



gather

**LIFE GROUP MATERIAL
APRIL 18- MAY 23, 2021**

Gather Series Introduction

I'm currently typing away at my desk with snow drifts 3 feet deep outside the church windows. Yesterday, a Monday, we received the single biggest snowfall we've had in years. Travel is difficult, at best, but I'm here because I had received roughly 1000 rapid fire questions while sitting at home trying to work, all before breakfast! Besides the mountains of snow outside, what makes this day even more unique is I'm the only one in the building. That's right. In a building designed to hold hundreds of people, all focused in this space on encountering Jesus, or serving others so they can encounter Him, I'm all alone. And...it's weird. Not weird in some creepy way. I'm not scared of being alone. It's weird because I KNOW what was intended for this building we call a church. Granted, we know CHURCH is so much more than a building, but nonetheless, this space was designed to be used for the Kingdom, and when it's shut down...when it's just me in the building...it seems weird. Almost like a waste. Certainly not everything it was intended.

On a similar note, we're coming through a season in our world where lots of buildings that have been used as gathering places for the Church over the centuries have been largely left empty...largely neglected...abandoned almost...in a precautionary effort to fight off an unseen enemy we call Covid-19. And while some of those cautions have certainly been warranted, isn't it interesting to think that ANOTHER unseen enemy, one far more nefarious than a virus, could really be getting a kick out of this season as well? You see, when Jesus was here on earth, living out the days that had been prophesied about the Messiah, checking all the boxes that enabled the story of His life to become what we call THE GOSPEL, He told us the plan for telling the world about Him was for the Church to do it, not just by words, but by actions...for the Body of Believers, the new members of the Family of God, to work together in a concerted effort to show the world the message of Jesus. And when the Church is united...is GATHERING together for support, for training, for prayer, worship, and connection, well those are the times that other unseen enemy, the one kicked out of Heaven...those are the times he is most defeated. So, it stands to reason when we're NOT gathering together, NOT in the habit of meeting together, those are the times Satan is most free to work, most free to advance his evil agenda.

You'll likely remember these words from the author of Hebrews, over in **Hebrews 10:25**: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Can I be frank with you? I think many of us may be running the risk of giving up meeting together. I think some of us have made that a habit – not for a short season out of necessity but for a longer period out of convenience. I've heard the conversations about how nice it is to sit at home, drink coffee, and watch church in your pajamas. I've heard how tempting it is to sleep in on Sunday, not fight to get the kids dressed, and then watch the service later in the day. But you know what I hear behind those words (and I daresay what Jesus hears as well)? "Gathering together is simply NOT AS IMPORTANT as my comfort. I'm out of the habit because it's just easier that way." Would you think me too bold if I said that smells like hypocrisy? Would you shut me off if I told you Jesus didn't hang on a cross for you to be comfortable? What if I told you walking with Jesus was NEVER intended to be about the bare minimum required?

We're going to spend the next 6 weeks in a series called GATHER. Throughout this series we'll look at a variety of different reasons why gathering together as the Body of Christ is imperative to a vibrant walk with Jesus. Our prayer is you'll be wisely instructed, properly convicted, and wholly inspired to physically and spiritually GATHER together with the Family of God as often as you can.



“...in Jesus’ name I pray, AMEN.” That was the refrain I was taught from a very early age to use when I was finishing my bedtime prayers...or mealtime or any-other-time prayers for that matter. I could shorten the “in Jesus’ name I pray” part to just “in Jesus’ name...” if I wanted, but it always had to end with that “Amen.” It’s so engrained in me that still today if someone stops praying in a group prayer as they wait on someone else to take their turn, I’m always a bit uneasy until someone else starts. And we’re CERTAINLY not done until someone throws the “Amen” out there. But why? Why end every prayer with that funny little Hebrew word? Well, as you may know, AMEN had a deeper meaning to it than just a tagline on the end of prayers. If we were to actually translate that word into English it would read “so be it” or “let it be so.” Said in a prayer simply between a child and the Father, it’s probably an unnecessary way of telling Him you’re done praying for the time being. However, the true strength of the word “Amen” is found in the midst of corporate prayer. It’s a way of telling the pray-er that you wholeheartedly endorse what they are praying. You are standing behind the truth and power of their words.

