

In the Midst of the Assembly

by H.J. Vine

The sermon explores the nature and character of the gathering, the relationship of believers as co-heirs in Christ Jesus, and the inheritance that believers are heirs to, highlighting the significance of the question 'Who is in the midst of the assembly?'

Scripture: John 17:22, Romans 8:29, Ephesians 6:6, Hebrews 1:2, Hebrews 2:12

Topics: "Church Assembly", "Eternal Inheritance"

Description

H.J. Vine preaches about the profound honor bestowed upon men, fallen and sinful, now saved and sanctified by Jesus Christ for the service of God. The assembly, composed of His companions, brethren, and joint heirs, is brought into oneness of heirship and a new creation through Christ's redeeming love. The inheritance of Christ's assembly is eternal, incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading, contrasting with Israel's earthly inheritance. The assembly, as co-heirs and brethren of Christ, experiences the highest note of singing in the midst of His praises, declaring the Father's name and enjoying the endless blessedness of a new heavenly relationship.

Transcript

Who is in the Midst of the Assembly?

The answer to this question determines for us the nature and character of the gathering; and seeing it is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself--as Hebrews 2:12 tells us--the One who is exalted above all as Heir of all things, we may well marvel at the honour which is thus bestowed, not upon angels, but upon men; men, once fallen and sinful; now saved and sanctified by and for Himself, and for the service of God. The glory of this grace is indeed divine, and only by the enabling of the Holy Spirit can we speak at all rightly of this wonderful phase of the truth of Christ and the assembly.

We have had prominently brought before us the corporate side of the truth connected with the mystery. There are also the collective and vital aspects of it. The very first which the Holy Spirit names in Ephesians 6, is heirship; for believers in Christ Jesus from amongst both Jews and Gentiles are brought into oneness of heirship--"fellow-heirs," or "joint heirs," as it reads. This is collective rather than corporate which is named second--"A joint body." Precedence is often given to the latter probably because of the comparatively recent revival of the precious truth of the body of Christ. The truth of heirship needs reviving also, for the place which the risen Lord has with His brethren and co-heirs is little appreciated because little understood. The grace and glory of it would profoundly affect the assembly were it apprehended in

the power of the Spirit. It would impart a rich sense of divine grace, and give a character of true dignity to all gatherings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The very thought of being associated with such an One as He is, through His own redeeming love, would make us esteem supremely

"That love which gives not as the world, but shares,

All it possesses with its loved co-heirs."

As our hearts rejoiced in this, true reverence and humility would mark us also, because it results from His own work and not ours; "for both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare Thy Name unto My brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praises unto Thee." This church (properly "assembly") is composed of those called "His companions," "His brethren," and "joint heirs with Christ."

The Heir And The Heirs

The inheritance which those who belong to Christ's assembly are heirs to is said to be eternal; and, unlike that into which God's earthly people entered, the Israelites, it is incorruptible, undefiled and unfading. When Christ presented Himself to the leaders of Israel, at the city of the great king, as having right to the earthly possession, they said among themselves, "This is the Heir; come, let us kill Him, and the inheritance shall be ours." This gives us some insight into the importance of this question; and we will therefore use the analogies and contrasts of Israel and her inheritance to aid in the understanding of that which we are heirs to as belonging to the assembly of God. We will seek to carefully examine this.

The coming Heir to the glory of Israel's inheritance was pointed on to all through the Old Testament Scriptures. In Him all was to be headed up. They were to possess all in their Messiah, the Anointed One. They were to inherit nothing apart from Him. In Him was to be their portion of blessing,--their King, Priest and Prophet. Israel will yet come into the wealth of the promises made to their fathers, but meanwhile, Christ is "Head over all things to the assembly," and all our blessings are in Him in the heavenlies. In Deuteronomy 17 and 18 we are told what was to mark Israel's King, Priest and Prophet, and what was to be His relation to God's people. In view of the extremes of autocracy and democracy, seen in various nations, it would be interesting to compare them with the mind of God made known in these Scriptures, but that would divert from what is immediately before us. The king was to be of God's choosing (17:15). He was to be "one from among thy brethren" and not "a stranger which is not thy brother." He was to write a copy of the law himself and read therein all the days of his life, "that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren." David was chosen and anointed of God, and David treated those who inherited with him as brethren, yet they rightly honoured him and addressed him as "lord, the king." David, however, failed in many ways, and only in our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found the perfect answer to God's mind in this respect.

