

THE GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Leader pages on pp. 158-161

THE POINT:
WORSHIPING ALONGSIDE OTHERS ENCOURAGES US IN OUR FAITH.

HEBREWS 10:19-25; 13:12-15

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¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus—
²⁰ he has inaugurated for us a new and living way through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)—
²¹ and since we have a great high priest over the house of God,
²² 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 in pure water.

MEMORY VERSE

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²³ Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful.

²⁴ And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

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^{13:12} Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, so that he might sanctify the people by his own blood.

¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing his disgrace.

¹⁴ For we do not have an enduring city here; instead, we seek the one to come.

¹⁵ Therefore, through him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

KEYWORDS

New and living way (v. 20)—Two terms describe the way Jesus opened into the heavenly sanctuary for believers. It is new because this way did not exist before. It is living because it is based on the living One who Himself is life.

Confession of our hope (v. 23)—Hope in biblical terminology is not “hopefulness” or “wishful thinking.” Rather, it is a sure and steadfast confidence in God and His promises.

Fruit of lips (v. 15)—Refers to praising God (Ps. 119:171).

WHY IS CORPORATE WORSHIP IMPORTANT TO THE BODY OF CHRIST?

It's a scene I will never forget, perhaps the most impressive gathering of worshipers I've ever seen. The band started playing and every single person in a crowd of 90,000+ stood to their feet. I saw the power of gathered worship right before my eyes. Their hands were in the air, and all of them started singing in unison, "The eyes of Texas are upon you," as the Texas Longhorn football team ran onto the field. It was worship alright.

On another occasion I experienced a similar scene, also in a football stadium. But this time it was the Dallas Cowboys Stadium as 90,000 men gathered for a Promise Keepers event. Those men stood and started singing at the top of their lungs, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." It didn't matter how each man sounded when he sang. All that mattered was how all of us sounded together. And it was something that drew me into the worship of a God worthy of all the worship of those men. I didn't see a single man sitting it out with arms folded.

When the church gathers to worship, we become something none of us can be alone—and it brings the encouragement every disciple needs.

Together We Draw Close to God // Hebrews 10:19-22

Every Sunday, people come to worship in a similar way. They view God as a master to be resisted and One from which to hide. They feel guilty. They slide into a pew and hope no one notices they are there. If they can get out of there without anyone knowing who they really are, they'll count it as a win. Even better, if they can avoid going to church altogether and still get the invite to moms for lunch, they would count it as a bigger win. However, the writer of Hebrews painted a totally different picture.

The truth is, we are guilty. Romans 3:23 says it succinctly: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Our own rebellion means we have no right to come into the presence of God. We should find a closet and hide as long as we can.

The sacrificial system in God's covenant with Israel made their relationship with God possible in a limited way, but it was unable to settle the account permanently. Hebrews 9 helps us see that God instituted the sacrificial system in His first covenant to foreshadow the work Christ would do on the cross. The tabernacle of the Old Testament



THE POINT: WORSHIPING ALONGSIDE OTHERS ENCOURAGES US IN OUR FAITH.

was the place where Israel would offer sacrifices to atone for their sin, but it was a task that was never completed. One high priest after another would come year after year to make sacrifices on behalf of the people, but their sin debt was never settled.

Because He loves us, God designed a permanent solution for our guilt problem. Hebrews 9:11-15 describes Jesus settling our atonement once and for all. Jesus came to earth, lived a life of perfection, and became the sacrifice for our sin. He went into the heavenly place of sacrifice and put His own blood on the altar to cover our sin. He is the perfect High Priest who can reconcile us to God. When we place our faith in Jesus, we don't have to hide anymore.

But it's even better than that. We not only are allowed in, but we are also invited to come close to our God with hearts that have been forgiven. We draw near not as guilty sinners, but with confidence that the finished work of our High Priest settled our sin debt.

Imagine having a huge debt to someone. You wish you could pay it, but you just can't. Every time you're around the person, you feel awkward and apologetic. You certainly wouldn't feel entitled to ask this person for anything else. You might even be tempted to avoid this individual altogether, especially if this person was constantly asking you when you will pay the debt.