There’s just something powerful about crying out to God and having others in the Family echo that cry...having others proclaiming, “so be it!” I know the Holy Spirit can hear the collective prayers of God’s people even when they pray from different locations. However, there is no disputing the fact that gathering together for corporate prayer was something God wanted His people to practice and hold in high regard. Throughout Scripture you seldom see one believer tell another, “I’ll be praying for you,” and then walk away. However, you see time and time again believers pausing to pray TOGETHER for one another...for the Spirit to move in powerful ways...for His Kingdom to come “on earth as it is in Heaven.”

One of the fundamental reasons to GATHER together as a Church body is for prayer. How easy it can be for our prayers in our time alone to focus mostly on ourselves...our own needs. And don’t get me wrong, that isn’t a bad thing. However, praying with others promotes a shared focus, a shared passion, and a shared goal together. It enables us to connect with other believers and boldly proclaim “Amen! Let it be so!” I’m not sure what the habit has been in your own life, but if consistent prayer with other believers has fallen out of fashion in your walk with the Lord, perhaps it’s time to reconsider this powerful component of life in Christ?!

Scriptures: *2 Chronicle 20:1-30, Matthew 18:19-20, Acts 4:23-31, Acts 12:5-17*

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever thought about the strength behind the word “AMEN?” Knowing the origin and meaning of that powerful word, how might it change the way you pray – alone and collectively?
2. What are your general feelings about praying corporately with others? Are you excited for those times or are they intimidating?
3. What might be some potential hurdles that keep folks from wanting to GATHER together and pray? How can we work to help overcome those hurdles?
4. Read **Acts 12:5-17**: Have you ever been a part of a particularly powerful time of corporate prayer? What made it some impactful?
5. Read **Matthew 18:19-20**: Why do you think Jesus places such an emphasis on the power of praying together?
6. Read **Acts 4:23-31**: Are there certain types of corporate prayers God seems to answer more consistently than others? If so, how might that change how we pray as a Body?

Think It Over:

There’s just something about prayer together that can be so intimidating. Maybe it’s a matter of our own insecurities. Maybe we don’t truly trust others enough. Whatever the reason, many believers are guilty of neglecting this powerful reason to GATHER together. Consider how God might be calling you to respond and commit to asking Him to reveal others you can partner with in lifting your requests to Him. If no one in particular jumps out at you, then just start with ANYONE. This reason to GATHER is too important to ignore!



When you grow up in a church that waits for Easter every year to finally break into triple digits in attendance you might be inclined to believe the praise time is just something you suffer through each week, with a few dozen people unenthusiastically singing along to an out of tune upright piano. Well, if you grew up in the church I did, Popcorn Christian Church, you would know that thinking is DEAD WRONG. Sure, we DID have an out of tune piano, with a sweet pianist who only knew one volume and tempo. And sure, we DID rely on the “modern” convenience of an overhead projector (expertly manned by the minister’s son who looked suspiciously like a younger version of myself). And yes, ours was a congregation dominated by melody-only singers struggling as much as the piano to find the right key, but our times of praise were ANYTHING but unenthusiastic. I can remember moments lifting our voices together in praise where I was almost certain the cracking plaster on the walls was going to come down from the noise. I can also vividly recall the great *esprit de corps* in the congregation as we sang. Praising our King together bonded us on a deeper level than I understood at the time. I don’t recall many Sundays of preaching (except for when my dad left the pulpit once to spank me in the lobby!) but I can definitely remember our times of praise together.

