



PART FOUR

Gathering Around Jesus

Hebrews 10:19-25





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By Pastor Robert MacDonald

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Biblical Camping

In the first chunk of the Bible, the wilderness is the place where God establishes a relationship with a people, and a place where he transforms a group of abused slaves into a fearsome nation of warriors.

The Book of Hebrews is an ancient sermon that is written by an unknown church leader in first century AD who is really concerned about people's spiritual survival. The author leans heavily on stories, images, and motifs from stories of Israel in the wilderness.

So, when the author of Hebrews says, "not giving up meeting together," it's in this framework of survival. We are in a wilderness, and the wilderness is wild. If you want to survive, meeting together is important. Why is it important?

I. Why One: We Meet Consistently Because Faith Erosion Is Almost Imperceptible.

Faith isn't usually swept away in a flash flood, but erodes one small, lapping wave at a time. The gradual picking away at habits, beliefs, and practices.

"Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith. Just in the same way, a jealous man, drifting and unresisting, reaches a point at which he believes lies about his best friend; a drunkard reaches a point at which (for the moment) he actually believes that another glass will do him no harm."

- C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Spiritual erosion is gradual, nearly imperceptible, but in many ways, so is spiritual growth. We combat the degradation of habits by the building of habits.

"[L]et us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." - Hebrews 10:24 (NRSV)

The word "provoke" is an intentional, spicy hyperbole. Like annoying to high heaven. The author is using this kind of hyperbole "severely annoy one another" to counteract the laissez-faire attitude toward meetings.

Putting a Date in the Calendar

For many of us who have been married for a while, we've recognized the importance of "date night" for keeping our relationship healthy – keeping the romance alive. Over time, these gestures and events pile up, and we find that we're transformed. We've voted with our feet – we've communicated to ourselves and the world: this person really matters.

Throughout the first five books of the bible, weekly and yearly rhythms of worship are given to Israel as guiderails to help them keep God's relationship with them front and center.

For Christians, there's something beautiful and important about having set times to ensure that we never lose sight of what Jesus has done and what Jesus has promised to do.

II. Why Two: We meet consistently so we can build our lives around Jesus

To return to our dating analogy, you don't do your taxes on date night. Hopefully. If I'm going on a date night with Jess, we're probably going to go somewhere or do something that makes us look at each other.

*"Let us **draw near** to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed in pure water."*

- Hebrews 10:22 (NIV)

The structure of a Sunday service here at Summit Drive is intentional – each major element of the Sunday service is meant to help us draw near to God and to each other in different ways. Here are eight major components:

1. Singing (Colossians 3:16)

"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."

- Colossians 3:16 (NIV)

We sing because it uniquely engages the emotions. Singing allows us to tap into a range of emotional expressions beyond what words alone allow. If we're wanting to cultivate love among us, having spaces for emotional expression is pretty valuable.

We also sing because it unites us in prayer. Music has rules that are easy to slide into – when we sing together, we're able to sync up with each other, almost like a big organism.

2. Community Life Announcements (Hebrews 10:24)

We draw attention to things that help us to connect with each other, deepen our walk with Jesus, and serve our community. It's part of how we "spur each other on to love and good works".

3. Greeting (1 Corinthians 16:20)

In one of Paul's letters, he tells Christians in Corinth to "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (1 Corinthians 16:20). Greeting others has been a part of gathered worship services throughout the last two thousand years, and it has two main functions.

First, it's a way to communicate the love of God to each other. Second, we remind ourselves to pursue peace and unity with our fellow Christians.

4. Prayer (Philippians 4:6)

We pray every week, for each other, for others in our city, and for concerns across the globe. Paul writes: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." - Philippians 4:6 (NIV)

5. Baptism (Colossians 2:11-12)

"In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

- Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV)



Baptism symbolizes our decision to follow Jesus, who laid down his life for us, by symbolically burying ourselves, laying down our lives, and committing our futures to Him. We perform baptisms in this here baptismal tank, in front of everyone, because it's a community affair.

6. Preaching Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13)

Paul writes this direction to Timothy, one of his close companions and a leader in the early church: *“devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”* - 1 Timothy 4:13 (NIV)

Preaching is one of the keyways we allow the text scripture to “be alive”, so to speak. The text of Hebrews itself is a sermon, and if you read it, you'll see that the author is doing exactly that: taking these timeless biblical texts and allowing them to speak into the present moment. You'll also notice that the Gospel – the message of Jesus – shapes how scripture is read and proclaimed throughout.

In Pastor Dave's book, *Preaching and the Mission of God*, he summarizes what makes Christian preaching distinct: “Jesus—his life, death, resurrection and already present, yet still-to-come reign—this, or rather, he, is the content of the good news that Christian preaching preaches.” (David Fields)

7. Communion (1 Corinthians 11:26)

On the first Sunday of every month, we take Communion together, which regularly reminds us of what Jesus did. The elements – the bread and cup draw us to the body and blood of Jesus, and give us a tangible, tastable expression of the Gospel.

