

## “Why Church?”

Reading: Colossians 3:1-17; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

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Stop and think for just a moment: why are you here today? I don't mean *why are you here* in an existential or philosophical sense. I mean why are you here in this room, in this church building, attending this service of worship with these people right now? You could be doing so many other things right now! You could be going for a hike among the beautiful fall colors, or you could be cleaning your house, or you could be working and making money, or watching TV, or sleeping, or any number of other things instead of this! Why are you here? I'm actually quite serious; I really want you to ask yourself that question. Maybe you're here because this is just what you do on Sundays, and you'd feel guilty for doing something else. Maybe you're here because someone else made you come. Hopefully at least a few of you are here because you actually want to be here and you hope to encounter the living God. But I'm honestly not offended if some of you don't really have a good answer to the question. By now I probably have at least a few of you thinking, “Yeah, why *am* I here today?” That's okay. I'm not offended; honesty is good.

I ask the question because it's an important question to be able to answer. If you don't have a good answer to it, I don't think you'll remain in the church as time passes and things come up and life gets in the way and challenges arise. Even if you're really committed to attending because you feel like you should or because this is what your family does, as time passes I think it's likely that at best you'll be present in body but absent in spirit. You'll be here, but not for the right reasons, so you won't get what the church is really for.

But more than that, I ask the question because today we're beginning a journey through the book of Hebrews, and the question of why you're here in our worship service today is relevant to the book. In fact I'd suggest that this question really is the point of the book, or at least one of the points. Hebrews is a very difficult book to understand; I think it may be the hardest book of the New Testament to study. That's partly because it relies heavily on imagery from the Old Testament and other sources of ancient Jewish thought that are very foreign to us, and it's partly because it often uses a type of logic that we don't use today and is hard for us to wrap our brains around. But a lot of the difficulty comes from the fact that we don't have a clue who wrote it — there have been a variety of characters suggested through the ages, but they're all pretty much as likely as the others — and we have only slightly more of a clue of the people and the situation to whom it was written, and those are very important things to know to understand what the book is really trying to say.

It almost certainly was not written by the Apostle Paul; that's something that was recognized pretty early in church history. The author sounds very different than Paul, basically, and in fact the author sounds different than any other writing we have in the New Testament. It sounds like the book was probably written either to Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians who have a pretty solid background in Judaism, and maybe they were living in Rome or somewhere else in Italy. The book reads more like a sermon or a series of sermons than it reads like a letter. Much beyond that is an open question, and that makes it hard to know what the goal of the book is.

However, we can make some educated guesses based on the content. All through the book, the author compares Jesus with various images or characters or institutions out of the Old Testament.

And the conclusion in each case is that Jesus is either superior to those things or He completes them or supersedes them. Therefore, the author says, stand firm in your faith and continue to trust God like Jesus did. Based on that, it looks like the situation is something like this: this group of Christians is being persecuted for their faith in Jesus, and as a result they're wondering if their trust has been misplaced. Maybe it would be better for them to turn back to some of the older, more respected practices of Judaism that won't get them in so much trouble. Maybe Jesus wasn't all He was cracked up to be. Maybe the gospel has been a failure since we've trusted in Jesus but we're now facing persecution and maybe even death. So the author of Hebrews seems to be telling them that no, turning back to those other practices is not only a waste of time, it's a rejection of all God has worked for, because Jesus has always been the goal of what God was doing all along.

Sometimes you'll hear people talk about *apologetics*, which is making a reasoned defense of the Christian faith against the arguments people make against it. The book of Hebrews serves something of an apologetic function; it explains and defends the work of Jesus to these folks who are apparently thinking about rejecting Jesus. So, in very general terms, we can boil this book down to answering our two-word question: why church? Why do what we do as Christians? Why participate in the life of the church? Why take the time for worship and singing old songs and reading an old book and listening to sermons? Why church? That's the theme we'll be following while we're in the book of Hebrews over these next few weeks, because that's the question the author of Hebrews is trying to answer. Of course we're going to have to apply the principles differently than the author of Hebrews does, because we're not tempted to leave the church for the same reasons as they were back then.

But it's certainly still true that the "Why Church?" question is relevant today. It's very fashionable in some circles today to criticize the church or Christian faith or religion in general. We're not going to be very systematic or exhaustive in our attempt to give good answers to that question, but we will try to offer some good answers. One of the ways people ask that question is to argue that the church and religion in general really just cause problems in society. Aren't things like racism and hatred and wars always caused by religious people? Hasn't the church really been a net loss for human society? Didn't it hold back Western civilization for hundreds of years? Why church, when church is the root of so many negative things in our world?