There’s just something about gathering together to praise the Lord. Whether it’s in a sanctuary, around a campfire, in a cave underground or on top of a mountain, lifting our voices TOGETHER in praise is one of the more powerful components of being in the Family of God. Sure, you can praise God in your car, or while you’re walking alone or even belting out choruses in the shower. However, God’s design for praising Him was never to exclusively praise Him by ourselves. We see this over and over again in the Psalms:

- **Psalm 43:3:** “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name TOGETHER.”
- **Psalm 95:1:** “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.”
- **Psalm 99:5:** “Exalt the Lord OUR God and worship at His footstool; Holy is He.”
- **Psalm 132:7:** “Let us go into His dwelling place; Let us worship at His footstool.”

The list goes on and on. God deeply desires for His people to GATHER together and PRAISE HIM. And if we’re to faithfully follow His commands, we’ve only really got one choice when it comes to praising Him...we’ve GOT TO PRAISE HIM TOGETHER!

Scriptures: *Psalm 34:1, Psalm 150:1-6, Psalm 119:164, Ezra 3, 2 Chronicles 20:20-30*

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever been a part of a particularly powerful time of corporate worship? What was it like for you personally? For the group as a whole? What stuck out to you the most?
2. Read **Psalm 150:1-6:** What does this extensive list seem to indicate about the Lord’s desire for our praise?
3. Reread **Psalm 150:1-6:** Aside from “His sanctuary” and “His mighty expanse” what are some other places you’ve experienced powerful opportunities to praise God with other believers?
4. Read **Ezra 3:** While this story seems to indicate a rather unique occasion for praising God, what does it tell us about the proper TIMES to praise Him?
5. Read **Psalm 119:164:** This passage was written by King David, who was certainly a very BUSY guy. What does this verse tell us about his passion for praising God? How does your daily routine of praise match up with that? If necessary, what practical changes could you begin to make in order to make praise a more consistent part of your walk with Jesus?

Think It Over:

This should be pretty simple, but there are so many believers who don’t grasp it. If I wanted to throw a parade at the home of someone I loved which would be best – to show up on my own, in my single vehicle, and honk my horn...or...get as many others as I could find, gather them together, decorate our cars and all drive past being as wild and crazy as possible?! Of course, the latter would be better. There’s just something special about having a group that will GATHER and praise together. If this hasn’t been your habit, there simply is NO SUBSTITUTE. Gather with the church to PRAISE!



I'm sure if you've been walking seriously with Jesus for any length of time you've had moments when you've opened up your Bible and felt like the words were written SPECIFICALLY to you! I love it when God does that. I'm equally certain you've had times when your eyes have fallen on a passage that makes ABSOLUTELY NO SENSE to you! I don't always love it when God does THAT! However, I've learned over the years the best solution for me in those moments. The best solution is to study that confusing passage with someone else by my side. Sometimes that "someone else" is an author or theologian whose book I've got sitting on my shelf. However, the very BEST "someone else" is a living, breathing, God-seeking friend who I can sit with...reason with...argue with...and discern together exactly what a particular passage is teaching. Over the years I've had many pleasant opportunities for "iron to sharpen iron" (**Proverbs 27:17**) as it relates to my study of the Word of God. I count some of my best memories in my walk with the Lord as those moments when I've been challenged to see a passage of Scripture differently by a co-worker, a friend, a roommate, or my spouse. And those moments...aside from serving to strengthen my spiritual mind...those moments have almost ALWAYS strengthened the bond I have with those other men and women who are seeking truth alongside me.

I believe the privilege of studying God's Word together is one of the greatest we have as Christ-followers. It's much bigger than just reading words together and discussing them. If the Word of God is indeed the specific set of instructions we're called to follow in order to walk as Christ intended us to walk, then when we study God's Word and seek how best to apply it to our lives, TOGETHER, then we are participating in a deeply spiritual and deeply transformative exercise. It cannot be overstated how powerful is this practice of coming together in order to work out how we've been called to live. In fact, devoted followers of Christ in the Early Church would have never dreamed of trying to go it alone...of trying to understand and follow Christ's commands on their own. And if it was important for these believers, who were still able to hear from the mouths of men and women who had actually walked with Jesus, how much more important is it for us, who are centuries removed from eyewitness accounts of Jesus, to study His words and His life? For successfully navigating how to live lives that honor Him on this earth, there may be no greater reason to GATHER, than to STUDY THE WORD OF GOD!

