

Hebrews

Hebrews 10:24-25 - A command to attend church?

The old King James Bible really got the ball rolling on attending church being a command performance, with its translation of **Hebrews 10:25** as “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some.” Other translations phrase it along similar lines, like “not avoiding worshiping together,” or “Some people have given up the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that.”

It's not surprising, then, that life for many Christians has revolved around “going to church” on Sundays. It usually involves meeting in a building called a “church,” that has a structured “worship service” following a traditional worship calendar, under the banner of a denominational name like “Baptist” or “Presbyterian” or “Reformed,” etc.

I grew up in a little English village where the “Church of England” building with its steeple, stained glass windows and wooden pews surrounded by a cemetery occupied the most prominent spot, and that's where most of us met every Sunday - since Sunday was the day that Jesus was believed to have been raised from his death three days earlier.

But is all this what Hebrews 10:25 was getting at? Should it really have given rise to required attendance at a church service on Sunday? And was it really meant to justify the building of huge cathedrals, musty stone churches, a structured hierarchy of clergy separated from the “lay” people, and a platform for one's own denominational beliefs? And yet that's the most visible picture of Christianity we've presented to the world.

The context of Hebrews 10:24-25 and a “peek at the Greek,” however, offer a different picture, that has nothing to do with required attendance in this type of church on Sundays.

Take the context of the previous verse, for instance, **Hebrews 10:23**, which says: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” The King James Version has “faith” instead of “hope” in that verse, but the Greek word used is *elpidos* which means “hope” or “expectation.” In other words, “don't for a second let our hope waver or get shaky.” Why not? “Because God made a promise he will stick to.”

And what “promise” would that be, exactly? Again in context, **Hebrews 10:37**, “For, ‘In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.” So it’s obviously referring to **the return of Jesus**, and isn’t that the great hope of every Christian, that one day soon Jesus will come back to restore this planet and solve all its problems? And it’s “seeing that day approaching,” **verse 25**, that stirs us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” and to “encourage one another too,” **verses 24-25**.

Titus 2, verses **13** and **14**, say much the same thing, that we “live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while **we wait for the blessed hope** - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.” And the same thing again in **1 Thessalonians 4:13**, that we don’t “grieve like the rest of men, **who have no hope....**For (verse **16**) the Lord himself will come down from heaven.... And so (verse **17**) we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore (verse **18**), **encourage each other** with these words,” just as Hebrews 10:25 said. “For in this hope we are saved,” Paul writes in **Romans 8:24**, because this is what keeps us going through whatever our present world throws at us.

So that’s the context of Hebrews 10:24-25, but why did it need to be said? Was it because their hopes had been dashed somewhat by the delay in Jesus’ return? Thirty to thirty five years had passed since the church had begun on Pentecost, when Christianity had spread like wildfire. Everything the apostles preached was always salted with hopes of Jesus’ return. Expectations were high that since Jesus’ ascension to a position of real power, that their enemies would soon be crushed.

But for years there’d been no signs at all of Jesus’ imminent return, and Christians were now under fire from the Jews too. It was a time of real worry, as Christians were being hounded and losing their homes and jobs, and some were being thrown in jail as well. And in only two years time Jerusalem itself would be facing its worst time ever as the Romans unleashed their horrific power on Jewish rebels. Ominous storm clouds were already forming, which wasn’t helped by the delay in Jesus’ intervention. The Jewish Christians - to whom the book of Hebrews was written - were worried, depressed and losing hope.

But why should they lose hope, **verses 32-34**, when they’d already been through “hard times” when they first came into the church? They’d been “kicked around in public, targets of every kind of abuse.” And “If enemies broke in and seized your goods, you let them go with a smile, knowing they couldn’t touch your real treasure. Nothing they did bothered you.”

They'd been through all this before, in other words, "So don't throw it all away now. You were sure of yourselves then. It's still a sure thing. But you need to stick it out, **staying with God's plan** so you'll be there for the promised completion" - quoted from The Message.

The context, therefore, is very much about holding steady through tough times, when all that they held dear as Christians was under threat. The idea, then, that "not giving up meeting together" on Sundays was being suggested in verse 25 is hardly likely when it was doubtful they could meet together at all in their circumstances - on any day of the week.

So that's the context, but what about a "peek at the Greek" in verse 25 too?

"Let us not give up (or forsake) meeting together" in that verse makes "meeting together" sound like a verb, that we should be attending church on a regular basis. But the Greek for "meeting together" in this verse is a noun, *episunagoge*, which changes the meaning to "THE meeting together." The same noun is used in one other New Testament verse, in **2 Thessalonians 2:1**, describing "our gathering together (*episunagoge* the noun)" with Jesus at his coming again.

So the "gathering together," or "the meeting together," is not talking about meeting at church on Sundays, it's talking about the great gathering of God's people - those alive at the time and those resurrected from the dead - on the day of Jesus' return. What the verse is saying, then, is "Don't abandon the hope that one day we'll be in that great gathering together with Jesus....and all the more as you see that very Day approaching" (verse 25).

