

Hebrews 10:23-25 God's People Gather: The Blessing of Christian Community and Encouragement

What kind of hopes do you have in life? Do you hope you have enough money put away for retirement? Do you hope the weather is good for the family reunion next week? If you are a Packers fan or a Vikings fan or a Bears fan or a Lion's fan, you might be hoping your team isn't as offensive as it was last Sunday.

See, and that kind of characterizes how we typically talk about hope. There's nothing certain about most of the things in which we have hope. I hope we're putting enough away for retirement-and our financial planner tells us we are, but something crazy may happen and our financial goals may not pan out. We might hope the weather is 70 and sunny with low humidity next weekend. But it could be 45 with a constant drizzle. And you might hope that your football team doesn't play another stinker of a game on Sunday, but there's no guarantees of that, right? There are no guarantees with our earthly hopes.

That's completely different from the hope we have as Christians. I want you to listen to these verses from Romans 5. ***"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God."* (Romans 5:1-2)** We Christians know what Christ has done for us. He's shown us unthinkable undeserved love-amazing grace. He died for all our sins-he died for us. And that has resulted in our justification. That is, we've been declared not guilty of our sins in God's spiritual courtroom because of the sacrifice which Christ made for us. We're justified. Because of Christ we have access to God. And we have the hope of eternal life with God in heaven. My brothers and sisters in Christ, that is not an uncertain hope. That's not an iffy, "I hope the weather's nice", "I hope the Packers win" kind of hope. In Christ we have the sure hope of heaven. Our eternal life is secure. Because **"he who promised is faithful."**

We need to hold on to that certain hope-unswervingly. That's what the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to do in this Word of God. And that's why it's so important for us to be here today-and on all the other Sundays (or Thursdays!) of the year. We need our Lord's promises and his encouragement. And that means that we need each other.

We're in the midst of this worship series entitled "God's People Gather." We're thinking about all the blessings and benefits we experience when we gather together as a church, specifically, when we gather together in person as the people of Christ's church. And obviously, we all need to recognize that there are legitimate reasons why some people at some times can't gather here-people who are sick or who are shut in. Of course, those circumstances exist. But it's important that we recognize that that is the exception rather than the rule, right? Most of us can and should make it our regular habit to gather with other Christians for worship and Bible study. And why?

Listen again to what the writer to the Hebrews says: **"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."**

Why do we Christians need to meet together? Because we need to be encouraged by the certain hope we receive from the promises given and fulfilled by our God. We need to be reminded that our Lord loves us, that he gave his life for us, that his sacrifice has won forgiveness and eternal life for us, and that nothing can separate us from that love. Because it's easy to lose sight of those promises as we trudge or crawl or limp our way through a tough week. We need the encouragement of God's Word. And we need to offer that encouragement to each other.

But here's the thing-and I've certainly had this said to me before, maybe it's been said to you, too. Maybe you've actually been the one to think this way. And the thinking goes like this: I don't need to attend worship or Bible class in person. It's 2021! There are so many awesome resources out there that enable me to be fed by the Word. Online devotions and worship services. Self-guided, interactive virtual Bible studies. For goodness sake, Pastor Mike Novotny from Time of Grace is on my TV every Sunday morning, and he's a great preacher, and he's way better looking than any of the pastors at St. Paul's. Well, at least most of the pastors at St. Paul's. 😊

But there's an element of truth in those statements, right? Not about the good-looking pastors thing.

☺ There's truth about the power of the Word of God to encourage us and build up our certain hope. And that powerful Word works whether you're reading it on your own or hearing it as you sit in that pew/chair ninety feet from me or whether you're hearing that Word through your TV or computer speakers. Yes, the Word of God-no matter the medium of proclamation- is powerful and effective, sharper than any double-edged sword. The writer to the Hebrews said that. That's Hebrews 4:12.

And we believe that wholeheartedly. But the writer to the Hebrews also said this: **"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."** Why does the writer to the Hebrews consider in person gathering together around the Word to be so important? Because God wired us to be social creatures. God created us to need interaction and companionship and friendship. And there are no more important relationships and friendships that we have in our life than those that exist between people who share the same faith.

And why is that true? To answer that question, maybe we should ask some different questions. What does it reinforce to you when you stand in a room full of like-minded believers and you confess your sins together and then sing a glad song of praise together when you hear that Christ has forgiven all your sins? What does it reinforce to you when you confess your faith together with other Christians, when we pray together? What does that reinforce? It reminds me, *"I am not alone in this world. Sometime when I sit at my desk at work, or when I turn on the news and see everything going sideways, and I feel alone. But I am not alone. When I gather with my Christian community, I know that God has not abandoned a sinner like me, nor has he left me alone in this world. I'm surrounded by like-minded believers, my brothers and sisters in the faith. And I'm encouraged to keep fighting the good fight of faith, because I know I won't be battling all by myself. When I gather and worship with other people who believe what I believe, I'm reminded that I am not weird; there are other people just like me in the most important way. When I see and visit with other Christians, I'm encouraged to keep witnessing my faith, because I'm looking at visible proof of how the Word works to create and strengthen faith."*

Furthermore, what happens when we stand and visit together after the service concludes or before the Bible class gets going? We share our lives with each other. We hear what's going on with one another. You see the tears of a friend in Christ. You hear about the fears and the pain of a brother in Christ. You hear about their joys. And we can offer a handshake or sympathetic ear or a shoulder to cry on. We can share in their joys. And in doing so we encourage each other. We remind each other that we are never alone. We are **"spur(ring) one another on toward love and good deeds."**

But can I be honest with you? Sometimes I don't want to be face to face with others. Sometimes I don't want to experience Christian community with others. And it has absolutely nothing to do with my concerns about their physical health, or about Covid. Those things would at least be legitimate. What I'm talking about is when I don't want to be present with other Christians because I don't want to encourage them. And I'm guessing that you all can relate to this. There are times when we don't want to be present with others and hear about what's going on in their lives because it's going to be messy. It's going to involve effort to help them and encourage them. It's going to involve carrying the burdens of others. And there is a part of us-namely, our sinful nature-that is not at all interested in doing such things. Because we'd just rather focus on ourselves.

For that, God should leave us to ourselves. I mean, for our sinful nature and our selfish ways, God should remove from our presence all the people that we need in our lives to help and encourage us. More than that, he should remove his own gracious presence from our lives. We should be left alone to face God's anger over our sins.

But this is the hope that we have. God has said, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** (Joshua 1:5) **"I love you with an everlasting love."** (Jeremiah 31:3) **"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."** (Isaiah 43:1) That's why we have the hope of heaven. And it is a certain hope, because "he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23)

So let's live in that hope. Let's share the certain hope of those promises with one another and apply those promises to each other. **"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."** Amen.