The priest also was one from among "his brethren." He ministered in the name of the Lord his God (18:7), the Lord was his portion, therefore he had no earthly inheritance among his brethren.

It is said of Christ, if He were on earth He would not be a priest, a heavenly priesthood is now His, and God is His portion; nevertheless, we read, "Such an High Priest became us" (Heb. 7:26). We need none other, for God Himself recognizes Christ alone now. Then as to the prophet we read, "I will raise up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, (Moses) and will put My words in His mouth; and He shall speak unto them all that I shall command Him" (Deut. 18:18). Especially in the gospel of John is the

fulfilment of this prophecy in the Son of God related. He spake God's words to those He graciously called His brethren. "The words which Thou hast given Me I have given them" He said. "Hear ye Him," the voice from heaven commanded.

The anointing oil was poured upon king, priest and prophet. The Anointed One is Christ. It is the meaning of His Name Christ. All the three offices centre in Him, and He holds these in relation to His brethren and co-heirs. When He has His rightful place in the midst of Israel they will inherit all the rich promises and glories which have been given to the nation; but, meanwhile, the assembly is brought into relationship with Him on new and higher ground altogether. Those who form the assembly are called from amongst both Jews and Gentiles; and, through the work of Calvary, are brought in Christ to be His co-heirs in "a new creation" as we shall see. Both Israel and the assembly inherit on account of the redemption which is secured in Christ through His blood, but the nature and extent of that which they are heirs to differ in a great degree. Psalm 20 gives us the sufferings of Christ first and then the glories to follow. He Himself was forsaken of God, and suffered when there was none to help. "Many bulls have compassed Me" He said, "Strong bulls of Bashan have beset Me round." His heart melted in the midst of His bowels. The assembly of the wicked enclosed Him; they pierced His hands and His feet. They parted His garments among them, and cast lots upon His vesture. He was brought into the dust of death. His cry to God to save Him, however, was heard, and He was raised from among the dead. If He was forsaken of God as none other, He was nevertheless raised again by Him as none other. Therefore He said, "I will declare Thy Name unto My brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise Thee" (Ps. 20:22). This is the verse cited in Hebrews 2:12. Later in verse 25 He speaks of praising Him in "the great congregation." This is clearly a further thought; and again He speaks of "all the kindreds of the earth" worshipping before Him (v. 27). The blessing is wholly the result of Christ's atoning work; and the heirs inherit, be they earthly or heavenly, on the ground of that work.

In Hebrews 1:2, our Lord Jesus Christ is said to be the established "Heir of all things." Who can tell the glorious range of this inheritance? The Holy Spirit comprehensively speaks of it as "All things!" In Hebrews 6:17 we read of "the heirs of promise." God makes known to them the unchangeableness of His purpose, that they might have strong encouragement. He confirmed His word by an oath, swearing by Himself since there was none greater to swear by. How secure therefore is that to which believers are the heirs! Faithful is He that promised. All shall be fully accomplished in the most minute and in the most complete sense. Then in the midst of the assembly of co-heirs Christ shall sing God's praises in triumph and victory.

Christ And His Brethren

We have seen how the truth of heirship and the relationship of brethren go together. It is so both in connection with Israel and the assembly, though in a new and higher way for the latter as we have said. This will become clearer to us as we proceed. First, however, we must observe, there is a certain use of that precious expression of relationship--"My brethren" which applies to both, and also to the heavenly relationship which is ours with Christ, the Son of God, somewhat distinct from assembly relationship simply. This also we shall see presently.

When the Lord Jesus came to take up the whole question, we are told, He did not take hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham; and "it behoved Him in all things to be made like to His brethren" (Heb. 2:17). That shows the marvellous grace of Christ, and gives us a view of the wide extent of this grace,--"the seed of Abraham." Faith on their part is of course taken for granted, and also His work of redemption. We will now follow the way Scripture presents Christ and His brethren step by step, and observe in what manner

those who are thus designated are associated with Him. By noting carefully the distinctions we shall the better understand our own place in the assembly in the midst of which He sings; and, as surrounding Him, His brethren and co-heirs, we shall respond in fuller measure to His immeasurable grace and love.

