

DRAW NEAR**HEBREWS 10:19-25**

In a remote valley of northern California forty-two radio telescopes point skyward. The Allen Telescope Array is a powerful tool for an organization called the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute. This technological marvel represents a new phase in its cosmic search for extraterrestrial life. The array of large telescopes is "listening" carefully to the universe. In sync with each other, the telescopes read and record distant radio frequencies from across the universe, in the hope that something from the heavens will indicate the presence of an intelligent life form. While the technology is new, the search is not. For all of human history, we've looked upward and wondered, "Is anyone else out there?" Whether we admit it or not, we are seeking God. Ironically, we human beings desire to draw near to Him and stay away from Him all at the same time. The SETI Institute has invested millions on the hope that the universe will say something to us. But perhaps those dollars are being wasted. Perhaps we've simply been unwilling or unable to hear what the universe has been shouting all along. God is there and He is not silent.

We're in the midst of a message series based on selected passages in the New Testament book of Hebrews. It was probably written by a Jewish Christian to other Jewish Christians because there are many references to the Old Testament and Jewish worship practices. It was meant to encourage, challenge, and exhort people who were getting discouraged and disillusioned. Just a few decades after Jesus went back to Heaven, persecution was escalating. Just being a follower of Jesus was starting to invite criticism, negative attitudes, and discrimination. Later on it evolved into physical attacks, jail, and martyrdom. It was getting harder and more costly to follow Jesus. Some were asking, "Maybe it's just easier going back to the Jewish faith. I'm not sure I want to keep following Jesus if my life gets harder to live."

In Hebrews, there's a specific phrase that turns up at least fifteen times depending on what English translation you're using: "let us." Each one is a challenge, an encouragement, or an exhortation either to start or to stop doing something that affects our lives spiritually. Today, I want us to read and think about just seven verses, but there are several "let us" challenges found there. It seems to me that while there are all these "let us" challenges in those verses, the dominant or primary one is found in v. 22. "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb. 10:22 NIV) If we're going to get after it spiritually in 2017 – in other words, see genuine spiritual growth happen in our lives – it will depend on drawing near and staying near to God. But how do you do that? How do you draw near to God and – better yet – stay near to God through all the ups and downs of life? Well, first of all, you and I...

DRAW NEAR TO GOD THROUGH JESUS AND PERSONAL EFFORT.

Both are required. Not just Jesus doing all of it for you. And certainly not just personal effort without Jesus making it possible. Let's think about the Jesus part first. The

author of Hebrews used imagery that sounds strange to many of us. He's referring to Old Testament worship practices for Jewish people. The Jewish Temple was the center of Old Testament worship. The interior of the Temple had two rooms: a larger Holy Place and a smaller Most Holy Place separated by a thick, heavy curtain. The Most Holy Place was a very special and very sacred space. Only one object was in the room - a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the Ark were the stone tablets upon which God Himself had written the Ten Commandments. God allowed a physical manifestation of His presence to hover in and above the Most Holy Place for at least some of the Old Testament period of time. It was a dense cloud-like pillar that changed into a column of fire at night. The Most Holy Place, then, was where God's presence resided – where God dwelt among His people here on Earth.

Jewish priests entered the Temple's Holy Place at any time, but only one person ever went inside the Most Holy Place and that only happened once a year. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the Jewish high priest killed a perfect lamb as a sacrifice of substitution for the sins of the Jewish people. He took some of the blood, pushed back the curtain, and entered the Most Holy Place. He sprinkled some of the lamb's blood on the Ark. What did that mean? Through powerful symbols, God was teaching His people very important truths about a relationship with Him. God is holy, righteous, and perfect. Human beings are sinful. The curtain symbolized human separation from God because of our sin. No one just walks into God's presence or draws near to Him on his or her own merits. God is unapproachable unless He Himself creates a way to approach Him. Furthermore, the penalty for human sin is death. But, because God is gracious and loving, He did not demand the death of every human being. He accepted a substitute death – the sacrifice of a perfect lamb – in the place of, or instead of – requiring the death of every human being for his or her own sin.

But Old Testament worship was only intended to be symbolic and temporary. The whole system was a great object lesson pointing to Jesus and what He did. Jesus was and still is the real and eternal High Priest. He presented to God – not the blood of an animal – but His own blood. He was the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. He became our substitute on the cross. He paid the penalty for our sin before God. And God accepted His sacrifice because Jesus was morally perfect and sinless. Now, only because of Jesus, you and I can draw near to God. We have full access to the God of the universe. We become His children and He becomes our Father.

Do you remember what happened when Jesus died on the cross? The Bible says, "Then Jesus shouted out again, and he released his spirit. At that moment the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mt. 27:50-51 NLT) Something miraculous happened at that very moment to the actual, physical curtain separating the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Torn wide open. It meant the total separation of an absolutely holy God from sinful human beings was no longer necessary. God had made a way. It was in and through His Son, Jesus. What is God's temple now? Your body or you as a person. The Bible says, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?... For we are the temple of the living God." (1 Cor. 6:19, 2 Cor. 6:16 NLT) What

is the Most Holy Place now? It's no longer a literal room in a physical building. It's the inner heart or spirit of a follower of Jesus. You and I can come into God's presence anytime and anywhere. You don't have to be inside a church building to be in God's presence. You don't have to wait to die and go to Heaven to be in God's presence. And, you can draw near to God with complete confidence. But never self-confidence. It's confidence in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. In another place, the Bible says, "Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence." (Eph. 3:12 NLT) There you have it.