Because of Jesus, we can gather in His presence. We can approach Him with boldness, as if we deserve to be there. We can be there because Jesus made a way for us to be there. We don't have to find a place to hide from His wrath. We can come into His presence as ones who are welcome.

HOW IS JESUS'S SACRIFICE CONNECTED TO OUR ABILITY TO DRAW NEAR?

Together Our Confession is Stronger //

Hebrews 10:23-25

Each person comes to faith when he or she realizes that their separation from God is because of his or her sin and the need of a Savior. God's Spirit draws us to Him by convicting us of our sin and pointing the way to the Redeemer and High Priest, Jesus. By faith, each individual calls out to Jesus, repents of sin, and places trust in Jesus to forgive their sin.

Salvation is personal and each disciple has his or her own personal relationship with Christ. If we are healthy in our walk with the Lord, there will be plenty of times of personal intimacy in prayer and worship. So, what about the person who would say, "Look, I'm a Christian, but I don't really need to go to church. I worship God by myself in my own way." Sounds spiritual, right? But it's not really.



DIGGING DEEPER OUTSIDE THE CAMP

When reference to the "world" is made in the Word of God, the idea is of a system of organized society that is hostile toward God. Scripture has much to say about the world:

- We do not have an enduring city here; instead, we seek the one to come (Heb. 13:14).
- God's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).
- Friendship with God results in being hated by the world (Jas. 4:4).
- Friends of the world are God's enemies (Jas. 4:4).
- If you love the world, you don't love the Father (1 John 2:15).
- Believers should proclaim the gospel to the world (Mark 16:15).
- You can gain the whole world and still not have eternal life (Matt. 16:26).

Just as our Savior, Jesus Christ, prayed that His disciples not be taken out of the world, so should we pray for one another.

How does looking forward to heaven impact our worship now?

Although our relationship with Christ is personal, salvation should not be private. Our relationship with Jesus can't be completely experienced in isolation. Remember these stories?

- **The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42).** Her first instinct after meeting Jesus was to find others. Once they returned, all of them believed in Jesus!
- **The Disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33).** Their first action was to connect with others to talk about the Lord who had risen from the grave.
- **The Early Church (Acts 2:42-47).** Every day, people were coming to faith in Christ because of the faithful worship of the gathered disciples. This is the way church is meant to be!

To the writer of Hebrews, deciding whether to gather with other believers would have been like asking a fish if it wanted to be wet. Christians thrive when we are in community with other Christians. So, what is it about gathering that makes it so beneficial to disciples?

The writer continues: Once the followers of Christ have gathered, the passage explains there are two vitally important things we do together that we can't do alone: "hold on to the confession", and "provoke love and good works" (Heb. 10:23). The writer further explains the urgency for why we do them. First, let's look at the two reasons for coming together.

"Hold on to the confession" (v. 23). The Christian faith is a "confessional" faith. That is, disciples will affirm beliefs to one another as an expression of faith and in obedience to Scripture. The confession continues as Christians recount God's faithfulness and explore God's promises and provisions for His children discovered in His Word. Our testimonies fuel the faith of others.

"Provoke love and good works" (Heb. 10:23). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is seen in how that person lives out faith in community with others. Obedience to the truth, love for others, and serving believers and non-believers alike indicates an active faith and a growing disciple (1 Pet. 1:22).

These two purposes help us see the vital importance of gathering that prompted the writer of Hebrews to address this question head on. Finally, this section of Scripture ends with an appeal for urgency, as we acknowledge the relentless passing of time. Faithfully gathering with other believers encourages the body of Christ to remain faithful to the task of making disciples until Jesus returns.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT GATHERING TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP?

Together Our Service is More Acceptable // Hebrews 13:12-15

Hebrews is a book full of metaphor and imagery. As the writer pressed toward the conclusion of this book that is a master class in the new covenant, a new picture comes into view: the rejection of Jesus that previews our own rejection by a world lost in sin when we choose to identify with His sacrifice. Jesus "suffered outside the gate" (v. 12). What does that mean?

