Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

With the Passover celebration that we just read about in 2 Chron. nearly 40,000 lambs and goats and 4,000 bulls were sacrificed and feasted on! Can you imagine that? At the end of the passage we read that no Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the Prophet. And the point is not that no one celebrated the Passover for 400 years, but that there was nothing *on the scale of* this Passover or that was so carefully observed in accordance with the Law. So it truly was a day of **festal celebration**, which means celebration to do with a feast.

Well, it has only been three months since we last celebrated the Lord’s Supper, but it feels like it has been a long time. And not only do we celebrate the Lord’s Supper today, we have also heard two professions of faith and witnessed two baptisms, and we shall have a shared lunch afterwards. So today is a day of festal celebration for us also.

It seems fitting then that we would use this occasion to think about life in the congregation. And that is what this passage in Hebrews is about. The Letter to the Hebrews was originally written to a congregation that was made up of mainly Jewish or Hebrew believers, hence the name of the letter. And because of persecution and the struggles of living the Christian life, they were thinking of going back to Judaism, the religion of the OT. So the author of Hebrews wrote this letter to show that Jesus Christ and His church is better than every aspect of Judaism and to exhort believers to persevere in faith, hope, and love.

Now, if you asked any Jewish person from that time to name the three greatest aspects of the Jewish religion, apart from God, they would have said, Angels, Moses, and everything to do with the temple. So in the first ten chapters of Hebrews, the author goes: Angels? Jesus Christ is better! Moses? Jesus Christ is better! Temple worship? Jesus Christ is better! So now, in vv19-21, he summarizes the importance of Jesus Christ being better than every aspect of OT religion, and vv22-25 are exhortation to persevere in the Church of Christ. So they will be our two, main points this morning – the NT Believer’s Incredible Position and the NT Believer’s Essential Practice. We want to see again just how blessed we are as NT believers and the responsibilities or obligations that we have as NT believers.