Psalm 22:22 comes first. He there speaks as the One Who is raised from the dead, Whose work upon the cross is finished, and of those who are the fruit of that work,--He calls them "My brethren." He declares to them God's name,--Jehovah's name; and in the midst of them,--"the congregation," He utters His praise. Christ's brethren here spoken of could not be limited to the assembly, the body of Christ, as we know it today. It is striking that this verse is cited with others which are true in connection with the believing remnant of Israel in Hebrews 2:12-13. The Holy Spirit uses it in the epistle to the Hebrew brethren, as having application today rightly. To see this interesting overlapping explains many Scriptures which if confined to the assembly, the body of Christ, confuses the mind, because the word is not rightly divided in so doing. Even His Jewish disciples, before they were baptized by the coming of the Spirit into one body, He spoke of as His brethren. This will be so again after the assembly is glorified with Christ, and believers from among the Jews continue "the testimony of Jesus" as Revelation shows. Precious to them also will be the sense of this relationship, for a new nature will be theirs too, even though their hopes do not rise to the same height as that which the joint-heirs of the mystery of Ephesians 3 know through divine grace. To them will be declared God's name, and in their midst shall His praises be sounded, by Him Whose strength was weakened in the way, and Whose days were shortened; Who, nevertheless, as Hebrews 1 and Psalm 102 tell us, laid "the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of His hands." He shall "declare the name of the Lord in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem" (Ps. 102:21). This will take place when the Anointed introduces the national blessings of Israel. The joint-heirs of the assembly are not called to national blessing, but, according to the mystery, out of the nation of Israel and out of the other nations of the Gentiles also, to inherit assembly blessing in Christ Jesus.

Before we speak of this, however, we will notice how the synoptic gospels confirm what we have said. When they came to the Lord Jesus and told Him that His mother and His brethren, desired to speak with Him, He lifted the relationship on to moral ground, and stretching forth His hand toward His disciples, He said, Behold My mother and My brethren. He tenderly maintained natural relationships to the very end of His days in the flesh, but the establishment of an abiding relationship which death could not destroy was ever before Him. Therefore He added not limiting it to the disciples of Israel--Whosoever shall do God's will the same is My brother (Mark 3:35; Matt. 12:50). The gospel of Luke connects the relationship with hearing the word of God and doing it. This again would take in those who are of the assembly today as having the full revelation of God as well as the remnant of Israel to whom a more limited revelation is made. Of both, the Lord could say, My brethren are those who hear the Word of God and do it (Luke 8:21). When He returns from heaven, and comes to the earth as the King, and sits on the throne of His glory, the faithful remnant of Israel have a very near and special place with Him. Before the assembled nations, among whom they have borne testimony after the translation of the assembly to be with Christ in glory, the King declares them to be His brethren (Matt. 25:40). What an honoured association is theirs! The brethren of the King of all the earth! Doubtless they will designate Him as their Lord and their King, and not indulge in the unwarrantable familiarity which is often used in speaking of our Lord and Saviour today; nevertheless, the glorious relationship is indeed theirs through His atoning sufferings, death and resurrection. The work of God in them has written His law in their hearts as well as in their minds, and they all know the Lord. To them His grace, love and glory are known as the Anointed of God. He is King, Priest and Prophet: they are His brethren and co-heirs. In Him they are blessed and inherit their earthly portion.

