

“Welcome to Paradise”
Hebrews 10:19-25
September 12, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Our author has concluded the doctrinal portion of this book and moves now to the practical. God never intends his truth to be received only in the mind, but always to move into our everyday, practical lives. He begins by summarizing the doctrine he has been teaching for several chapters and then giving three specific applications. The doctrinal summary is that now, through Jesus, we are able to enter the holy place, the place where God lives. He says it like this. **“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God...”** He mentions two realities that were developed in the previous chapters. The first reality is that by the shed blood of Jesus we have confidence to enter the holy place. He’s talking about the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament tabernacle, the place where God lived. Also in that place is the One who is our priest, the Lord Jesus. He represents us there, providing us all we need.

These two realities are the reversal of Genesis 3:24. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God “drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” It has taken thousands of years and the blood of God’s own Son, but the way back to paradise has been opened. Paradise, as the Bible understands it, is simply where God is. It’s not a place that, if we could find it, would still be a paradise. It is a paradise only because God is there. Our hearts all long for Eden. It is the home for which we were created, and we will never feel fully at home until we can return there. Jesus has torn down the curtain preventing our access to God’s presence, and this passage describes three practical applications of living with God in his paradise. Each of these applications is introduced by the words “Let us.”

I. Draw Near – v. 22

The fact that God would invite us to draw near is an amazing thing in itself. But he goes beyond the mere invitation and does all that is necessary to allow us to be near him. That has been accomplished by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Most of us experience something of a conflict when it comes to welcoming other people into our lives. On the one hand, we feel our need for others and eagerly desire intimacy. But on the other hand and at the same time, we have fears of being hurt if we let others get too close. We have

both a longing and a hesitancy. It is as if one hand is inviting people in while the other is signaling “stay away.” These verses declare that God has both hands motioning for us to come in, with a smile on his face. All of this we have through Jesus.

What does it mean to draw near? For years I assumed this was just another way of inviting us to pray. I thought that to draw near to God is to come to him in prayer. While it certainly includes prayer, it is bigger than that. In the context of Hebrews, to draw near to God is to come to him in worship. In his seven-volume commentary on Hebrews, John Owen says, “This drawing near contains all the holy worship of the church—both public and private—all the ways of our access unto God by Christ.” The people of God in the Old Testament drew near to God through worship in the tabernacle. The people of God in the New Testament draw near to God through worship in the church, which is the temple of God.

I come across people regularly who say they love God but not the Church. COVID-19 has accelerated the separation between personal faith and organized religion. It is estimated that as many as one-third of churchgoers have stopped attending church during the pandemic. It remains to be seen how many of those will return when the pandemic is behind us, but I’m afraid there will be permanent losses, perhaps in significant numbers. So it needs to be emphasized that this passage, and the rest of the Scriptures as well, are clear in teaching that the church is the place where we draw near to God. This is the case not because of the excellent character of the church, but simply because God has chosen to make it so. I liken this to the word Elisha gave to the Syrian general, Naaman. He was a leper who came to Elisha for healing and was told to go wash himself in the Jordan River. At first, he was insulted by Elisha’s word, comparing the Jordan River unfavorably to the superior rivers in Damascus. But his servants prevailed upon him to give it a try, and he was healed immediately. He was not healed because the Jordan was a superior river, but because it was the river God chose to use for the healing. The Church is the place where God says we draw near to him. It is the closest thing to Eden available in this world.

There are several clauses that describe how we are to draw near. First, we are to do so with a true heart. Many Christians think that church is the place where they are supposed to put on their happy face. The idea seems to be that we need to help God out by pretending that following him makes us happy and together all the time. The word for that is hypocrisy. Instead of putting on our happy face, we are to put on our honest face. Wendy read something to me this week that said, “Every church family is perfect until the children’s Sunday School teacher asks for prayer requests.” Bring that person to church, the true one. God wants our true self, not our false self. That’s the self he loves. We will only be able to do that as we keep in mind the next phrase.

