

FORSAKING THE ASSEMBLY

by George Battey

The assembly of God's people was very important during the Old Testament dispensation. Gathering all the people together was important for several reasons. First, in Leviticus 8 Aaron and his sons were ordained as priests before all the assembly to publicly acknowledge: "These are God's official priests and we will follow no others." In the New Testament elders were ordained in the assembly to demonstrate they were the official leaders of the congregation (Acts 14:23). Second, in Numbers 15 all the people were gathered to witness discipline – an execution so everyone would learn to respect God's law. In the New Testament church discipline is to be administered before all the assembly so everyone would learn a lesson (1 Corinthians 5:4). Third, in Deuteronomy 31:12 all the people were to be gathered for the reading of the law. Not everyone could read, but all could hear and understand the reading. Likewise, in the New Testament we are to gather together for public reading and teaching of God's law. Everyone might not have their own copy of God's law, or be able to read, but all can hear and understand (1 Corinthians 14:23-25).

"HOLY CONVOCATIONS"

The Israelites were at liberty to have as many assemblies as they wanted and as often as they wanted, but there were certain assemblies which God chose and attendance at these meetings was obligatory. These divinely appointed assemblies were called "holy convocations" (miqra'), or "sacred assemblies" (NIV). "*And in the first day there shall be an holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be an holy convocation to you; no manner of work shall be done in them*" (Exodus 12:16).

A "holy" convocation was very special and there were no excuses accepted for not appearing. One might be excused for not coming to a common town meeting, but there were no excuses accepted for missing a "holy convocation."

Numbers 9:10-13

10 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If anyone of you or your posterity is unclean because of a corpse, or is far away on a journey, he may still keep the Lord's Passover.

13 'But the man who is clean and is not on a journey, and ceases to keep the Passover, that same person shall be cut off from among his people, because he did not bring the offering of the LORD at its appointed time; that man shall bear his sin.

This passage demonstrates the seriousness of “sacred assemblies” and the requirement to be present.

Leviticus 23 lists all the “holy convocations” which Israel was to observe – there were 7 in all:

- 1) Weekly Sabbath. According to verse 3 there was to be an assembly in each town – an assembly for weekly worship.
- 2) Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv 7-8)
- 3) Feast of Firstfruits (vv 4,11-12)
- 4) Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) (v21)
- 5) Feast of Trumpets (v24)
- 6) Day of Atonement (v27)
- 7) Feast of Tabernacles (vv 35-36)

Some of these “holy convocations” required all the nation to gather together in Jerusalem. Others allowed the people to gather in the nearest village.

THE NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY

In the New Testament there is only one “holy convocation” required – a regular assembly of the Lord’s people for worship and it is this assembly to which we turn our attention.

Hebrews 10:25

25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Here we have a familiar passage which is often abused and misused. In this present study we hope to accomplish two things: first, examine what the passage meant to the Hebrew brethren when it was first written, and second, draw out of the passage any principles which may apply to those who are not Hebrews and who did not live during the first century.

WRITTEN TO THE HEBREWS

First let us emphasize that this epistle was written to Hebrews – Jews. It was not written to Gentiles. This is not to say Gentiles could not learn from it, but it was written specifically to Jews who were facing special problems. Keep this in mind for it will soon become very important.

JEWES WERE QUITTING THE CHURCH

Another important ingredient to understanding this passage is to understand these Jewish Christians (1) were being persecuted and (2) were tempted to quit the church. The fact that they were being persecuted is evident from the following passage:

Hebrews 10:32-33

32 But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings:

33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated;

The fact that they were tempted to leave the church and quit is evident from such passages as: “*cast away your confidence, which has great reward.*” (Hebrews 10:35). Over and over in this epistle the Lord is exhorting the Jewish brethren, “Don’t “cast away” your faith; don’t quit the church; don’t abandon the Christian faith.” Again, “*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*” (Hebrews 3:12). Again, in a rather lengthy section the writer warns:

Hebrews 6:4-6

4 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,

5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, ...

In the very chapter where these people were instructed to not forsake the assembly the writer says, “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful*” (Hebrews 10:23). There it is again: “Don’t give up; don’t quit the church and revert to Judaism.”

