

What happens when we gather?

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[0 : 00] Now let's have a moment of prayer before we look at the passage together. Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here, but it is only in his power and by his gracious spirit that we can open the scriptures and we can learn from them.

We pray now that the gracious Holy Spirit who inspired these words to people of long ago will now use them to speak directly to us and change our hearts and our lives as a result of this.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. So if we have our Bibles open please at Hebrews 12.

And I'm calling this sermon today, What Happens When We Gather? When we meet together in the presence of God and with each other, what exactly is it that happens?

This is not part of a series but I thought about this a lot when we were doing the series on Solomon and the temple and then when Dick Lucas opened up Hebrews to us at Corn Hill and also preached on Hebrews 11, my mind and heart were drawn once again to this passage.

[1 : 28] Hebrews chapter 12 verses 12 to 29. A young minister in the Church of England was taking his first evening service in his new charge.

He was very, very excited and looking forward to it but he would not have been human if when he turned up there were only five people there. It was a desolating and disappointing experience. But he believed God had called him so he plowed manfully on through the sermon and on to the communion service. And as he was starting to lead the communion service he came to that part in the Anglican service book which reads like this, Therefore with angels and with archangels and with all the company of heaven we praise and magnify your holy name.

And to the astonishment of his rather staid congregation he burst out, Forgive me Lord, I had forgotten what company I was in. Who are we gathering with today?

Is it just the people beside us? No, of course it's not. We are gathering with angels, with archangels, with all the company of heaven and with all the Christian people who have ever lived and indeed whoever will live throughout the centuries.

[2 : 47] Now that's true whether it's a tiny village church where that man was, whether it's a church like this which is reasonable numbers, or whether it's one of the American megachurches with thousands.

The answer to what happens when we gather is not just that we meet with each other but that we are gathering with angels, with archangels, with all the company of heaven as we'll see with Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

Now the letter to the Hebrews was probably written to third generation Christians at a time when the early vision was losing its grip on their hearts and on their imagination and when the challenges were beginning to become painful.

I think we could say the Hebrews were suffering from spiritual and emotional and probably physical fatigue and they were tempted to go back and the author warns them not to do what happened to the generation in the desert who wanted to go back to Egypt.

He says we can only persevere if we look to the great high priest and now he gives us an extended picture of what that means. And we're going to look at it in three parts.

[4 : 00] First of all, there is a warning in verses 12 to 17 and that warning is picked up again in 25 to 26. There is a warning, there is a vision particularly verses 22 to 24 or verses 18 to 24 more exactly and then there is a promise verses 27 to 29.

I'm going to spend rather more time on the vision than on the warning and on the promise. So if I come to the end of the warning in a few minutes don't start getting ready to leave because that would be a mistake.

So first of all, let's look at the warning he gives. Verse 12, Therefore Now there is a certain type of Reformed preacher who when they see the word therefore thinks it gives them the excuse to expound the whole letter that's come up to that point.

I'm not intending to do that. What I've already said should put us enough in the picture. The author is warning people of the danger of going back. And therefore he says we need to keep on going. Look at the vigorous verbs he uses. Verse Lift your drooping hands. Strengthen your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet.

[5 : 20] Verse 14, Strive for peace. All these positive and vigorous verbs which are used. In other words it's not let go and let God.

It is because we are conscious of the presence of God and we strive to make every effort to go on. And he warns, he uses the case of Esau, don't be verse 14 like Esau who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Can you just imagine Esau bursting in from hunting that day and saying I'm dying of hunger. That was a total exaggeration. Esau was not dying of hunger. Esau was very hungry.

But he threw away the whole of the grace of God for a single meal as the author puts it vigorously and vividly. But notice this is not salvation by works.

Verse 15, the grace of God. Now the grace of God was rejected by Esau actively and deliberately. Our author is not talking here about our carelessness or about our weariness.

[6 : 28] He's talking here about active, deliberate rejecting and turning our back on the grace of God. And he's urging us to help each other to keep on going.

These are all plural verbs. They're not just something we should do individually. We should try to help each other to live the Christian life. Helping one another not to sin.