Next, we draw near **“in full assurance of faith.”** The assurance he is speaking of here is the assurance of God’s love. Because of the shed blood of Jesus, not even our sin is able to separate us from God’s love. We don’t draw near to a God who is barely able to tolerate us, but to one whose heart rejoices to be with us. Let me invite you to conduct an exercise with me. Think of a sin in your past that makes you shudder to think about it. We all have such sins, many of them. Just think of one. Our tendency is to conclude that God has to hold his nose to draw near to us in light of such sins, and only reluctantly lets us draw near to him. The truth is just the opposite, the heart of God goes out to us. These sins only cause him to hug us harder. That is the full assurance of faith that comes only through Jesus.

The next two qualities of our drawing near develop more fully how it is that we can have this full assurance of faith. We are to draw near **“with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”** The language harkens back to Old Testament ritual practices in which blood was sprinkled in various ways and other ritual practices for the cleansing of the body. The idea is that sin defiles us on the inside (the conscience) and the outside (the body). But where sin defiles, the blood of Jesus makes us clean. It cleanses you from sins no one knows about except you and God, sins which trouble you in your quiet moments. It cleanses you also from sins that are evident to others. The blood of Jesus cleanses, and that frees us to draw near to God in full assurance of faith.

II. Hold Fast – v. 23

The second application is found in the command of verse 23. **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”** To hold something fast means to grip it strongly and not let it go. It’s the strong grip of the mother who grabs her toddler just before he runs in front of the car. And what is it to which we are to hold so tightly? It is the “confession of our hope.” The word “confession” is referring mainly to our doctrinal confession. It is the central truth of the gospel. He calls it the confession of our *hope* because hope is the word used to describe our future. We believe that the forgiveness we have in Jesus is only the beginning of all the good God has in store for his people. It is stage one of paradise, but there are further stages to come. Not only have we been forgiven for our sins, but one day we will be fully delivered from them, meaning that our sin nature will be eradicated and sin will be as distasteful to us as eating vomit. Bodies will be raised to life, never to die again or even endure sickness and weakness. The curse will be removed from work, with the result that all of our work will feel more like the most enjoyable hobby we can imagine. And all of life will be lived with a joy of which the deepest joys you’ve experienced in this life are but a small sample. Relationships will all be made whole. And the purpose for which we were all created, living for the glory of God, will be fully realized.

The author tells his readers to hold on to this hope because it is always challenged in this fallen world. His readers were suffering trials of various kinds, the kind of trials that sometimes make you just want to throw in the towel and give up. Instead of that, they are to remember that this bright future ahead of them is secured not by their efforts, but by the promise of God. **“For he who promised is faithful.”** Heaven and earth would pass away before a single promise from God will fail to be realized.

III. Consider Others – v. 24-25

The third application, to consider others, is worded like this. **“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”** Jesus has opened the way to paradise, and we find that paradise isn’t the place where we ask, “What’s in it for me?” Rather, it’s the place where we learn to ask, “How can I bring benefit to others?” This is the case because this is who God is. Paradise begins with each member of the Trinity centered on the other two. Neither the Father, Son nor Spirit asks, “What’s in this for me?” Rather, all three love the other two. Paradise is inescapably other-centered. To be self-centered in the paradise God has made for us is to be a fish out of water.

As the Lord’s Church, we are called here to do the same, to live for others. To do so requires that we reverse the pull of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our world urges us to embrace self-centered values. It rewrites this command to say, “Let us consider how we might find the people who will make us feel better about ourselves.” It is the consumer attitude that reduces all decisions to what’s best for me. People choose churches the same way they choose fast-food restaurants, with absolutely no thought that the two should be evaluated any differently. The power of this self-centeredness in our culture is reinforced by our sinful nature. We want others to be all about us. And then the devil adds to all this by his temptations to self-centeredness. The self-centered life is not paradise, but its opposite, hell. Hell is the place where unredeemed sinners are given what they want. They have always wanted a place where all things center on them, and God gives it to them. The problem is that there is room for only one person in such a world. So hell is a place of solitary confinement, which I think is why it is described as a place of darkness.

