

The Church Visible and Invisible

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 August 2019

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] One of the things we read here is that believers have come to a kingdom that cannot be shaken. There's going to come a shaken, a shaking, but we belong to a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And once all things have been shaken again by God, the things that remain are the things, of course, in God, in Christ. But it also says here that believers have come and now have access into a heavenly realm.

It's not that we're coming to this. It's though one day we will have access into a heavenly realm.

Notice what he's saying. What he's saying is that you have come to this heavenly realm.

And so by faith, you ought to understand this evening where you are. And the answer shouldn't be sat in a building. The answer should be, according to Hebrews, in the heavenly realm.

And this is what we'll begin to unpack. So let me just summarize this if I can. One of the comparisons that are made here from verse 18 through to 24 is the believers of old compared to the believers of today.

[1 : 13] And the believers today, in any day that is today, are to look back on the believers of old. Those whom God brought out of Egypt and what he did for them.

And we're told to remember their experiences. We're not told that we can experience what they did because experience is non-transferable. You can pass on a memory.

You can pass on information. You can pass on ideas. But you can't pass on an experience. Another person may share the same kind of experience. But you can't pass yours over to them.

It doesn't work. However, you can remember the experiences of others. And that's what the writer here wants you to do. That they are stood before Almighty God.

And they do not want to hear another word that comes out of God's mouth. Because they could not bear it. And the reason they could not bear it is because of what they had done.

[2 : 12] And what God was about to do. So terrifying was this experience. That it says even here that Moses trembled with fear.

The people didn't want any further message to be spoken to them. Verse 19. They endured that no order to be given anymore.

And that Moses was so terrified that he says he trembled with fear. God's people have been brought out of Egypt. And you think once they're brought out of slavery, then everything with God is going to be okay.

Well, they go through. Moses goes up onto the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. And yet the people down below are doing what? Instead of recognizing and waiting patiently, obediently, as they had been told, for Moses to come back, they decided to take the gold that they had and to make a god out of it.

And they took the gold off their earrings and off their necks and wherever else it might have been out of their bags. They made a golden calf. And then got Aaron to declare that this is the god that brought them out of Egypt.

[3 : 25] The mistake that they were making is not that they were worshiping a false god, but they were trying to worship the true god through a false mean. Okay? They understood who brought them out of Egypt.

They understood I am was the one who brought the Ten Commandments, the Ten Plagues upon Egypt. They understood all of that. The issue here is they decided to take that god and turn him into an image.

And they tried to worship that god through an image, which, of course, is the very thing you cannot do. Even further, to claim that this image of the true god is the one that brought them out of Egypt,

which is not the case.

Now, the reason we're to remember that is because of what we have come to. Okay? Notice what we have come to. Verse 22 to 24.

For you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God. You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to a place where there are innumerable angels in festival gathering.

[4 : 32] You have come to the place to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.

You have come to the place where God is the judge of all. You have come to the place where the spirits of the righteous are made perfect.

You have come to the place where Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. You have come to the place to the sprinkled blood that speaks better word than the blood of Abel.

What you are meant to understand this evening by faith, and therefore you will see it, is that as we gather for worship, we're not alone. You need to, that needs to sink in.

That here we are, sat here, on a hot summer's evening, and we're not alone. Okay, we've got innumerable angels surrounding us right at this very moment.

We've got the presence of God here at this very moment. We've got Jesus Christ, the mediator of a better covenant, right here at this moment. We've got the spirit of the righteous who have been made perfect.

[5 : 39] Those dead believers that have gone to be with Christ, we're not alone. What we are is the visible church meeting with the invisible church. So what may look like a worship service down here on earth, you know, of sorts, a gathering down here on earth that seeks to worship God, what we are meant to see is that as we come to worship God, as God's people have always come to worship him, that we do so not alone.

This is why it says you're not coming to this place. It says you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You're not being told that one day you'll occupy that place.

You're being told you do occupy that place right now. And yet many of us sit here with not the faith to believe it, not the understanding to see it.

And the writer of Hebrews wants to correct you in your worship. That as you turn up here, notice where you're turning up. Notice what you're coming to. You are coming here in the corporal gathering of God's people to worship God in the heavenlies.

This is where we are, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of angels, upon thousands upon thousands of believers. And we think it's just us. Not even for a moment is it just us.

[7 : 01] God is here. Jesus is here. That blood which redeemed us is here. This is what we are meant to see. This is what we are meant to understand.