When we choose Christ, we identify with His rejection and join Him "outside the camp," that is outside the world's system. We are admitting our guilt and our need for His redemption, and we willingly choose Him over any religious attempts at justification. We choose His death and receive His life because of His victory over the grave. Martin Luther called this "the great exchange." Paul described it like this: "He made the one who did not



THE POINT: WORSHIPING ALONGSIDE OTHERS ENCOURAGES US IN OUR FAITH.

know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Why would we choose the rejection and ridicule of this world and identify with Jesus and His suffering? The writer explains: We do this because the world we live in now is not the permanent place for us. Hebrews 12:1-2a tells us, "Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Our eyes are fixed on Jesus. We gather in worship to see His beauty expressed in the lives of His body of believers. Only when we focus on Him can we endure the temporary trials and difficulties of life. And when we focus on Jesus, we understand His promise that He will return and take us with Him to a place He has prepared for us (John 14:3).

Until then, we worship Him.

The truth is this, a person in right relationship with Christ will be drawn into worship with the body of Christ, and praise will be on their lips.

WHEN HAS ANOTHER BELIEVER ENCOURAGED YOU IN YOUR WALK WITH THE LORD?

DID YOU KNOW?

The book of Hebrews was written by an unknown author. Some Bible scholars say it was written by Paul or Apollos and some say it was written by Peter. The truth is no one knows. What we do know is that the author was a believer inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the epistle. We also don't know the exact destination of the epistle. What we do know is that it was written to a group of suffering and persecuted Christians. We know very little about the occasion. But what we do know is that it makes valuable contributions to the doctrines of Christ and teaches the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. We do not know much about the background. But what we do know is the whole of the author's message to exalt Christ can be summed up in Hebrews 10:19-22—Let us draw near.

Biblical Truth: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:15).

Based on this lesson what will drawing near to God look like in your life from now on?

LIVE IT

How will you honor God through the corporate worship experience this week?

Reflect on your recent experiences in corporate worship. Are the people of God where you live committed to gathering? What activities seem to replace worship as a priority for the people in your church? In your family? Choose one of the following applications:

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- **The Starting Place.** Spend time in prayer asking God to show you how you can grow in your participation in worship.
- **The Growing Place.** Invite someone from the group to go with you (outside of your normal worship time) to experience corporate worship in a different way.
- **The Sowing Place.** Read Hebrews 13:16-19 and discover other evidence of a lifestyle of worship that naturally flow from the heart of a follower of Christ. Put these principles into practice this week.

DAILY READINGS

1. CHOOSE ONE ANOTHER // HEBREWS 10:19-12

It feels great when you have something in common with someone. You can talk freely about your shared interest and experience things together based on the commonality you share. In Hebrews 10:19-22 we learn as Christians we share a new way of living through the blood of Jesus Christ therefore, we are called to draw near to God together in our new life. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives forever. Although we can gather without restrictions, we have become used to being away from those we find joy in being around and often meet on the other side of a camera.

The blood of Christ is the great unifier, restoring back to God and one another.

2. THE POWER OF CONFESSION // HEBREWS 10:23-25

When I made a life-altering decision that was wrong and caused harm, I thought I was in my situation alone. I believed everyone around me was better, thinking they would never have done what I did. Until, one day during a women's Bible study, someone shared a similar life story. I felt safe, encouraged, empowered, and compelled to ask for guidance from another believer. Hebrews 10:23-25 instructs us to "hold on to the confession of our hope, watch out for one another and encourage one another."

When we confess our sins to one another we can find hope that builds us up.

3. JESUS'S SACRIFICE, OUR SERVICE // HEBREWS 13:12; ROMANS 15:7

Jesus sacrificed his life to sanctify us, enduring hardships. Hebrews 13:12, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, so that he might sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the gates, bearing his disgrace. Verse thirteen calls us to become attached to the corporate being as we look to Jesus instead of the

temporary world. When we consider what Jesus has done for us to be together, we find strength in the corporate practice of community. Romans 15:7 says, "Therefore accept one another, just as Christ also accepted you, to the glory of God." So may we glorify His name.

Through him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise.

4. COLLABORATION // HEBREWS 10:25

In public service collaboration is one of our core values to carry out service to others. Working with community partners or other departments to complete a task is rewarding and creates ways to learn the talents of others. It is always nice when we can do something important and even better when we get to celebrate our accomplishment. Hebrews 10:25 instructs not neglecting to gather, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other and all the more as you see the day approaching. As Christians, we find strength in numbers as we serve one another in community; needing one another.