OK, so that's the Jesus part of drawing near to God. Wonderful! Fantastic! Amazing! But you will never experience it – much less keep it - unless you extend some personal effort. No, it's not 50-50, by any means. It might be 80% Jesus and 20% me or even 95% Jesus and just 5% me, but you and I have got to do something to draw near to God! Sometimes we talk so much about God's grace we think God does everything for us. No, He's provided everything that we need through Jesus to draw near to Him, but we still have to exercise some personal initiative and effort to experience His presence. That's what I hear in v. 22, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

I hear three things you and I can do in that verse to draw near to God. If you want to draw near to God successfully, be sincere about it - continually. You can't ever pull a fast one on God. Do you sincerely want to know God better, and not just because of what He might give you or do for you? God draws near to people who sincerely desire a relationship with Him. If you want to draw near to God successfully, have some faith - continually. Get rid of the cynicism and the doubt. God is there and He does seek a relationship with you. Faith simply acknowledges that fact and seeks to live life in light of it. After all, the Bible says, "And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him." (Heb. 11:6 NLT) God draws near to people who make the effort to believe in Him and live life His way. If you want to draw near to God successfully, turn away from sin - continually. When you sin, confess it right away and ask God's forgiveness. When you sin, don't excuse it away. Don't rationalize it. Don't pour cheap grace all over it. Forsake it. Do whatever you have to do to get rid of it and be done with it. God draws near to people who are making an effort to live a life that pleases and honors Him – people who are open to being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

When Roger Barrier left for college, his mother—who'd always done his laundry—sewed a canvas duffel bag for him. "Put your dirty clothes in this every night," she said. "At the end of the week, wash them at the laundromat." Seven days later, Roger took his dirty clothes to the laundromat. To save a little time, he threw the entire duffel bag in the washer, put in some laundry powder, inserted the proper change, and turned on the machine. Moments later, a loud "thump, thump, thump, thump" echoed through the laundromat. A pretty co-ed approached Roger with a grin. "I watched you load your washer. I think the clothes would get cleaner if you took them out of the bag." Sometimes we deal with our own sinfulness in much the same way. We pray, "Dear

God, please forgive me for all the sins I've committed today." That's about as effective in cleansing them as the way Roger tried to wash his clothes. Each sin needs individual attention. Turning away from sin needs individual attention. Jesus took your sins and mine very seriously. If we want to draw near and stay near to God, so should we. I see another challenge about drawing near to God in these verses.

DRAW NEAR TO GOD BY HOLDING ON REGARDLESS.

"Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise." (Heb. 10:23 NLT) No doubt you've heard the saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." There's a certain amount of truth in that concept, but it doesn't go far enough. As followers of Jesus, we might rephrase it this way, "When the going gets tough, the tough depend on Jesus even more." Life is going to hand us hard, difficult, and sometimes overwhelming circumstances. Perseverance, endurance, hanging onto and holding onto God will be all we can do. We aren't going to feel very victorious when those moments come. Our faith in God will be tested. We will be tempted to conclude God has abandoned us or doesn't truly love us.

God never asks you to depend on your own strength in the midst of difficult times. Instead, He invites us to depend consciously upon His divine strength. Human toughness is unreliable and limited at best. God is always reliable and He has no limits. The reason you can hold on when the hurricane-strength winds of adversity and trouble blow into your life is because you have placed your ultimate confidence in God's character and power to get you through those storms. God, indeed, can be trusted to keep His promise to never leave you or forsake you. When trouble comes – and it will – make up your mind just to hold onto God all the more. When you make that decision and follow through with it, you will draw near to God and He to you. There's at least a third and final challenge about drawing near to God in our passage today.

DRAW NEAR TO GOD BY INVESTING IN HIS PEOPLE.

"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Heb. 10:24-25 NLT) Apparently, even way back there in the first century a problem surfaced that's an even greater problem today: Christians who think they can draw near to God while bypassing or ignoring the local church. Those verses remind us that if you want to draw near to God and stay near to God you have to interact with and invest in His people. That might sound obvious to all of us here today, but many Jesus followers see no need to identify with any local church whatsoever. The Barna Research Group estimates that one out of every six adults who claim to be born again have no involvement in any local church. That's millions of people! Many followers of Jesus reveal what they really believe on Sunday morning: "Jesus, yes, church, not so much." We've become a nation of church shoppers where our current relationship to any local church is governed by whether it meets our needs at any given time. Some call it a "dating the

church” mentality meaning you just keep your options open all the time in case something better comes along.