A WARNING SIGN

Here in the midst of all these warnings to not quit the church the Lord exhorts: *“not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:25).

Contextually the Lord is pointing out one of the first signs a Christian is getting weak and is about to quit the church is when he begins to forsake the assembly. This is not always the case. Sometimes we witness Christians who quit suddenly with no warning signs of weakness. But this is relatively rare. Most often people begin to slack off in attendance and it means they are losing interest, growing weak, becoming worldly and are in danger of eventually quitting altogether.

Attendance at the weekly assembly is a good indicator of how things are going in the rest of a person’s life. If a brother is not attending regularly he probably is not reading the written word, praying, or witnessing to others regularly.

Start listening to the excuses people offer for not being present at the assembly and it reveals even more. Some of the more common ones include: “I was tired.” “I just don’t get anything out of the services.” “It’s just too far to drive all the time.” The revealing thing about all this is people would never use these as excuses if summoned to appear in court. Imagine someone excusing themselves for not responding to a court summons by saying: “I would have come to court, but I was tired. Besides, I’m just not getting anything out of my trial lately and it’s just too far to drive all the time, so I didn’t come.” Talking to the judge like this will land a man in jail, but for the church these excuses seem to be adequate.

Hebrews 10:25 is exhorting the Jewish people not to slack off on attendance like this because forsaking the assembly is the first step toward quitting the church altogether.

DEFINING SOME TERMS

At this point it is necessary to define some key terms. First, the word “forsaking” comes from the Greek verb ἐγκαταλείπω and its form in Hebrews 10:25 is a present, active participle. There are several bona fide ways of translating this participle: “forsake,” “abandon,” “neglect.” But which of these three valid options most correctly expresses the author’s intended meaning? Because ἐγκαταλείπω is a present tense participle, continuous action is being described – that is, action that is performed continuously or habitually. Had the Lord wanted to indicate a “one time” abandonment He would have used the aorist participle. Again, had He wanted to indicate a “one time” abandonment with emphasis on the resulting state, He would have used a perfect participle. But because He used a present participle He, without doubt, was describing continuous, or repetitious action. (Summers, p. 90). Of the three possible selections,

then, the word “neglect” carries over the idea of continuous action better than the words “forsake,” or “abandon.”

The next critical word we must define is “manner” – “as the *manner* of some is.” This comes from the Greek word ἔθος which means “a usage (prescribed by habit or law): custom, manner, be wont” (Strong’s, #1485; cf. Bauer, p. 217 where ἔθος in Hebrews 10:25 is translated “habit.”). In other words, the kind of “forsaking” which the Lord is describing has become a “habit” with some. Had we chosen “abandon” to translate ἐγκαταλείπω (as mentioned in the previous paragraph) it would lead some to think of a “once and for all” abandonment rather than something done habitually. “Neglect,” by contrast, goes well with “manner” and carries across the idea of habit quite well fitting the context perfectly.

Notice the words “the assembling.” This translates the Greek article and noun τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν which means literally, “the assembling.” This again validates our contention the Lord is describing a habitual, continuous “neglecting” of the assembly rather than a “one time” abandonment of the church. Had the Lord been discussing total abandonment of the “church” He would have used the word ἐκκλησία rather than ἐπισυναγωγὴν. (Concerning the definitive article proving ἐπισυναγωγὴν should be translated “assembly” while ἐκκλησία is reserved for “church” or “congregation,” see: Barnes, p. 1308; Lindsay, 2:121-122; Delitzsch, 2:182-183.)

To clarify, there are two separate issues at stake in our study which we might label as (1) the disease and (2) the symptoms of the disease. These two items must not be confused. The Lord is concerned about the Hebrews abandoning the church – that’s the disease. One of the symptoms indicating the Hebrew Christians were coming down with the disease was their neglect of the assembly. Hebrews 10:25, then, is forbidding men to neglect the worship assembly for this will only make them weak and lead to their actual abandonment of the church altogether. Hebrews 10:25 is focusing on one of the symptoms leading up to total abandonment of the faith.