The Lord sits upon the throne as King and Priest, (Zech. 6:13), and as Prophet He declares the name of Jehovah to them. The Lord, the King is in the midst of them and they shall see evil no more (Zeph. 3:15); yea, the Lord their God in the midst of them is mighty. He will rejoice over them with joy, resting in His love, and joying over them with singing (v. 17). And even if the name of the Father and the heavenly relationship remains to be declared to those who are joint heirs according to the mystery, nevertheless, Psalm 145--David's, the Beloved's, Psalm of praise--shows the high note which will resound in their midst. That Psalm really ends the Song book of Psalms, for the five following are resultant bursts of Hallelujahs, all beginning and ending with "Praise ye the Lord!" Hallelujah! And no wonder. The Beloved's praise begins thus, "I will extol Thee, my God, O King; and I will bless Thy name for ever and ever," and ends, "Let all flesh bless His holy name for ever and ever." There is, however, designedly no doubt, one note missing. It is contained in the Hebrew letter N. The Psalm is alphabetically ordered, and uses every letter, of the twenty-two in the Hebrew alphabet in regular sequence, save that one. This is clearly shown in the original, which is an acrostic. Does it not indicate that the heavenly note is to be heard only in the midst of the assembly, where not only Jehovah's name is declared by Christ, but also the Father's? It is there, above the national ground altogether, that those who are the co-heirs and brethren of Christ, know the exalted privileges which are theirs as joint-heirs according to the mystery which was kept secret from the foundation of the world, hidden in God Himself.

The Singing

We have spoken of the high and honoured association into which the co-heirs of Christ are brought, through divine grace, and through the redemption work of Calvary, and especially of that which will be enjoyed by those of the nation of Israel who are the brethren of the King. Now the mystery connected with Christ and the assembly involves co-heirs,--not as belonging to the nations or Israel, but as called out of the nation of Israel and out of the Gentile nations also, to become one as thus called out, as we have already indicated; and the relationship which is theirs as brethren of Christ is not so much with Him as King therefore, but rather as the Son of God. Both are spoken of as Christ's brethren as we have pointed out, but on different planes. The latter is an entirely new and heavenly association. This we shall see. It is here in the midst of the assembly the very highest note is sung, for to them the Son declares the Father and utters His praise. To the former Jehovah's name is declared, but not the Father's.

Matthew is the gospel of "the King," and we have already observed, He shows us the King's brethren. Again in the last chapter, when Christ was risen, the angel said to the woman, Go, tell His disciples.--(Mark the forming of the assembly, the body of Christ, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, had not then taken place, for Pentecost was not yet)--When the Lord met the same woman He said, Go, bring word to My brethren. In His commission to these brethren, He tells them to make disciples of all the nations, also that He would be with them to the completion of the age (v. 20). The kingdom character of this commission is plain, and its time limit goes beyond that of the assembly, for the assembly, Christ's body, will be taken away before the completion of the age; and after its translation from earth to heaven the testimony of Jesus will be carried on still. It is this overlapping during times of transition that has to be understood before the word of truth can be rightly divided, and before the special place which the out-called co-heirs have today can be rightly appreciated, according to the truth of the mystery concerning Christ and the assembly. Moreover, although it broadens our view of the brethren of Christ, it nevertheless safely secures us from the Laodicean character of the worldwide brotherhood movement which is developing so quickly and so popularly. The truth preserves the saints in Christ Jesus, whereas Laodiceanism shuts Him outside in His true character. It professes His name, but shuts the door in His

face, and vainly boasts in its self-sufficiency.

How cheering and beautiful is the application of Psalm 22:22 by the Spirit to us today in Hebrews 2:12! What a privilege and honour to be associated with those to whom Jesus declares the name of God! How rejoicing to the heart to be of that assembly of co-heirs and brethren in the midst of which He sings such a song--the praises of God! What music gladdens the souls of those who hear the joyful notes of such singing! It is never to be forgotten that the singing is His, Who, in the first part of Psalm 22, is described as the One Who endured the suffering of Calvary. The Sufferer has become the Singer in the midst of those who reap the results of His redeeming work. There was no suffering to compare with His, and the singing of Jesus is incomparably beyond the sweetest singing that ever reached the mortal ear. Its rich melody has never been heard and never can be heard by those who are still dead in offences and sins. It is in the assembly's midst Jesus sings. There He can express the grace and melody that fill His heart in all the ineffable blessedness of the God whom He knows so well. It is there He utters His glorious praise.

