

The Great Gathering

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of looking forward to the great gathering of true Christians at the end of the world, when Christ returns to earth the second time.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23-24, Isaiah 26:20, Matthew 24:31, Matthew 28:5, Acts 27:44, Ephesians 5:27, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 1 Peter 5:5, Revelation 20:13

Topics: "The Second Coming", "Christian Fellowship"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound significance of the gathering of true Christians at the return of Christ, contrasting it with the temporary and often sorrowful nature of earthly gatherings. He highlights that this future gathering will be a joyous assembly of all believers, free from the pain of separation and filled with perfect unity and holiness. Ryle encourages Christians to look forward to this event with hope, as it promises safety, reward, and eternal fellowship with God and fellow believers. He challenges listeners to reflect on their current desires for gatherings and their readiness for the ultimate gathering with Christ. The sermon serves as a reminder that the joy of being gathered to the Lord far surpasses any earthly celebration.

Transcript

"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him"

[2 Thessalonians 2:1]

The text which heads up this page contains an expression which deserves our most careful attention. That expression is--"Our being gathered."

"Our being gathered." Those three words ought to find a response in every part of the world. Man is by nature a social being: he does not like to be alone. Go wherever you want on earth, and you will find that people generally like meeting together, and seeing one another's faces. It is the exception, and not the rule, to find children of Adam who do not like "being gathered together."

For example, Christmas is noted as a time when English people "gather together." It is the season when family gatherings have almost become a national institution. In cities and in the country, among rich and among poor, from the palace to the home of the poor, Christmas cheer and Christmas parties are universal experiences. It is often the one time in the whole year for many to see their friends. Sons snatch

a few days from the business district to run down and see their parents; brothers take vacations from the desk to spend a week with their sisters; friends accept long-standing invitations to pay a visit to their friends; students rush home from school, and rejoice in the warmth and comfort of their parent's house. For a little while business comes to a standstill: the spinning wheel of ceaseless labor almost seems to stop spinning for a few hours. In short, all over the nation, there is a general spirit of "being gathered" together.

It is a happy land where such a state of things exist! Long may it last in our country, and may it never end! Poor and shallow is that philosophy which sneers at Christmas gatherings. Cold and hard is that religion which frowns at them, and denounces them as wicked. Family affection lies at the root of a well-ordered society. It is one of the few good things which has survived the fall, and prevent men and women from being mere devils. It is the secret oil on the wheels of our social system which keeps the whole machine going, and without which the power of the machine is useless. May the Christmas day never arrive when there are no family gatherings!

But, despite what I have just said, earthly gatherings also have something about them that is sad and sorrowful. The happiest parties sometimes contain disagreeable members. The merriest Christmas parties last only for a short time. Moreover, as the years roll on, the hand of death makes painful gaps in the family circle. Even in the midst of Christmas merriment we cannot help remembering those who have passed away. The longer we live, the more we feel that we are standing alone. The old faces will rise before the eyes of our minds, and old voices will sound in our ears, even in the midst of holiday merriment and laughter. People do not talk much about such things, but there are few who do not feel them. We need not intrude our inmost thoughts on others, and especially when all around us everyone is bright and happy; but there are many, I suspect, who reach middle age, who would admit, if they spoke honestly, that there are sorrowful things inseparably mixed up with a Christmas party. In short, there is no unmixed pleasure about any earthly "gathering."

But is there no better "gathering" yet to come? Is there no bright prospect on our horizon of an assembly which will far outshine the assemblies of Christmas and New Year--an assembly in which there will be joy without sorrow, and merriment without tears? I thank God that I can give a plain answer to these questions; and to give it is the simple object of this paper. I ask my readers to give me their attention for a few minutes, and I will soon show them what I mean.

I. There is a "gathering" of true Christians which is yet to come. What is it, and when will it be?

The gathering I speak of will take place at the end of the world, in the day when Christ returns to earth the second time. He went away in the clouds of heaven, and in the clouds of heaven He will return. Visibly, in the body, He will return. And the very first thing that Christ will do will be to "gather" His people. "He will send His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." (Matthew 24:31)

The manner of this "gathering" is plainly revealed in Scripture. The dead saints will all be raised, and the living saints will all be changed. It is written, "The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them." "The dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (Revelation 20:13; 1

Thessalonians 4:16, 17; 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52) And then when every member of Christ is found, and not one is left behind, when soul and body, those old companions, are once more reunited, then will it be the great "gathering."