Helping one another positively to live the Christian life. So there's a need to keep on going. And then in verse 25 where the warning is picked up again, the need to obey. The heart of Hebrews is that God has spoken.

Chapter 1, he spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, which is the whole of the Old Testament. But now he's spoken in his Son and that Son speaks today.

And in particular, he spoke at Sinai in Exodus 19 and 20 when the people were gathered to hear the Word of God. So he's not simply talking about individual reading of the Bible and obeying it, although he is talking about that.

[7 : 30] He's particularly talking about the congregation gathered to hear, to listen to, and to obey the Word of God. But part of the reason why persevering, part of the reason why obeying is so difficult is the sheer pressure and grind of daily living.

There are big difficulties. Sometimes, of course, if you're at all like me, you'll find if there's a period of huge difficulty, you can rise to it. But it's the sheer grind, the little frustrations, the daily weariness so often that makes it very difficult to keep going.

So the author now turns to the reality of what happens when Christians gather. Now this is true at all times. This is true whether we are gathered or not. But it's particular, the image is particularly of God's people gathered to hear God's Word.

Those comparisons with Sinai, if you read Exodus 19 and 20, what they particularly gathered for was to hear God's Word, which was particularly crystallized in the Ten Commandments.

That's the warning. The warning, he tells them not to go back and to keep on obeying. So let's turn then to the vision where there is an extended comparison between two mountains, Sinai and Zion.

[8 : 52] Verse 18, you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest. This is the place of God's revelation at Sinai where his awesomeness, his holiness is revealed and where the people react to it with fear and with awe and with dread.

Even in verse, even in verse 21, Moses himself trembles with fear. But this, after all, is the fear of the Lord, which the Scriptures tells us is the beginning of wisdom.

To fear the Lord and to love the Lord, not only are they not incompatible, they belong together. If we say we love the Lord and don't fear him, we're probably loving a fantasy God, a sentimental God of our own imaginings.

But this God who speaks at Sinai terrified the people as he spoke. Whereas, he says, you have not come there, but verse 22, you have come to Mount Zion.

Now, Zion is the city of the great king, the joy of the whole earth. Sounds like Psalm 48. And the difference between Sinai and Zion is not that one is real and the other is unreal.

[10:10] It's that Zion was tangible. It could be touched. It could be seen. Whereas, Zion is invisible. That's the brain right at the very heart of the letter to the Hebrews, the invisible Lord and the unseen world.

And our author has been emphasizing that that currently invisible reality is just as much a reality as visible reality.

Back in chapter 11, Abraham looked to the city which he hadn't seen and which indeed he never saw in his earthly life. Was already there. A city whose architect, whose pioneer is God.

So, the point about Zion is not that it's unreal but that it's invisible. We cannot yet see it. So, that means we mustn't get obsessed about visible realities.

Rather, this is an encouragement to come into God's presence. So, what happens then when we gather? Now, first of all, there is a horizontal dimension if you like when we gather with each other.

[11:15] this is picked up from chapter 10, verse 25, which reads, Do not, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

And this really is what our author means when he talks about the assembly or the church of the firstborn whose names are enrolled in heaven. This is picked up from Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 6, the people of God whose names are written in heaven.

What did we sing? My name is written on his hands. My name is hidden in his heart. And the other passages talk about people whose names are in the book of life, whose names are written in heaven.

So, that's, in a sense, we meet with them all, not just with the people who happen to be in the building on that particular day, but with all God's people, the fellowship of the saints as the old creeds talk about.

Now, for some, that is the main point of gathering. Some see this as, if you like, the be-all and the end-all of meeting together. The danger of that is that encouragement can easily be collapsed into saying nice things to one another.

[12:37] When the author is talking about encouragement, remember what he's talking about. He's talking about a very tough and difficult Christian life. And he's talking about encouraging each other to keep going.

And as he says in chapter 10, as you see the day approaching. In other words, the encouragement is primarily that things are going to change.

There is going to be a difference. One day Zion is going to be revealed in all its splendor and in all its reality. So it wasn't collapsed meeting. Now, I've come across this a lot, particularly in England, and it shows itself in the kind of vocabulary that's used.