The verb to “consider” indicates the need for careful thinking and planning. We give consideration to such things as our safety, our health, and our future financial needs. We are also told here to give consideration to how we might stir up one another to love and good works. The verb for “stir” is the same one that is used for provoking someone to anger. We are being told here to consider how we might help motivate other Christians to live the kind of life God calls us to live—one marked by love and good works. There is an assumption that not

everyone is motivated similarly. Some may need a little rebuke, while others gentle encouragement. We are being told here to take notice of such things.

A good way to know how to obey this exhortation is to ask yourself, “What have others done that has motivated me to love and good works?” In many cases, those are the same things we can do to stir up others. What motivates you? I’m motivated at times by observing others humbly and faithfully serving. This church motivates me in this way as I observe many of you doing just that. I’m also motivated when it’s clear that someone is for me and not against me. They genuinely want my good. I’m motivated at times simply by being asked to do something. An important way to love others is to pursue people. Most of us need a little pursuit of others. So one way to stir up others to love and good works is to take the risk of pursuing people. Those who pursue in this way will often find that others will send that mixed signal of holding one arm up to keep people away while the other arm longs for them to come near. We must push through that and pursue people.

One of the requirements of being able to stir up others to love and good works is the mere fact of being with others. So the author adds the command of verse 25 that we not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some. I think this includes not just attendance at the weekly corporate worship of the church on Sunday morning, but also more intimate gatherings where the kind of “stirring up” commanded in verse 24 can happen. Our church’s small groups provide just such a setting.

The author’s choice of verbs is instructive. We “neglect” to meet together. People usually don’t abandon the fellowship of the church because they wake up one day and decide that it’s a bad place they never want to go to again. It’s a much more gradual process that begins by mere neglect. It’s easier to stay home. Other priorities displace going to church. This person tells himself that a return to church will happen at some point, but then non-attendance becomes habitual. Habits are marked by inertia. Did you learn about inertia in physics class? An object in motion or a stationary object both tend to stay that way unless acted on by some outside force. Once a person gets out of the habit of attending church, it becomes harder to begin again. But it can work the other way too. Once the habit is formed of faithful engagement with God’s people in God’s church, that too becomes more likely.

CONCLUSION:

Perhaps you noticed that these three commands involve faith, hope and love. Paul said that those three qualities abide (1 Corinthians 13:13). They abide because they are part of our eternal life in paradise. Phase one of this paradise is here already, with more to come. Eden is open again to all who will put their faith in Jesus.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 10:19-25

1. The first two verses of our text summarize the doctrinal section of Hebrews by declaring that Jesus has opened the way to God. This is the reversal of Genesis 3:24, which describes humanity's banishment from the paradise of Eden. What kinds of things come to mind when you hear the word "paradise?" How does a relationship with God through faith in Jesus bring about those elements of paradise?
2. The first of the three commands of this passage is to draw near to God. The context indicates that the church is essential for that. How does the church help you to draw near to God? As part of the church, are there things you can do to help others draw near to God?
3. We are told to draw near with a true heart. Why do you think so many Christians seem to think that we need to put our happy face on to come to God, instead of our honest face? How would you encourage someone to pursue honesty in their relationship with God?
4. We are also told to draw near "in full assurance of faith." This refers to the assurance of God's love for us. It was said in the sermon that our sins that cause us to shudder when we recall them cause God to hug us harder. What difference would it make in your life if you believed that more fully?
5. The second command is to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering." We can infer from this that the readers are being tempted to let go of their confession of hope and to waver. Hardship is often the challenge tempting us not to hold on. How does hardship and suffering tempt us to let go? Is there a hardship you are undergoing right now where you need to "hold fast?"
6. The third command is to consider others, "how to stir up one another to love and good works." How has God used others to stir you up to love and good works?
7. What do we learn from the use of the verb "neglect" in verse 25: "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some"? Are there any aspects of life in paradise (as described by these three commands) that you have been neglecting?