

S.N. July 1, 79 - R.M.
(Steward)

"CAN YOU STAY AWAY FROM CHURCH?"

Heb. 12:22-25

INTRODUCTION:

The writer first of all talks about those who belong too an earlier community. And he talked about the rich inheritance of the church. And the idea which is oursin the body of Christ. When you meet in the place of worship. Now, he tells you about (with whom) you are meeting when you come to worship.

By way of introduction, there are two things here. One is negative. He casts your mind back to the (old days). That is, before God in the fullness of time had sent forth his son. What he was talking about was the time when they'd come under the old dispensation of the Mt. of (Sinai). There was a rigid system of exclusion. Only Moses and his assistants. And he said, there at that time - it was a dark dispensation. Upon that mountain there was blackness - there was darkness. It was a dreadful thing - the thunder and the lightning. And it seemed to have a limitation to it. V. 18-19. That all might not approach that mountain but only Moses and Aaron. It turned out to be a very dangerous time because there was fire whenever a man or a beast touched the mountain - he must be stoned or thrust through - V. (20)

This is some contrast that he is offering to us. How rigid.

22 And then on the positive side, he begins, but you have come to Mt. Zion with the great group of angels. To the church of the first born, written in Heaven. To the God of all who is judge. To the spirits of the blessed departed.

And to Jesus and his saving blood. On a positive side, he says, this is your Christian heritage. He declares that men who read this it is still to you and to me. And this truth is about the church at worship.

He does not say, you shall come - forecasting something that is far away in another world. But he says, you have come Meaning, that this is what actually happens every time we meet for worship. This is the fellowship into which you enter. If only you could realize the rich heritage, which you have. And of course, you will be thinking this week about the heritage you have in this nation Because the 4th of July arrives - the independence once again is played up. But the amazing wealth that we have here helps us with a question. Can you stay away from church with this amazing wealth that the writer piles up here in orderly fashion. Can you get along without it. Can you turn to something else that will feed you. As this fellowship of the church in worship.

There are many things - think of a few of them.

I. SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

V. (22) ⁴⁴ You have come to Mt. Zion - the city of the living God. The heavenly Jerusalem. "

You Christians, he means, have direct touch with the invisible, spiritual world. Which is the only ultimate reality. You are not prisoners behind the bars of this earth. But you have the bedrock of reality here.

Think about this in a clear fashion - what does this mean. What is it that it does not mean. Far too often the spiritual has been set over against the secular. We have sometimes tried to put these in different realms.

Now this is a misunderstanding of Bible revelation. The spiritual world is not something apart from this world and the affairs of the ordinary work day life that you live. How could it be. Somehow in this world and its relationships - God keeps drawing near to us. If God is ever to be found at all, it must not be some isolated sacred place that is apart from the secular. Because the word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

So far from making the acts of worship unnecessary, this means that the act of worship is more essential. For we are not likely to go on believing for very long that God is with us for every common task and duty. But we know that unless we make room for times and seasons when we think of him above everything else - and we deliberately put our minds to thinking upon him. We know that all of life ought to be worship. But we know that there is no chance it will be worship unless we have times when we have worship and nothing else.

You and I know that on the highways and the roadways of this life, there is dust. And there was a poem that a man compared our daily life to a little narrow road. He said it was over-hung with high buildings. And between he says you could see a single strip of blue sky, out in space. And then he said, you could see the sun a few minutes at mid-day. And you would ask yourself, is it real? Then you would feel a breeze of Spring. And you would say, is it real? The dust would come, the noise of the traffic. And these things would be pressing upon

you.

We know that there are many things in this world that disturb our security. But there is something about worship in church, where the (unseen) breaks right in upon us. Eternity stirs within our hearts. And we are going to be restless until we rest in God. You have come unto Mt. Zion - the city of the living God. The heavenly Jerusalem.

✓
II. UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP →

23⁴ You have come to the church of the first born. You are written in Heaven.¹¹

Now the writer is thinking there, (not) of the church in glory - (but) the actual Christian church here. And it's a wonderful idea. (You) who belong to Christ, he declares, are (no) longer isolated and alone. You are (members) of the greatest fellowship on earth. The church universal.

We are told that in that day they had (a register) that the King kept. And the names of those faithful citizens were placed in this book. And of course that meant a great deal. And this is what the writier is saying here. It is something actually that the first born - you have your name written, he says, in Heaven.

It is a (great) thing to be loyal to your own congregation. Every (stone) in this building where you worship, week after week is (dear) to you. There is splendor here. It has widened your horizon. And you belong to this fellowship.