The Apostle Paul says it well when he states: *“whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”* - 1 Corinthians 11:26 (NIV)

8. Sending/Benediction (Matthew 28:20)

When Jesus concludes his ministry on earth, he gives a mission to the disciples, and a promise: *“surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

- Matthew 28:20 (NIV)

When we leave this building at the end of our worship gathering, it's with purpose and blessing. We are bringing the light of Jesus out into our world, and we are going reminded that we aren't doing it alone. Jess (my wife) describes the flow of weekly worship like a braid. Braiding strands of fibre together involves repeated motions of “out” and “in”. Over time, the braiding becomes stronger and stronger.

In a way, our leaving and returning to gathered worship accomplishes something similar. Over time, the rhythms of regular worship gatherings weave us together with Jesus and each other. We are bound to each other, and we are strengthened.

III. Why Three: Why Not? Church Hurt

Good reasons to gather aren't that helpful when we're experiencing real emotional pain. We've looked at two big “whys” for regular gathering, but now I'd like for us to talk about a pretty powerful “why not”: church hurt.

For most of us, especially those of us who've been in community for a while, our faith is a pastiche of experiences ranging from incredible and beautiful to utterly painful. For some of us, the wounds from “church hurt” are deeper than we thought possible. We were told church was different. We were expecting church people to take the high road, the pursue peace, to put away their claws, to be better.



My experience

A little while ago, I was in the early stages of healing from some tough church things. When we started attending another church, most Sundays, we would show up in the middle of the first song, sit in the very back, and often duck out before anybody saw us. There were some days that it was tough to open my mouth and sing a song – the associations, the memories, the absences I felt – it was emotional overload.

To pull away from church altogether would allow a certain *darkness to crystalize*. Like, wounds are ugly. If left untreated, they *putrefy*. I also knew, deep down, that God's community was going to be the main place where I would find healing.

It's a wild thing that community – the source of many types of pain – is also the cure. It's sort of like the deadly venom of a snake, is needed to make antivenom.

So, we continued to show up. We did what we could to handle, and over time, we started to experience a kind of healing that I wouldn't have otherwise experienced. We joined a life group, and got to be fully honest and vulnerable with people who loved us well and gave us space.

Hebrews was actually a text I kept coming back to during this time. Specifically, that this text paints draws this line between following Jesus and the wilderness time.

If you've read about the exodus, you'll know that **the wilderness is wild. And like any wild thing, it brings out the best and worst of us.** You may also know that there are stories of miraculous rivers appearing in the desert. It's also a place lots of walking, complaining, rebelling, people losing their way, faith ups, faith downs, and all the rest.

But if you've read those stories, you'll also know that the wilderness is a place where God shows up. It's a place where Israel is sent on a big, long camping trip, so God commissions a tent to be built – called the Tabernacle. As though to say, "you're going camping? I'm camping with you."



What makes Church different isn't the idea that we're magical people – magically free of people problems. It's the God that sets up a tent in our midst.

Opening up the Curtain

*“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way **opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,**”* - Hebrews 10:19-20 (NIV)

Hebrews uses the imagery of “opening up the curtain” that guards the Most Holy Place. This Holy Place is the very center part of the Tabernacle, God's tent. Jesus' death and resurrection stands as a profound gesture of hospitality, inviting us into the hearth of the life of God.



Open Up

What are some of your most memorable “big crowd” moments, where being part of a large group of people moved you emotionally? Did you feel like you were changed in some way?

Follow-up question: How is a church worship service similar and different from this experience?

Dig In

1. Read **1 Timothy 4:13**. What do you think makes preaching distinct from reading aloud, teaching, or a TED talk?
2. There’s an old saying: “to sing is to pray twice” (*Anonymous*). Does that phrase resonate with you? Why or why not? Read **Colossians 3:16**.
3. Antoine de Saint-Exupér says, “*If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*” Where do you feel that longing is lacking? Where have you felt stirred up in the past? How can we help provoke “love and good deeds” in each other? for each other?
4. Have other Christians ever done something to you that caused pain? How do you think your pain affected your experience of gathered worship? Are there ways in which the Christian community has helped you heal from this kind of pain?
5. Read **John 1:14** and **Hebrews 10:19-25**. As we gather as a community to worship, how does it encourage you to know that Jesus is right in our midst?

Pray

Take a few minutes to ask Jesus to take a central place in our lives. Pray for the needs that have come to the surface throughout the discussion. Pray for those suffering from “church hurt”, that they would experience healing, and that our community will extend the restorative love of Jesus to each other.