



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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### *Forsaking the Assembly*

#### Hebrews 10:25

**T**HIS MONTH'S TOUGH TEXT IS ONE THAT HAS been close to my heart for most of my thirty-five years of ministry. It has also been a cause of great burden—not the text itself, of course, but rather its implications and the lack of impact those implications seem to have on many believers. Our text declares:

**Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.**

Dear Christian Friend, I would like to speak to you from two perspectives. First, I would speak from a *teacher's mind*, carefully examining the text exegetically and historically, for that must always come first. Second, however, I want to speak to you from a *pastor's heart*, sharing with you the profound implications of this principle both in the Christian's experience and the life of the church.

#### *From a Teacher's Mind*

While the recipients of Hebrews has been debated, there is no doubt that the audience was predominantly Jewish. The chief point of the letter—which reads more like a sermon than a letter—is the superiority of Christ (note the repetition of “better” throughout) over the levitical system. It is devoid of all things Gentile and is aimed solely at Jewish Christians to encourage them not to return to the old system, a system that has been rendered null and void because of the fulfillments of it in Christ.

Turning to our text, then, there was for some reason a tendency among these Jewish believers to neglect meeting together for worship. There have been several theories offered as to what this reason was. Perhaps they didn't think it was important, perhaps it was due to apostasy, or perhaps they simply had no interest in it.

One strong possibility was that they were dissatisfied with other church members. While the congregations were mostly Jewish, there would have been at least some Gentiles, since the “middle wall of partition” between them had been “broken down” by Christ (Eph. 2:14). The Jews had always been exclusive, however, and despised other nations. It's quite possible, as Calvin puts it, that “the Gentiles were a new and unwonted addition to the Church,”<sup>1</sup> causing many to forsake attendance altogether.

Another strong possibility—and we think it possible that more than one of these reasons existed—was that they simply feared persecution. Persecution is referred to, in fact, further down in the passage (vs. 32–39; 12:4). It is reasonable to assume that this applied even to meetings in house churches, as the Romans, like all dictatorships, were suspicious of private meetings.

The challenge, therefore, given to these believers was not to **[forsake] the assembling of [them]selves together**. The language here is significant.

*First, assembling is episunagōgē.* The root *sunagōgē* (assembly or congregation), of course, was the name of the Jewish gathering, which is transliterated directly into the English *synagogue*. Many Bible students believe that it was during the Babylonian captivity that the system of synagogue worship was instituted due to the absence of the Temple.

Added to this root, then, is the preposition *epi*, which fundamentally differentiates this gathering from the strictly Jewish one. As one Greek authority submits: “The preposition *epi*, “to,” must refer to Christ Himself as the one to whom this assembly was attached. Thus it would have the meaning of not betraying one’s attachment to Jesus Christ and other believers, not avoiding one’s own personal responsibility as part of the body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

That picture is all the more evident in the only other New Testament occurrence of *episunagōgē*: “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our *gathering together* unto him” (2 Thes. 2:1; emphasis added). This unique word, then, emphasizes that the Christian congregation is just that, a gathering of believers in Jesus Christ for the express purpose of worship, fellowship, and learning with Him at the center.

*Second*, is the word **forsaking**, *egkatalēipō*. While the root *leipō* means “to leave or forsake,” *katalēipō* is stronger, as in “leave down, that is, leave behind or remaining.” Adding the prefix *eg* (or *en*), “in, at, or by,” further strengthens the word to its fullest: “to leave behind in any place or state . . . to leave in the lurch.”<sup>3</sup>

That expression “to leave in the lurch” is itself an interesting one. It “alludes to a 16<sup>th</sup>-century French dice game, *lourche*, where to incur a ‘lurch’ meant to be far behind the other players. It later was used in cribbage and other games, as well as being used in its present figurative sense by about 1600,” as in, “Jane was angry enough to quit without giving notice, leaving her boss in the lurch” (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms*).