Finally, notice two things about the Greek article and noun τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν: (1) the definite article is used and (2) it is singular in number. The definite article means a specific assembly is envisioned; not “an assembly,” but “the assembly”; a special assembly convened and conducted by the church. The singular number means one and only one particular assembly is envisioned; not “the assemblies,” but “the assembly.” There is one and only one assembly peculiar to the Lord’s church – the Lord’s day assembly when the brethren gather to “break the bread.” “*On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight*” (Acts 20:7). This is the only assembly divinely commanded. “*Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment*” (1 Corinthians 11:33-34). This passage teaches the church must “come together” to eat the Lord’s supper and according to verse 26 it was done “often.” Every first day of each week the church would do this (Acts 20:7).

OTHER ASSEMBLIES

The church has been granted the liberty to have as many assemblies as she wishes and as often as she desires. For example, in Acts 15:6 the church in Jerusalem convened to discuss some church problems. In verse 30 the church in Antioch convened to hear an epistle read to them. There is no indication in either of these verses that this was the Lord's Day assembly. Instead, the brethren themselves decided to conduct an assembly and they chose a day and time which was convenient for all concerned. In Acts 2:46 Christians assembled together every day.

These passages demonstrate it is scriptural for brethren to assemble on other occasions besides the first day of the week. But there is a certain assembly which God chose and attendance at this meeting is obligatory. A congregation does not sin by not having a mid-week service, or a Sunday evening service, but it does sin when it does not come together on the Lord's Day for communion.

SUMMARY

In summary, Hebrews 10:25 is commanding the Jewish brethren not to neglect the weekly assembly when the church comes together to "break bread." Some people were in a habit of neglecting this assembly, but this must stop. When people neglect this assembly, it is an indication they are growing weak and on the verge of total apostasy. Irregular attendance doesn't mean they have totally abandoned the church, but it does indicate they are headed that direction.

EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER

There is now a contrast made in the passage we're studying: "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but **exhorting one another**, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

In contrast to neglecting the assembly, we must "exhort one another." The question we must now answer is: Did the Lord mean we should (1) exhort to assemble? or (2) assemble to exhort? Look carefully at those two questions and you will see they are saying quite different things.

The context is in favor of the second choice. We assemble in order to exhort one another. In fact, look at the preceding verse: "*let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works*" (Hebrews 10:24). We must "provoke one another to love and good works." How can we do this? By our assembly. The Lord's Day assembly was

designed by the Lord to exhort all who attend. “Let all things be done unto edifying,” the apostle wrote (1 Corinthians 14:26). In the assembly we sing and by singing we teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16). When we pray we edify (1 Corinthians 14:15-17). By teaching we edify (1 Corinthians 14:4-5). By giving liberally we edify (2 Corinthians 9:2). By communing we edify (1 Corinthians 11:26).

This is why it is so critical for the Hebrew brethren to make sure they are present at the assembly. In those days they were tempted to give up and to quit the church. By neglecting the assembly they were only getting weaker and so the Lord is here commanding them to be present at the assembly where exhortation takes place.

“THE DAY APPROACHING”

The exhortation offered in the assembly is always needful, but it becomes even more so when a crisis arises: “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching*” (Hebrews 10:25). As these Jews saw “the day approaching” it was even more critical to be present in the assembly and receive exhortation from brethren.

What “day” is “the day approaching”? There are three popular interpretations: (1) the “first day of the week” theory; (2) the “Judgment Day” theory; (3) the “destruction of Jerusalem” theory. Let us examine each briefly.

“FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK” THEORY

Brethren who hold to the “first day of the week” theory believe the passage teaches Christians should “exhort to assemble” rather than “assemble to exhort.” For them the passage means: On Monday exhort one another to attend church next Sunday. On Wednesday exhort more fervently because we can “see the day approaching.” On Saturday become almost frantic exhorting each other to be present at the assembly Lord’s Day assembly.

The problem with this is: Those who believe it don’t believe it. None of them practice it. None of them go around during the week becoming more and more earnest in their exhortations as Sunday draws nearer and nearer. Furthermore, there is no logical reason why exhortation to assemble should be more intense on Saturday than on Friday, or Thursday.

