

[New Testament Themes, E5]

[Speaker in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this is the fifth of a six-part series that represents a number of teachings that I did years ago at Door of Hope Church. We challenged the whole church to read the New Testament in ninety days, and hundreds of us did. And we gathered at 6 a.m., five mornings a week, to read the day's readings aloud together—to talk about them. And then in the Sunday gatherings, which is where these teachings come from, we would pick on key themes and ideas from that week's readings and unpack them.

And so this is a message from the book of Hebrews, near the end of the book—and we're in chapter ten of the letter to the Hebrews, exploring these really cool images and ideas and challenges connected to what it means to gather as a community of Jesus's followers [on] a regular basis, and to commit to each other.

Being a part of a church community goes in and out of fashion in Western culture—modern Western culture. As I'm here recording this today, in the middle of 2017, there are many movements that are beginning to question the value of even being a part of a church community. And I get that. Church communities are ripe for bad leadership and spiritual abuse. But the ideal is that a group of Jesus's followers are calling out the best in each other and striving for the ideals of a community centered around the risen Jesus to be a form of witness in their neighborhood and in their city. And so this message was really challenging for me. It helped me reshape some categories and expectations that I even had about church, and it was very helpful for me. So I hope it's helpful for you, too. Let's dive in.

[Musical Break (02:51—02:57)]

All right, today is day seventy-seven of the ninety days. What? So just two weeks left, you guys. We're powering through the 6 a.m. studies, Monday through Friday. This week, we're going to explore what it means for the Gospel to reshape our idea of community, friendship, and relationships together.

And so we're in Hebrews 10. And this is, kind of, one of those things—what book did we study all summer as a church? Hebrews. And so—and in fact, who taught Hebrews 10 last time, say, in August or something? Oh, that would have been me! Wow. So, but I had to teach half of the chapter. It's a big, long, complex thing, and that was fun. But I remember thinking to myself, “Man, if I could just focus on this one paragraph.” There's so much here for us as a church, I think.

And so, lo and behold, the readings for the weekend landed in these chapters. And so it was just a great chance to focus in. So we're going to be in Hebrews 10, verses nineteen through twenty-five. Read the verses as a whole, give us a framework, and then we're going to dive back into some particulars here.

Hebrews 10, verse 19. The author—we have no idea who that person is—they say, “Therefore, brothers”—and that includes the brothers *and* the sisters in the community, right? [Laughing] Everybody in the community. “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since—because we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, here's how we should respond. Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.” It's referring to, I think, baptism there. Christian baptism is a symbol of our souls being washed with the grace of God.

How else should we respond? “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And,” third response, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

This is one of the most powerful, dense statements about genuine Christian community that you have anywhere in the Bible. What's important is that, in the last couple sentences, you have a description of the practices of a genuine Christian community. And that's in verses 24 and 25. We're going to come back to them in just a second here.

But that whole discussion of the practices of what a genuine Christian community looks like only comes after the source and the power that generates Christian community is explored in the first half of the paragraph there. And so that's what we're going to do. We're going to talk about: what does it actually look like, practically, to be in Gospel reshaped types of relationships with each other and as a whole, as a community? And where does the power—the power that generates the ability to do those kinds of things—where does that come from? That's what this paragraph is all about here.

Let me give us a big framework for a metaphor that I came across while studying the passage that's been helpful for me. So here's what I'd like you to consider—and we'll come back to this, kind of, again and again, as we study through the paragraph. I'd like you to consider the difference between—who played marbles as a little kid? Anybody play marbles? There you go. So I had a large bag of marbles, but I never, like—the whole thing about the circle? And like this

—you hit the ones in the circle? I never did that. [Laughing] I always used them as, like, cannonballs for my G.I. Joes, or something like that, anyway.

But I inherited from my dad a big bag of marbles, and I think he may have played with them in the circle or whatever. So I'd like you to consider a bag of marbles. Think about a bag of marbles. A big bag, like 200 glass marbles. And you have a collection of all these individual entities. And I'd like you to consider how a bag of marbles is similar, but also different, from a cluster of grapes. Because a cluster of grapes is also a collection of individual entities, isn't it?

There's a lot of differences. So marbles, right, there's a bunch of little individual entities. It makes noise when you crash them around, or whatever. Some of them might crack or break, or something like that. If your mesh bag, like mine, had a hole in it, sometimes the marble would drop through, sometimes, and whatever. And you wouldn't really notice it, because it's just a conglomeration of all these little, individual entities.