We must now pass on to that which is peculiar to the out-called assembly. In doing so, however, we will just notice the striking use which the Spirit makes of Isaiah and his two sons presenting themselves before God--a beautiful type of Christ and the remnant of Israel--"Behold I and the children which God has given Me" (compare Isaiah 8:18, and Hebrews 2:13). This is applied to the assembly now, for it indicates the relationship which is ours also, and which we are about to speak of. This intensely interesting Scripture explains many similar passages when it is discerned rightly. In the gospel of John the Spirit unveils for Christ's brethren the full revelation of God as "FATHER" in the Son--"the only begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (1:18). In Psalm 22:22 and Hebrews 2:12 it is "GOD" who is declared. Of course it is God also in John, but in the fullest revelation of Himself as Father, and as bringing us into a new and special relationship with Himself, not simply as the brethren of Messiah, the Christ, but as associated with the risen Son of God; for after He had secured eternal redemption through His death and resurrection, He sent the message of this new relationship--a relationship never before made known--saying to Mary, "Go to My brethren and say to them I ascend to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17). To what an elevation of glory and love does this bring us! Such grace and dignity in relations of deep affection could never have entered the highest thoughts of the most exalted creature in the whole of God's universe! The brethren of God's beloved Son! His Father ours! His God ours! We have said that this is somewhat distinct from assembly relationship simply, and that is correct: but we must bear in mind, those alone who are of the assembly, and who are the "joint-heirs" of the mystery, are given to know and rejoice in the endless blessedness and love of this new relationship, as they sing:

"His Father and our Father,

His God and ours Thou art,

And He is Thy beloved,

The gladness of Thy heart."

To enter into the full meaning of this, we must appropriate, in faith and in the Spirit's power, the plane of Christ's resurrection and ascension with which it is connected. Mary desired to hold the Lord on the old plane, but He said to her, "Touch Me not, for I have not yet ascended to My Father." Then He graciously declared the new relationship, and when He appeared in the midst of His own, bringing the peace of His victory over sin and death with Him, the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. What singing would fill

their hearts with melody and grace then! A singing that could scarcely be sung for the very intensity and sweetness of its experimental depth! A singing that we might fear to spoil by our expression of it! Nevertheless, Jesus has said, "I will sing!" Rich is His singing of God's praises as we have seen: surpassingly so His singing of the Father's in the midst of His co-heirs and brethren as the Son of God.

He says to the Father, Thou hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me, and the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given them! (John 17:22-23). How supremely this arises above all else. Oh, may our hearts enter into the truth of it, in the power of the Spirit ungrieved; and may we be sensitive as to allowing anything in ourselves that would spoil our appreciation of all this divine love and life and glory with the Father and the Son. Words seem to fail as we try to speak of it. In the beautiful type of the Father and Son, we read that Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac, and sent his other sons away eastward that they should not inherit along with him (Gen. 25:5-6). It is in contrast to this that the grace and love of Christ shine out. He brings others to share all He possesses as His loved brethren and co heirs. Soon God's purpose will be brought to full fruition, and then, actually conformed to the image of the glorious Son of God, we shall unhindered and eternally be able to speak His praises as we would, for whom God foreknew, He "predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He should be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29); and in the midst of them, who shall tell the gladness of His heart? Who shall attempt to describe the singing which He then sings in the midst of His co-heirs and brethren? The Holy Spirit alone can give us any sense of its harmonies for it is altogether divine.

In closing, however, we would challenge our hearts. Since these things are so, beloved brethren in Christ, what should mark those who are called to such great realities,--such holy and heavenly intimacies, such glory and grace? Avoiding the Babylonish corruptions of a worldly Christendom, and the seductions of anti-Christian teachings, let us pursue the path of God's will by following Him Who sanctified Himself that we might be sanctified through the truth; by dwelling in faith in nearness to the Son prove the vital reality of His Word to the Father--"And the world has not known Thee, but I have known Thee, and these have known that Thou hast sent Me. And I have made known unto them Thy name, and will make it known, that the love with which Thou hast loved Me may be in them and I in them" (John 17:25-26)--for this is the present portion of the brethren and co-heirs of the Son of God, while they wait and watch for His coming again to receive them to Himself, and to take them home to dwell with Him in the Father's house for ever,

"Where eternal love abounds,

And the sweetest song resounds."

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