Some people will never talk about a service. It has to be a meeting because service has associations with church formality and so on. And preaching has collapsed into explaining the passage rather than proclaiming Christ.

Christ. And even you hear people saying, let's stand and sing to one another as if we were the objects of worship. Now, of course, we sing to encourage one another, but we sing to encourage one another because we're turning each other's eyes to the divine reality to Zion, the city of the living God.

[13:52] And what I'm suggesting is that the author of Hebrews is saying there is a horizontal dimension. We do meet with each other. And the incident I mentioned at the beginning about the young minister with only five people was desolating.

Never listen to a minister who tells you they don't care how many people come. They're not telling you the truth because, of course, they care about who comes because the fewer people who come apart from anything else, the fewer people hear the word of God.

And it is very difficult to sing the great hymns of faith with only three or four people. And it is encouraging. The sheer sight of lots of people is always encouraging.

But we must never collapse into that. There is a horizontal dimension. It is important. But it's not the whole of what happens. That's what I want to turn to now. What we might call the vertical dimension.

Or maybe even the depth dimension. C.S. Lewis had a wonderful phrase, deep church, which was the fellowship of all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ, irrespective of their denomination, irrespective of their particular habits and particular customs as they gather.

[15 : 03] This deep underlying bond that united all God's people through the spirit of God. And that I think is what our author is speaking about here at Deep Church. As we come into the presence of God and to the unseen world.

Verse 20, you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God. Very interesting, isn't it? God here is called the living God. Now if the living God is going to have a church, it's not going to be a dead one, is it?

When you use the phrase living God about the church, that means the church is composed of those who are alive, those who have been translated from death to life, those who have God's spirit. It's not just a case of those who attend, it's a case of those who are alive in Christ, who look to the great high priest and who are God's people.

And this is Zion. Zion is referred to elsewhere, it's the heavenly realms of the letter to the Ephesians, the throne of God in Revelation around which the great multitude that no one can count, sing to the praises of God and to the Lamb.

[16 : 12] It is the place where the great high priest has gone. We have a great high priest who has gone into heaven. And the background there is of the old temple and the old tabernacle before it, where only one man, once a year, was allowed to go into the holy place on the day of atonement after elaborate rituals Aaron and his successors were allowed to go there.

And in the book of Leviticus we have everywhere there are no entry signs, everywhere there are keep out signs, everywhere, don't go beyond this, this is dangerous. And what happens when Jesus dies, the great thick, heavy curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom.

Notice it's not torn from bottom to top, it's not human effort that's done this. No entry signs are removed, that this is dangerous has gone, and the great high priest has gone into heaven.

And because he's gone into heaven, all his people are represented there by him. And that's so important because when we pray, we are joining our feeble Twitter with not only the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, these prayers are presented by the great high priest. And when God the judge says, whose prayer is that? What voice that answers is the voice of the great high priest? Father, this is my prayer. Grant it for my sake and in my name.

[17 : 40] So that's where we've gone, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. All through scripture, these words Zion, Jerusalem both refer to the earthly city, but much more to the people of God throughout space and time, culminating in the book of Revelation where the city is also the bride, the new heaven and the new earth.

And against it stands Babylon, the city of the world, the real literal place, and also the anti-God forces. When we have gone into that place, what happens there?

To innumerable angels in festal gathering. Angels have feared very badly in Christian theology, it has to be said. In the early years, and we know this from Hebrews itself and from Colossians, people worshipped angels.

Why do you think the author begins his letter saying Jesus is far greater than angels? It's difficult to imagine a modern writer or preacher telling his hearers or readers, Jesus is so important, he's even more important than angels.

Because this letter comes to a group of people who are probably giving too high prominence to angels. The trouble is, of course, like Luther's drunk who falls off the horse on one side gets up and falls off on the other, we've gone to the opposite extreme.

[19 : 03] And we ignore the importance and the ministry of angels. And of course, when that happens, all kinds of things rush in to fill the vacuum, all you need to do is to go to the mind, body and spirit section in Borders and Watterson's and look at the books and see what's filled, trying to fill this vacuum of spiritual hunger.