They're alike. They're similar. So it has that going for it. But if you shake the bag, or something like that, a marble that's down here, all of a sudden it's going to kind of . . . wind its way up here. And nobody will have really missed it, because they all have traded places, and so on. There's a lot of slippage and movement and transience in a bag of marbles, right?

Contrast that with a cluster of grapes, which is also a collection of little individual entities that are about the size of marbles, yes? There's a profound difference. Let's say you were to lay a bag of marbles and a cluster of grapes on the table. And if you're to peer back into the cluster of grapes, you would discover what? What do you discover in there? You discover this network, this organic network, that's connecting all of the grapes to each other.

And so while it's a bunch of individual entities, yes, they are all connected to the same source, which is—whatever, I realized at the last message—I don't know what you call that runs through the grape. Sap? I don't know what runs through a grape cluster. I don't know. We'll just say sap, because you know what I'm talking about. So sap. But it's sourced in the vine. There's one source. There's one life-energy source, coursing through the network of vines, and so on, that leads to all of the little individual grapes.

And so here's what that means. What it means is that there's only—no grape can touch all the other grapes at the same time, right? So there's probably only about five or six grapes around any individual grape. But because of how the network works, a grape on this side might be connected to a grape on this side just by, like, two degrees of separation, something like that.

And some of the grapes—let's say a grape goes bad. A grape goes bad here. Is that only a concern to that grape? No, that's a sign that something is happening one or two links up the chain. And that it might affect a grape on the other side, that you would have never put the two together. There's an organic connectedness to a cluster of grapes, because they are all connected personally, individually, to a life source.

You, kind of, see where I'm going with this. But I would ask you: at any given church community, does it tend to be more like a cluster of grapes or more like a bag of marbles? Or maybe you could say it this way. You could say the great challenge of any Christian community is the constant temptation to drift from becoming what it ought to be—which is a cluster of grapes—to becoming a bag of marbles.

And actually, I think that's precisely the type of idea that's underneath this paragraph that we just read. Look at verse 25. Something that was a warning, or a danger, for some of the people in this little house church community was to stop meeting together, to stop connecting—marbles falling out of the mesh bag. And so he says, “No, that's deadly.” He says, “Don't neglect meeting together.”

The word the author uses right there—you actually know it, even though you don't know that you know it. So it's a Greek word: *sunagoge*, *sunagoge*—from which we get our English word, “synagogue.” Yes, synagogue. So all of the early communities of Jesus's followers—they were Jewish, the first generation . . . because they—Jesus, Jewish Messiah, and so on. They later came to call themselves “the church,” or “the assembly.”

But one of the earliest terms that Christians used to describe themselves was this Jewish term here: *sunagoge*. It's a congregation. And a congregation is very different from an aggregation. An aggregation is a bunch of marbles in a bag. An aggregation is a bunch of people who might have a common interest. They might look alike—similar. They all like the same music—common interests. They like to ride bikes together, roast coffee together—I don't know, whatever—right—people do in Portland.

But other than that common interest, or that superficial connection, they exist unto themselves. They aren't there for each other, and because of each other. They're there because of the common interest. And [like] with a cluster of grapes, a congregation of genuine Christian community is very different. It's very different because there's a common fate and interconnectedness to all of them. If something's going wrong, if one person is falling through the cracks, that's a sign of somebody, somewhere, losing contact with the source. And there's a noticeable gap when someone plucks off one of the grapes.

And, not that everybody can know each other, everybody can't be each other's best friend, but there's something that transcends us just being congregated together around, like, music that we like. There's something deep and personal.

This is a phrase that I came across while studying for the passage, and I think it's so profound. So, in other words, each grape or each person in a congregation has a personal connection to the source of life. The Gospel creates a community of people who are personally being impacted and transformed, and brought into this organic thing that takes place when the story of Jesus gets told. It's personal, but it is never private. It's personal, but never private.

And so what this means is that whatever's happening between me and Jesus is actually deeply connected to what's happening to you, and you through Jesus. Because odds are, your coworker invited you, and that you live up the street from there, and that through you—so fiancé, daughter-in-law, and so on to you. You know what I'm saying? Like, Door of Hope—every community of people is like that.

Did you know it's no longer six degrees of separation for the whole planet, the whole human population? Did you know that? It's 4.7. 4.7. People did these crazy statistical studies on Facebook of people across the planet, and it's now 4.7 degrees of separation. Anyway, that's an interesting one for you.

