

Together

Hebrews 10:24-25

November 1, 2020
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On the special occasion of all services back to normal times and indoors, our campuses are pausing Romans to contemplate and celebrate what it means to be together. Why have we missed this? Why do Christians have gravitational pull toward each other?

I totally enjoyed our outdoor services. If we became a full-time outside church, I'd be OK with that. But we do live in the Midwest and this isn't really a winter option. So, I'm not talking about how great it is to be together inside vs. outside. I'm just talking about how great it is to be together period. Our effort has been to do so responsibly and respectfully toward the authorities God has placed over us.

My mom called me this week. They attend a large church in Iowa. Two weeks ago, this church decided to remove all restrictions and return everything to pre-pandemic status. They had to announce this week that 19 staff and leaders all have COVID and the whole church is shut down for weeks. We are trying to avoid that scenario. So, thanks for flexing with us. Over the years I have admired a culture of kingdom flexibility around here as we have relocated, gone multisite, added services, switched around service times, and a host of other changes. Not all churches are known for their flexibility, but I think Bethel deserves to be.

Our text is Hebrews 10:24-25. As you get there, an important context note is that Hebrews 10 is about how God keeps us saved. We certainly believe God keeps us saved; all who are genuinely regenerate in Christ will persevere to the end of their lives and spend eternity with God in eternal life. What is often missed is that our perseverance is based on God's preservation of our faith. Did you know that God uses means of grace to keep us saved? Staying saved is a God thing but how God keeps us saved is complex. He uses various ways to keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts. That's what Hebrews 10 describes. The writer of Hebrews urges us to make the most of all these means of sustaining grace lest our hearts grow hardened. In the midst of these urgings, he highlights one critical means of sustaining grace in our lives.

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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" (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV).

Stir/Spur One Another to Love and Good Deeds

"And let us consider..." To consider something is to give it thought, to be intentional. This is not just something that happens, it requires forethought. What are we to think carefully about? How to stir up one another or as the NIV says it, spur one another on. Right now, this sounds interesting to some of us because there are some people in our lives we wouldn't mind giving the spur to at all. Wait. The goal of the spurring is not retaliation, but love and good deeds produced in their life.

Stir or *spur* is an interesting word in the Greek. It can mean, "to provoke, to incite, even to irritate." The word is often used in the negative sense of inciting someone to some action, like a bully picking a fight. *Come on!* But that is the exact opposite of the sense here. We

are to think about how to stir up desires of love and good deeds in the spiritual lives of our fellow members in the church.

Spurs provide a great example. Some of you know that I grew up around horses, although I was never a big horse lover. Most of this was because I had to feed them and help take care of them while my sister rode them in the horse shows and got the ribbons and the trophies and her name in the paper. They never noted in the paper that I was the one feeding them. I don't recall her ever feeding the horses or pitching manure from the stalls. She was the princess rider.

Anyway, if you've ever seen a western, they are always riding horses wearing spurs. What is their purpose? They are there to slightly irritate the animal to get them to do what they need it to do. It puts the horse in motion. It gets them going. I was watching a rodeo with my daughters. The question came up why the horses buck like they do. I said because they put something scratchy on their belly. It really gets them going.

Anybody wearing spiritual spurs today? Anybody come to church today with someone on their heart that you are purposefully going to help in their spiritual walk? *No. Pastor, I came to be helped.* But the passage doesn't say, *Let us be stirred or spurred.* It says, *Let us spur.* It's an activity we do in love for others. Why? ***One way that God works to preserve his people is through his people working to preserve one another.***

In other words, God uses the local church community to keep the individual members saved as the members look out for one another and actively promote the Christian life in one another.

Years ago, a remarkable thing happened to a man in our church. It ran in the papers and was quite the story. This man was playing golf at Oak Knoll Golf Club here in Crown Point with some friends. As they were playing, he suffered a massive heart attack. I was told that medically speaking, he died right there on the golf course. But he wasn't alone. His golf buddies raced to him and did CPR. A neighbor happened to be looking out the window and saw it happen. They called the paramedics who were able to get to him in time to shock his heart and bring him back to life.

