

Last week we spent considerable time contemplating God's desire for us to have continual communion with Him. We particularly focused upon the words of **Isaiah 58** and **James 4**. As we emphasize that God's intent for this intimacy far transcends an hour or so of a church service, one thing I am concerned about is that people often conclude that this somehow excludes assembling as His people. Why? This is exactly the conclusion that many believers have reached, thinking it is "one or the other." Either I seek communion with God in church or I do it apart from association with it.

But, it's not an "either or" – but a "both and" relationship that God wants. I ask that we revisit **Isaiah 58** for a few moments to confirm this. The LORD addresses His people concerning **His gathering**, saying in **verses 13-14**...

<sup>13</sup> "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, <sup>14</sup> then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

God fully intended for His people keep the Sabbath which according to **Leviticus 23:23** included "a sacred assembly" in the temple courts. Notice though, He didn't want them to see it as a drudgery, but as "a delight." And the way they honored Him was by "honoring" it. So, God wasn't saying, "Since you haven't been living out what you learn in the assembly, I want you to stop assembling." No, He was saying "put into practice" what you learn. "Come, be fed so you can have the spiritual vitality to live as you should."

And that's the model for the church as well, which was also God's idea. In **Matthew 16:18**, we see it was Jesus Himself who "built" the church. I know we think of bricks and mortar or wood and nails, but Jesus' church was built with flesh and blood - His first, and then ours. The "ecclesia" is the community of believers "called out" by God to be His unique people. Give attention to what the Hebrew writer has to say in **chapter 10:15ff**. (Page 1873)

<sup>15</sup> The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, He says: <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time," says the Lord. "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." <sup>17</sup> Then He adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." <sup>18</sup> And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. We are under a new covenant. It is one of mercy and grace, and of forgiveness – but it is also one in which God places His laws in our hearts and minds. When and how does He do that? Osmosis? Oh, that it would be so for all of us, but listen carefully. That is the exception, not the rule. Normally, He plants His word within us through His church. How do I know that? The Bible tells me so.

In **Ephesians 4:11-16**, the apostle Paul tells us that God's plan is for "*the saints to be equipped in the church.*" Let's read on in **Hebrews 10**.<sup>19</sup> **Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,**<sup>20</sup> **by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body,**<sup>21</sup> **and since we have a great priest over the house of God,**<sup>22</sup> **let us draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.<sup>23</sup> **Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.**<sup>24</sup> **And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.**<sup>25</sup> **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.**

**Let's draw near to God.** Sound familiar? James encouraged us to do that in **chapter 4**. God is nearer than we think. As I suggested last week, we're the ones who keep our distance.

**Let's hold onto our hope.** Good advice, Seems like the devil is trying to rip it out of our hearts every chance he gets. We can be tempted to let go of our confidence. If that's you right now, you need to "get a grip."

**Let's spur one another on to love and good works.** That sounds a little too much "*in your face*" for my liking. The **KJV** wasn't any better, urging us to "*provoke*" one another. Yet, though I usually prefer the gentle approach, the truth is that we all need a firm reminder sometimes. And as much as I hate to admit it, I may even need an occasional "*swift kick in the pants*" to get me moving in the right direction.

So, what's all this to do with church? The Spirit clearly urged, **let's not give up meeting together**. Why? For all the reasons mentioned. In fact, He says it should be a priority for us to get together to **encourage one another**. I've met believers who defend their decision to neglect the assembly, reminding me that they can pray at home, sing along with Christian music in the car, and read their Bible in the comfort of their living room – not to mention hear preaching and teaching on the radio, **TV**, or internet. They don't need the church. Really? Usually, if I challenge them about how much of that they're actually doing - well, it isn't as much as they want me to believe. And they almost always falter at the next questions: "*How often are you communing with your brothers and sisters? How are you encouraging them by your absence? Or being encouraged by them?*"

Paul has a lot to say about this in **Romans 12** and **1st Corinthians 12** using the metaphor of the church as a body. He stresses the importance of every member supporting one another with their unique giftings. And notice the emphasis on the growing need for that support as they "**saw the Day approaching.**" What day? Most commentators say it refers to the yet future coming of Christ to take us to glory. A growing number, however, understand God's judgement on in **AD 70** to be what was in the sights of the writer.

That is certainly a distinct possibility, which well fits into the current events of their time. Yet, as far as the application of the principle, I don't know that it matters. I mean, listen closely as we read on in **Hebrews 10**.

**26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge His people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. 35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. 36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised. 37 For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay."**

In the larger context of the book of **Hebrews**, the Holy Spirit was strongly cautioning Jewish Christians who were abandoning Christianity and returning to Judaism. Long story short, if they walked away from Jesus as their sole (*soul*) sacrifice, there would be "hell to pay." And guess what the first step on that slippery slope was? "*Forsaking the assembly of the saints.*" Think that's not an issue today? I see it all the time.

People who once embraced Christ, are drawn away by everything from the allure of the world to the nostalgia of former relationships and religion. Some who were once present every time the doors opened, hardly darken the entryway to the church now. We could debate as to whether they were ever rooted in Christ in the first place, or we could just agree to caution believers the same way that the scriptures do.

The assembly is meant to be **an anchor** to keep us from drifting away. In fact, more than one church has adopted that motif. **Hebrews 6:19-20** says, **19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.** I've seen many become ensnared once more in the worldly, fleshly pursuits once they have forsaken the fellowship and communion of the church. Losing connection with Christ's body often leads to a lost connection with the Him who is the head. (*Modem analogy*)