

Why Gather?

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Date: 11 October 2026

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[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's lovely to see so many with us this morning, and also to know that others are joining us through the wonders of modern technology. And I want to start with that as we think about the question we're beginning our series with, why gather? Why should we come together as church and meet with one another?

I think it's true to say that we live in a world which is in many ways more connected than ever before. The wonders of modern technology mean that we can connect with people on the other side of the world.

But sometimes, perhaps, that's at the expense of connecting with those who are closer to us. So we might be in contact with friends, with online friends through Facebook, through FaceTime, through X, through all sorts of other ways.

But maybe we hardly know the people who live next door to us at times. We used to walk along hand in hand with our loved ones. Maybe today our hands are more preoccupied with our phones and with enabling us to look at them.

We don't even need to meet people to have experiences in our own room by ourselves. We can have virtual experiences and join in with a world that is not real, but which at the time might seem real to us.

[1:30] We're connected, but perhaps we're not as connected in real life as we used to be. That's probably true in the world of work as well. When I was working, I went into the office five days a week. That was what you did.

It is much less common now people work at home. I noticed the other week that the union, a major employer in the country, was threatening industrial action because the employer was proposing that workers should have to come in three days a week rather than two.

And the union said, well, we should get extra pay for that because we're having to do more. We spend more time by ourselves, perhaps, and less time interacting with others.

And what impact should that have on church? Should we be thinking, well, we should go online with church? Why should we meet together? It's a lot easier, a lot more straightforward if we just sit at home and enjoy it.

Or some people, there's not a choice that they're not able to come to church. But I would say emphatically, if we're able to gather together as God's people, then we should.

[2:42] There's a real blessing in coming together and being church together. And I want this morning to give four reasons why I believe it's important that we gather together as God's people.

I hope they'll resonate with you and perhaps give some food for thought. So why gather together? We should gather because we can.

That doesn't sound a very spiritual reason. It's not in itself a reason why we should come. There are lots of things that we can do that it may not be particularly good for us to do.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that coming to church is a great privilege. That meeting together with God's people, meeting together with God as a group of his children, is an enormous benefit to us.

The days of COVID may seem like a bit of a bad dream now, but I'm sure we can remember when we couldn't gather together in church, couldn't gather together at all.

[3:49] And it really wasn't the same. Our tech team, our band and others worked wonders to connect us as well as they could and to ensure our Sunday services could continue.

But it really wasn't the same as being together. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world are unable to gather together because of persecution.

If they came together, certainly if they were seen together, then they could be arrested and they could have some terrible things happen to them. We don't have to worry about coming together. We can gather freely. And we don't need to look far afield to think of that either. There are some of our own members who would long to be with us on a Sunday morning, but aren't able to because of their health or family reasons.

And for all of us, it might be at some stage that that's our situation, that we don't have the privilege of gathering. So let's value the fact that we can come together.

[4:51] We gather because we can. Second reason, we gather because it's a good habit. Now again, that might not seem very spiritual, but it's picking up on what the writer to the Hebrews says to us.

He expresses it negatively, saying we should not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. Now we don't know exactly why the people the writer to the Hebrews was addressing were not coming together.

We're getting the habit of not gathering. Perhaps they were worried about persecution. Or perhaps they were discouraged because they had been expecting the Lord to return and he hadn't come yet.

Perhaps some of them were sinking back into Judaism and the practices of that. Or maybe they just lost interest. Maybe it was just apathy that they didn't come.

Whatever it was, the language the writer uses here is very strong. The word that's translated give up in the NIV has the sense of abandoning or forsaking something.

[6:04] It's the same word that Jesus uses on the cross when he says, My God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The writer is saying it's no small thing to give up on gathering with God's people.

And it can easily be habit forming. I think all of us to a greater or lesser extent are creatures of habit. I know that I certainly am.

If I'm involved in something, I really need to commit to it or it will very easily slip. So, for example, on a Monday evening, my priority needs to be to join the Zoom prayer meeting because if I took on other things, if I didn't see it as being my key priority, I could become quite an irregular attendee.

And maybe there's something there for all of us to consider. It's quite easy for us to say, perhaps on a Sunday, I'm a bit tired today. I don't think I'll go to the evening service.

Or I've had a busy week. Let's just watch the live stream today rather than going to church. But we really miss out if we're not here. Now, that doesn't mean every one of us has to be at every service and activity of the church.

[7:23] Arguably, some of us have made a mistake over the years by thinking we need to be at everything and maybe not giving the attention we should to family and other things.

And there are definitely times when our health or our circumstances mean that it's not possible or certainly not sensible to be at church. But we need to make sure we don't get into the habit of not being here.

I'd suggest that unless there's a very good reason otherwise, we should all prioritise coming to at least one service on a Sunday and meeting together with God's people.

