Dear GOD

Connect group questions
Dear God, do I have to go to church?
1 Peter 2:4-5; 9-10, 1 Corinthians 12:12-20, Hebrews 10:19-25

1. What does the question reveal about how the questioner views church? Why might people ask this question?
2. Why did Mark suggest that the short answer is ‘no’?
YOU’RE A BRICK Read 1 Peter 2:4-5 and 9-10
3. What is the correlation between the physical temple of the Old Covenant and the spiritual temple of the new?
4. How is the spiritual temple being constructed?
5. Consider the following descriptions of God’s people and reflect on what each description means: chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession. (Bonus: read Ex 119:5-6)
6. What does it mean that we are to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light?
YOU’RE A GIFTED AND NECESSARY BRICK Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-20
7. In many ways, the ‘body’ analogy is another way of communicating similar truths to the ‘temple’ analogy. Yet what unique and important truths are taught here?
8. Someone at church says to you, “well I don’t do anything much, no one would miss me if I wasn’t here”. How would you encourage them?
9. If you rob us of your presence (and therefore unique ministry), we lose- significantly! Yet if you rob yourself of us, you also lose! What is the danger of a Christian trying to go it alone?
WE CAN’T DO THIS WITHOUT YOU! Read Hebrews 10:19-22
10. Mark said that this ‘drawing near’ is not referring specifically to what we do in an hour in church on Sundays, but in all of life. But he went on to say, that our gathering is a particular and focused way of ‘drawing near’. Why then will this be important for someone who has been neglecting ‘drawing near’ all week?
11. Why are some today, also in the habit of giving up meeting together - or at least only coming every other Sunday, or only if there’s no better offer?
12. Drawing near to God is an awesome privilege. Encouraging one another is a significant responsibility. How do you answer someone who says “I worship on the beach” or similar?
13. Read the conclusion to the message again. What is wrong with the question, “Do I have to go to church?”
14. Has anything been new to you from this message? Or has anything struck you in a fresh way?

May the Lord give us such a grasp of his vision for the church, that we revel in all he has in mind for us and never ask that question again!
INTRODUCTION

• “Dear God, do I have to go to church…?”
• If you’re anything like me, that is a question you’ve asked at some stage or another.
• In fact, I asked it at around 6.30am this morning!!
• Seriously though… who asks that question? /
• People for whom church has become a burden… or a chore or a bore… or a source of frustration and a place of disappointment…
• Maybe people bruised and broken, by the whole church experience… /
• …I met someone at one of the three large funerals we have had recently who said they hadn’t been back to church since the seriousness and extent of the sexual abuse in the church had become widely known…
• She expressed an understandable sentiment – “we were good young people all those years… maintaining our morals because the church told us we should and all the time / they were abusing children…” she was angry… // I get that…! //
• Who else asks “do I have to go to church?”
• Sometimes it’s people who have no idea about the role or place of church…
• Their famous line is ‘I worship God at the beach’ or ‘I feel closer to God in my garden’
• Or they think WE think we score points with God for going to church – a friend of ours once said that they didn’t need to go to church any more because they’d racked up enough points for a lifetime going every day during school! //
• And some people who claim to be Christian will also ask this question – indeed – they may be Christians – but they have (sadly) missed the point about church – they’ve seen it as ritual and obligation – not something that is joy-filled and life-giving… they see it as something to be endured, not enjoyed!
• “Dear God, do I have to go to church…?”
• The answer? //
• The answer is ‘no’… // you don’t have to go church… we do not live under legal obligation… we are not about ticking boxes… //
• But by the time I’ve finished this morning, I hope you’ll have seen that while we don’t HAVE to go church… you’ll have also wonderfully seen that YOU – YOU as an individual - are such a unique and special and valued PART of church as God has designed it – that you’ll have grasped such a big picture of church, that you will actually never ask this question again…!
• Well that’s a tall order I’ve set myself… where do we begin?
• We begin with me explaining that…
1. **YOU’RE A BRICK**

- (Because we’re looking at a number of passages this morning and I don’t want you to lose focus by trying to find them – I’m putting them on the screen – but they are all from the passages which were just read for us…)

- Look with me first of all at 1 Peter 2:4-5: *As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him* – 5 *you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

- **Because** of the ministry of Jesus Christ… and under the **new covenant** – we do **not** now have a **physical temple**…

- …but we **DO** have a **spiritual** temple

- And the role of the spiritual temple is the same as the physical temple – to be a place where people meet God – and in the words of 1 Peter 2:9 – to be a place from which the praises of God emanate!

