

Gather In.

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 September 2024

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Well, the passage in front of us invites us to see what we cannot see. It's telling us about realities that we can't point to or describe.

The city of God, heaven, angels, God himself, the spirits of the righteous, Jesus and his blood. You could search all through this building, open every door, look in every nook and cranny, and you won't see any of that.

And yet, brothers and sisters, Hebrews is clear that we have come into the presence of all of it. Verse 22, you have come.

We haven't come to something that we can touch, he says, but just because you can't see it and touch it doesn't make it any less real.

Put a pin in that. We'll come back to that in a second. First, let me explain what we're going to do this morning. This morning, we're beginning to think more broadly together about something that we cannot yet see.

[1 : 1 5] And that is our vision as a church. Now, before you say, hang on, right, you've taken something so awesome and majestic and holy, right, and now you're going to sort of crowbar your petty vision into it, right, into God's majestic and holy and authoritative word.

Hang on a minute. Well, let me say, let me say what I mean by vision. Right, sometimes churches put together a vision and they begin with where they are and they think about where they want to get to and they set some goals, some expectations, and they might be excellent goals.

But if that vision starts and ends with us and where we are, then that vision is only going to be a response to our felt needs.

What we see in front of us, the needs, the opportunities that we feel are there, who's here, who's not here, rather than being a response to God's eternal word.

In other words, sometimes a vision reaches for secular tools to build up something which is fundamentally holy and sacred, which is God's church.

[2 : 3 3] And so when it came to putting together our vision here at Bon Accord, we didn't start with what our church is like, the needs, the opportunities we have.

We started with God's word, with the recognition that it's not our church, it's God's church. And the Bible describes that in different ways.

God is our father. The church is his family. Christ is the head. The church is his body. The Holy Spirit comes to live in us. The church is his temple.

So God gets to tell us, doesn't he, what the church is and what we do. And so this vision and the sermon series that is going to be preached on it over the next few weeks, it's not trying to cram a load of new ideas and plans into the Bible.

Instead, we want to draw God's vision out from the Bible so that we as a church family here can hear what God calls his church to be and do in all times and in all places.

[3 : 43] And once we've heard his vision for us, then for us to own it for ourselves and to begin to press his vision and his call to us down into the life of our church family here at Bon Accord in a way that shapes and reshapes what we do, what we plan, where we put our time, our energy, our money, what we organize.

And now over the past two years or so, we've come to recognize that God's vision for his church is made up of four basic calls to his people.

You'll see and hear a lot more of this over the coming weeks. Four calls, gather in, build up, reach out, send out.

And different churches, they might use different words or phrases for that. That's okay. But for a church to be a healthy gospel church, it has to answer those calls in a way that is consistent with the teaching of the Bible.

Now, hopefully we'll see over the next four Sundays that we are doing that. But my prayer, and I'd invite it to be our prayer together, is that as we bring God's vision for the church up to the surface and own it as our vision here, that it will sharpen our focus and strengthen our unity and increase our passion, and that the gospel would take an ever deeper hold on our own hearts and then flow out from our hearts into the people's lives that are around us.

[5 : 26] As we begin to put the implications of God's call into practice more and more in our church. In short, the prayer is that we would together become a healthier and more gospel-centered church than we already are.

And this morning, then, we're going to hear the first of those calls from the vision then, and then just begin to press in some implications. Firstly, then, God calls his church to gather in.

Now, where have we got that from? We see this through the whole story of the Bible, that God doesn't just work in the lives of individuals.

Rather, he saves individuals into a new family, and then he gathers that family together to worship and to know him. So where do we see that? Well, one big place is what's in view in verses 18 to 21 of our passage there in Hebrews.

What's in view?

[6 : 59] It says this, Exodus 3, verse 12. When you have brought this people out of Egypt, right, done the rescue, then you, ye's plural, will worship God on this mountain.

And there they saw the fire, darkness, storm, as God came down on the mountain to meet with his people. Now, if you know the Bible at all, we love the first bit of that, don't we, in the Exodus rescue story.