Why do we gather? Because it's a good habit and it's a bad habit if we get out of the way of it. Third reason, and this is maybe more the kind of thing you'd expect me to be talking about this morning. We gather because we are the family of God. Peter in chapter 2 of his first letter says, Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

[8:34] Then he says, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. God's special possession.

And John goes even further than that at the start of chapter 3 of his first letter. He says, see what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

If our faith is in Jesus, we are God's children. We are in a family relationship with the great creator of the world.

And alongside that, we're brothers and sisters in Christ. We're fathers and sons, mothers and daughters in the Lord. And when we gather, we come together as a family.

Now, I know many families are dysfunctional. Maybe yours would fall into that category. Maybe you're happier when you're apart from some of your relatives. But that's not how it should be with

God's family.

[9:45] We should find joy in each other's company, discussing what we have in common and what we're learning from our Heavenly Father. There's something extra special when we come together into the presence of our Father.

It's an expression of family unity and togetherness. Meeting with our Father. Bringing him our thanksgiving, our requests, and seeking to learn from him.

Giving him pleasure as we submit together to the Lordship of Jesus. Now, we're looking in the following weeks at some of the things that we do when we come together.

And I'm sure that will be very helpful. I'm not going to go into great detail this morning. But let me just highlight a few things we do as church that demonstrate the value of being together.

So, first thing we do is we worship together. Now, our whole life should be marked by worship of God, by serving him, by sacrificing ourselves to his service.

[10:53] But maybe we're particularly aware of it when we come together and we sing his praises. Hebrews 13 says, Let us continue to offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

That's what we do when we gather like this. The passage that Kate read to us said this, There really is nothing quite like God's people uniting together in praising him.

We have a wonderful group of singers and musicians that lead us in our worship. But I think the thing that's truly special about it is when God's people are worshipping together in unison.

And even those of us who can't sing a note in tune, we can join in and we can praise God with our hearts. We've got one God and Father.

One Lord Jesus Christ. One spirit dwelling in us. One faith that unites us. And singing together is a tremendous expression of that.

[12:19] Singing on our own or listening to music can be a great blessing, but it's not the same as coming together to worship our God. The second thing we do when we come together is we pray.

[illegible]

A key part of our services is listening to God and how he speaks to us through his words being read and explains. Online sermons and podcasts are great. I'm not putting them down at all. But there's something different about learning together in the same room, looking for the spirit to give the right word to the speaker and to apply them to the hearts of the listeners. Now, as you have gathered, I'm not a speaker who has lots of interaction. I don't get you responding a lot deliberately to what I say.

But I can tell you that during lockdown, preaching to a camera, even knowing that there would be lots of people watching it, was very different from preaching to a whole church like this. Now, that's not to diminish the work that Gary and others did to make that possible, or the fact that God can speak in any way and certainly can speak to us as we watch online. But I don't think it really

compares with being able to look as a preacher to see some people maybe making notes, other people checking their Bibles to see if what I'm saying is right there, perhaps some nodding along, and maybe some losing interest. And that can be a spur to the preacher to be a bit more interesting and engaging. There is something that is very special about being together. Same if you're sitting in the congregation.

You're aware that we're learning together, that we're all as one, hearing God's word and thinking about it when we can. And we do our best to incorporate those watching in the live stream.

[15 : 55] But those who are physically together, we have a great blessing of gathering as one. Why gather? Because we are the family of God. I think I need to say something else at this point, though.

Have you ever had the experience of someone saying to you, we're having a family gathering tomorrow, would you like to come and join us? And maybe you have some hesitation about it, but maybe you feel a bit too polite to decline. And a family will no doubt make every effort to make you feel welcome and to involve you. But you'll be very aware you don't belong in that family. You don't have the same depth of relationship that they do. You can't share in the memories they have of times when they've got together in the past. You don't have the same level of comfort in being together as one that they do, because you're not a member of that family. Now, we're delighted to welcome everyone who's here today.

Whether or not you're a church member, whether or not you'd consider yourself to be a Christian. But our real family identity comes from our shared faith in Jesus Christ.

Everyone is not a member of God's family. Only those who know Jesus as their saviour. Those who have recognised their sin, trusted in Jesus as the only one who can bring forgiveness, because he took our sins when he died on the cross.

Now, if that's not you yet, as I say, you're very welcome today. But please recognise the importance of faith in Jesus. It's the only way to avoid the judgement of a righteous God.

[17 : 50] It is the only way to become part of God's family. If you like, we'd be very happy to talk with you about that later. Why gather?

Why gather? Because we're the family of God. And finally, why gather? Because we're the body of Christ. If being a family brings together something of the closeness we should have with each other, then maybe this picture of the body takes it to another level.

Paul talks about the church as a body many times. Derek read the text from Ephesians earlier on. It is also very much the theme of Corinthians, particularly chapters 10 to 12.

In the passage that we read from Colossians, Paul says, As members of one body, you were called to peace. And in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul talks a bit more about what it means to be part of the body.