And in response, we would say along with the author of Hebrews that the church has been and will continue to be imperfect, and there are indeed sins that can be laid at the feet of the church. And while we could certainly make a strong case from history that the church has been a net positive for society due to things like Christian ethics and hospitals and schools and social programs and so on, the real answer we find here at the beginning of Hebrews is that the church does not drag us down, it lifts us up because it points us toward Christ. The answer to all of the charges against the church is Jesus Christ; He's the answer to the question, "Why church?" That only sounds like a cop-out answer until you stop and think about what Hebrews is saying about Jesus.

You see, we have this urge deep within us to find something that lifts us up. We're fascinated by high places and tall things; our eyes are naturally drawn heavenward. That's part of what lies at the root of Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains — where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord." That's not just being poetic, that's being apologetic: when that psalm was written, the tops of many of the mountains would have been studded with idols of worship for pagan gods, because the thinking was that high places were places where the heavens and the earth came

together. So “I lift up my eyes to the mountains,” and I see those pagan sacred spaces and idols up there, but I turn my back on them and rely on the Lord instead.

We seek things that lift us up. We look for thrills or contentment or excitement or satisfaction. We seek to be impressed with beauty or grandeur, or humbled with great knowledge or secrets of the universe. There’s nothing wrong with that, *per se*. The problem comes when we’re satisfied with something too small.

The book of Hebrews begins by making the case that Jesus is superior to the angels. It’s a fairly extended argument, too; basically the whole first chapter of the book focuses on making this case. It’s sort of an odd way to begin, but there it is. It makes a bit more sense when we read some of the writings in certain parts of Judaism around that time, when some folks were very concerned with the study of angels and demons, and figuring out which angels did what, and they collected and retold a variety of stories about angels. Even today people are taken with the concept of angels. It’s something that lifts our eyes up to the hills; it’s an inspiring and exciting idea that there are beautiful celestial beings watching over us. Maybe for those Christians receiving this book of Hebrews, the temptation was to demote Jesus to just another angel; that way we can make Him God’s messenger and still hold to traditional Judaism while avoiding the persecution of being a Christian.

But the claim of Hebrews is that Jesus is far superior to any angel. For our purposes today, Jesus is far superior to any of the other things that might lift our gaze heavenward, and in fact anything that draws our eyes upward is just a pale imitation playing with our deep inner desire for Jesus. Jesus is such a powerful work of God that He cannot be encapsulated or reduced by any human accomplishment, idea, science, building, or celebrity. He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being.” Why church? That’s plenty of reason right there. In fact, the author of Hebrews begins the book in the very first verse with a bold statement that is lost in our translation: the book begins with, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,” but the thrust of the words used in the original Greek text is not just that God spoke in a variety of ways, but that those revelations of God in the past were fragmentary and in pieces. They were only parts of the revelation of God. So relying on those other things, great though they may be, will only give you part of what God wants you to see. Jesus is the full revelation of God.

But the tone shifts in the second chapter, which was the main focus of our reading for today. The focus shifts onto Jesus’ willingness to be humbled and His suffering for us. This one who is so high and exalted has brought Himself low for our sakes, and as a result, “the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.” Jesus “is not ashamed” to call us “brothers and sisters.” So this message of Christ that is the core of the worship of the church draws our eyes upward, but it also draws us up with it. Why church? Because church celebrates Jesus Christ, who is the definitive revelation of God to us, and Jesus draws humanity upward toward God.

So to those who think that the church isn’t worth it because it’s too glum, too boring, too negative, too focused on sin, too focused on what’s wrong; to those who think that the church is too much trouble, or too costly, or that our society would be better off without it; in short, to those who would look elsewhere for hope and salvation, the answer we have is nothing more or less than the person of Jesus Christ. If you think that church is about making people feel guilty or about manipulating people, you haven’t yet seen who Jesus really is. Why church? The church is all about

lifting people up, pointing humans toward the one who is the exact representation of God, who reveals God to us in all His love and mercy and truth and holiness, and who calls us to be His brothers and sisters. If you haven't yet met that Jesus, and if you're here for some other reason, come and meet the real reason for church.



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