The object of this "being gathered" is as clearly revealed in Scripture as its manner. It is partly for the final reward of Christ's people: that their complete justification from all guilt may be declared to all creation; that they may receive the "crown of glory that will never fade away," and the "kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world;" that they may be admitted publicly into the joy of their Lord! It is partly for the safety of Christ's people, that, like Noah in the ark and Lot in Zoar, they may be hid and covered before the storm of God's judgment comes down on the wicked; that when the last plagues are falling on the enemies of the Lord, they may be untouched, as Rahab's family in the fall of Jericho, and unscathed as the three children in the midst of the fire. The saints have no reason to fear in the day of gathering, however fearful the signs that may accompany it. Before the final crash of all things begins, they will be hidden in the secret place of the Most High. The great gathering is for their safety and their reward. "Do not be afraid," will the gathering-angels say, "for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified." "Go, my people," will their Master say: "enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until My wrath has passed by." (Matthew 28:5; Isaiah 26:20)

(a) This gathering will be a great one.

All children of God who have ever lived, from Adam, the first saint, down to the last born in the day that our Lord comes--everyone of every age, and nation, and church, and people, and tongue--everyone will be gathered together. No one will be overlooked or forgotten. The weakest and feeblest will not be left behind. Now, when "scattered," true Christians seem like a little flock; then, when "gathered," they will be found to be a multitude which no man can number.

(b) This gathering will be a wonderful one.

The saints from distant lands, who never saw each other in the flesh, and could not understand each other's speech if they met, will all be brought together in one harmonious fellowship. Those who live in Australia will find they are as near to heaven and will arrive there as quick as those living in England. The believers who died five thousand years ago and whose bones are mere dust, will find their bodies raised and renewed as quickly as those who are alive when the trumpet sounds. Above all, miracles of grace will be revealed. We will see some in heaven whom we never expected would have been saved at all. The confusion of tongues will finally be reversed, and done away. The assembled multitude will cry with one heart and in one language, "See what God has done!" (Numbers 23:23)

(c) This gathering will be a humbling one.

It will make an end of bigotry and narrow-mindedness forever. The Christians of one denomination will find themselves side by side with those of another denomination; if they would not tolerate them on earth, they will be obliged to tolerate them in heaven. Those Christians, who will neither pray together nor worship together now, will discover to their shame that they must praise together for all eternity. The very people who will not allow us to sit with them at the Lord's Table now, will be obliged to acknowledge us before our Master's face, and to let us sit down by their side. Never, will the world see such a complete overthrow of sectarianism, party spirit, unbrotherliness, religious jealousy, and religious pride. Finally, we will all be completely "clothed with humility." (1 Peter 5:5)

This "being gathered to Him," is the mighty and wonderful gathering which ought to be foremost in men's thoughts. It deserves consideration; it demands attention. Gatherings of other kinds are incessantly occupying our minds: political gatherings, scientific gatherings, gatherings for pleasure, gatherings for gain. But the hour comes, and will soon be here, when gatherings of this kind will be completely forgotten. Only one thought will swallow up men's minds; that thought will be, "Will I be gathered with Christ's people into a place of safety and honor, or be left behind to everlasting agony?" LET US BE CAREFUL THAT WE ARE NOT LEFT BEHIND.

II. Why is this "gathering" together of true Christians a thing to be desired? Let us try to get an answer to that question.

Paul evidently thought that the gathering at the last day was an object of great joy which Christians ought to keep before their eyes. He classes it with the second coming of our Lord, which, he says elsewhere, believers love and long for. He exalts it in the distant horizon as one of those "good things that are coming," which should animate the faith of every pilgrim to walk the narrow path. He seems to say, that not only will each servant of God have rest, and a kingdom, and a crown; but he will also find himself truly blessed by "being gathered to Him." Now, where is the peculiar blessedness of this gathering? Why is it a thing that we ought to look forward to with joy, and expect with pleasure? Let us see.

(a) For one thing, when all true Christians are "gathered to Him" it will be a state, of things totally unlike their present condition.

To be scattered, and not gathered, seems the rule of man's existence now. Of all the millions who are born into the world each year, how few continue together till they die! Children who live their first days under the same roof, and play in the same living room, are sure to be separated as they grow up, and will draw their last breath in a far distant place from one another. The same law applies to the people of God. They are spread abroad like salt, one in one place and one in another, and never allowed to continue long by each other's side. Without a doubt it is for the good of the world that it is this way. A town would be a very dark place at night if all the lights were crowded together into one room. But, good as it is for the world, it is a big trial to believers. There are many days when they feel desolate and alone; many times they long for a little more communion with their brethren, and a little more fellowship with those who love the Lord! Well, they may look forward with hope and comfort, for the hour is coming when they will have no lack of companions. Let them lift up their heads and rejoice, for they soon will be "gathered to Him."