And he says, As the body of Christ, we belong together. He gives an example. How would it be if a leg said, Because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body?

[19 : 10] It would be no less a part of the body because it's said that. No, with an ear, it dissociated itself from the body because it's not an eye.

Our bodies belong together. And as the body of Christ, we belong together. We rejoice together. We suffer together.

And we can't do that if we're not together. We need to build relationships. We need to share life. We need to grow together. We need to be close enough to support each other effectively.

That's something that can happen as we meet on a Sunday and as we talk with one another. It happens in our growth groups, in Grove 92, in women's and men's ministry.

And as we serve together. For me, the Food Bank Plus on a Friday is a great example of being able to serve together and to grow closer in our sense of belonging and of supporting one another.

[20 : 17] We belong together. But then we also need each other. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul highlights that every part of the body has its own function.

And every function is necessary. The parts of the body that we cover up, that no one sees, are just as important as the parts that are visible that we present to the world.

That's true in a church as well. It's not those of us who stand up at the front who are doing the great work of the church. It is also those who serve silently behind the scenes.

Perhaps we don't even know what they're doing. But they're doing it for the Lord Jesus. And they're doing it for the benefit of his people. And that comes into the passage Aaron read us from Hebrews.

Just as he urges his readers not to get into the habit of neglecting meeting together, he says, let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

[21 : 29] I'm sure the love and good deeds certainly include the things that we do as we support one another of the body of Christ, as we look for each other's needs.

But I was particularly struck when he says we consider how we may spur one another on. The word consider in the NIV actually probably isn't strong enough.

The New Living Translation says, let us think of ways to motivate one another. The message goes further and says, let us see how imaginative we can be.

Now that's not a literal translation, but the point is, as we think of how we can encourage one another in our service for the Lord. It's got to go beyond just thinking mentally about it.

We need to give good thought to how we can encourage and help one another to grow in our faith and into the most useful service that we can give to the body.

[22 : 31] And then there's the phrase, spur on. Usually when that comes up in the Bible, it's got a negative context to it. It's the idea of being a bit of an irritant, of annoying people through what we do.

But here it's entirely positive. But it goes beyond just a gentle word of encouragement, I think. It's giving positive stimulation and motivation to others to serve the Lord in the best way that we can. To contribute to the body, to the foe, and for the benefit of all its members. And of course, we can't do that if we're not here.

We need to be able to observe others, to see how the Lord is working in their lives, how they're growing in faith, and the gifts that they have been given, and to spur them on towards love and good deeds.

That's a key role of the church leadership, but I think it's also a responsibility of all of us to observe Christ working in each member of the body and of helping each other to find the areas of service and of commitment and of showing love that the Lord has placed there for us.

[23 : 55] Then finally, as the body of Christ, we represent Christ to the world around us. We recognize that Christ is the head of the body and we seek to follow his instructions.

But Christ isn't physically visible to those round about us. And they can see him only in the lives of his body, his followers.

That's us if we're Christians. And that's something that should really motivate us in our daily lives, as we think that people are seeing our faith and are judging whether it's a good thing by our words and our actions.

But it's also a good thing when we gather. It's a reason to come together. When someone is not part of the body, but not a member of the church, if you like, joins us, do they see something different, something they would want to be a part of?

Do they feel really welcome when they come? Do they see a real bond and concern between us and know that we are Jesus' disciples because of the love we show for one another?

[25 : 09] Do they sense the presence of the Holy Spirit among us? Do they leave reflecting on the joy in our singing, on the sincerity of our prayers, on the power of the message from the Bible?

Can they see Christ in us? As church, we represent Christ to others. One final thought echoing the writer of Hebrews.

He says we should keep the habit of gathering together and encourage one another all the more as we see the day approaching. Time short.

The return of Jesus could be very close. None of us in any case knows how long we'll have in this world. Let's make sure we're ready for the Lord's return or for our death.

That through faith in Jesus, we are part of the family of God, the body of Christ we've talked about. And let's, if we are Christians, if we are particularly talking to members of this church, let's be together.

[26 : 24] Let's gather joyfully. And as we do, let's spur one another on towards love and good deeds as we meet in Jesus' name.

As we worship together, as we pray together, as we study together. We are together in faith, in community, in Christ.

Let's pray together. Father, our Father, we thank you for the enormous privilege it is to be able to gather in the name of the Lord Jesus.

We do recognise that there are many who would long to do so who aren't able to. We pray we will never take it for granted or diminish its importance.

Help us to be faithful, to have the good habit of gathering. And as we do, help us as we worship, as we pray, as we learn from your word, and as we share fellowship and enjoy life together.

[27 : 28] We pray that every member of the body may find their place, their role, and may be able to do it to your glory and to the good of everyone.

Thank you for what we have in Jesus. We pray for any who don't know him this morning, that they may come to put their trust in him and become a part of your family. Thank you for the privilege of meeting together.

And we pray that you will continue to be with us now and through the week as we give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.