

Going to Church as if Your Life Depended on it, Because it Does.

OUTLINE

How Church keeps us from apostasy
How sin leads us into apostasy

INTRODUCTION

When you woke up this morning and the reality of life came slowly through the sleep fog and you realised that it was the Lord's Day and you had to go to church, what was your emotional investment in that thought? Today as we continue our series on membership I want to talk to you about the necessity of Church and strike a tone that scripture strikes when it speaks about the necessity of going to church. I have called this sermon: Going to Church as if your life depended on it, because it does. Too often when we think of church we think of boredom, burden, optional extra. We don't think lifeline, life guard, life support system. So today we are going to be listening to the letter to the Hebrews as it talks to us about the necessity of Church.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish believers who under a lot of pressure to give up Christianity and return to Judaism. Their faith was under fire and the letter to the Hebrews was written to equip them with the facts of Christ's superiority to Judaism that they needed to know in order to cling to Christ, the warnings they needed to hear so that they would not forsake Christ, as well as instructions about how they needed each other in order to survive the pressure of these persecutions. The verses I would like us to begin with are Hebrews 10:24-25, 'And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ 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.'

Let's fill in the context. The Book of Hebrews in general is about demonstrating the Superiority of Christ to the Judaism that they feel pressured to go back to. So the author goes about demonstrating how Christ is superior to the angels who were the mediators of the law, superior to Moses, a superior High priest as well as sacrifice. Chapter 10 is part of the argument showing how Christ is a superior sacrifice to any sacrifice in the OT. V1-4 remind us that the OT laws about sacrifice were types and not the reality, and so they were impotent to truly cleanse from sin. V5-10 show how Christ in fulfilment of Scripture is the sacrifice that does cleanse from sin. V11-14 contrasts the OT priests and their regular sacrifices with the Superior Christ who is both the offering and the offerer, who only has to be offered once to forgive sins. V14 is one of the great statements of the Bible that expresses our justification, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' Please notice the once off finished action of perfecting as well as the ongoing finishing work of sanctifying. So which is it, are we perfected once for all or are we being sanctified and the answer is, Yes. We are both perfected in justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, yet we are also undergoing ongoing sanctification by the indwelling Spirit. Simil iustus et Peccator. Then v15-18 tells us that the OT was expected to be replaced with the New Covenant which has come. So we have a better sacrificed offered by a better High priest and are in a better covenant. Then the author of this letter pours on the application. V19-25 are structured around three repetitions of the words, 'let us'. The section begins with a therefore showing how these duties are grounded in the sufficiency of the gospel, these are gospel informed imperatives that we are about to see. Let us draw near, let us hold fast, and the verses for our meditation today, let us

consider.... V26-31 give strong warnings to those who apostasize, and the chapter ends with further exhortations, v32-39.

I want to split our message into two parts, firstly, looking at how the church keeps us from apostasy, and secondly how sin leads us into apostasy.

How Church keeps us from apostasy

The first thing we want to do is appreciate the top three things that we ought to be doing in light of who Christ is and what He has done for us. V19-25 tell us the top three things the Hebrews have to do is, draw near to God, secondly, hold fast and don't apostatize, and thirdly, our verses. In other words, the verses we are looking at rank highly on the scale of things along with draw near to God and don't abandon the faith. Please see how in light of the gospel this is the way we are to act, our service to God flows from His service to us first. 'And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ 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.' There are four main ideas in these verses, firstly, the call to consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, think of this as the duty of consideration; secondly, to not neglect to meet together, think of this as the duty of meeting; thirdly, to encourage one another, the duty of encouraging one another; and all this as we heed the times, the duty of living in light of the times.

In the first place we must pay some attention to the words, 'Let us.' This is used three times and it is an address to the whole church. In other words, the things laid out here are not only for the elders and the deacons, they are not only for the super saints, but something for all saints to apply. It is needed for all of us to do these things. Since Jesus is the Saviour of every believer, every believer ought to draw near to God, hold fast and consider.

'And let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works.' Appreciate with me the life or death issues that serve as the background and why this is what we are called to. These Christians were on the edge, they were toying with abandoning their faith for a more comfortable socially acceptable existence. What is the remedy to people in danger like this? You are the remedy? You are God's instrument of encouragement and the one who will aid in strengthening them and keeping them from stepping over the edge. This is a call to turn your mind to the problem of the other Christian who is tempted with falling away, with making them your problem and how you are going to stir them up to love and good works.