It's basically, right, the prince of Egypt, isn't it? The plagues, the sea splitting in two, right, darkness over the land, the Passover land. They're rescued from slavery.

But that only gets us up to chapter 15 of a 40-chapter book, right? More than half of the book of Exodus is actually about the second part.

God bringing his family to Mount Sinai, gathering them in his presence where they worship him and get to know who he is and how to live with him.

[8 : 07] And so that big rescue story in the Old Testament teaches us that it's all one piece, that there is no such thing as God rescuing someone from sin and not bringing them into his church and the church gathering in worship of him and to meet with him.

It's all one piece, isn't it, beginning to end. And we can say that's still true for us today or this time later because the rest of the Bible sees the Exodus as the pattern for our salvation in Christ.

Right, Paul says he is our Passover lamb who was slain for us. And the New Testament speaks, doesn't it, about us being set free from slavery to sin and darkness and the powers of evil and the fear of death.

And when God sets us free, what happens? Jesus gathers his rescued people together. Right, think of it. He got his disciples, didn't he?

And he didn't make them his disciples and they came unto him and he said, right, now you go on and get on with your life. He said to them, didn't he? Follow me.

[9 : 28] And they did. The 12 and then others. And then when he died and rose again and ascended into heaven, he didn't say to thee, now you go off and you go and get on with your life.

He said, stay here until I send what I promised from the Father. And they did, the start of Acts, all 120 followers.

And on the day of Pentecost, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit and the church was born. And what was the result? What did the very first church do?

Well, here's our reading again from Acts chapter 2. Listen to how they spent their time. How often were they together? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And all came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

[10 : 34] And they were selling their possessions and distributing proceeds to all as they had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. See that? God saves individuals and he adds them to their number.

God saves them to their number.

God saves them to their number. God saves them to their number. God saves them to their number. See, being together, gathering in to worship and know God in each other's homes, one-to-one over a Bible study or in organized ways like a life group's prayer meeting.

It should feel to us, brothers and sisters, like coming home. It should be a relief to us to walk into a gathering of God's people.

[12 : 01] What a relief to be able to share together spiritually and physically together. And Sunday, Sunday is the pinnacle of that, isn't it?

It's the highlight of our week because on a Sunday, the whole church gathers together. And when I say the whole church, yes, that does mean all of us in the local church here at Bon Accord.

Sunday is the one day of the week. God wants all his people together to worship and to know him. But it's even bigger than that, isn't it? It's the church, big C, that gathers on a Sunday.

Because on the first day of the week, we join with Christians across the world and with the church in heaven in the worship of God.

All right, remember what God did for his people in Exodus. They all gathered to the mountain to worship him as their God. Now, that's a long time ago, you say.

[13 : 09] Does God really gather us to himself in that way now? All his people? Well, listen again to these verses in Hebrews 12. For you have not come to what may be touched, blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and attentiveness.

So you say, oh, God clearly doesn't do that. We haven't come to that mountain. That's different. But just look down at verse 22.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly or the congregation or the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus.

So you're right. You weren't there at Mount Sinai. But today, you have come to a better mountain, a place we can't see, but a place where angels gather with joy, a place where the whole congregation of every Christian who has gone before us meets, where God himself lives, and where the risen Lord Jesus sits on his heavenly throne.

So where do we gather on a Sunday? Brothers and sisters, we gather around the throne of Christ in heaven.

[14 : 45] That's where we are. God gathers us Sunday by Sunday in this place so that we would be gathered with his people throughout time and space around his heavenly throne.

And if that's what happens, if that is the gathering that we're part of, can we see now why verses like Hebrews 10, 24, and 25 are not a suggestion, but a call and a command for us?

He says, let's consider how to stir one another up 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.

See, gathering in, it's not something we do as Christians because it's convenient for us, because we like it, because we appreciate being with other people if we feel like it.

Gathering in is part of our identity as Christians. It's part of who we are as God's people. We are a gathered people. And so the act of gathering is vital then, isn't it, to how we live out our holy calling to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

[16 : 06] Right, we can't be any of those things on our own, can we? That we might proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous lights.

Friends, God calls us to gather in. So here's the question then. So what?