What's the lesson? Don't go golfing? Don't go golfing alone? Maybe. But the point is that others play a role in sustaining our spiritual lives, especially when we are going through trauma, trials, or suffering. It's an example of how we desperately need each other. By divine design, the Christian life is to be lived in community with other Christians. What does that look like? Look at verse 25:

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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 is a life choice that will seriously diminish your spiritual vitality. What is it? It's said in the negative, *don't give up meeting together.* There may be a play on words that hints at the problem—the Greek word is a form of *synagogue*. As the name of the book hints, Hebrews was written to formerly practicing Jews who have converted to Christianity. What might have been happening is that these Jews were "synagoguing" again. Not "churching" but synagoguing and being drawn back to Old Covenant religion. We don't know. What we do know is that some of the members of the church were not prioritizing being together with other Christians.

The word for *meeting together* conveys a formal gathering. *Let us not forsake the formal gathering of Christians, which some are already habitually doing.* Why would this be so important that the Holy Spirit would inspire the writer to include it in Scripture? Because there is nothing more invigorating to the Christian life than being with other Christians who are passionate about living for Jesus Christ. And there is nothing more damaging than ignoring that opportunity.

Apparently, some professing Christians in Rome were doing just that. They were habitually **not** getting together. The reasons are not given but I think we can assume some of them.

- *Sunday chariot races*
- *Sunday's a great day to sell stuff at the market*
- *Up too late the night before*
- *Too many hypocrites at church*

If we were to examine the heart issues behind these excuses, what is the real reason they were neglecting to get together? *Pride (I don't need church or other Christians). Idolatry (Sports, yard work, convenience). Greed (maybe I can pick up some overtime).* How about this one—*Lost. Pastor, are you saying people who don't prioritize being with God's people aren't saved?* Last year, we had 6,000 people at our Easter services across all campuses. We don't have that many on a regular Sunday. One reason for Christmas-only and Easter-only church attenders is that there is no reality to their faith. God isn't the priority of their life.

"The warning about apostasy that follows (26–39) implies that people who deliberately and persistently abandon the fellowship of Christian believers are in danger of abandoning the Lord himself!" (New Bible Commentary)¹

Here's the point: we simply cannot do it alone. Our faith is too flimsy without the love and support of the church, so one reason I go to church is to stay saved. That's the admonition here. Let's get together, and in the getting together, let's individually feed off the corporate heat that being together produces.

Martin Luther said, *"At home in my own house there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."*² Luther is remembered each year on yesterday's date, Reformation Sunday. This hero said, *At home, I'm weak but something happens in the corporate experience that I cannot produce on my own.*

I hear that sort of thing from many people, *I leave Bethel and I am ready to take on the week, or this is the highlight of my week.* Good. It's supposed to be.

You may be watching online or listening on the radio and not realize that our church is in Indiana, home of the most famous car race in the world, the Indy 500. Did you know that the actual beginning of the Indy 500 was right here in Crown Point, Indiana? Before it moved to Indy, it was called the Cobe Cup race from Crown Point to Lowell and back. Average speed? 50 miles an hour. Try to beat that speed when you drive to Lowell. In a sense, you are winning the Indy 500. If I may connect one more dot, the property our

¹ D.G. Peterson, as quoted by D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), "Hebrews," *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.). Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1345.

² Martin Luther as quoted by R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul (2 Volumes in 1, ESV Edition)*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), page unknown.

building is on was a tree farm owned by the family the Cobe Cup hired to build the first grandstands. It's possible wood from this property was used. For history lovers like me, that's fun to think about. For most people, they just want me to get on the with the message.

I'll assume we all have watched at least a portion of the Indy 500. Round and round they go. But at certain intervals, they take a pit stop. They do this very fast. They clean the windshield. They change the tires. They top off the gas. They give the driver the thumbs up, and off the car goes.

What happens if an Indy car skips pit stops? Tires get really worn. It's hard to see through the windshield. And worst of all, they run out of gas. They may go awhile. They run on fumes. They can coast for a long time. But eventually, they stop.

God's design for Christian community and gathering is for it to be a spiritual pit stop. We all run 200 miles an hour throughout the week. Go. Go. Go. Got to win. Got to compete. Got to get around the track. As we do, our spiritual tank approaches empty. Our tires start to wobble. The service engine light comes on. Spiritually, we desperately need a pit stop. What is God's plan for keeping us going spiritually? There is much right here in this verse.