The word 'stir' here is a strong word we could translate as provoke. We are called to provoke one another to love and good works. These two things, love and good works, are probably a hendiadys, in other words, they mutually inform each other. In other words, provoke one another to love which does good works. The love that we are being asked to stir in one another is not mere sentiment but a love that acts in concrete ways producing good works. It is more than mere sentiment. In many ways this is a perfect summary of true religion, a heart of love towards God which proves itself in a life of good works. Let's just stop and feel the weight of this responsibility and our inability to do it. Your brother or sister is tottering on the edge and toying with the idea of leaving Christ, and you are called to think deeply about how you are going to provoke them, spur them, stir them up to a love for God that inevitably produces good works. So let's do that, let us consider how we can do such a thing. How do we do it?

Let's concretize this for ourselves. A young unmarried Christian woman is being flirted with at work. A young unbelieving man is showing interest, and there are no other believing men in her age group who are showing interest, she is thinking about giving up her Christianity to start a relationship. How do we provoke her to a love for God that produces good works? A Christian teenager is sick of being bullied and marginalized and cruelly taunted for not drinking, swearing, going to all the parties and joining in the ribbing at school. They are lonely and fed up and want to stop being a Christian just to make their life easier, how do we provoke them to a love for God that produces holiness?

V25 gives us two key things we need to do, '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.' Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some. What are we being told is the thing that will help stir up the love that will save us from going over the edge? Meeting together! Some have already turned their backs on Christ, why, they gave up the habit of meeting together. So let me ask you, should you go to church? Why get together, what is it when we get together that pulls us back from the edge? To answer this we would have to look at the early church and what they did when they met. Acts 2:42, 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'

We have spoken about the means of grace and that is what God uses to minister to us. Here is how I see it as a pastor. You the sheep come in to church on a Sunday morning. Some are weak, some are sick, some have wandered and injured themselves, some have indigestion from eating wrong food, some are anxious, some have picked up parasites, some have been ravaged and attacked, some are close to death, some are new lambs, we may have some goats amongst us, and even the odd wolf in sheep's clothing. And God has appointed our meeting together to suit a blessing to each one. Through the means of grace, the Spirit through the word meets every need. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the powers of the age to come, the same power that rose Jesus from the dead is present to turn goats into sheep, to grant joy inexpressible and full of glory, to protect our hearts with peace, to conform us to Christ, to ignite love towards God within our hearts, to comfort, restore, heal, etc.

And what truth does the Spirit use in every part of the service to do all of these things within us? It is the word of the gospel. If you look down at v22-23 you will see how the author of this letter reminds his readers of gospel truths to stir their hearts to loyal love, 'let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.' Firstly, come into God's presence with full assurance because of the sufficiency of Christ's work for us. We are clean in the sight of God, all sin has been removed, let this fill your heart up with assurance and drive you into God's presence as a welcome and loved child. You are not an alien, you are not a stranger, He has made you worthy, and at such a cost. Secondly, consider the God who made promises to you. He is faithful, He is no liar, He will be with you, He will not forsake you. Come together to be reminded of this when we sing it in our songs, when we hear it in the readings, when the sermon explains it more deeply to us, when we see it visibly in baptisms and the Lord's Supper, and even hear it in the promises of the benedictions. The whole letter to the Hebrews is a meditation on the gospel to make hearts that feel tempted to wander to see the sufficiency of Christ and stir us up to love.

Let's stop and feel two important truths. Firstly, your love for God is what you need stirred up as a protection against defecting. Secondly, your coming together with the church is

seen by the Bible as the main way in which we do this. We all have a part to play in one another's hearts being stirred up to love.

Now some will want to try and spell out the time commitment involved in not neglecting the meetings of the church. How many prayer meetings, how many bible studies, how many services, I am not going to put a number on these things. What I am going to say is this, there is a goal articulated here, a goal of doing as much as is needed to lift a faltering brother or sister, a goal to meet together so that our hearts are kept full of love towards God, a goal to have access and relationships with one another that we are able to be a constant source of support. You tell me how much is required.

V25 gives us another way in the church saves our lives, 'but encouraging one another.' Yes we must meet together and do church and get all the benefits that it offers, but there is more. There is the responsibility to have personal connections, to have friendships and communication that is free and open enough that real conversations about one another's struggles are the content, not just work or hobbies or politics, and the other stuff we fill our conversations with. The encouragement here is not the positive self-esteem stuff that our western culture thinks of. Here are people whose livelihoods are at stake, if they carry on being Christians their parents will disown them, their engagements will be cancelled, their spouses might leave them, their jobs will come to an end, that apprenticeship they haven't finished yet will be cancelled, their whole family and social circles will shun them, their children's friends will be removed from them, there may even be physical threats along with the social ostracism. Who plays a pivotal role when the pressure is on like this? You do! You are the provision of God for their weakness. You are the community and the arm of flesh that He gives to lean on. The question we have to ask is, are we fulfilling this role, and when we go through trials do we avail ourselves of this provision?