"So that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other" (1 Cor. 12:25).

5. A HEART CHECK // PSALM 139:23-24;

Throughout our lesson we have learned the ingredients of the heart so we may worship God through our thoughts, actions, how we treat one another, and come together to further live our life in worship through service to one another. May we be like David in Psalms 139:23-24, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way." It is important to consistently do a heart check through the lens of God's will and draw near to him faithfully.

"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 in pure water" (Heb. 10:22).



Hymns in the Early Church

BY BECKY LOMBARD

The early church was a singing church. In New Testament Scripture, we have several references to the songs of early believers:

- Jesus and the disciples sang hymns after the Last Supper (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26).
- Paul and Silas sang hymns to God while in prison (Acts 16:25).
- Paul's instructions for church order and involvement included allowing those who received a psalm to be free to share in worship. Believers were to sing with the spirit and with understanding (1 Cor. 14:15,26).
- Paul encouraged believers to address one another in "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).
- Quoting Psalm 22:22, the writer of Hebrews called the early church to sing praise (Heb. 2:12).
- James included instructions that believers were to "sing praises" (Jas. 5:13).

What were these psalms and hymns of the first-century church? When did they sing hymns? Did their heritage of song play a role in the music of worship? What hymns did they sing?

Religious Heritages

The community of believers that formed the nucleus of the early church evolved in the milieu of Jewish culture. They were accustomed to the liturgy and musical practice of the tabernacle and temple. Synagogue worship, which had become a common practice by the New Testament era, included intoning of psalms led by a cantor with congregational participation.

The Hebrew Psalter, Israel's hymnal, was a compilation of psalms from many eras of Israelite history. It served as the major source of worship music in this tradition. Members of the Jewish community sang psalms in worship, both personal and corporate. These psalms were comfortable and meaningful. First century believers who had this Jewish heritage continued using these psalms in worship in the Christian community.

The early Christians knew they needed to tell the story of the Messiah, the Christ. Thus, they focused on realities that reflected their own Christian experience in community. They told the story of the coming of God's kingdom, the message of the gospel of grace, the carrying of the gospel into the world, and the building up of the church.

As Gentiles began to convert and become fellow worshipers of Christ, they brought their own hymnic tradition into play. The singing of hymns to deities was common practice in the pre-Christian, Greco-Roman world.

As hymnody grew within the believing community of Jews and Gentiles, the early church adapted some pagan hymns by retaining the literary forms but infusing the hymns with new theological content, celebrating what God had done for them in Christ.¹

Reflecting Hope

Certain New Testament songs emerged as worshipful response to the mighty work of God. In the first two chapters of Luke, we find four nativity canticles. They follow the form and style of psalms and other Old Testament texts. These canticles, which the early church used in worship, have continued to serve as primary texts for liturgical music through the centuries.

Magnificat²—This song of Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” echoed the song of Hannah (Luke 1:46, see also 1 Samuel 1:11; 2:1-10).

Benedictus—The song of Zachariah, which he sang after his speech was restored, prophesied of John's ministry and spoke blessing on the God of Israel, quoting several Old Testament passages (Luke 1:68-79).



Last Supper Carving in Salt

Gloria in excelsis—At the birth of Christ, angels glorified God and proclaimed “peace” (2:14).

Nunc Dimittis—Simeon sang “Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace” after seeing Jesus in the temple (vv. 29-32).

In other New Testament books fragments of hymn-like material appear. These are identified by the presence of distinctive poetic writing, change in vocabulary, and style from surrounding material, introductory phrases that set them apart as quotes, and use of the relative pronoun “who” or connective “that.”³ Some of these were doctrinal in nature, as in 1 Timothy 3:16: “He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”⁴

The early believers used doctrinal hymns liturgically for the occasions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the two ordinances of the church. The following hymn, from Ephesians 5:14, was specifically a baptismal hymn:

Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine in you.⁵

Others were probably intended as doxologies of praise, as in 1 Timothy 6:15-16.⁶

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign,
The King of kings and Lord of lords, Who
alone possesses immortality and dwells in
unapproachable light, Whom no man has
seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal
dominion! Amen.⁷

Many hymns in the New Testament are “Christ hymns.” They testify of the work of Christ in coming, dwelling with us, and rising to be with God the Father. One of the best known of the Christ hymns is in Philippians 2:5-11.⁸ The poetic passage was probably part of worship liturgy in that day. This hymn traced salvation’s saga. Christ was equal with God, yet lowered Himself to serve others, even in death. Only then did God exalt Him. The church that sang Philippians 2:5-11 knew that, in spite of worldly appearances, all “gods” and “lords” of their contemporary world had been defeated in Jesus Christ.