Which from its beginning was small. Why it started in an upper room in Jerusalem - it has grown and extended until today - and this fellowship is world-wide. We do not realize fully but here is something that ought to thrill your soul, belonging to a fellowship like that. One of the hymns used to complain - we make God's love too narrow. By false limits of our own. We might have said the very same thing about the church. We make God's church too narrow by false limits of our own. Too often men have built against which mistake - with mistaken zeal, the very barriers Christ came to level. They built up racial barriers, class, even denominational or government. And they restrict Christ.

It is wonderful today to be a part of a fellowship where hymns we sing in this church are being used in Africa, India, China, Australia, Brazil, and around the world where missionaries gather and come together. And it is what Jesus means to me that causes us to come together. Under the same roof - here we are with a great host - worshipping the same Christ, feeling toward Jesus, as we feel toward all of those the same who pledge their lives to him. A fellowship that nothing can compare with.

If today we should speak from our church to others across the world, and say - Christ is risen. Thousands of miles in Nigeria or Argentina--there would come back the cry, yes, he has risen indeed. Is there anything comparable to that - such a universal fellowship that everytime we come together, we are a spiritual fellowship. We are a universal fellowship. And you have come to the church of the first born who are written in Heaven.

III. IMMORTAL FELLOWSHIP

Where he says this - that you have come to angels in festive array. And to

23 B.
spirits of just men made perfect.

Now as you look across the river, to the church invisible, and the church triumphant - he is thinking that in that other world where all that great host sings to the Lord - ten thousand times ten thousand united in the great song in Heaven. Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom, and strength and honor and glory, and blessing. And what he says is important for all of us who are here today on earth. We have had to face the sorrow of separation. And there have been bereavements that have come to us.

Did you know that when we as Christians are at worship and we are bowing in prayer before the throne on high - that your loved ones who are on the other side are very near to you. The cloud of witnesses is all around about you. In coming to worship, we somehow have fellowship with the world immortal that is unseen. And we are coming to the spirits of just men made perfect. The immortal fellowship.

There is a Greek play in which it tells how the hero Heracles - the Sampson of the Greeks once met and conquered death. He was on a journey and he came to the palace of a king. And there he found everyone in grief because death had come and carried off the young queen. Well, Heracles had fought against beasts and monsters. So he offered to go out to the grave and fight the last enemy. And rob him of his prize. Away he went to the lonely tomb. And there he met the monster of death. He grappled with him, he won the victory, and he set the victim free. It is a beautiful scene as he comes leading by the hand - someone completely covered in white veil. And there he stands before the heart-broken king. And he said, look on her. If aught she seems to thee, like to be like thy wife, step forth

from (grief, to bliss) He lifts the veil - there is the queen. Alive, and fair and smiling, as of old. See, oh King, I give her back to thee. Now of course the Greeks knew that this was a myth.

That that kind of thing does not happen in this world.

But when we come to Christianity - it is no myth. We have one in our Master who met the last enemy, who won the victory, and so today from across the river there comes back to us. See, here is Christ. Whom death had robbed. I give him back, I give her back to you. You know that your loved one is alive. And is still near you.

No, they are not far away. The spirits of just men made perfect. And those who love God never meet for the last time.

They are still watching over us who are left journeying and carrying on in this life.

Napoleon and his great army crossing the Alps once were at the point of defeat. They refused to march. It was cold. But someone had the idea that the band should play a (triumphant piece) of music, and as soon as the notes were sounded - there was a melody that flashed a light back into the faces of the Army. Soldiers and their wearily limbs went on to defeat - and on to victory. So our dear ones who have what there with Christ in Glory, still cheer. And urge us on. And there is a new song that comes forth in our hearts - everytime we worship. Remember the writer of Hebrews when he says - you come together to worship. They are very near

to you. It is just as if they were holding Christ's hand. And you his left hand. They are as near as that. You are coming to the spirits of just men - made perfect. This is immortal fellowship.

Can you stay away from church - knowing this spiritual fellowship. This universal, immortal.

IV. DIVINE FELLOWSHIP

You have come to the God of all who is judge - and to Jesus the mediator.
Of the New Covenant.

In your worship he tells them, that reaching down to the very heart of the matter, you have come to God. As revealed in Jesus.

And indeed without this, all other things that he has said are insufficient. But he says, you go deeper and he says, you have come now right through Christ!

Lenor Do DaVinci looking at his unfinished picture of his Last Supper with a friend, the friend said - there are two lovely silver cups on the table in front of Jesus. He says, they are magnificent. The painter said - now that was not the design of this picture. And so he took his brush and he painted them out. It is not that that I want you to see - he said. It is the face!
And is there anything we need to see but just the face of Jesus.

Did you know that a congregation meets for worship, and there are some who are present. Who are baffled by life, who are oppressed. Who have problems in life that seem to have no answer. There are those who have sin and there is a longing in their hearts. "Sir, we would see Jesus." Are there indeed, and of us, exempt from this experience.

