

After more than twenty years, I'm admitting the truth

Hebrews 10:25: What Are We Not To Forsake?

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Collins English Dictionary defines a "sacred cow" as "a person, institution, custom, etc, unreasonably held to be beyond criticism." Among many Christians, there are sacred cow Bible passages. Hebrews 10:25 is one of them. It states, "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."

This verse is taken by virtually every church and every elder to mean that we should not stop attending church; that we should be in church every Sunday. Some even take the latter part of the verse to mean that, the closer we get in each week to Sunday, the more we should be exhorting one another to attend church. Many Bible scholars, who I must presume are afraid of upsetting the "sacred cow," simply will not give an unbiased exposition of this verse.

I know what it is like. I saw the truth of Hebrews 10:25 well over twenty years ago. But I looked the other way. I convinced myself that I must be wrong, and that, since everyone else says so, then this verse—despite what the Greek clearly says—must be saying that we are not to forsake "going to church." And, particularly since there is no other Scripture that says we are to go to church, it is a fearful thing to give up the "sacred cow" of Hebrews 10:25. Nevertheless, all through those years, in the back of my mind, I knew full well that Hebrews 10:25 doesn't address going to church at all. This verse addresses something altogether different. I hope that my confession in this article will encourage others, who also know the truth of this verse, to also come clean.

Verses 23 and 24

What I intend to do in this article is give an honest exposition of this verse, just as I would any other. I would encourage readers to read the whole of Hebrews 10 to get the context, but I will begin my exposition with verse 23: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)." I won't belabor

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you with details, but I will point out here that the word "faith" in the King James Version should really be "hope." The Greek word is *elpidos*, and in every other place where it appears in the New Testament, it is translated as "hope." So, this is talking about not wavering concerning our hope that our faithful God has promised. What is this hope?

Certainly, there are many things for which we may hope. But the Scriptures often refer to our hope as the resurrection from the dead and our glorification at the return of Jesus Christ. In Acts 23:6, Paul refers to "the hope and resurrection of the dead." Again, in Acts 24:15, Paul says that he has "hope toward God, which they themselves [the Pharisees] also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust." This same hope is what he refers to in Acts 26:6 and 28:20. In Romans 5:2, Paul writes of the "hope of the glory of God." This is not referring to God's essential glory, but to something we hope for in the future. That is, this is a reference to our hope in the glory that God will bestow upon us (see also Ephesians 1:18).

This is also what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:19-25:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

There are many other passages I could cite, but I will give just two more. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, Paul again refers to the resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ as our hope: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." In Titus 2:13, Paul says we should

be, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

Getting back to Hebrews 10, in verse 24, we read, "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works." In context, then, because of our hope of glorification in the resurrection at the return of Christ, we are to keep one another in mind to incite each other to love and good works.

Episunagōgē

Hebrews 10:25 says we are not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together." "Assembling together" is from one Greek word. Its lexical form is *episunagōgē*. This word is a noun and it is found in only one other place: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). "Gathering together" is translated from *episunagōgē*. It is obvious in this passage that *episunagōgē* refers to our being gathered to Christ.

There is a verb form of this word. It is *episunagō*. It is found in several verses. Let's look at them.

Matthew 23:37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (a parallel verse is Luke 13:34). "Gathered" and "gathereth" are both from *episunagō*. Jesus uses the way a hen completely gathers her chicks to describe the way He desired to gather Jerusalem's children (those who like children humbly wanted to come to Him—see here for more on this verse <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/mt2337qa.htm>). Thus, *episunagō* is here used for a gathering to Christ.

Matthew 24:30-31: "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (the parallel verse is in Mark 13:26-27). "They shall gather together" is from *episunagō*. Again, this is an obvious reference to a gathering to Christ.

Mark 1:33: "And all the city was gathered together at the door." "Gathered together" is translated from *episunagō*. Jesus was in a house healing the sick when all the city gathered at the door of the house. Although only a relatively small manifestation of such a gathering, this is again a gathering to Christ.

Luke 12:1: "In the mean time, when there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another, he began to say unto his disciples first of all, Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." "When there were gathered together" is from the word *episunagō*. This verse speaks of a multitude of people gathered together to Christ.

In every place where we find the verb *episunagō*, it is used to refer to a gathering of some sort to Christ. And in the only other place where the noun form *episunagōgē* is used, it is used for that great gathering to Christ on the day of His return and our resurrection. Thus, when we see *episunagōgē* used in Hebrews 10:25, we must begin to suspect that perhaps it does not refer to going to church on Sunday (or any other day of the week) but to something greater. Does this fit the context? Let's see.

The Day Approaching

Again, the entire verse reads: "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." Notice that, instead of forsaking, we are to be exhorting (the word can also mean beseeching or comforting) one another, and all the more as we see the day drawing near. What day?

Just a little further in the chapter, we read this: "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (verses 35-37). "He that shall come" is certainly a reference to Jesus Christ. We are to have patience (verse 36) in waiting for that day, the day of Christ's return. But apparently some did not have patience and forsook the hope of our gathering to Christ at His return.

The evidence from both the context and the words used is weighty. It clearly leads us to the conclusion that Hebrews 10:25 is saying that we

are not to forsake the hope of our gathering to Christ at his return, as some had done, but instead we are to exhort one another concerning this hope, and we are to do this all the more as we see the day of His return approaching.

Verses 26-27 then give the hypothetical case if we were to forsake the truth of this hope: "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." In other words, to forsake our glorious gathering to Christ is to forsake the very thing our salvation points to. It would be a forsaking of the truth and a willful sin. Anyone doing this would suffer the condemnation and fate of the adversaries. But remember, this is a hypothetical case. Verse 39 says, "But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." God causes true Christians to persevere so that they cannot forsake their hope. (For more information about the perseverance of the saints, download our free booklet, *Once Saved, Always Saved?* from this page http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm)

Further Thoughts

Hebrews 10:25 has been used to try to convince people that they must not forsake going to church. In fact, it is the only Scripture in the New Testament that could remotely have been used in such a way. But it is wrong to use it this way. The Greek and the context simply do not support it, and when we understand the true meaning of Hebrews 10:25, the entire idea of "going to church" as something we must do entirely falls apart.

The truth is that the *ekklēsia* (the word mistranslated as "church" in most English Bibles) is not something we *go to*; it is what *we are*. As Christians, we cannot forsake our assembly because we are always assembled before God. We *are* the assembly, the "called out" of Christ. (The literal meaning of *ekklēsia* is the "called out ones," but it was used by Greeks to refer to the people who were called out of the community to be members of the assembly.) Certainly, the Bible also speaks of the *ekklēsia* in a local sense as being in a city, according to (*kata*) houses or families, and as coming together (*sunerchomai*—literally, "come together"). But it is never spoken of as something apart from us that we go to, nor is our coming together locally ever spoken of as a duty. I will address this aspect further in another article.

In summary, Hebrews 10:25 tells us not to forsake the promise and blessed hope (verse 23 and Titus 2:13) of our gathering to Jesus Christ at His coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1), which is the custom of some. Anciently, the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection (see Matthew 22:23). Today, many who call themselves Christians, such as liberal theologians and full- or hyper-preterists, do not believe in a literal and future return of Jesus Christ and resurrection from the dead. Others who once had the name Christian also forsake their hope. Saying "my lord delayeth his coming" (Matthew 24:48) and "the resurrection is past already" (2 Timothy 2:18) are both errors. Hebrews 10:25 tells us that instead of forsaking the promise and hope, we are to be encouraging one another, and so much the more as we see the day of His return approaching.