Scriptures: *Nehemiah 8, Acts 2:42-46, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Revelation 1:3*

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever had a moment when God used another Christ-follower to teach you a hard truth about Scripture you had never understood before? Please share if you're willing.
2. Have you ever been used by God to reveal Biblical truth to someone else through your study together?
3. Do you currently have a practice of digging into God's Word together with others...besides in Life Group? If so, what does that look like?
4. Read **Romans 15:4**: What do Paul's words here teach us about the rest of Scripture and the need to study it together?
5. Read **2 Timothy 3:16-17**: Do you have trouble believing these words that "all Scripture" can be used for building up the Body? If this IS true, what should be our process when we come across a word from Scripture that doesn't seem to make any sense?
6. Read **Revelation 1:3**: Have you ever thought about the fact we're blessed EVERY TIME we read Scripture out loud together, simply because we've chosen to read the words? How should that change the excitement and expectancy of our corporate times to GATHER and read the Word?

Think It Over:

There are countless places in Scripture where we find God's people choosing to be intentional as they GATHER together to study His word. As important as it is to study His word on our own, it is impossible to overstate the importance of doing that with others. If you've not been in that habit, prayerfully consider what changes He might be calling you to make in order to more effectively GATHER with others and study Scripture together.



Wanna know a secret that when you think about it isn't really a secret at all? I'm a recovering sinner. That's right, before I joined the program and got cleaned up, I was just like all the other sinners. And no amount of hard work or happy thoughts could take away that fact. I...WAS...a...sinner. But you know what I am now? I'm a child of God, adopted into the Family through the grace of Jesus. So now, regardless of what anyone else thinks, I'm NOT a sinner anymore. Sure, I relapse from time to time, but SINNER is no longer what defines me. SAVED is what defines me. And if you're in Christ, that's your defining characteristic as well. So, if we were both in the SINNER boat before Jesus and now we're both in the SAVED boat after Jesus, why in the world do we feel like we have to hide the fact we needed saving? And STILL need the grace of Jesus every day?

But that's the sad truth of the matter. Something strange often happens when people join the Family. It's like we immediately start pretending we're no longer even capable of what we used to be capable of before we got adopted. Here's the deal though: at least according to the apostle Paul we still have to live in this earthly body that sometimes causes us to "relapse" into sin. Here's what he wrote, in **Romans 7:24-25**: "*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature[a] a slave to the law of sin.*"

Did you catch that? We've been made alive in Christ, reborn not of the flesh but of the Spirit, seeking to abide by God's law. BUT, sometimes we're still going to make mistakes...still going to make a mess of things. And in those moments, there's something we're supposed to do and it certainly ISN'T put on a happy face and pretend like we're perfect. Scripture tells us we're supposed to admit it when we sin...confess it when we sin...to God and ALSO to one another (**1 John 1:9, James 5:16**). Our confession isn't to take the form of bragging about our poor behavior or glorying in how much our sin shows the grace of Christ (**Romans 6:1-2**). Our confession is intended to lead us to repentance and walking on a different path. That's one of the reasons we're to confess to others. We won't EVER confess our sins to another human who is perfect. It will just be a confession to another member of the Family who is seeking to follow Jesus as well. In that confession, we align ourselves...strengthen ourselves...and guarantee better, holier, and more God-honoring lives TOGETHER as we move forward. Oh yeah, there's one other reason we confess...that's to show Jesus we understand our sin and still need Him to bring us a fresh dose of the Grace only He can give each and every day!