Angels are of huge importance in scripture. Go through your Bible and notice everywhere angels are mentioned. If you take these parts out, you have very little left.

Because angels, Psalm 103 says, are God's mighty ones who do his will, who carry out his bidding across his whole dominion. In an impeccable evangelical publication, I read this.

Evangelicals are far too obsessed with mysticism, with the new age and with angels. Fair enough about the first two. But this guy never read his Bible about the importance of angels.

I believe only when we stand in Zion will we realize what we have owed to the ministry of angels. Angels are gods sent into the world to guard the heirs of salvation.

[20 : 19] They are unseen, we don't worship them, but we thank God for them. If you've never thanked God in your prayers for the ministry of angels, it's a good time to begin now.

Because angels are part of God's gracious gift to help us to glory. So as we gather, the angels gather with us. We don't worship them, they worship with us.

We join with them and they join with us in praising the one who sits on the throne and the lamb. We have come secondly to God, the judge of, sorry, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

I mentioned that already of course in the horizontal dimension. To God, the judge of all. Now this is emphatic, a judge who is God.

And in chapter 4, verse 13, God has been described as the one before whom everything is visible and there and to whom we must give account.

[21 : 22] So you see, there is, although we don't come to Sinai, we come to a God who is the judge. The judge of all the earth, whom as Abraham says, is going to do what is right.

So there is nothing, there is nothing trivial, nothing cosy about this God. He is to be feared. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.

And we have come to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Now you see how that balances God the judge. They have already been judged by God and they have been justified and they are now enjoying his presence.

They have been justified by the perfect sacrifice that the author speaks about. And the spirits of the righteous made perfect, I believe, are identical with the great cloud of witnesses earlier on in the chapter in verse 1.

In other words, all those who both in Old Testament and New Testament times lived by faith and indeed all those who will yet live by faith in the days to come.

[22 : 29] the reality is in the future but we have glimpses even now. After all, that great cloud of witnesses contains famous names, names that you read about in chapter 11 and also famous names in Christian history.

But it also doesn't it include names of those whom we know and love, those who were not well known in their time but who are now the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

And we gather with them, with the company of heaven as we meet here. The old hymn for all the saints who from their labours rest talks about we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

Then goes on to say, when the road is steep, the pathway long, steals on our ear the distant triumph song. Hearing as it were the rejoicing of the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

just as sometimes you switch on a radio and you hear music coming from another dimension. It's real music and the place where it's coming from is real. And so it is as we join with the angels and with the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

[23 : 44] And to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. That is what the letter is about. Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

covenant. As I said, the Sinai covenant was about not touching, about not going beyond, about keeping out. That was the symbolism of tabernacle and temple.

But now that the curtain is torn, the way is clear. Abel, who has been mentioned already in chapter 11, Abel's blood called for vengeance. Because Abel's, remember, the Bible tells us the first baby to be born into the world was a murderer.

And the second baby was his victim. And from that blood flows the rivers of violence and blood and violence that have marked human history ever since.

Abel's blood calls for vengeance as God looks down and judges the evil that expresses itself in murder and in all other kinds of violence.

[24 : 47] But the blood of Jesus instead, which is the answer to that violence, offers grace once for all. This is the great word of Hebrews, once for all.

This sacrifice can never be repeated. Nothing can be added to it. This is the sacrifice which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And once again, notice that he's not saying there's something magic about the sacrifice. It's saying something really happened. The same word that spoke from heaven to create.

The same word that spoke from heaven to judge. That is the word which speaks in the death and in the blood and in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what happens when we gather.

That is the company we are in. As Jacob said, this is the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. Now, of course, the building we meet in is not the house of God.

[25 : 49] Nor is the building Buchanan Street the house of God. The house of God are the people of God, the temple of living stones built up into a temple that will one day adorn Zion.

And indeed, when Ezekiel speaks about the future, he sees the whole of the new creation as temple. That's not contradicting what Revelation says.