Now it makes you wonder why anybody would want to miss that. Right? And the reason they miss it is because they don't see it. They don't come because they don't believe that they're coming to that. They just believe they're coming to this. And of course, if this doesn't excite them, why come? But what we're actually coming to is this, which is exciting, but also this, which is God given to us this very evening.

The point here is it is a believing church. As Christians, we are to understand that as we gather for worship, as we gather God for praise, we do so in the heavenly realm and we are not alone.

We are never alone. And this is the beauty of the church. The church is both visible and invisible. We're one church.

[8 : 09] We're one church. There aren't two churches in scriptures. There is only one church. But the one church is witnessed, as you read, both visibly and invisibly.

And we gather together in the same place, the heavenly realm, Mount Zion, the city of the living God, in order to worship him. We are gathered here in the heavenly Jerusalem in order to worship God.

And we do so with the church. Some we see and much we don't see. But that's what we see by faith. We understand it by faith.

And therefore, we see it. It's hard to believe, perhaps, that you this very evening are having access into the heavenly realm. I didn't realize I was coming to church and that's what would happen.

But that's exactly what's happening to us as we gather and worship God this evening. None of us sees it with our eyes. But all of us should see it.

[9 : 09] In faith, in accordance with the word of God. The church is here, both visible and invisible. Now, given that there is only one church, this, of course, leads to a few difficulties that theologians

throughout the years have written plenty of words about.

I don't want to go into them other than to say that the visible church is something we can see with our eyes. But not even that we see clearly. The invisible church we can't see, but it is the pure church.

It is the clear church. And what I mean by that is this, that everyone who belongs to the invisible church is genuine. But not everyone who belongs to the visible church actually belongs.

There are plenty of parables, the wheat and the tares grow together, to point out that just because you happen to be found together in the same field, it does not mean that you are actually the same thing.

Okay? Paul has to say through Romans, as he looks back on the people of God, that not all Israel were Israel. Well, they're all Israel. They're all from Abraham.

[10:23] They're all part of that nation. Well, yes, visibly, that's true. But in terms of faith, not all of them were. And so we understand that the church, like the nation of Israel, has the same difficulty with the visibility of the church, the visibility of God's people.

Not everyone who's here is actually here. So what's the difficulty? Well, the difficulty is if we're gathered and worshiping God in the heavenlies, does that not mean everyone?

What do you do with that? Or else we're going to get further down the line trying to distinguish where people actually are this evening.

There's the complication. Another complication, or not so much a complication, but rather a pattern, is that the way we worship God down here is meant to be set by God up there.

We worship God in the heavenlies, and Jesus has already told us to pray that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That means the pattern of worship down here should always reflect the pattern of worship up there, and that's why we're told about it.

[11:35] We're told what worship looks like in the heavenlies, go read Revelation, so that we can understand how to do it down here. Now, the pattern's not the other way around.

The pattern's that way around. We're to understand what happens in heaven so that we may copy it down here on earth. Now, that seems like a pretty straightforward problem to figure out until, that is, people have their own ideas about what worship is.

And as I said on Wednesday evening, it's better for God's people to do the right thing badly than to do the wrong thing well. Okay? It's better for God's people to do the right thing badly than to do the wrong thing well.

It's much better for the church to gather, and their singing, let's say, isn't that impressive. We could all be better singers. Well, I'm speaking just illustratively here.

I think I'm a great singer. That was a joke, by the way. Just a joke. Okay? But it's better to be a bad singer singing the right song than it is to be a good singer singing an atheistic song.

[12:47] Okay? I'd much rather be the bad singer that I am singing the songs that we have done tonight than being a tremendous singer singing Lady Gaga's I Was Born This Way.

Okay? Okay? Okay? There's a difference between the two. And the difference here is fairly obvious that if you have this issue between being good and being bad, okay, further distinctions have to be made.

So we'd much rather be bad at doing the right thing than being good at doing the wrong thing.

Imagine it like this. A man in the world could be tremendously successful.

A Christian man in the world, let's say, could be tremendously successful. But when you take a closer look at him, he's storing up his treasure on earth. Now, he's been told to store it up in heaven, but he's storing it up on earth.

What is he doing? Well, he's doing the wrong thing well. And he's doing the right thing very badly.

And so in the eyes of the world, he looks like a successful man.

[13:58] But in the eyes of the church, he looks like a failure. Because though he's successful, he's successful in the wrong thing. So it's much better as a church to do the right things badly, though we're all to be better at them, we're to be better singers, we're to try in every way, than it is to be successful in all the wrong areas.

And that's one of the key issues when it comes to the worship of God. Now, with that said, a few more distinctions have to be made.