- If **YOU** trust Jesus… you are a **living stone** // a **brick** in God’s spiritual temple…

- That is, **YOU** individually, are part of God’s temple in the world, whereby **together** with every other living stone, you represent God and declare God’s praises to a needy world.

- This is spelled out a little more in v9 – have a look with me - *you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

- He’s speaking to – and speaking about – all Christians together… globally…

- …we Christians – ALL Christians together – are a **royal priesthood** – that is – we mediate God to the world… /

- …and we are his **chosen people**… we saw that in Ephesians last year – chosen by God since **before time** to be holy and blameless – do you recall? –

- … as a people we’ve been set apart – we’re different – we’re feel different – we live differently – we have a whole different understanding of the world and our part in the world…

- …we are God’s special possession – yes of course – all the world is his – but we are his in a special way because we have a very special and unique role in the world…

- **And that role?** – to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light…

- By ’declaring praises’ he doesn’t mean to sing hymns and songs – though it includes that! –

- …no / we declare the praises of God – we announce how wonderful he is – we advertise the riches of his grace and the beauty of his invitation to come to him / simply yet profoundly as we live the radically different lives to which we’re called…  ///

- You’re a brick… //

- You’re part of God’s plan to save the world…

- Part of the spiritual structure he’s set up, whereby more and more people may be attracted to the light – and leave the darkness of a life lived **without Jesus**… just has WE have been transferred from darkness to light.. ///

- “Do I have to go to church?”  //

- Well – here’s the reality – you’re part of the very structure – the fabric – the makeup of the church… if you have turned from self to Jesus… you ARE the church…!! // ‘Going’ to church – by gathering with the other living stones – you are simply living out who you are! ///

- But – there’s more - not only are you a brick… but you are:
2. **A GIFTED AND NECESSARY BRICK**

- Now we turn to 1 Corinthians 12:12 - *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.*

- We are the **body** of Christ… another expression which helps us realise who we are…

- So you’re a **brick** – a living **stone** in the spiritual temple… but here, using another analogy – you are **one** of the many parts of the **body** of Christ…

- What does the **body** of Christ do? It does what Jesus Christ **himself** did – reveals **God** to the world… it’s the **same** role as the **temple**…!!

- And you saying – “well I don’t **want** to go to church” – or “I don’t want to be **part** of the church…” is the same as your **foot** saying – look – I’ll be fine without the rest of your **body** – and you’ll be **fine** without me…// an obvious **nonsense**…

- I love the **ridiculous** nature of the way Paul is putting this to us…!

- Saying you’re not **needed** in the **church** – not needed in THIS church – is like your ear saying ‘look, I do not **belong** here… I’m going it alone’…

- …or your **eye** saying to your **hand** – thanks but I don’t **need** you… //

- There is **one body**… there are many **parts**…

- And each part Paul says (in the paragraph just before the one we read…) is given unique gifts from the Holy Spirit for the common **good**… /

- So if you’re **part** of our **church** – God has given **you** to **us**…

- ….you’re **unique**… and you play a unique **part** in the **body** of Christ here – which no one else can **play**… / just as your thumb cannot suddenly fill in for your **eye** if it wants to take a **break**…

- Only you can do what you do here… God has given you to us… I don’t care who you are – or how long you’ve **been** here – you’re a **precious** and **important** part of this **body**… //

- Now you may say to me ‘well – Mark – that’s very **nice** of you – but really – I don’t do a **thing**’.  

- And if that’s what you’re thinking, you’ve **missed** the **point** // because this is not about the **jobs** you do… This is not about fulfilling **tasks**…

- …no; this is about you being you…!

- No one else can be **YOU** here… no one else can care in the way you care, love in the way you love, pray in the way you pray… //

- In the **body** – every single **part** plays a **vital** and unique **role**… and we are all **magnificently different**… the part an **eye** plays is very different to the part a **foot** plays – or a **toe** plays for that matter – but both are **vital** for a **normal** life…

- And the part **YOU** play in this church is **vital**…!

- …just by you, being you…!