The strength of *egkatalēipō* is further seen in some of its other New Testament occurrences. Paul uses it to describe Demas, who had once been an active partner in ministry (Col. 4:14; Phile. 24) but had now “forsaken” Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). Six verses later Paul goes on to write that as he sat in prison in Rome, everyone had deserted him; all had indeed left him in the lurch. Stronger still, this is also the word Matthew used of our Lord when He cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

We should also note that the construction of this verb in our text is the present participle, which expresses continuous or repeated action. There was, therefore, a continuing habit of staying away from the gathering of the church, a consistent pattern of forsaking the church.

So what does it mean to forsake the assembling of ourselves together in the local church? It means to abandon those who remain in the congregation, to leave them in the lurch. In light of the reasons for leaving noted earlier, the reason is actually irrelevant. Because of that truth, one commentator pulls no punches with his very first comment on this verse:

One of the first indications of a lack of love toward God and the neighbor is for a Christian to stay

away from the worship services. He forsakes the communal obligations of attending these meetings and displays the symptoms of selfishness and self-centeredness.<sup>4</sup>

Those are strong words, indeed, but words that need to be heard in our day. They lead us, in fact, to our second emphasis.

### *From a Pastor’s Heart*

Dear Christian Friend, this issue is not a minor one. On the contrary, this is an extremely serious matter that every true pastor is burdened by. Commenting on our text, R. Kent Hughes shares his pastor’s heart when he writes:

People have a thousand reasons to stay away from church. This is not a new problem. The early Jewish church had had a fall-off in attendance due to persecution, ostracism, apostasy, and arrogance. Today persecution and ostracism may not be our experience, but people find many other reasons to absent themselves from worship, not the least of which is laziness. But de-churched Christians have always been an aberration, as Cyprian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the various classic confessions repeatedly affirm.<sup>5</sup> John Gill is equally candid: “This evil practice arises

sometimes from a vain conceit of being in no need of ordinances, and from an over love of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Commentator and professor E. Schuyler English also effectively “meddles” into the life of such Christians: “Point out a man or a woman who does not desire communion with other Christians, and you are pointing to one whose spiritual condition is low and whose testimony for Christ is weak indeed.”<sup>7</sup>

Speaking from my own heart, in all my years of ministry, I have never quite gotten past this oddity. I simply don’t understand it. I have seen countless things come before church, proving that such attendance is not only not the priority but is also flippantly considered as “no big deal.” I’ve seen Christians abandon church for any number of reasons. We could make a list, but such a list would go on *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*. It would be far better if we each examine ourselves to see where our priority lies. One I just can’t resist mentioning, however, is the lady I once heard say, “Oh, I can’t be at church tonight because I’m getting my hair done.”

If I may also say from my heart, I lovingly submit that there is something seriously wrong with the Christian whose priority is not faithful, consistent attendance in the local church. I know that might sound intolerant—or even that most terrible of words “legalistic”—but such nonchalance about unfaithfulness is a staggering contradiction. What can possibly be more important than our attendance in the local church, where we worship, fellowship, and receive the essential nourishment of God’s Word?

I would, therefore, offer seven reasons for **not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.**

### **To Obey Christ**

This is first and actually should be enough. We have seen in our text that such attendance is not to be neglected. To neglect it, therefore, to abandon it and “leave it in the lurch,” is simple disobedience. Attendance in the local church is repeatedly assumed (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1Cor 5:4; 11:17; 11:18; 11:20; 14:23; 16:2). While there will certainly be times of illness, the yearly vacation, or the unforeseen emergency that keeps us away from church, these are the few exceptions that prove the consistent rule.

### **To Praise and Worship Our God**

While the common attitude in our day is that the local church is a place for entertainment and the meeting of our “felt needs,” it is on the contrary, first and foremost, the place for corporate worship.