And the distinction I'd want to make is this. The distinction between praise, the praise of God, and the worship of God. And the reason this distinction has to be made is because many Christians

don't think there's actually a distinction here to be made.

They will argue it's the same thing. But the praise of God and the worship of God has never been the same thing. Now, to define what praise is, is fairly straightforward.

It's to speak well of. When you speak well of God, as we have done in the songs that we have sung this evening, we're speaking well of him. We're praising his name.

[15:12] We are magnifying him. We are lifting him high through the very words that we use. That's praise. That's how we're praising God. We're saying true things about God back to God, magnifying him as we sing to one another and hear that magnification of God.

And as we build our faith by understanding what it is that we are singing. That's praise. We're adoring God. We're holding God in high reverence.

We are magnifying him. We are exalting him. We're doing the very things that God's people have always done. We are taking God and drawing attention to him through praise, through speaking well of him.

Now, if that's praise, what's worship? Now, many people say it's the same thing. But in Scripture, worship is part of praise.

It all fits within the same basket, camp, let's say. But worship has always been understood as obedience. Take Paul in Romans.

[16:20] That as we reflect on the gospel, considering the mercies of God, and we're no longer transformed, conformed to this world, but we are transformed by the renewal of the mind, what's the next thing that we're told to do?

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. For this is your spiritual act of worship. Worship is presenting yourself obediently to God.

Now, why is that distinction so incredibly important? I'll give you a simple illustration, if I can put it this way.

When it comes to worshipping God, and worship is obedience, and praise is speaking well of, there is tension with one that you don't have with the other. When you praise God's name in song, there are many other things that factor into that.

The type of song that you're singing, the fact that it's easy to sing, the fact that it's quite a fast-paced song. There could be many things. The fact that you like the tune and the melody and all of those things can take you with it.

[17:29] But you're able to speak well of God in such a way where your heart, it is possible for your heart to be somewhere else. It could be on the TV program that you're wanting to get back.

Okay, your heart is really pounding for that rather than for God. Okay? Now, that displacement is the very thing that Jesus speaks about when he says, they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

It's somewhere else. Now, why is that so crucial? Well, why is it so difficult to get children to church? And why do they use the word, if they do, sometimes it's boring.

They do so, they do so because worship is about conforming the will to God. And praise is about speaking well of God.

And sometimes the temptation is for a church to accommodate, to accommodate the wills of the younger ones by doing things differently. And that's a bit like lowering the standard so that it's easier to obey.

[18:37] That's all that's happening. And yet we can't lower the standard of God because God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. And so one of the difficulties that the church has when it comes to encourage worship is what you're really trying to do is you're trying to conform people's will to the will of God.

Children who want things differently or even people in the church who want to do things differently, who want to praise God differently, what they're actually saying is is that I want to do it in my way. I want it to be conformed to what I like so that I can then worship God. And all that's happening is a bit like someone taking an exam that's not as difficult.

I can't, I don't want to do that so I'll just do this instead. When parents or churches make things easier for children to obey than the real things that they're meant to obey, they're actually not obeying the real thing.

And this is one of the things that we are meant to understand through the book of Hebrews. Who it is that we're actually worshipping and how it is that we are to worship him.

[19 : 48] Imagine two people getting together and deciding I like this type of worship or I like that type of worship. I like this type of praise or I like that type of praise. You think they're talking about singing.

You think they're talking about worship. What they're actually talking about, what they're actually discussing is why can't God do it this way? This is how I think God should have said we ought to worship him.

And this is what Hebrews is trying to correct. People, God's people, have always, instead of waiting on God, they've taken off their golden earrings and built idols.

Okay, those type of conversations are nothing more than the construction of idols. And God's people, this is why the picture here reminds us of those experienced back then so that we don't make the same mistake again.

When the worship of the church shifts towards an impatient people or a people who would like to put their own mark on it, all that's happening is the church is involved in building golden caps.

[21 : 02] And that's what's happening. And that's what shouldn't happen. The challenge here is not so much the idolatry, though that's a big challenge, but it's this. Why should the length of a service be the length that it is?

Well, some of us have got to get home. Some of us have got to get to work tomorrow. Okay, that's a good answer. But by and large, why is it the length that it is? Well, because we have to leave some things in and we have to leave some things out.

Okay, it's got nothing to do with it. The length of the service, like the length of sermons, normally have much more to do with how patient God's people can and how committed they are to sustain their own obedience to God.

