll seek always, that I may come within God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze and in his house may seek to know direction in his ways.

For in his dwelling he will keep me safe in troubled days. Within his tent he'll shelter me and on a rock me raise. My head will then be lifted high above my enemies and in his tent I'll sacrifice with shouts of joy and praise.

[59 : 48] And we're singing to a tune Grafenberg these verses 4 to 6. one thing I'll plead before the Lord and this I'll seek always that I may come within God's eyes and dwell there all my days that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze and in his eyes may seek direction in his ways for in his dwelling he will keep me safe and troubled way where than his tent he'll shelter me and on a rock me raise my head will then be lifted high above my enemies and in his tent

I'll sacrifice with hearts of joy and praise if you allow me to get to the main door please I'll greet you on the way out now may grace and mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be your portion now and evermore Amen thank you thank you Thank you.