“END OF THE WORLD” **THEORY**

This theory says: As you see the end of the world getting nearer and nearer, it is even more critical to “assemble to exhort,” or “exhort to assemble.”

The problem with this interpretation is the Lord was speaking of a certain day which the Jewish Christians in the first century could see coming and they could not see the end of the world coming. Of this point we can be most confident because: (1) Christians of the first century were clearly taught the Judgment Day would not come before a great apostasy occurred first and this did not happen until hundreds of years later (2 Thessalonians 2:3). (2) Jesus taught us over and over His second coming would be like a thief in the night. “The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (2 Peter 3:10). “But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 24:43-44). “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (Mark 13:32).

Over and over we are taught the coming of the Lord will be like a thief who gives no sign or warning that he is coming. Therefore, because there are no signs given to indicate the end of the world is approaching, Hebrews 10:25 is not speaking of the end of the world.

“DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM” **THEORY**

This theory holds “the day approaching” refers to the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. (Shaw, pp. 56-58). In the year 70 AD God allowed the Roman army to completely destroy the city of Jerusalem, burning and leveling both the temple and royal palaces. It is estimated in the siege 1,100,000 Jews were massacred. (Shaw, p. 10). Never was there such an intense, overwhelming bloodbath as this upon any nation. Not even the atomic bombs of World War II caused such massive destruction of human life. Jesus had forewarned of this very thing: “*For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be*” (Matthew 24:21). The first 34 verses of Matthew 24 give the great prophecy Jesus made concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. He gave the people signs to watch for which would indicate the approaching day.

This is undoubtedly what the Lord was referring to in Hebrews 10:25. Some object by arguing, “How can Jerusalem’s destruction be called ‘the day’ (singular) when

it actually took many ‘days’ (plural) for the Romans to actually destroy it?” This objection, however, is unfounded. The word “day” (singular) is a Biblical expression for distress, calamity, or judgment of some kind. It envisions the “day” or the final completed state of such calamity, without considering the time involved in reaching that state. For example, Isaiah 2:12 mentions “the day of the Lord” when referring to Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon. If Jerusalem’s fall to Babylonian armies could be properly called “the day” in Isaiah, then Hebrews 10:25 could likewise call Jerusalem’s fall to Roman armies “the day.” Again, Jeremiah 30:7 refers to Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon as “the day” (singular) although the actual siege required many “days” (plural). Ezekiel 21:25 likewise uses the singular word “day” to describe Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon.

Remember, the Book of Hebrews was written to Jews. They, more than any other people, would be affected by this destruction. These Jewish Christians were already being persecuted and harassed by unbelieving Jews. As Jerusalem’s destruction drew nearer and nearer the persecution intensified. *“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another”* (Matthew 24:9-10). This increase of persecution would cause many to question their allegiance to Christ. Many would be tempted to abandon the church and revert to Judaism. But the Lord was trying to tell them, “If you’ll stay faithful and remain in the church, this persecution and harassment from the Jews is going to end when Jerusalem is destroyed and your enemies are killed. But, if you defect and return to the Judaism you will find yourself destroyed along with those unbelieving Jews.”

As these Hebrew Christians saw Jerusalem’s destruction drawing nearer and nearer and their persecution grew worse and worse, it was all the more needful for them to attend the assembly of the church where they would be exhorted to stay faithful.

APPLICATION FOR TODAY

If the “day approaching” refers to Jerusalem’s destruction, does the passage become meaningless to us today? Not at all. The passage is teaching a principle: When a great crisis arises in our lives, it becomes even more important for us to be present at the assembly.

The destruction of Jerusalem was a major crisis in the lives of the Jews and they were tempted to give up on God and quit the church, but the Lord is saying, “This is the time when you need the church most of all.”

Many times when people go thru a crisis, they are tempted to give up on God and quit the church. The loss of a child, the loss of a parent, financial problems, marital problems, health problems – all of these are disasters that drive a lot of people to give up and quit the church. They throw up their hands and quit thinking, “If God cared for me why does He allow all these disasters to come upon me?” Times of crisis are times when it is especially important to be present at the assembly where exhortation takes place.