(b) For another thing, when all true Christians are "gathered to Him" they will be an assembly entirely of one mind.

There are no such assemblies now, for hypocrisy and false profession creep in everywhere. Wherever there is wheat there are sure to be weeds. Wherever there are good fish there are sure to be bad ones too. Wherever there are wise virgins there are sure to be foolish ones too. There is no such thing as a perfect Church now. There is a Judas Iscariot at every communion table, and a Demas who will desert the church because of his love for the world; and wherever the "sons of God" come together Satan is sure to appear among them. (Job 1:6) But all this will come to an end one day. Our Lord will finally present to the Father a perfect Church, "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish." (Ephesians 5:27) How glorious such a Church will be! To meet with half-a-dozen believers together now is a rare event in a Christian's year, and one that cheers him like a sunshiny day in winter: it makes him feel his heart burn within him, as

the disciples felt on the way to Emmaus. But how much more joyful will it be to meet a "multitude that no man can number!" To find too, that everyone we meet is finally of one opinion and one judgment, and sees eye to eye--to discover that all our unfortunate controversies are buried forever, and that one group of Christians no longer quarrels with other Christian groups--to join a company of Christians in which there is neither squabbling, nor discord, and where every man has complete holiness, and all of his former sins, that so easily entangled him on earth, have dropped off like the leaves of a tree in Autumn--all this will indeed be happiness! No wonder that Paul invites us to look forward.

(c) For another thing, when all true Christians are "gathered to Him" it will be a gathering in which none will be absent.

The weakest lamb will not be left behind in the wilderness: the youngest babe that ever drew breath will not be overlooked or forgotten. We will once more see our beloved friends and relatives who fell asleep in Christ, and left us in sorrow and tears, and they will be better, brighter, more beautiful, and more pleasant than we ever found them on earth. We will hold communion with all the saints of God who have fought the good fight before us, from the beginning of the world to the end. Patriarchs and Prophets, Apostles and Fathers, Martyrs and Missionaries, Reformers and Puritans, all the host of God's elect will be there. If reading their words and works has been pleasant, how much better will it be to see them! If to hearing them, and being stirred by their example has been useful, how much more delightful will it be to talk with them, and ask them questions! To sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and hear how they kept the faith without a Bible--to converse with Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, and Daniel, and to hear how they could believe in a Christ that was yet to come--to converse with Peter, Paul, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, and to listen to their wondrous tale of what their Master did for them--all this will indeed be sweet! No wonder that Paul invites us to look forward.

(d) In the last place, when all true Christians are "gathered to Him" it will be a gathering without a parting.

There are no such meetings now. We seem to live in a time of endless hurry, and can hardly sit down and catch our breath before we are off again. "Good-bye" treads on the heels of "How are you?" The cares of this world, the necessary duties of life, the demands of our families, the work of our various callings in life--all these things appear to eat up our days, and to make it impossible to have long quiet times of communion with God's people. But, blessed be God, it will not always be this way. The hour is coming and will soon be here, when "good-bye" and "farewell" will be words that are laid aside and buried forever, when we will meet in a world where the former things have passed away, where there will be no more sin and no more sorrow--no more poverty and no more money--no more labor of body or labor of brains--no more need of anxiety for families--no more sickness, no more pain, no more old age, no more death, and no more change. When we meet in that endless state of being, calm, and restful, and unhurried, who can tell what a blessed change it will be? No wonder that Paul invites us to look up and to look forward.

I lay these things before all who read this paper, and ask them to give it their serious attention. If I know anything of a Christian's experience, I am sure they contain food for reflection. This, at least, I say confidently: the man who sees nothing much in the second coming of Christ and the public "gathering" of Christ's people--nothing happy, nothing joyful, nothing pleasant, nothing desirable--such a man has every reason to doubt whether he himself is a true Christian.

(1) I ask you a simple question. Do not turn away from it and refuse to look it in the face. Will you be gathered by the angels into God's home when the Lord returns, or will you be left behind?

One thing, at any rate, is very certain. There will only be two groups of mankind at the last great day: those who are on the right hand of Christ, and those who are on the left--those who are counted righteous, and those who are wicked--those who are safe in the ark, and those who are outside--those who are gathered like wheat into God's barn, and those who are left behind like weeds to be burned. Now, what group will you belong too?