Right, where does that leave us? How do we answer that call for us to gather in? Well, as we've prayed about it and thought about it, here are three aims that we think flow out of God's call for us to gather in.

And I guess you could think about these as applications of the main points. In light of God's call to gather in, we as a church want to place a premium on gathering for worship on a Sunday for our whole church family.

Premium on Sunday. Second, to provide opportunities for all to study God's word and pray together during the week. And thirdly, to encourage every member to seek out and invest in godly, Christ-centered relationships with others in the church.

[17 : 22] And so for the rest of our time, let's just ask ourselves three questions to help us put those aims into practice. They're down on your sheet. Firstly, how can I place a premium on Sunday worship?

Now, yes, there are goals here for the elders, for the preacher, for the musicians, and we're working on those. So, just put that to one side for a minute, okay?

What you think generally could be better on a Sunday, it's too busy, the service is too long, the coffee is too hot, all of that. Just put that to one side and ask yourself, how can I, as a member of this church, or as part of this congregation, how can I place a premium on the gathering of the whole church on Sunday for worship?

There are lots of ways that we could take it, aren't there? We actually preached a whole series on our gathered worship not so long ago that you can listen back to on our website. But let me just pull out a couple of big ones just to get us thinking.

Working back from the start of our service, the obvious one, in a way, is to be here, to gather. Now, I think that's all the more important, given how spread out we are across the city and the shire.

[18 : 47] Even in just modern church terms, we would be what's called a gathered church. Let's own that and gather then. Let's be the gathered church. Sunday is church family time.

Let's be around the table together, won't we? And there are only two things, I think, that should keep you from gathering then on a Sunday with your church.

If you're physically unable to come through illness or old age or something else, or you're looking after somebody who is, but you would otherwise love to be here, we miss you.

But it's okay. That's who the live stream is for. The live stream is not to give you options. It's for people who don't have any other option. And we miss them being here and we love them and we pray for them so we want them to be able to see and hear what's happening.

Or, the other reason is, if you work in a profession that if you didn't show up for your shift on a Sunday, people would suffer. Right? The Lord allows for that.

[19 : 54] We heard him say last Sunday night, which of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, would not take hold of it and lift it out? Right? If we ignore suffering on a Sunday, we haven't properly grasped what Sabbath rest is about.

If you miss your shift in Lidl, people are not going to starve. If you miss your shift in the hospital, people might suffer and go without proper care.

If you're in the hospital every Sunday, that might be a different problem. But aside from that, brothers and sisters, unless it is out of real necessity or out of mercy to others, there is no reason not to gather with the church for worship on Sunday.

Okay. If you've just moved here, maybe to study or to work, let me say whichever church you settle in, it might not be here, but whichever church, setting Sunday apart is something to build in from the very beginning.

Don't let your work or your studies, right, force Sunday out of the picture because this is the time that the whole church gathers around God's throne in heaven.

[21 : 08] And there is no replacement for that. There's no substitutes. And so perhaps for some of us, it will take a bit of reshuffling of our diaries, a bit of rearranging of our work to make that happen.

Be here. But there's also a few things in our passage, aren't there, about how we gather on the Lord's day, right?

There's joyfulness. Yes. See that? We come to the place where angels celebrate God, a festal gathering. There is great joy in heaven.

And we just sang, didn't we, from Psalm 122, that I joyed when they said, come and worship God. Now that's not the same as Angus really helpfully prayed.

That's not the same as pure happiness. Some Sundays, you might not feel happy to come to church. You might feel weighed down, weary, anxious, sad.

[22 : 12] But throbbing under those feelings should be a sense of joy that whatever's going on in our lives, the God of heaven and earth wants to meet personally with his people today.

And he wants me there when he does. And some of us need to tap down into that joy, the freedom of the gospel, don't we, to get us ready to come on a Sunday.

Think about it. If we don't find any enjoyment in God during the rest of the week, well, we're not going to enjoy God on Sunday, are we? We're not going to look forward to this gathering or place a premium on it if our joy is not in God every day.