There is somewhere that we feel that there must be a solution. That there is something that will transfigure the meaningless frustrations of life, and no mere philosophy of life will be the answer. But we will come, and we will see, that here is Christ who understands. Who loves. And we would stand and look and say, sir, we would see Jesus.

There is the story about Dr. John Duncan He knew the Hebrew language. And many thought that he prayed his prayers to God in Hebrew. One day, some of his friends listened outside of his door. At the time of prayer. And they wanted to discover what his prayer sounded like. And they listened and they heard.

Here it is --

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild
Look upon a little child
Pity my simplicity
Suffer me to come to Thee."

There is nothing deeper than that - we would see Jesus. We are all in that critical situation of need. Suffer me to come to Thee!

And those happy souls who first discovered Jesus have different kind of life now. You can listen to their testimony. I was battered by trouble and Christ was my strength. I was lost and Christ was my guiding light. I was in a terrible storm, and Christ came and led me over the waves and delivered my soul from death.

C. S. Lewis, in describing his conversion from atheism to Christianity - as a college professor. He read everything he could, he heard everything he could. And he said that he was alone in his room night after night feeling that there was something wrong. And fear had come upon him in 1929. And he said, I gave in and I admitted that God was God. I knelt and prayed. And he said I was the most dejected, reluctant convert in all of England. Having felt that all the joy and excitement of life was lost. If one became a Christian. He says that by comparison - his former life was drab, dull, and empty. Life took on meaning and was filled with joy, excitement, purpose, and hope.

Many people have found the delightful surprise. That this is true. What the writer of Hebrews is saying here - that when a person comes to Christ in this divine fellowship, the new covenant which he has.

The earthquake in Philippi, the prison walls were shaken. The door opened and the jailer rushed out. What did Paul and Silas say. He said, what shall I do. Now Paul did not say, man run for your life quick before the walls crush you. What did they say. They said to him what should be sounded today - believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. This is our deepest need. This is your cry.

This is what the (old covenant preacher) said to his flock. As he sent them out into the wilderness. He said, when the enemy comes - if there be one of you - Jesus will be the second. If there be two, he will be the third. You will never, never lack for company. And every time you come to worship says the writer of Hebrews, you can be certain that you are coming to Jesus.

Is there anybody here that can stay away from church. With that knowledge.

V. REDEEMING FELLOWSHIP

24 "You have come to the blood of the sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

And when all is said and done, it is sin that is the trouble. It is your weak will, your wayward heart that is undependable. Your stubborn way - your sins of the flesh.

Your whole life is unlike Jesus. It is full of pride. It is full of sin. And your righteousness is like filthy rags. And you are reduced to despair.

But listen, when you come to the blood of sprinkling - where shall any of us be if that were not true. Here is the redemption. He goes on to say - it speaks better things than that of Abel. To translate that, it cries louder than

that of Abel. The voice of thy brother's blood, said God to Cain, in that old story. Cries unto me from the ground.

Our secret sins, our many defeats go crying up to God in Heaven!

If this were all, hope would be gone. And we could never lift our heads again.

But here is where the Gospel comes - for when we are in our sins, cry out to God. The blood of Christ cries louder, overbears, drowns, and silences (every) sin that cries out. And God does this for Christ's sake.

There is an illustration by McClarin in Bonnie Briar Bush - the old country Doctor who for more than 40 years was a well-loved figure. He had gone his rounds and he had come himself at last to the end of the day. Beside him, in the groaning, sits his friend the farmer. The dying man asked him, to read from the old book. The farmer opened the book, to the 14th chapter of John, and said, my mother wanted this read to her when she was weak. But, the old country Doctor stopped him. It is a happy word - but it is not the one for me. It's owner is good. But he said, shut the book and let it open itself. The farmer obeyed, he shut the book. And it opened itself to a much thumbed page. It was the story of the penitent sinner in the temple who would not lift up so much his eyes to Heaven. And through his tears, he read these words - God be merciful to me a sinner. And whoever we are, and whatever we are, whether we are a preacher, a deacon, a church member - whatever our task in life, we all come to that at last.

God be merciful to me a sinner. And the only (question) that really matters is -
can God be merciful to such a one as I am. We must have worn out God's mercy
so often. Can his patience hold out to the end.

Let me answer that question. With the words of an old hymn -- wilt thou forgive
that sin where I have begun. Which was my sin, though it were done before. Wilt
thou forgive that sin which I run. I have a sin of fear, and when I have spun my
last thread, I shall perish on the shore. But swear by thyself, and at thy death
my son, shall shine as he shines now. And hithertofore, and having done that,
thou hast done. I fear no more.

Every time you come to church, says the writer, you come to the blood of
sprinkling that forgives. Everything. Everything. Everything.

Can you stay away from church? Can you stay away and refuse to have Him speak?