Perhaps you do not know yet. You cannot say. You are not sure. You hope for the best. You trust it will be all right in the end: but you won't undertake to give an opinion. Well, I only hope you will never rest until you do know. The Bible will tell you plainly who those are that will be "gathered to Him." Your own heart, if you are honest with yourself, will tell you whether you are one of the number. Do not rest, do not rest, until you know!

How can men stand the partings and separations of this life if they have no hope of anything better--how can they bear to say "good-bye" to sons and daughters, and launch them on the troublesome waves of this world, if they have no expectation of a safe "gathering" in Christ at the last day--how they can part with beloved members of their families, and let them journey to the other side of the globe, not knowing if they will ever meet happily in this life or the life to come--how this can be, completely baffles my understanding. I can only suppose that most people never think, never consider, never look forward. Once a man begins to think, then he will never be satisfied until he has found Christ and is safe.

(2) If you want to know your own chance of being gathered into God's home, then I offer you a simple way of testing the condition of your soul. Ask yourself what kind of gatherings you like best here on earth? Ask yourself whether you really love being gathered together with God's people?

How could that man enjoy the meeting of true Christians in heaven who takes no pleasure in meeting with true Christians on earth? How can that heart which is completely focused on parties, sporting events, entertainment, and worldly assemblies, and who thinks that earthly worship is a real drag--how can such a heart be in tune for the company of saints, and only the saints? It is impossible. It cannot be.

Never, never let it be forgotten, that our tastes on earth are a sure evidence of the state of our hearts; and the state of our hearts here is a sure indication of our eternal destiny. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. He that hopes to be gathered with the saints in heaven while he only loves the gathering of sinners on earth is deceiving himself. If he lives and dies in that state of mind he will find in the end, that it would have been better for him if he had never been born.

(3) If you are a true Christian, I exhort you to be frequently looking forward.

Your good things are yet to come. Your redemption is drawing near. The night is almost over. The day is at hand. For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. When He comes, He will bring the saints from heaven with Him and change the ones that are still alive on the earth. Look forward! There is a "gathering together" yet to come.

The morning after a shipwreck is a sorrowful time. The joy of half-drowned survivors, who have safely reached the land, is often sadly marred by the remembrance of shipmates who have sunk to rise no more. There will be no such sorrow when believers gather together around the throne of the Lamb. Not one of the ship's company will be found absent. Some got "there on planks or on pieces of the ship . . . [but] everyone reached land in safety." (Acts 27:44) The great waters and raging waves will swallow none of God's elect. When the sun rises everyone will be seen safe and "gathered together."

Even the day after a great victory is a sorrowful time. The triumphant feelings of the conquerors are often mingled with bitter regrets for those who fell in action and died on the battlefield. The list of "killed, wounded, and missing" breaks many a heart, fills many a home with mourning, and brings many a grey head sorrowing to the grave. The great Duke of Wellington often said, "there was but one thing worse than a victory, and that was a defeat." But, thanks be to God, there will be no such sorrow in heaven! The soldiers of the great Captain of our salvation will all answer when their names are called in the end. The roll call will be as complete after the battle as it was before. Not one believer will be "missing" in the great "gathering together."

Does Christmas, for instance, bring with it sorrowful feelings and painful associations? Do tears come to your eyes when you note the empty places around dinner table? Do grave thoughts come sweeping over your mind, even in the midst of your children's festivity, when you remember the dear old faces and much loved voices of some that sleep in the grave? Well, look up and look forward! The time is short. The world is growing old. The coming of the Lord is drawing near. There is yet to be a meeting without parting, and a gathering without separation. Those believers whom you laid in the grave with many tears are in good keeping: you will yet see them again with joy. Look up! I say once more. Lay hold by faith the "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him." Believe it, think of it, rest on it. It is all true.

Do you feel lonely and deserted as every December comes around? Do you find few people left to pray with, few to praise with, few to open your heart to, few to exchange experience with? Do you increasingly learn that heaven is becoming every year more full and earth more empty? Well, it is an old story. You are only drinking a cup which myriads have drunk before. Look up and look forward. The lonely time will soon be past and over: you will have plenty of company in the future. "When [you] awake, [you] will be satisfied with seeing your [Lord's] likeness. (Psalm 17:15) Yet a little while and you will see a congregation that will never break up, and a day of rest that will never end. "The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him," will make amends for everything.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/the-great-gathering/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net