As stated above, certain New Testament passages appear to have the actual literary features of hymn texts. Paul gave direct witness to the use of such hymnic fragments—“psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in Colossians 3:16 and its parallel text, Ephesians 5:19-20. While scholars differ in opinion as to whether we can conjecture specific meaning for these headings, many agree on the following distinctions:

Psalms—Old Testament psalms and canticles or new materials sung in this older style.

Hymns—Newly written songs by the Christian community that served as an apology for Christ, worshiping Him as Son of God and Savior

Spiritual Songs—Spontaneous outbursts of praise, perhaps improvised singing on the last syllable of the “alleluia.”

Scholars who believe interpreters of Scripture should not attach these descriptions support using the term “spiritual” to describe all three terms—psalms, hymns, songs. Neither interpretation takes away from Paul’s essential truth. We are to sing from our hearts to God. Rather than vain recitation, it is to be a matter of personal devotion.⁹

The Final Amen

Finally, we turn to the doxological hymns of John’s Revelation. “Doxology” comes from two Greek words meaning “word of glory.” Like the nativity canticles in Luke, John’s drama connected the Old and New Testaments. John wrote with liturgical symbolism and instrumentation that echoed ancient Israelite worship, yet portrayed ultimate worship at the end time. While earlier examples of hymnody in this article were set forth as more theological expression, in Revelation worshipers reveled in ultimate, pure doxology.¹⁰

Though we see the connection of worship in Revelation to the worship of the early church, the worship John portrayed here was in response to something new. Doxology was given to the Father and to the Lamb. The twenty-four elders sang praises as well as the four living creatures, those who were sealed, and ultimately, every living creature.

Hymnic fragments are throughout the book.¹¹ These include thanksgiving, praise, confessional acclamations of the work of Christ, “Amens,” and “Alleluias.”

So, what does this history of hymns in the early church portend for us today as worshipers of the risen Christ? Our hymns should facilitate our personal and corporate doxologies of praise. They should teach us about theology and cause us to think about God. They should bear witness of all that Christ is to a lost world. They should aid us in teaching and ministering to one another. We must look to our heritage of music, yet we must always sing new songs telling of the new things God is doing in our lives. And most assuredly, we should always sing of the hope that is to come in Christ.

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God, the Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come.”

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!”

“Hallelujah, because our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns!” (Rev. 4:8; 5:12; 19:6).

Hallelujah! He reigns!

1. Ralph P. Martin, “Hymns, Hymn Fragments, Songs, Spiritual Songs” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Gerald E. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 420.
2. The name of each canticle is derived from the first word of the passage as it appeared in Latin translation.
3. W. J. Porter, “Creeds and Hymns” in Dictionary of New Testament Background, Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 232-233.
4. Additional doctrinal hymns: Romans 1:3-4; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.
5. Additional baptismal hymns: Ephesians 2:12-19; Titus 3:4-7.
6. Additional doxological fragments: Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17.
7. Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, Sing with Understanding, 2d ed. (Nashville: Church Street Press, 1995), 79-80.
8. Additional Christ hymns: Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:1-4; 1 Peter 2:22-24; 1 Peter 3:18-22; John 1:1-14.
9. Donald P. Hustad, Jubilate II (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993), 146-148.
10. Ibid., 154.
11. Revelation 4:8b,11; 5:9-10,12,13b-14a; 7:10b,12; 11:15b,17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3b-4; 16:5b-7; 19:1b-3,4b,5b,6b-7.

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Traditional prison of Paul and Silas at Philippi in Greece. The prison is situated adjacent to and slightly north of the Roman agora.