In summary, Hebrews 10:25 is just as relevant to us today during crises which we face as it was to those Jews who were facing the crisis of Jerusalem's destruction.

TROUBLESOME VERSES

Look at the next few verses which tend to be rather difficult:

Hebrews 10:26-31

26 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

30 For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people."

31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

If we fail to see the overall message of the Book of Hebrews, we will fail to see the point of this passage. Many read verse 25 in connection with these verses and immediately draw very serious conclusions:

- 1) Forsaking the assembly is willful sin.
- 2) There "remains no more sacrifice for sins" when men miss church.
- 3) Men deserve "fiery indignation" for missing church.
- 4) They deserve to die without mercy under two or three witnesses.
- 5) They trample the Son of God under foot when missing church.
- 6) They count the blood of Jesus as an unholy thing by missing church.
- 7) They insult the Holy Spirit by missing church.
- 8) God will take vengeance on those missing church.
- 9) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God after missing church.

To hear some tell it, you would think missing church is tantamount to blaspheming the Holy Spirit – an unforgivable sin. To make matters worse these people declare: “Well, it’s in the same context! Verse 26 comes immediately after verse 25, and the willful sin being discussed is missing church!” Admittedly, on the surface, this does seem to be the contextual setting.

However, what we’re failing to do is to back up enough to see the larger context. The Lord is warning about leaving the Christian faith and returning to Judaism. Forsaking the assembly is merely a symptom some were about to do this. They were starting to “not care” about things God commanded.

If these Jewish Christians quit the church and abandon the Christian faith, then: they are willfully sinning; there is no other sacrifice outside of the Lord’s body to atone for their sins; they deserve “fiery indignation” for turning their backs on the Lord who purchased their salvation. When men rejected the Mosaic covenant and left for false religion they died without mercy under two or three witnesses.

Deuteronomy 13:6-9

6 *“If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers,*

7 *“of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth,*

8 *“you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him;*

9 *“but you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.*

If “death without mercy” was inflicted upon men who left the Mosaic covenant, how much worse should one be punished who leaves behind the new covenant? Again, by leaving Christ and returning to Judaism these Hebrews would be “trampling under foot” the Son of God. They would be counting His blood that sanctified them as something unholy. They would be insulting the Holy Spirit. Anyone guilty of such atrocities will surely have vengeance taken upon them by God Himself. No wonder a person is worse off after obeying the Gospel, and then falling away (2 Peter 2:20-21).

Again, for emphasis sake, Hebrews 10:25 was warning the Jewish Christians not to “neglect” the weekly assembly because such was the first step toward weakness leading to total abandonment.

WHAT CONSTITUTES “FORSAKING THE ASSEMBLY”?

Now it’s time to apply what we have learned – the hardest part of any Bible study. How much does one have to ignore something before being guilty of “forsaking” it?

First, many insist “forsake” in Hebrews 10:25 means to “totally abandon” the church once and for all time. They make the passage read something like this: “Do not totally abandon the assembling of yourselves together as some have done.”

There are two problems with this: (1) the passage does not have the word “totally” in it. That’s been added by wishful thinking. (2) this interpretation ignores the force of the word ἔθος (habit). Some Christians were in a regular habit of doing something. Were they in the habit of “totally abandoning” the church once and for all on a regular basis? That’s like saying, “You can’t count on John Doe because he totally abandons the church once and for all about twice a month.”

Second, when forced to admit “forsake” is not total abandonment, some argue “forsake” at least does not mean missing church just once. They argue “forsake” necessarily implies multiple occasions. They illustrate it by asking this: If a preacher leaves his wife behind to hold a meeting for a week, he has not “forsaken” her has he? Most would answer, “No.” Their conclusion is: If a preacher doesn’t “forsake” his wife by being gone just one week, neither does a Christian “forsake” the assembly by missing just one Sunday.

While this sounds reasonable, let’s imagine this: Suppose the husband left his wife at home sick with no one to care for her? Or, suppose he left her penniless with no food to eat? Or again, suppose he spends his week with another woman? Did he “forsake” his wife in any sense?