If worship is obedience to God, then the length of the service that we give to God is normally an indication of how long we can sustain that obedience of praise.

this is why many Christians struggle with the idea of being in the heavenlies, in heaven ultimately, and worshipping God all the time. They don't like that thought.

[22 : 13] Right? Because what it's doing, it's a constraint on their will. The thing that they're really being pressured under is the praise of God continually and obediently.

And this is what Hebrews is trying to correct. Correct. So remember Moses. He goes up onto the mountain to receive the commandments from the God who redeemed his people out of slavery and brought them into complete freedom.

And the people down below got fed up with waiting. So impatient were they. Instead of waiting obediently as they were told, they decide to do things their way.

Instead of waiting for the God that we know brought us out, we will make our own down here. And God's people have always done this when they've taken their eyes of God.

It's always been about how long can they sustain their obedience to God. Now the word, the New Testament teaches us that the word of God is to dwell in us richly.

[23 : 19] And the reason for this, the obvious reason for this, is because some of us have real difficulty sustaining that worship of God. Okay, we can sing songs in the house on our way to work.

We can sing them in the church wonderfully. But that sustained obedience is the very thing which worship is. So when God's people made the golden calf, we ought to recognize the problem was with not having gold.

They could have had all the gold in the world, but that was not the problem. The problem neither was the fact that Moses was taking his time. That Moses just was, he was gone too long.

No, the real problem was that there was no worship. People could not sustain any kind of obedience to God patiently. So praise is, of course, speaking well of God.

But worship is speaking well of God obediently. Where your heart and your words are very, very close together, lest you fall into the sin that Jesus points out of those people worshipping him with their mouths, but whose hearts are far from them.

[24 : 39] So as we close, I want to consider a few things. The first is this, that as we come this evening, it's not a small thing to realize that we're entering into the heavenlies.

We need to recognize where we are. And I think if we recognize where we are, that not only are we in the presence of others, but we're actually in the presence of innumerable angels, God himself and the Lord Jesus Christ, I think our worship of him would be a lot different.

I think we would come ready to meet God. The other thing we recognize is that what we do down here is always to be an imitation of what is happening up there.

If people bow down and worship God up there, then surely God's people down here should be doing the same thing. The pattern is set for us.

So here's the exhortation. We gather one day a week. Some of us gather one morning or one evening a week. And we think we've done a good job in worshiping God.

[25 : 46] But we know that when we actually get here, that every day of the week is God's. Not just a morning service or an evening service. The whole day and in fact the whole week belongs to him.

It's only when we're here we're actually reminded that it's not only that this day belongs to God, but the rest also belongs to God. God. And so it is true to say that we worship God all the time, but if we do worship God all the time, then this day should be no problem to the Christian church whatsoever.

It's a bit like people who say, you know, I don't read books, but I read my Bible a lot. I'm not entirely so sure that's true because the issue is reading, not what book it is.

Okay? When there's a commitment to read and to learn of God, that normally permeates everything. And that's not to say people don't read their Bibles, all it is to say that it's probably alongside where you read more of a daily reading and a couple of Bible verses.

So you're reading more of what somebody else has said rather than what God has said. It's not a criticism, it's simply an observation. And the temptation to turn those things into some kind of horoscope where people, where I've seen it, where Christians don't like the reading that they've had today and so they read tomorrow's, hoping that it would be just that little bit more favorable to the way that they're thinking.

[27 : 11] Well, I think when your worship is and your praise is, what are you doing? You're building golden calves. That's all that you, you're just taking off your earrings and building God in the fashion that you want him to be.

So what does this mean practically? It means if you're here and you're really struggling with your faith. Okay, good. It is better to be here struggling than to be out there succeeding.

If you're here and you're finding it incredibly difficult to pray to God because something's happening, great. It is better to be here doing the right thing than it is to be out there doing the wrong thing successfully.

If you're here, if the children are here and they're struggling to understand what I'm saying or read the words of their Bible or even write things down, okay, great. But it's better to be here struggling doing the right thing than it is to be out there succeeding in the wrong things.

And that's the basic point to the worship of God. It's about obeying God. It's not about getting it perfect. We will get there but we will get there in glory.

[28 : 22] But the pattern is this, that God's people are called to do the right thing. However well or unwell you do it, we are called to do the right thing.

And doing the right thing badly is much better than doing the wrong thing successfully. So as you've come this evening, remember, you've not come alone.

And you've not come to a place where it is only us. You have met not only with God and with the Lord Jesus Christ, but with innumerable angels.

And with the spirits of the redeemed, those who have been made perfect in Christ Jesus. The church has come together, both visible and invisible.

And that's worship. Amen.