It says, I saw no temple in the city. What it is saying is that when we finally stand in Zion, those parts of our lives which at the moment are disunited, at the moment are difficult to fit together. The meeting together with God's people to hear the word of God and the actual daily realities of our lives. It's so difficult sometimes to hold these together. And what the prophets are telling us is that when the kingdom comes in the new heaven and in the new earth, in Mount Zion, the city of the living God, there will no longer be any divorce between these and we will perfectly and fully worship and serve God.

So that's the vision and it's a tremendous vision. Preceded by a warning of course, but then followed by a promise. And I'm particularly thinking of verses 28 and 29.

[27 : 08] There's an awful lot in verses 25 to 27. But as the author himself says, time would fail me to tell. That's for another place and another day.

But there are two things he's saying. First of all, Zion is secure. Now he quotes here from the prophet Haggai. The removal of things that are shaken in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

Now Haggai comes at a period in Israel's history when they've returned from exile and when they're rebuilding the temple. And the people who remembered Solomon's glorious temple see it as a very inferior and rather shabby comparison.

And Haggai is saying look, look beyond this. Look beyond the temple to the true temple. And that's what our author is speaking about here. It's both now and then.

We have glimpses now. But the full reality will be then and it is a secure reality. There is no possibility. Because remember our author has told us back in chapter 11 when Abraham saw that city it was already there.

[28 : 20] It wasn't as if God still had to build the city. The city was there to which Abraham was called. The heavenly realities are there all the time. It's not just they're going to happen at the end of the age.

They're there now and they're a reality now. So that's the first thing. Zion is secure. And the final thing about the promise he says this promise means that we can offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

Now notice how he does this. This is the way the Bible does its theology. He doesn't say because of this now you should really think about how you're worshipping God.

That's not the way the Bible does its theology. The Bible says look this is the reality. reality. And if you really glimpse that reality if the vision grips you. If it grips your heart and your mind then this is what will happen.

It will be acceptable worship. Now of course there is the worship of our daily lives. We know that. Where do you worship? Well wherever my body happens to be says Paul in Romans 12.

[29 : 25] Present your bodies a living sacrifice. But those times we meet together are times. I'd use the word special. the times when that reality is mediated to us through the word of God.

After all the basic metaphor for the worship and the relationship with God in scripture is that of marriage isn't it? Now if you're married you obviously are married all the time.

But there are special moments. Holidays. Evenings together. those times when you experience the reality of what it means to be married. So it is with worshipping God.

It's not about, it's not simply worshipping every day of our lives. Which is true. But it is realising his, realising his, that he is a consuming fire.

He is the same God as Sinai. So as we finish, what happens when we gather? It's not about externals or about reality.

[30 : 30] But about reality. It's not about styles and customs which differ from time to time. If you've been around a bit and if you have been with, gather with different groups of God's people, we'll know that.

It's so easy to assume that certain styles are more glorifying to God than others. By the way I'm not saying anything goes. I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying is that when people approach with their hearts moved, with their obedience stirred to God, the externals will take care of themselves. But we must never mistake them for the reality. C.S. Lewis talks about a child who asked a honeymoon couple if they'd have chocolate on their honeymoon.

And of course the couple said, well we may have chocolate but that's not the main reason we're going on honeymoon. Now in a sense meeting together on earth is like the chocolates.

We wonder if we'll have chocolates in heaven as it were. We wonder if we'll have all the kind of things we like on earth. Well, who knows? I mean that's all point of narnia isn't it?

[31 : 39] That those things have been wonderful on earth are still there. But if not, something better will be true. So it's not about externals, it's about reality. And secondly, it is the word of God which will guide us on this as on everything else.

What is important is that we are biblical churches, that we are gospel churches because see a phrase gospel church doesn't actually say anything at all about church polity, doesn't say anything at all about style.

It simply says we are devoted to this fundamental reality of God himself in Christ. So where do we worship on Sunday? The author of Hebrews says where we worship is Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, innumerable angels, the assembly of the firstborn, God the judge of all, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.

Amen. Let's pray. Now our Father as we have paused the moment to look at the glories of Zion, to listen to the songs of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we pray that this may indeed strengthen us to continue in the Christian pathway that forsaking what is behind, that we may look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

We ask this in his name. Amen.