- God has gifted you, uniquely for THIS **body**…

- Look with me at v18. *But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be…* That includes, **YOU**!

- “Do I have to go to church?” you may feel like asking…

- …but here is the thing… if you rob us of **YOU**… we lose…!! // we’re not complete… something is seriously wrong… and our life together will be **hampered** by your absence… like we’ve undergone an **amputation**…

- if you’re not here and not playing your part in church life… not only do you rob us of **YOU**… you ROB **YOU**SELF of US!! – how are you going to **survive** on your **own**…?... without the rest of the **body**…? //

- Try chopping your **leg** off and see how it does on its **own**… or taking your **eye** out and seeing if it survives on its **own**! //
• “Do I have to go to church?”
• Do you see how that question misunderstands the whole point… misses the whole glorious vision of what the church is for? //
• So you are a brick... // you are a gifted and much needed brick in the temple or member of the body...
• ...and...

3. WE CAN’T DO THIS WITHOUT YOU!
• Look with me at Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 
  20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 
  21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 
  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.
• Since the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus has opened the way for us to draw near to God, we can and should draw near to God! /
• We can run to him without fear now, because our sin has been dealt with.
• We have been cleansed from a guilty conscience and having been joined to Christ in baptism, our whole selves have been washed.
• This ‘drawing near’ is not referring specifically to what we do in an hour in church on Sundays, but in all of life.
• Every moment of every day is to be lived ‘drawing near’, because God has made that wonderfully possible!!
• And yet there is a sense, as we gather for corporate worship, that we draw near to God in a particular and focused way. /
• What an awesome privilege – and one we neglect to our own undoing! Why would we miss!?
• You may have been neglecting ‘drawing near’ all week... and that in fact may make you feel less inclined to come on Sunday... but it is exactly what you need... take advantage of ‘drawing near’ with the rest of us, who also need to draw near in a specific and focused way... //
• Which brings us to vv24-25 – these verses are very significant for our understanding of mutual responsibility as believers.
• have a look with me again: And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 
  25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
• We need to consider how to spur one another on in love and good deeds and to encourage one another in our relationship with the Lord Jesus.
• When you get together with other Christians, whether that be on Sundays for church or simply for a coffee or lunch; do you ask yourself, “how can I spur my brothers and sisters on toward love and good deeds”?
• “What can I do, to inspire others to be more loving and more generous in doing good?”
• “How can I encourage them in their walk with the Lord?”
• And it is because we have this awesome and weighty mutual responsibility, that we must NOT give up meeting together. It is too important!
• Show me a Christian who has stopped gathering with other Christians or for whom the Sunday gathering has become ‘subject to a better offer’, and I’ll show you someone for whom God is no longer their passion or focus. They are no longer taking up their cross daily and serving Jesus!
• And not only are they neglecting their responsibility to their brothers and sisters, they are also seriously missing being spurred on and encouraged by others.
• The result is not good! //
- So – because we have the **freedom** to do so – let’s **draw near** to God.

- And because we have the **responsibility** to do, let’s **not** give up meeting together, but seek to **spur one another on** and **encourage one another** – especially as the **day of Jesus’ return** gets closer and closer!

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- **Do I have to go church?**

- If you’ve caught God’s vision for his work in the world, you won’t **ask** that question.

- If you’ve grasped that you’re a living **stone** in God’s spiritual **temple** and that you’re part of his **priesthood** – part of his **chosen people** to declare his **praises** to a **needy** and **watching world**… you won’t **ask** that question…

- If you’ve understood that you’re a member of the **body** of Christ – **uniquely created** and **gifted** to be a **member** of the **body** that only **you** can **be**… and that the body is **hampered** or **disabled** without you, you won’t **ask** that question

- And if you’ve grasped that we draw **near** to God – and as a church we are to **spur one another on** in **love and good works** and **encourage** one another to **keep going and to keep going** and to **keep going**… and therefore we should **never** give up **meeting together** as some do… you won’t **ask** that question…

- You’ll ask more importantly // **how can I live out my role** as that **living stone**…? **how can I best play my part** as a **member** of the **body**…? **how can I spur others on** and **encourage** them… ??

- …**SO THAT**… the glorious **message** of the Lord Jesus – the **praises** of **God** - can be **declared** more effectively, to the **world**!