God's Plan for Keeping Us Going Spiritually

Regularly get together with other Christians

"...not neglecting to meet together" (Hebrews 10:25).

It would be anachronistic to force Sunday morning worship services into this verse, although it most certainly includes that. It's a much broader statement including any regular gathering for the purpose of spiritual enrichment. It doesn't say small groups or ministry groups or Bible study groups, or meals and celebrations together, but if you cut this verse, it bleeds any of these Christian gatherings.

Now, does it leave room for occasional absences? Yes. Of course. However, even in those times you can creatively do this. I talked with a man in our church who was away with family celebrating his parents' 50th wedding anniversary. That Sunday morning, the family all got together, and they had church. Someone prayed. There was some singing. This man was the preacher that morning. The adult kids and grandkids will never forget those times, and it says something to the family about priorities.

Carefully create holy habits

Hebrews highlights the wrong approach, "...not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some..." (Hebrews 10:25). Notice the word *habit* here. What's a habit? A habit is a choice that is made more than once. It's a choice becoming a pattern. Every time we choose something unhealthy for us, it's the start of a habit and it makes it all the harder to choose the other.

There were some who had developed a habit of NOT meeting together with other Christians. One week turned into three, and three turned into seven, and soon the choice becomes a negative habit proving spiritually damaging.

If you are online today, you may be sweating a little bit and wondering, wait, is he talking about us? That depends. If you have conscientious concerns about gathering during the

pandemic, we praise God that we can digitally gather. The churches that closed during the Spanish flu didn't have this option. We are grateful that we can. We are thankful for our tech team that works so hard to make this the best it can be.

I hope as good New Testament theologians, you realize this is still less than ideal. It reminds me of a guy I was golfing with this summer. He hit a shot. I didn't see where it went. I asked him how well he hit it. He said, *"It was a son-in-law shot."* I said, *"What's a son-in-law shot?"* He said, *"You know, okay but not quite I was hoping for."*

If you aren't doing online church conscientiously for pandemic reasons, then you are likely online conveniently. Perhaps this has become a habit by now. I know some of you online aren't concerned about COVID because you post on social media that you think this is all overblown and it's a conspiracy. You post pictures eating in restaurants. For some, COVID is a hoax except on Sunday mornings. Hey, we miss you! We want to see you.

I'm urging you to not allow this to become a habit of not gathering. Indy 500 drivers know they need pits stops and are glad when they can.

Encourage and be encouraged

"...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" (Hebrews 10:25).

Do you see in the structure of the sentence that there is to be one distinguishing mark of our times together? The opposite of not getting together is to meet together for the purpose of encouragement. The quality that is to mark Christian times together is encouragement of one another. Why? Because through the encouragement of others, we keep going spiritually. You realize that if we all are looking for someone to encourage us, nobody will actually be encouraged. It's like the old gag where you tell the congregation to stand up and shake hands with the person behind you. When everyone's turning, there's no hand to shake.

When everyone's wanting to be encouraged, there's no one doing the encouraging. Don't come to church looking for someone to encourage you. Look for who you can encourage. Encouraging others is itself personally encouraging. This activity certainly includes New Testament words like fellowship, friendship, bearing each other's burdens, and praying for each other. This takes time to cultivate. If you are a first-time guest today, don't expect deep heart-level sharing today. Maybe, but it's more likely you'll hear, *Hi! Welcome, tell me about you.*

But we want these interactions to move to deeper levels where mutual sharing, mutual ministry, deeper fellowship and relationship occur. This often requires other times of meeting: small groups, meals, situations where this naturally can be cultivated. If you are interested in taking these steps, check out our small groups at bethelweb.org.

Here is our re-gathering logo (next page):

BETHELWEB.ORG/ATTEND

Together

SUNDAYS AT BETHEL



It summarizes Hebrews 10:25 and reflects our Savior Jesus doing life and community with 12 guys. That paradigm lives on in this church. Let's make the most of it. Please stand. Enjoy some fellowship. Online, engage our online team in the comments section or call a fellow Christian. Bethel Church, let's fill the tanks and rev the engines!

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