There’s no doubt “forsake” can mean “total abandonment,” but the question is: Is this all it can mean? Can a man “forsake,” “neglect,” or “abandon” his wife, or the assembly in any sense short of total apostasy?

DEGREES OF “FORSAKING”

The Scriptures clearly indicate there are degrees of conduct. Consider the following:

1 Samuel 15:3-9

*3 ‘Now go and attack Amalek, and **utterly destroy** all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’“*

9 *But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.*

Here the Bible distinguishes between destroying and “utterly” destroying. They are not the same thing. Saul “destroyed” some of the Amalekites, but he did not “utterly” destroy them. Again, “*It came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not **utterly drive them out***” (Judges 1:28). Israel drove out the Canaanites, but they did not “utterly” drive them out.

There is apparently a difference between:

refusing	and	utterly refusing	(Exodus 22:17)
making desolate	and	utterly desolate	(Isaiah 6:11)
rejecting	and	utterly rejecting	(Jeremiah 14:19)
forgetting	and	utterly forgetting	(Jeremiah 23:39)
going bald	and	utterly bald	(Ezekiel 27:31)
cutting off	and	utterly cut off	(Hosea 10:15)
being at fault	and	utterly at fault	(1 Corinthians 6:7)

Likewise, the Bible distinguishes between “forsaking” and “utterly forsaking.” “*O forsake me not **utterly**,*” the prophet said (Psalms 119:8). In contrast, God said: “*For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee **for a moment***” (Isaiah 54:7-8). Interestingly, the LXX uses ἐγκαταλείπω, the same Greek word used in Hebrews 10:25, in both of these Old Testament passages.

In the New Testament there are some familiar passages: “*About the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, ... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46). Notice this is the first time God ever forsook Jesus. It was the only time He ever did it. And, He never intended to permanently forsake Him. The Father forsook Jesus “for a small moment,” but He did not “utterly” forsake Him.

Again, “*Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world*” (2 Timothy 4:10). Even if Demas had returned the very next day, it would not remove the fact he had “forsaken” Paul.

The point is, we can be guilty of “forsaking the assembly,” or “neglecting” the assembly when we miss only one time. To say “forsaking” in Hebrews 10:25 is “total abandonment” of the church is to confuse the disease with its symptom.

WHAT ABOUT JOBS?

A common question asked is, “What about my job? I have to make a living and my job requires me to work sometimes on Sundays.”

I believe the Lord knew this would be a problem. He knew His disciples would sometimes have to make a choice between their jobs and their obligations to God and that’s why He taught:

Matthew 6:25-33

25 “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?”

26 “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

27 “Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?”

28 “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin;

29 “and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30 “Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

31 “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”

32 “For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

33 “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

There is not a better answer to the question, “What about my job?”. Jesus said if we put the kingdom of God first in our lives God will provide for all our physical needs. The real question today is not, “What about my job?” but, “Are we believers, or unbelievers?”. Do we believe what Jesus said or not? I do note this particular point: In Matthew 22:3-5, when the king’s wedding invitation was rejected in favor of job related matters, the king was wroth and declared the guests to be “unworthy.” If a job was an inexcusable reason for missing a king’s wedding feast, it becomes highly questionable if it would be an excusable reason for missing the “holy convocation” called by the living God.

SUMMARY

When we “neglect” the assembly for vacation, for business, or any other excuse, we have violated the command of Hebrews 10:25 and are guilty of sin. Unless we repent we will only grow weaker and end up quitting altogether.

As a side note, why some churches use men in leading roles in the services of the church when they can’t even be faithful in attendance is beyond my ability to reason.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what have we seen? Hebrews 10:25 is teaching this: First, the command is given: Don’t neglect the assembly. Remember, this is a command. Second, the rationale is given: To prevent apostasy. The assembly is where men receive the exhortation that will prevent apostasy. Third, an extra reason is given: Crisis. As we see times of crisis approaching, the assembly becomes all the more important.

Don’t think you can out-guess the Lord – thinking you can “neglect” the services just once in a while without growing weak. The Lord said it will make you weak and He knows – He made you.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following are some commonly asked questions with replies for your consideration.