Unfortunately, verse 25 also tells us that "some were already in the habit of" abandoning that hope, just as Jesus predicted some would in Matthew 24:48. Some were even saying the resurrection of the dead had already past, 2 Timothy 2:18, which totally ripped away their hope for the future.

The writer of Hebrews, therefore, reminds them in **verses 37-39** that "He who is coming **will come** and will not delay," and to trust in that promise, because "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." It's **all in the context of Jesus' return and keeping that hope alive**, because to give up that hope means all we're left with in **verse 27** is "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" when Jesus returns. To give up our hope in that great day yet to come is giving up the very thing our salvation points to, the promise one day that we'll be "crowned with glory and honour" (Hebrews 2:7).

There's some more Greek too that buries the idea in Hebrews 10:25 that we must attend church or "go to church" on Sundays on a regular basis.

Take the Greek word for "church," for instance. It's *ekklesia*, which means "called out ones." It was used by the Greeks to describe people being called out of the community to become members of a legislative body or assembly, like a local council or municipal government. We call it "The House" today, meaning an assembly of voted in members of various political parties. An *ekklesia* is not something you "go to," therefore, it's something that YOU ARE.

The author of Hebrews picks this up in **Hebrews 3:6** when he says "WE ARE GOD'S HOUSE." We, therefore, are now **the legislative assembly of God** in training to rule the world one day, "crowned with glory and honour" as "kings and priests" when Jesus returns. And it's this amazing future awaiting us that Hebrews 10:24-25 says "stirs us to love and good deeds," and "encouraging one another." This is our dream, that carries us through whatever this world throws at us, just as it carried all those faith filled people of God listed in Hebrews 11, the very next chapter.

But let's be honest: do we talk about this much when we get together as Christians "in church"? Or is our time taken up in a prescribed order of service in which we hardly exchange any thoughts about our future and what being a member of God's legislative assembly is going to be like, and what our personal part in it may be? Do we come away from a "church service" excited by what we talked about that makes our place and purpose in this world so much clearer, and in particular how it ties in with training us for our future?

When was the last time, for instance, that you had the chance "in church" to talk about the things you'd love to be able to do in the future, based on what you've discovered you love doing today? Have we ever had the chance to sit with Christians with like interests, and get each other excited about how our shared interest will play out when we're in positions of rulership later, and we've got the power to make really good things happen?

But this is what "being the *ekklesia* of God" is for: it's being the assembly of God's people stirring each other up about our future and our part in it, based on "seeing that day approaching" when God gives us the power to do what we'd love to be able to do more of now. I love nurturing a barren landscape into a beautiful park like setting, for instance. I've done it, but only to a point, because life in this world limits what I'm able to do. I've been interested since the 1970's in being "off grid" and being totally self-sufficient too, and I'd love to see whole cities operate that way, but for now it can only be a dream.

But one day, a day I can see in my mind's eye approaching, Jesus, who knows me better than I know myself, will let me loose, so to speak, to develop my "loves of life" into exciting reality. And won't it be great working with people with the same interests?

And for some youngsters today, who pick this up from us oldies, it can become a passion they pursue in this life now as well, to use their education time to develop their interests and start "spurring each other on to love and good deeds" in this world, giving themselves and others a glimpse of what lies in the future for all of us one day. And many young Christians around the world are doing just that, some of whom may end up in positions of real power doing real good in their lives right now.

But that's what being God's house, the *ekklesia* of God, his legislative assembly on this planet, is for, as described in the context and the Greek in Hebrews 10:24-25. It's not about separating ourselves from the world and huddling together in our church silos to "worship" in prescribed rituals and traditions because that's what "we're supposed to do" as Christians, based on an unfortunate misinterpretation of Hebrews 10.

"Church" is never spoken of in the New Testament as something we "go to" as a duty. The church Jesus said he'd build, which the Holy Spirit then kickstarted on Pentecost, was based on the kingdoms of heaven and earth coming together in visible reality and demonstration in the lives of individual Christians. This is what excited those Christians in Hebrews when they first understood it, but they hadn't expected a delay in Jesus' coming again to make it a reality worldwide.

So the author of Hebrews reminds them they can still practice making it a reality by their love and good deeds in this world now, and bolstering each other up with actual stories of the impact they're having. It makes "the good news of the kingdom of God" real too, and it keeps our hope alive in the promise of restoration and times of refreshing that God created the *ekklesia* to be central in creating.

And if there's nothing we can do because of opposition, pandemic lockdowns, age or health problems, we can still "live by faith" in what God has in mind for the future. Don't "throw away our confidence in that," **Hebrews 10:38** says. And think of those in Hebrews 11 who survived hell on earth because they could see what God would be building in the future. Or as **Hebrews 11:10** phrases it, they "looked forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." That, in context, is more about what Hebrews 10:24-25 is getting at, rather than a command to attend church on Sundays.