Scriptures: *Leviticus 26:14-45, Proverbs 28:13, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9*

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think it's SO DIFFICULT to confess our sins to others?
2. Why is it often easier to confess our sins to Jesus than to other people?
3. What could we do as a group to make it easier to confess our sins to one another?
4. Do you think it's sufficient to JUST confess our sins to God or is there a need to be willing to confess to others as well?
5. Read **Leviticus 26:14-45**: What do you find about the nature of God in this difficult passage?
6. Have you ever confessed a sin to another Christ-follower? What did it do for the relationship?
7. What difference might it make in the Church if we as brothers and sisters put down our masks and were actually willing to confess when we're struggling with sin?

Think It Over:

Satan loves to keep us separate...to keep us believing we're the only ones who struggle with sins...or are the only ones who doubt our faith...or _____ (fill in the blank)! In truth though, we NEED each other. We need the spiritual strength and healing that only comes when we GATHER together and confess our sins to one another and repent. If you've been guilty of going it alone...of pretending like everything is perfect but you're struggling...STOP IT! Get with some other believers and live like we were intended to live! GATHER together to confess and repent.



"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Abraham Lincoln

My sons have always loved the idea of battle, sometimes with Nerf guns, other times with sticks fashioned in the shape of swords, and now Airsoft guns. They love the competition of it. They love the adventure of it. And yes, they probably love the fact that after it's over no one ever winds up dead. Truly there are some advantages to childhood battles as opposed to the real thing! In all battles though, there remains a constant: in order to find success against your enemy, you **MUST BE PREPARED**. I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who first coined that famous mantra "To fail to prepare is to prepare to fail." And that mantra is true for every season of life. What is true in business, finances, relationships and military conflicts is also true for our spiritual lives. In order to find success in our spiritual battles, we **MUST BE PREPARED**.

When Paul penned his letter to the church in Ephesus it wasn't to a specific individual but to an entire group. And it was to that entire group he gave those famous instructions about preparing for our spiritual battles. The armor of God (**Ephesians 6:10-17**) we are instructed to wear was to be put on by the whole church body **BEFORE** the day of evil came. Paul understood the need for spiritual preparation **AND** he understood the need for the Church to do it **TOGETHER**. Just like no soldier should attempt to fight a physical battle on his or her own, the same should be true for our spiritual battles. We were **NEVER** meant to fight alone, and we were **NEVER** meant to enter a battle unprepared.

Those are two more great reasons to **GATHER** as a church body. First of all, too many Christians think our spiritual battles were meant to be fought alone, without the support of other believers. And I guess you could make a case that Scripture doesn't specifically spell that out for us very often, but for those Christians first reading these words, it was understood. They didn't live in a culture that celebrated the individual. It wasn't desirable to go it alone and show everyone how tough you were. They **KNEW** they needed each other...and we would do well to relearn that truth as well.

Secondly, just like any group of warriors – whether on the beaches of Normandy or in my back yard – will tell you, any expectation of winning a battle should also carry with it the expectation of preparation. Satan doesn't haphazardly attack. His efforts are calculated, specific, and focused. Peter reminds us in his first epistle *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* (**1 Peter 5:8**) And if he truly **IS** like a lion, he'll focus his attacks on those who are lonely and unprepared...unable to defend themselves. Gathering together as a spiritual army, preparing to do battle against the enemy will ensure both strength in numbers and effective preparation against his attacks. We were never meant to fight our spiritual battles alone and unprepared.

Scriptures: *Joshua 6, Proverbs 15:22, Proverbs 21:5, Ephesians 5:15-17, Ephesians 6:10-17*

Discussion Questions:

1. What were your favorite childhood activities with siblings or neighbors?
2. What is the best movie or book you've encountered where you saw preparation for battle make all the difference?
3. Reread the quote by Abraham Lincoln above. Do you live your life like this? How might it help you be more successful as a Christ-follower if you were more committed to spiritual preparedness?
4. Read **Ephesians 5:15-17**: What can these words of Paul teach us about preparedness in our spiritual battles?
5. Read **Ephesians 6:10-17**: Of the components Paul lists from the armor of God, which has proven most beneficial in your spiritual battles? Why?
6. Have you ever felt attacked by Satan on your own in ways much more intensely than when you've been walking with other believers? Explain.