1) *Can a Christian miss worship because of sickness, or car breakdown?*

REPLY: The Lord said, “*Not forsaking the assembly as (καθώς) the manner of some.*” The Greek word καθώς is an adverb of manner and describes in this passage the kind of forsaking under consideration. Hebrews 10:25 is discussing men and women who could attend the services, but they chose of their own volition not to do so. To miss for persecution, or lesser excuses is to miss “as the manner of some.” However, missing for sickness, or car breakdown is not within one’s control – not “as the manner” of some.

To equate missing for sickness with missing for work is to make the same error the Pharisees were guilty of. They could not distinguish between working on the Sabbath Day and being sick on the Sabbath Day (cf. Matthew 12:9-14). Shame on anyone equating sickness and car breakdowns with working.

2) *Isn't there such a thing as an "ox in the ditch" that justifies missing services?*

REPLY: First, notice the ox in the ditch (Luke 14:5), was not harnessed up plowing in a field. In other words, the farmer did not work on the Sabbath Day and this cannot justify a man working during the Lord's Day assembly. Second, Lynwood Smith put it best when he said: "*If I had an ox that kept getting in a ditch, I'd either sell the ox, or fill in the ditch.*" Third, the kind of "forsaking" the Lord had in mind was "as (καθώς) the manner of some." Missing for an ox in the ditch is not "as" some in Hebrews 10:25 were doing. They were missing by choice. They were not "providentially hindered."

3) *In Numbers 9:9-13, men who were traveling were excused from observing the Passover like everyone else. They were allowed to make it up later. Why can't we today miss worship for traveling purposes?*

REPLY: Consider carefully the passage cited in this question:

Numbers 9:9-13

9 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

10 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If anyone of you or your posterity is unclean because of a corpse, or is far away on a journey, he may still keep the Lord's Passover.

11 'On the fourteenth day of the second month, at twilight, they may keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

12 'They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break one of its bones. According to all the ordinances of the Passover they shall keep it.

13 'But the man who is clean and is not on a journey, and ceases to keep the Passover, that same person shall be cut off from among his people, because he did not bring the offering of the LORD at its appointed time; that man shall bear his sin.

First, The unclean and travelers still kept the passover (v10). They did not miss the passover for traveling. Men traveling on Lord's day miss the assembly. Second, special revelation was required from God to allow even this second opportunity of observing the Passover. Where is such revelation given for those who miss the weekly assembly to "make it up"? Third, the man who could attend, but simply chose not to, sinned. Many times when people say they "couldn't" go the truth is they "wouldn't" go.

4) *Is attendance at Sunday night and Wednesday night services mandatory?*

REPLY: We should "*be ready to every good work*" (Titus 3:1) and men should try their best to attend these services, but I am not ready to put these services on an equal level with the "holy convocation" God commanded. To illustrate, suppose all the men of a

congregation worked third shift and decided to have Wednesday services at 10 AM. When a brother moved in with a daytime job, would he be sinning if he did not take off to attend the 10 AM service? I think not. Or, suppose a congregation decided to have services every evening at 7 PM. Would a brother be sinning if one night during the year he stayed home to rest? Again, I think not. Several things need to be considered before condemning someone who misses one of these services: Why are they missing? How regular are they missing? And how mature are they in the faith? Are they just babes in Christ, or have they been “raised up” in the church? Furthermore, we should consider what position they hold in the church? Is this person an elder? A preacher? A deacon? Or just an “ordinary” member? It is a scriptural principle to expect more out of church leaders than from others (cf. James 3:1; Luke 12:48b) We must be careful, and not make a law where God made none (cf. Matthew 23:4). Before we require a man to quit his job so he can attend a 7 PM Wednesday night service, ask yourself if you would quit your job to attend a 10 AM Wednesday morning service.

5) *Should churches change the time of their weekly assembly to accommodate brethren who work as practiced by the churches in the Philippines?*

REPLY: This is a judgment call which requires consideration of several things: Will changing the services to help one man end up hurting ten others? Will changing the services hinder the effort to get unbelievers to attend the assembly? Has every effort been made to resolve this problem some other way? If every effort has been tried and the overall work of the church is not harmed, there is no Scripture that would forbid the congregation from using this option.