1. So first of all, vv19-21 and the NT believer’s Incredible Position.
   1. One way to describe the Bible is the unfolding of God’s Grand Temple plan. Have you ever heard that before? Let me explain:
      1. The Garden of Eden was the original temple. It was the place where God and man lived together in sweet fellowship on earth. And Adam and Eve were to multiply and the temple would slowly extend out until the whole earth was a temple, with all of humanity living in this sweet fellowship with God. But Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and became corrupt sinners who could no longer live with God in the temple/garden. So do you boys and girls remember what happened next? Adam and Eve were banished (sent out) of the temple/garden, and the Lord placed a cherubim (angel) and a flaming sword at the entrance to the temple/garden. So they were barred from entering into the Lord’s presence.
      2. Well, then we come to the next phase of God’s plan to live with His people in a temple – Israel. So 2000 years after Eden, God formed Israel and He gave them instructions about how to build a temple. And the Book of Exodus ends with the glory cloud of God’s presence coming down to fill the temple – God living with His people, again!
         1. But the first issue is that this was just Israel; not every nation. And secondly, were even the Israelites allowed to waltz into the temple whenever they wanted and enjoy the presence of God and worship Him? No they could not, because they were still a sinful people.
         2. And if you have read Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, you will know about all of the sacrifices and offerings and ceremonies that the Lord gave the people, so that they could be cleansed and purified, so that He could live among them.
         3. And God’s presence dwelled in the very back, inner room of the temple. And there was a thick curtain that closed off access to this room. No one was allowed in there, except for the High Priest, who could only go in one day a year. And even the High Priest could only go in after an elaborate washing ceremony, and with a very specific uniform on, and after he had first made sacrifice for his own sins. And for anyone who tried to enter that room, or if the priest got his preparations wrong, the result was instant death!
         4. So you can bet your boots that the High Priest went in there shaking in his sandals. And even when the people brought their offerings to the priests for them to offer to God on their behalf, they would have shaken in their sandals, because worshipping God was a life-threatening business; get one detail wrong and you would be fried on the spot.
         5. So, how did this phase of God’s temple plan end up? Pretty much the same as the Garden of Eden phase. The people became so disobedient that they were banished from Jerusalem and sent into exile, and the Ark of the Covenant and the glorious shining cloud of God’s presence left the temple and never returned. And eventually in AD 70, Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed.
      3. Now, because we have the whole Bible, we know the end goal of God’s temple plan. It is called heaven. It is described in Rev. 21. All His people will live there in sweet, face-to-face fellowship with the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, and each other, forever and ever.
      4. But before Jesus comes again to usher in eternal life in the temple-city of heaven, He came the first time to bring in the second to last part of God’s temple plan – the church. And that is what vv19-21 describe – **life in the church of Jesus Christ**. So we cannot yet enjoy physical, face-to-face, perfect fellowship, with God and His people. That will have to wait until heaven. But Jesus has set us free from the OT religious life. Because of His blood, which truly forgives and cleanses us, and because He is the sinless, eternal High Priest, who offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice, if you believe in Jesus as your Saviour, then you can **confidently**, any time, any day, enjoy fellowship with God. It is not yet *physical* fellowship; it is *spiritual*, but it is real and it is sweet!
      5. And there is one word in v20 that illustrates this incredible truth; it is the word “**curtain**.” Boys and girls, do you remember what happened when Jesus cried out His last breath and died? The thick curtain that hid the inner room of the temple and kept people away from the place of God’s presence, was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the message was clear, by faith in Jesus, you can now enter God’s presence! That is the great blessing of church!
      6. So the author of Hebrews is saying, why would you want to go back to shadows and types, to sacrifices that did not actually secure forgiveness and cleanse, to a temple and not being allowed to enter the presence of God, and needing a priest to worship on your behalf, when you can have Jesus and the church and direct, spiritual access to God?! Do you get it? Life in the church of Christ is vastly superior to OT religious life!
   2. And very soon, we shall celebrate the sacrament that is about what the blood and the flesh of Jesus has accomplished for us – the Lord’s Supper. And we will be joined by Na-young and Rebekah for the first time. They want to enjoy the fullness of life in the church of Christ. And if you are sitting here today and you have not yet formally joined this or another congregation of Christ, you are missing out on something that is totally incredible!
2. So the NT believer’s **Incredible Position** is that we enjoy sweet, spiritual, confident, anytime communion with the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit, as part of the church. But secondly and very briefly, the rest of this passage speaks about the NT Believer’s **Essential Practice**. So these are the things that we must *do* because of our position or who we are in Christ. And it’s vital that you see that; these are not things we must do to earn Christ, these are things we must do because we are in Christ. And there are three parts to this doing – v22 talks about drawing near and ***faith***, v23 talks about holding fast and ***hope***, and vv24-25 talk about considering others and ***love***.
   1. So first of all then, v22 and “*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of* ***faith****, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*.”
      1. Yesterday was the first day of the new church league football season. So several of us blokes, the ones who are limping and wincing and sore all over, got all of our football gear out over the last few days, so that we were ready to play – playing strip, shin pads, boots, corset, knee brace, ankle brace, liniment, duct tape... We put it all on and then did warm ups and finally we were ready to play.
      2. Well, we won’t do it today, but if you get a moment during the week, have a read of Leviticus 8&9&16. That is where the process of how the priests prepared for their temple duties is described. And elaborate and particular doesn’t come anywhere near to describing what would have taken hours to do. They had to carefully wash and put on their temple uniform. But you see, the problem was that OT worship was all about shadows and types of Christ; faith in Messiah was very difficult. And so, for too many of the OT people, all of the ceremonies became empty routines that lacked genuine faith and were not accompanied with genuine holiness.
      3. But congregation, Christ has come! We know who Jesus is and what He did! And we don’t have a uniform that we have to put on for church. We don’t have rules about showering before church. That’s not important now. What is important, and what v22 is about, is our **spiritual preparation**. But if the OT believers were so careful about outward preparation, then we must be even more careful about our inward preparation. Because we know Jesus, we have no excuse for coming here tired, or going through the motions without meaning what we sing and pray. And we have no excuse for an ‘I don’t care about obeying God’s commands’ heart. So brothers and sisters, are you one who is more concerned with preparing your heart for worship than the OT priests were with bathing and getting dressed for temple service? Because of Christ, you should be.
   2. But secondly, from v23, “*Let us hold fast the confession of our* ***hope*** *without wavering, for He who promised is faithful*.”
      1. While the sprinkling and washing language of v22 reminds us of baptism, v23 surely reminds us of profession or confession of faith – “*let us hold fast the confession of our hope*.” And while there will be a first time that we publicly confess faith in Christ, this verse reminds us that we must confess Christ every day.
      2. In **2 Timothy 4:7-8**, the Apostle Paul said, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day*.” So once we publicly commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ, we must do so, every day, regardless of the cost.
      3. Yesterday there was a gathering at Greenlane hospital to remember victims of abortion. And there are many people in our society who despise Christians who say that abortion is wrong. And there are many other truthes that the Bible teaches that our family members and friends and workmates and employers and parliamentarians will not like to hear; that they will call offensive and hateful. And have no doubt, some of us will lose friends and jobs and freedom and perhaps even our lives over issues like these, because that has been and always will be how the world deals with those who proclaim God’s truth, until Christ returns.
      4. But we hope in Christ – our Saviour and deliverer, and the Judge of the world. So Na-young and Rebekah, you and we must hold fast the confession of our hope.
   3. And thirdly and finally, from vv24-25, “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*.”
      1. And in many respects these words need no explanation. As God has loved us in Christ, so we should love each other. The problem is that it is very easy for us to view love as a noun and not as a verb. What do I mean? Well, a noun is a naming word. Do you love pizza? Do you love animals? Do you love sunsets? When you use love in that way, love is just a vague, fuzzy, warm thing. But the love in view in this passage involves doing or performing concrete and specific and sacrificial acts that benefit others. And if we are honest, we find vague fuzzy love much easier than specific and sacrificial love.
      2. A very well-known Russian author, named Fyodr Dostoevsky, wrote about this in a book called ‘*The Brothers Karamazov*.’ One of the characters was a doctor, and he said,