David’s words in that well known verse lay an Old Testament foundation: “I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever” (Ps. 23:6b). The Hebrew behind “dwell” (*yāšab*) primarily means to sit (Gen. 27:19; Ex. 11:5; 2 Sam. 19:8; etc.). Several other meanings include “to inhabit, endure, or stay,” but the most common is “to dwell” (e.g., Lam. 5:19, “remainest”).

Significantly, the Septuagint renders *yāšab* here, and elsewhere, as the Greek *katoikeō*, “to inhabit a house.” Elsewhere (e.g. Ps. 102:12), *yāšab* is translated *menō*, which denotes remaining in one place, keeping an agreement, and remaining valid, as in a law. The clear truth in all this, then, is permanence, continually dwelling in a place. Does not David, therefore, teach us about attendance in corporate worship? He speaks of spending the rest of his life worshipping God in the Tabernacle. Should that not encourage and challenge us? R. Kent Hughes again writes:

We meet Christ in a special way in corporate worship. It is true that a person does not have to go to church to be a Christian. He does not have to go home to be married either. But in both cases if he does not, he will have a very poor relationship.

### **To Hear the Word of God**

One of the most important reasons for our consistent attendance in the local church is that it is here we receive the teaching of the Word of God. The primary reason the office gifts were given (Eph. 4:11) was “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (v. 12).

“Perfecting” translates *katartismos*, which occurs only here in the New Testament. The root *artismos* comes from the related word *artios* (English *artist*) and means suitable, complete, capable, sound. With the intensifying prefix *kata*, “according to,” the meaning of *katartismos* is very

instructive: “to put in order, restore, furnish, prepare, equip.” It was, therefore, the responsibility of the “apostle” and “prophet” in that day and is the responsibility of the “evangelist” and “pastor-teacher” today to put in order, restore, furnish, prepare, and equip the saints.

I am reminded often of a military illustration. As soldiers are trained as a combat unit at a specific training facility, Christians are likewise trained in a specific place. What would be the result if soldiers were as unfaithful to their training sessions as some Christians are to the church? What would that do to the quality of the unit in both combat readiness and morale? Likewise, we are in a war, and we are not only *required* to be in training, but we should also *want* such training because of the ferocity of the war.

To illustrate another way, what if we were as unfaithful to our daily job as we are to the local church? How long would we have that job?

Consider David again: “Behold, I have longed after thy precepts” (Ps. 119:40a). In stark contrast to the common dismissing of church today, David’s use of the words “longed after” are most instructive. The Hebrew *tā’ab* appears only twice in the Old Testament, both of which are right here in Psalm 119. David declares in verse 174, “I have longed for thy salvation, O LORD; and thy law is my delight.” A derivative (*ta’abâ*) occurs once more back in verse 20: “My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times.” This word speaks of an intense hunger, and David was broken hearted when deprived of God’s Word. How many of us are broken hearted when we can’t be under the preaching and teaching of the Word? Mark it down: the consistent Christian is one who has an insatiable appetite for God’s Word.

### **To Edify Yourself**

Another critical reason for faithful church attendance is that of your personal edification. Returning to Ephesians 4:11–12, our Lord gave the office gifts not only “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry,” but also “for the edifying of the body of Christ.” The Greek *oikodomē*, along with its other forms, is a compound word comprised of *oikos*, “house or dwelling,” and *dōma*, “to build.” While the entire body of Christ, of course, is in view here, individuals comprise that body, so each is vital to the structure, which in-turn can obviously be applied to the local church. No single building material is isolated from the rest in building a literal house; none is meant to stand alone. Likewise, it is vital that every believer be present for God’s use in building.

If I may change analogies, I read of a pastor who visited a man who wasn’t attending church very faithfully. It was a cold, winter day, so they sat by a fire and warmed themselves as they talked. To this irregular attendee the pastor said, “My friend, I don’t see you at church on the Lord’s Day. You seem to come only when it’s convenient, or only when you feel like you need to come. You miss so

very often . . . I wish you'd come all the time." The man didn't seem to be getting the message, so the pastor said, "Let me show you something." He then took the tongs from beside the fireplace, pulled open the screen, and began to separate all the coals so that none of them were touching each other. In a matter of moments, the blazing coals had all died out. "My friend," he said, "that is what's happening in your life. As soon as you isolate yourself, the fire goes out." Likewise, the Christian will not survive alone out in this world.