Sunday might even feel worse for you if our joy is not in God. And so we will drag ourselves here, won't we, out of duty rather than out of joy. And that joy might even show itself, mightn't it?

Like hot magma breaking through the thick crust of the earth, right? Some volcanoes flow slow and steadily. Some volcanoes erupt violently, don't they?

[23 : 28] But every active volcano puts forth lava. It shows and it flows. And so every active Christian shows forth joy in the gospel and in the gathering of the church.

Dormant volcanoes are on their way to becoming extinct volcanoes. So with Christians, if our joy is dormant, brothers and sisters, we are on our way to becoming extinct.

But there's also seriousness, isn't there, Luke? Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire. And again, if we don't take God seriously through the week, we won't be able to take his worship seriously on Sunday.

Now, reverently has sometimes been taken to me in utter silence. It doesn't mean that. It's not silently. I love the chatter before and after a service.

I love the noise that comes from just having children in our worship service. But we need to come, don't we, prepared to sit quietly together.

[24 : 45] and still our hearts before God and to be in awe of him and to let what's happening settle on us, that we are in the presence of the living God.

And again, some of us need to be in the habit of doing that in our week so that we're ready to come and do that on a Sunday. I wonder, what's the longest time that you've spent this week with your Bible open without being distracted by something on your phone or another thought or the next thing that needs to happen?

It doesn't need to be long, but if we're not taking God seriously in the week, why do we think we're going to be ready to set aside an hour or two on a Sunday and not be distracted or get bored?

Right, verse 28 there talks about acceptable worship with awe and reverence. I take it, therefore, that there is such a thing as unacceptable worship which comes without awe and without reverence that doesn't take God seriously.

And so, friends, we can put a premium on Sunday worship by gladly and solemnly blocking out Sundays in our diary for church, family, and worship and by getting our hearts ready then, once we've done that, by finding joy and awe in God in the run-up to Sunday.

[26 : 23] Right, think about your week, your normal week as an appetizer for the feast that we get to come to on a Sunday. Right, do you spend your week wetting your appetite for God or are you filling yourself up on bread?

The difference will be how you gather in on a Sunday. Which brings us on to the second question to ask ourselves on gathering in.

How can I take opportunities to study God's word and pray with other Christians during the week? Now, we heard in Acts, didn't we, how the earliest church didn't have an either-or attitude to being together.

They didn't say, right, it's either the morning or the evening service or it's either in the week or it's on a Sunday. They had a both-and attitude, didn't they, day by day attending the temple together.

In another part of Hebrews in chapter 3, it says this, take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God but exhort one another every day as long as it's called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

[27 : 44] So the New Testament assumes, doesn't it, that we're going to be having spiritual conversations with other believers not just once a week but every day which makes opportunities for us to do that in between Sundays purely, purely a stepping stone towards everyday relationships where we're pushing one another closer to God.

For those of you who can remember a time before life groups or before home groups when it was basically just church services on a Sunday and a Wednesday, I can remember a time before that when all who believed were together day by day to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers.

Now the obvious pushback to that is well, you know, those first century believers didn't live in the 21st century which has busyness and pressures, right? We don't have time to do that.

to which the Bible says you don't have time not to do that. Right? Hebrews 3 does not say, does it, don't worry, brothers and sisters, if any of you has an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God because the minister will exhort you on Sunday that none of you may be hardened to the deceitfulness of sin.

It doesn't say that, does it? And history has proven that when believers only gather on Sundays it is a field day for evil, unbelieving hearts.

[29 : 27] And that's not a new thing at all. A guy called Richard Baxter wrote a book in 1656 called The Reformed Pastor where he says that the Sunday sermon is supposed to go hand in hand with what we would call today week-to-week discipleship, what he called catechism.

So the word on a Sunday is like a stone dropped into a pool that sends out ripples through our relationships, our conversations through the week.

So if we as a church are committed to providing opportunities for everyone to gather for week-to-week Bible study and prayer, the so what is that we want every member of our church to take those opportunities whenever they can.

Right, the opportunities that we organize for the whole church, family, are life groups and prayer meeting. Now, you might say there's nowhere in the Bible that says I have to go to life group.