Did you know church is the safest place in the world? It’s true! Avoid riding in automobiles because they’re responsible for 20 percent of all fatal accidents. Don’t stay home because 17 percent of all accidents occur in the home. Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14 percent of all accidents occur to pedestrians. Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water because 16 percent of all accidents involve those forms of transportation. Of the remaining 33 percent, 32 percent of all deaths occur in hospitals. Above all else, avoid hospitals. You’ll be pleased to learn that only .001 percent of all deaths occur in worship services in church, and those are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church! Bible study is safe, too. The percentage of deaths during Bible study is even less. There’s one very obvious conclusion. For safety sake, we should spend all of our available time at church and reading our Bibles!

Seriously, many Christians view this church or any church as an optional institution at best. Many don’t see church as necessary either to drawing near or staying near to God. Again, Barna discovered that only 18% of American Christians – not non-Christians – strongly agreed with this statement: “You cannot become a complete and mature person unless you belong to a community of faith that influences you.” If you’re among the 82% who can’t agree with that statement, you likely have a view of the local church that directly conflicts with the Bible. One of the most fundamental images for the church in Scripture is that it’s the body of Christ and Jesus Himself is the Head. It’s not saying that the church is *like* the body of Christ, but that it literally *is* the body of Christ. In other words, the Bible teaches that Jesus continues His incarnation by dwelling in and among His people. Jesus is no longer with us through His individual, physical body limited to one location, but instead through a complex, corporate body called the church.

If all that’s true, then the implication is crystal clear. You can’t be a solo follower of Jesus and draw near to God effectively. God is a relational Being. He created you and me to be relational beings. You can only ever grow spiritually if you invest intentionally in relationships with other people who also want to draw near and stay near to God. Our current emphasis on discipleship has bought into that biblical truth hook, line, and sinker. Discipleship only happens in and through relationships. Relationships – both with God and with God’s people - are essential to spiritual growth. If you want to draw near to God and stay near to God, you will invest yourself in God’s people.

But here’s another question. What should be the atmosphere of this or any church? What should you sense, feel, encounter, and experience among God’s people whether we’re gathered in the sanctuary, in the lobby, in the classrooms, or in the fellowship hall – anywhere and everywhere? I hear the author of Hebrews saying, “Encouragement.” “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” (Heb. 10:24-25 NLT) What should happen any and every time God’s people get together for any reason? Bible

study and prayer? Not necessarily. Discussion on how to implement some program or put together some event? No. Idle chit-chat? No. Intentional encouragement? Yes!

How many of you know that the world we live in is full of discouragement and has plenty of discouragers? Sadly, even God's people can be discouraging and church itself can become a discouraging place. You've probably heard the old story about the little boy who noticed a plaque on the wall of his church. He said to his dad, "Daddy, what's that for?" His father explained, "Oh, that's a memorial to all those from our church who died in the service." His son asked, "Which service, Daddy? The morning or the evening service?" May God never allow KRBC to become a place where people are just left to die off of discouragement. It must be different in this place! The word translated "motivate" there in v. 24 is a strong word. It means to stir one another up, spur one another on, and even provoke one another to grow spiritually.

We need to encourage each other to get after it spiritually! What does that look like? Every time you're in this building, be aware that someone probably just walked in who feels like he or she got emotionally mugged this week. Be available to God to offer a verbal word of encouragement. Put your arm around somebody today and tell him or her, "God loves you and so do I." If someone opens up and tells you about a stress or a problem, stop right then and there and pray with him or her. Take the opportunity to encourage people to draw near to God, to stay near to God, to hold on to God regardless, to love God, to love others, and to keep on living a life that honors the Lord – not in a proud, arrogant, judgmental way, but instead in a loving, tender, gentle way. Some days you will need to receive encouragement. Others days you will need to provide encouragement. That's how it works in the body of Christ. When that happens in the church – this church or any church – we help one another draw near and stay near to the Lord. Before you leave today, I want you to look around and see if anyone looks like they need to receive the gift of encouragement from you. The Holy Spirit's going to give you a little nudge. Do it! Give the gift of encouragement.

For years scientists were baffled by a mystery involving Brazilian fire ants. When placed in water, an individual fire ant will flounder, struggle, and then eventually sink. But when fire ants band together they form floating life rafts that help them survive the flash floods of the Brazilian rain forests. As a unified raft, they can even travel for months before reaching dry land. After collecting a bunch of ants, scientists dropped them into containers of water. The ants quickly spread out and formed themselves into rafts. Each individual ant used its claws and the adhesive pads on their legs to grip onto each other. At first it just looks like a tangle of bodies and limbs everywhere, but the longer you look at the picture, the more you're able to distinguish between different body parts and see the connection. Then the insects use air pockets that form around their bodies to keep themselves afloat. What a wonderful example of encouragement and helping one another! The Bible repeatedly reminds us of the need to be connected to other followers of Jesus in order to survive and grow spiritually. If fire ants can figure it out, maybe we should, too. Alone, we will sink, but clinging to Jesus and to one another, we will grow and we will ride out any storm life brings our way. That's how you draw near and stay near to God. That's how you get after it spiritually.