One commentator puts it still another way: "We Christians are like short-lived radioactive isotopes; we have a very short half-life. Get us away from the worship of God with other saints and our radioactivity dissipates quickly and we lose our effective radiance."<sup>8</sup>

### To Encourage Your Pastor

I can tell you from personal experience, there are few things that discourage and grieve a pastor more than seeing Christians who are sporadic in their attendance. Scripture calls him a shepherd, and like a literal shepherd he wonders where in the world his sheep are when they are absent from the fold. He is concerned because those sheep need nourishment but have wandered from the rich pasture where the food is waiting. He is concerned because there are predators just waiting for such a moment to pick off a wandering sheep that is completely oblivious to the danger. The biblical pastor spends the majority of his time in the Word of God so he can feed those sheep. So when they don't care to show up to hear what God has laid on his heart, it grieves his spirit. If I may confess, more than once I have thought, "What's the point in going on?" but I then remember that God simply demands our *faithfulness* (1 Cor. 4:2) not our success or even our attendance numbers.

### To Encourage Other Believers

Many people feel they can worship God by being out in nature or by viewing a church service on television. But what of other believers? What about the other Christian soldiers in our company? Just as literal soldiers depend upon one another, so do we. We encourage each other in spiritual combat. We love, encourage, and protect each other. Those who just shrug this off by not "showing up" discourage the others that do. Consider this often quoted statement by Martin Luther: "At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."

### To Be a Testimony to Others

I again have grieved when I've seen Christians forsake their responsibility of church attendance in such a way that unbelievers see it. I have seen many other things take precedence even though unbelievers at those times knew that the Christians involved missed church to be there. What message does that send? How is this a testimony of

our commitment and love for Christ? Is our faith and spiritual life important only when it is convenient and doesn't interfere with our schedule? Is our church life just a satellite that revolves around everything else, or does everything else revolve around it? What is really at the core of our "universe"?

Finally, our text goes on to declare: **exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.** Which day is approaching? The views vary: death, the last judgment, the destruction of Jerusalem, heightened persecution, or Christ's Second Coming. While I lean toward one of the latter two (perhaps even a combination of the two), in the final analysis does it really matter in practice? The point is that whichever event is in view, that event is **approaching**. This is the Greek *eggízō*, "to bring near, to be at hand." Today we might say, "It's just around the next corner." In light of that impending day, then, we should be **exhorting one another** (*parakaleō*), that is, comforting, beseeching, admonishing, and even imploring one another in this area of faithfulness to the assembly. As one commentator submits:

To neglect Christian meetings is to give up the encouragement and help of other Christians. We gather together to share our faith and to strengthen one another in the Lord. As we get closer to the day when Christ will return, we will face many spiritual struggles, and even times of persecution. Anti-Christian forces will grow in strength. Difficulties should never be excuses for missing church services. Rather, as difficulties arise, we should make an even greater effort to be faithful in attendance. (*Life Application Study Bible*)

Dear Christian Friend, is there any doubt as to the critical importance of faithful attendance in the local church?

Dr. J. D. Watson  
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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Commentaries*, note on Heb. 10:25.

<sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers), p. 640 (entry 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, p. 499 (entry 1459)

<sup>4</sup> William Hendrickson and Simon Kistemaker, *Baker's New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1984), electronic edition, comment on Heb. 10:25.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Hebrews, Volume 2, An Anchor For The Soul* (Crossway Books, 1993), electronic edition.

<sup>6</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, electronic edition, comment on Heb. 10:25.

<sup>7</sup> E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1955), p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Ed.), *The Preacher's Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, 1982-1992), electronic edition, note on Heb. 10:25.