Think It Over:

Rambo only works in the movies, not on the real-life battlefield...and much **LESS** on the spiritual battlefield. God designed us to walk through our battles together – to rely on one another and trust one another. He also designed us to **GATHER** together and prepare for battle. Find some folks you can walk with and wage the spiritual battles we're called to fight!



I turned 7 on April 7th, 1987. Our party (my twin brother and me) started at 7 PM and we were allowed to invite 7 friends...which also meant 7 presents (Are you picking up on a pattern?)! I'll never forget my "golden birthday" and the events surrounding it (not the least of which was the ridiculous number of times the number 7 appeared in our celebrations)! You know what WAS a forgettable birthday? April 7th, 1988. In fact, I can't tell you ANYTHING about that celebration...probably because I didn't invite anyone over for the party. That's the thing about parties...or celebrations of any kind for that matter. It just simply isn't as much of a celebration on our own.

I remember the 1990 High School Boys State Championship game when my high school, Bedford North Lawrence, beat Concord 63-60. It was the most attended high school basketball game in history, with 41,046 in attendance. I...was NOT one of them. I watched at home in my basement while Damon Bailey scored 30 points, including the final 11 for BNL. As excited as I was, I don't remember that moment nearly as well as the Seymour Regional Championship game I watched in person where Bailey broke the all-time Indiana high school scoring record. He scored 31 and the Stars beat Scottsburg 78-58. Midway through the 3rd quarter, off a pass from Chad Mills and with Bobby Knight sitting in the stands, Bailey scored his 3,020th point. The Barney Scott Gym erupted and the game was stopped for several minutes to clean up the hundreds of rolls of toilet paper fans rained down on the court! Now THAT was a memory. The noise was deafening. People were hugging strangers and I've seldom been caught up in a moment of such euphoria. But you know what, had I been watching that game in my basement as well, it probably wouldn't be nearly as memorable.

Celebrations are meant to take place with OTHER PEOPLE. Just like no great meal was ever built around a salad, no great celebration was ever built around being alone! And as much as we may lose sight of this truth from time to time, being saved from our sin is CERTAINLY a cause for celebration. Seeing God show up and work miracles is certainly a cause for celebration. Seeing captives set free...marriages restored...or prodigal children return are all causes for celebration. But those celebrations will never be what they were intended to be when we aren't together. When the Israelites gathered together it was often to celebrate, to commemorate, what God had done. The 7 prescribed feasts in the Old Testament were for no other reason than to CELEBRATE together what God had done. I wonder if maybe we miss out on something powerful, something profound, when we don't make it a habit to GATHER and celebrate what God has done?

Scriptures: *Exodus 12:12-17, Deuteronomy 14:22-26, 2 Samuel 6, Psalm 95:2, Psalm 118*

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you celebrated your Golden Birthday (when the date matches your age)? Do you remember anything special about that day?
2. What is a moment in your life you recall as being the most frenzied with celebration?
3. Have you ever truly had a celebratory experience in church? What made it so special?
4. Read **Exodus 12:12-17**: What was the nature of the celebration God put in place in this passage? Are there times in your life you have seen His deliverance that you should celebrate?
5. Read **Deuteronomy 14:22-26**: What does it tell you about the nature of our God that He would command the people to use their tithes to basically buy anything they needed for an amazing party in His honor?!
6. Read **Psalm 95:2** and **Psalm 118**: Have you ever thought of our times gathered together as a time to shout and celebrate unreservedly about what God has done? How does this differ from our usual gatherings with other believers?

Think It Over:

If Scripture is full of accounts where God's people gathered together for passionate and energetic celebrations just to show Him how much they loved Him, that should have a profound impact on our gatherings as well. Far from times to be constantly somber, our times to GATHER should be filled with excited and passionate celebration! Ask yourself what you can do to make that more a reality!