6) *If a man misses the weekly assembly to work, is he covetous and should we discipline him as per 1 Corinthians 5:11?*

REPLY: Missing services to work could indicate covetousness that would be grounds for discipline, but not necessarily. We shouldn't make a blanket rule that governs all such cases. We need to consider each individual case: How mature is this Christian? Is he a “babe,” or a mature member? What was the man's reason for missing the assembly to work? Was it really covetousness, or merely weakness in faith?

7) *What about being a doctor and having an emergency call on Lord's day?*

REPLY: First, it is not wrong to be a doctor. Luke was a physician (Colossians 4:14). Second, I think it wise for men to seek branches of medicine that would not be likely to interfere with their religion. For example, there would be less problems for an “ear, nose and throat” specialist than for a heart surgeon. Third, what might be an emergency to an ordinary person might not be an emergency to a doctor. He should think thru situations

likely to occur and be prepared for them (e.g. have someone fill in for him while he's gone. Fourth, it is possible that life-threatening emergencies can arise out of the ordinary which would justify a doctor missing services (e.g., a plane crash with all available doctors called in, or a massive car pile-up on freeway). In such cases the doctor would not be guilty of forsaking "as" the manner of those Hebrews of 10:25 who were voluntarily choosing to miss. Jesus said, "*But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless*" (Matthew 12:7).

8) *Is Hebrews 10:25 really a command? Isn't the subjunctive mood used rather than the imperative mood?*

REPLY: Owen L. Crouch correctly comments upon this: "Subjunctive at this point is kin to the imperative mode in that it offers an exhortation or entreaty." (Crouch, p. 298).

9) *What about worshiping God in a motel room when on vacation? Isn't Jesus "in the midst" when just 2 or 3 gather?*

REPLY: First, Matthew 18:20 is discussing church discipline, not worship. Second, even if this passage was discussing a worship service, the phrase, "in my name" means "by my authority." Where did Jesus ever authorize the practice of missing the Lord's Day assembly and worshiping in a motel room? Third, the apostle never offered this as a solution to the Hebrews. They were being persecuted. Paul never advised them it would be better for husbands and wives to have communion on the roadside for the time being until the persecution ends. If they could not commune on the roadside to avoid persecution, how can we do so to simply have a vacation? Fourth, the weekly assembly requires brethren to "come together" (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:33). There is no "coming together" when a husband and wife wake up in a motel room and "play" church. Fifth, if a man and wife may commune on the side of the road once without coming together with other brethren, they could do so every Lord's day. This reasoning destroys the need for congregations. "What proves too much, proves nothing at all."

10) *Wasn't Paul saying we can miss so long as we don't make a "habit" like some – "as the manner (habit) of some"?*

REPLY: The Lord was using the bad habit of some to illustrate what Christians should not do even once. To illustrate, in Romans 6:1-2 Paul wrote, "*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*" When Paul condemned continuance in sin, did he thereby condone occasional sinning so long as men don't make a habit of it? Obviously not.

Likewise, in Hebrews 10:25, by condemning the excessive habit of some, the Lord was not thereby condoning neglect of a “holy convocation” on an occasional basis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, Albert. Barnes’ Notes On the New Testament – 1 volume edition. Kregel Publications. 1980 edition.

Bauer, W., W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich. A Greek - English Lexicon. Chicago Press. 1957.

Crouch, Owen L. Expository Preaching and Teaching – Hebrews. College Press.

Delitzsch, F. Delitzsch’s Commentary on the Hebrews. T. & T. Clark. 1870.

Lindsay, William. Lectures on the Epistle to the Hebrews. William Oliphant & Co. 1867.

Shaw, Tommy. The Destruction of Jerusalem: Its Important Place in the Divine Plan. Published by Tommy Shaw. 1979.

Strong, James. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Abingdon Press. 1974 edition.

Summers, Ray. Essentials of New Testament Greek. Broadman Press. 1950.