In this series on membership I am wanting to destroy certain ideas: Casual attachment, shallow engagement, low levels of commitment, the church as an optional extra, the church as a burden not a necessity.

We have a fourth aspect to these verses, 'and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.' What does the author of Hebrews mean by this? Well, when the Day of Christ draws nearer, will things get worse or better, will satan be more active against the church or less, will there be less trials and temptations or more? In every instance things will be getting worse. So then our attachment to the church should it be greater or lesser? We will have to consider how to stir one another up to a greater extent, we will have to not neglect meeting together to a greater extent, and we will have to encourage one another to a greater extent.

How sin leads us into apostasy

There is one more verse related to this that we need to consider, they are often taken together, 3:12-13, 'Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' Once again we have the problem to be avoided, apostasy, as well as the remedy stated, to exhort one another daily. Here we have a bit more detail about what happens. Someone is put under pressure to give up their faith. Perhaps it comes in the form of an argument to believe that Christ is not the Messiah or to stay in Judaism is necessary to save oneself. The pressure of being persecuted and ostracized makes you will to believe the lie that Jesus is not the Messiah. You wound your conscience by making these sorts of internal

compromises, and sin hardens your heart. The more you tell yourself the lie, the easier it is to believe it because you have silenced your conscience and grieved away the Holy Spirit and a flat denial of the truth results slowly but surely. No one ever abandons the faith overnight there is a long history of these compromises and a slow hardening of the heart until it no longer feels the fear, it is no longer enthralled with God's love in Christ. It might appear that certain arguments have changed your mind, but in truth your heart stopped being invested in the truth a long time ago, and we will all believe what we want to believe. You will never understand the psychology of unbelief unless you understand the deceitfulness of sin, until you understand that the heart, your heart is a liar and is willing to believe the sweet little lies that make your life easier or line up with the sins you want.

There is a remedy for this, you! I need the reminder of your faith. I need the pattern of your godly life. I need the encourage of your likemindedness and the commiseration of our joint suffering in faithful witness for Christ. I need to see your love for Christ while you sing, I need to hear you own your sins while you pray, I need to hear you encourage me, rebuke me, and teach me. When my heart is caught up in the lies of my desires I need the Spirit to use you to remind me of what really matters and what is really true. And I need this every day.

Now there is an elephant in the room here, and it is the elephant of can a Christian lose their salvation, so let me deal with this elephant in closing. Can a true believer every lose their salvation? The answer is never! But don't these verses clearly say that 'brothers' can fall away from the living God. Firstly, we must think about what the whole Bible says on this matter. Christ clearly teaches us that nothing can snatch us from God's hand, that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ. So in the first instance we dare not read the Bible so as to make it contradict itself. So we must revisit how we read the Bible because if we are reading it and make a liar of God we are obviously reading it wrong and need to learn how to read it so that it agrees. Secondly, there is a hermeneutic that I call 'worm's eye view, bird's eye view' that helps understand verses like this. You see from the human perspective of the author, the people being written to are collectively the church. The people sitting and listening to the reading of this letter are all baptized members of the church who are technically speaking as far as appearances appear, 'brothers.' However, God has the bird's eye view perspective and knows that there may be some unconverted people who have been baptized. So when John says, 1 John 2:19-20, 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. ²⁰ But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.' It is quite clear that John recognizes that those who were once in their midst and left to follow false teaching, were never truly part of them. When Jesus turns away hypocrites on the last day He will say, 'I never knew you.' Not 'I knew you for a while and then you backslid.' Thirdly, these verses are what the Puritans called gospel threatenings. You see God does keep His children, the question we want to answer is how. Does God stop us from falling away by removing all temptation and love of sin in our hearts? No of course He doesn't. Does He do it by overriding our freedom and make choices that we don't want? No, wrong again. No, God keeps us on track by placing these severe warnings in front of us. Those who are saved will take them to heart, those who are not, will not. The teeth and claws of these verses are the very things that the Christian lays to heart. There is no false sense of security, there is a call to endure to the end. We are not saved because we endure, we endure because we are saved, and we endure because being saved we lay these threats to heart and obey them as commands of God. Hence the name gospel threatenings.

So in conclusion. Do you have a biblical attitude towards church? Do you believe that you need the church because your life depends on it?