*I love mankind, but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams, I often … think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days, this I know from experience. As soon as someone is there, close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I can begin to hate even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose … [and yet] it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.*

* + 1. This same thought was captured in a Peanuts cartoon where Linus says, “*I love mankind… it’s people I can’t stand*.”
    2. Imagine if God had looked down to earth and just said, Aww. I love mankind. We would be lost. But He didn’t; He said, I love Andre and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I will send my Son to live among them and to die a cruel death on the cross. And the Lord Jesus said, I love Andre and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I will go and live among them and die a cruel death on the cross. And in that supreme example of love that it is concrete and specific and sacrificial, we have the template for how we must love one another.
    3. But left to ourselves, we will not naturally and easily *do* love to others. And that is why v24 says, “*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works*.” The NIV puts it this way, “*Let us consider how we may* ***spur*** *one another on toward love and good deeds*.” Do you know what spurs are, boys and girls? Spurs are star-shaped pointy things that cowboys have on their cowboy boots. And they press those spurs into the horse’s flesh to get it to speed up or turn. Well, the Lord has added two spurs to our congregation today – Rebekah and Na-young. And we hope and pray that Mason will grow up and complete his baptism and publicly profess faith and become another spur in our congregation. Rebekah and Na-young, we need you to spur us on to love and good deeds and we promise to spur you on to the same. We all need brothers and sisters who are prepared to ‘dig in’ and ‘poke’ us when we are lazy in love.

The NT believer’s **Incredible Position** is that we enjoy sweet, spiritual, confident, anytime communion with the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit, as part of the church. And it is because of that incredible position that must offer **genuine worship** and holy living, we must confess biblical truth, whatever the cost, and we must spur one another on to love and good deeds. That is the Christian life. May God preserve us in this life. Amen.