Well, no, there's not. The irony, though, is that if you're not engaging with your life group, you have to create your own opportunities for yourself instead because the Bible does say that we're to gather with other believers day-to-day to do what we do in life group.

[30 : 48] And students, that's not the same, by the way, as Girls and Guys Bible study or CU because your life group is a cross-section of the church family. Right, the whole point of life group is that there are people in it who are not like you because that is God's family.

So if you're managing to create your own opportunities like that for discipleship in the week where you're coming together with other believers who are unlike you around the Word and in prayer, great.

Right, great. We love that. Carry on. But life group and prayer meeting are going to be the easiest opportunities that you have to do that.

And that's why we do it, not to trap you in some kind of man-made system, but to make it easy for you to do what the Bible commands, which is to gather in and speak to each other about the Word, pray together, and maybe share some food.

So how can I take the opportunities to gather in for Bible study and prayer? Well, take them. Engage with your life group.

[32 : 05] Come to the prayer meeting. And don't settle for that because, as I say, they are just stepping stones towards something even deeper, which is our last question that we're going to ask ourselves, which is this.

How can I invest in godly, Christ-centered relationships with other people in the church? Now, in a bigger church family like Bon Accord, it can feel overwhelming, can't it?

I know some of you feel like that on a Sunday, that it's too much. But in a church family that's as diverse as we are, there's going to be two or three people that you get on with a bit better, that you're closer to and that you click with at a personal, spiritual level.

Life groups are supposed to help with that. It's not just the fortnightly study. It's supposed to help us get to know each other a bit better so we can walk together. But there might be people not in your life group that you click with and that you can open up with at a deeper level.

You're those people that you might ask to pray for you about slightly more personal things than you would want everyone to know about. And those relationships, they are pure gold.

[33 : 22] They are pure gold. But they don't just happen. They take time, investment, preparation.

So let me ask, who are you spending time with and being open about your life? Who are you in touch with regularly to ask for prayer?

Who are you encouraging in the faith and being encouraged by? Who do you meet up with to do that? Who really knows you?

If that sounds really weird or a bit intense, all I'm describing is friendship. And wouldn't it be even weirder if in God's family none of us were friends?

Friendship is one thing that you can't organize. That's not something that we can do at a kind of organizational level. But that's part of the beauty of it, isn't it? Unlikely people click. So please, brothers and sisters, don't write off being friends with people here just because you don't have it now.

[34 : 32] Give people a chance. Let people in. Have people over. And bake spiritual conversation into those friendships.

Because again, wouldn't it be really weird if we were friends and never talked about the most important thing in our lives? Brothers and sisters, God calls his church to gather in.

His vision for the church is a gathered church. Christians, we don't do life on our own. That's not the plan. And so these questions, they're only here to help you reflect on how you can help us to answer that call as part of Bon Accord.

So take those questions away with you. Right? This is just the start. Have a think. Pray about it. Perhaps you can talk about it with someone over coffee or during the week.

But let's together devote ourselves like the first believers to living out our identity in Christ by gathering in with God's people to worship him and to know him.

[35 : 45] let's pray for that together now. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you that you have called us from darkness into light.

And Lord, we praise your marvelous work and grace in doing that for us in Jesus Christ, your son. Lord, we thank you that he is the mediator of a new covenant, the beginning of a new relationship with you that's possible because of his blood poured out on the cross.

Lord, we pray that you would help us not to cut the gospel short. Lord, not to be satisfied with simply personally being right with you when, Lord, your story says that you are gathering a people and a family.

Lord, help us to love the gathering of your people. Lord, we pray for those who find that difficult for different reasons. And Lord, that the joy that we have in you and what an awesome God you are, Lord, would overcome our reluctance or our fear of gathering like this, of being known.

Lord, we pray that you would bless the gathering of our church. Lord, we pray that every member of it would find their place in this family and feel at home with us.

[37:17] And Lord, we pray that you would do that for us not only on a Sunday but on a Wednesday too and throughout the week. Lord, that we would have opportunity to build one another up in love by speaking the truth in love.

These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.