So let's just think of any church community. It's going to be like two—you know what I'm saying—two degrees of separation, maybe three. And so whatever is happening with one grape,

because we're all connected to a common source, whatever's happening with you is not private. It's not just "you and Jesus and your pickup truck," cruising through life. There's a common fate because we have a common source, a common lot together. That's what's underneath the vision of genuine Christian community.

And this is very countercultural. Let me just—I'll just make this comment and then we'll dive back into the passage. I don't know if any of you read *Portland Monthly* at all. You probably see it on the grocery stands or whatever. October issue of *Portland Monthly*. You guys know *Portland Monthly*? Yeah, so in October, their October issue was like the poll—popular opinion poll—of, like, what Portlanders think about God, money, sex, race, family, love, and death.

And what was interesting, about the statistics related to religious belief—and actually kind of surprising to me—64 percent of Portlanders don't believe that we're just random molecules crashing into each other, you know, as an accident. Two out of three—64 percent of Portlanders believe there's something bigger going on here, related to a spiritual realm or to God, or to "the gods." That's two out of three. The odds are really good, among your coworkers, that people have some kind of intuition or bigger idea that there's something bigger going on there. It's just a conversation waiting to be had.

Of that 64 percent, here's what's interesting: 25 percent describe themselves as religious, meaning, "I'm connected in some way, however loose, to an actual, religious community of some kind." And so what that left is 39 percent, 40 percent of Portlanders—right, so it's almost half—describe themselves in the category of "spiritual, but not religious." Spiritual, but not religious. This is a growing category or mindset in American culture right now.

And it's not just among people who are not Christians. It's prevalent among people who are Christians too. It's because "me and Jesus, and my pickup truck." A church is an aggregation of individuals who are having spiritual experiences and all sing songs with you. "Oh, maybe I'll go to Bible study," and so on. But the moment you, like, actually want me to get real? The moment my anger problem . . .? "No, like, I don't let people go there with me. Talk about, like, my spending habits? Like, I'm not going to let you talk to me like that." So it becomes private.

And I think in our culture, at large, what it becomes is, essentially, it's kind of the hodgepodge, kind of "make your own religion" out of a couple other, few religions. And essentially, what we become subject to is Sigmund Freud's, just, fundamental critique of religion. His basic point about religion is: all we're really doing is projecting our biases, our anxieties, our sexual frustrations—we're just projecting them out onto the clouds and calling it "God."

And then people who have similar, distorted ideas of God congregate into what we call—and there's an element to which that is totally true. Many of us have such deeply distorted views of God, but we wouldn't know it because we would never open ourselves up to another voice, of another person, to speak what we need to hear, or would never tell ourselves.

And so I actually think that's true. Our churches are, most likely, filled with lots of people who are, kind of, connected to the cluster of grapes. It's like a bag of marbles and a cluster of grapes put together. And you shake it around. And so my guess is that many of this 39 percent of Portland have probably been in a bag of marbles. And they got hurt. They got burned—I don't know. They fell through the cracks. Nobody cared about them. Nobody helped them when they needed help. Nobody challenged them when they needed to be challenged.

Genuine Christian community, it's a rare thing. And so let's have that in mind, and what this means for us as Door of Hope, as we dive into this paragraph and look at what genuine Christian community could really be. Look at verses 24 and 25. We're going to look at the marks, or the practices, of a genuine Christian community. And then we're going to explore the source that generates it.

So look at verses 24 and 25. He says, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but rather encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near." Did you see it? Did you see the practices there? There's four character traits of genuine Christian community right there.

The first one is right there in verse 24. He says, "Let us"—do what? Let us . . . Let us . . . "Let's consider." At least that's the English Standard Version translation. "Let's consider." A genuine Christian community begins with intentional attentiveness to others. It's not about, "I go there to get something out of it." It's, "I go there to be intentional, to invest in others." It's consideration. It's consideration.

So think about this. You don't have to raise your hands here, but if you've had the experience, which I highly recommend for most human beings in their lives—is to go see a counselor or a therapist at some point. It's just—can be a wonderful experience. Not always, but it can be. And so what happens in a situation like that? You're in the chair, the couch, or whatever, and what is the counselor doing? They're asking you questions. They're listening. They're studying you. That's what they're doing.

And most often, you will find them taking notes, jotting down little things that you're saying. They're jotting down your body language and non-verbal cues, and so on. They're paying attention to what you are saying, but also all the stuff that you're not saying, too, right? That's what a good counselor does. They're studying you. They're considering you. That's the word, "study"—*pay close attention to*.

So a genuine Christian community is marked by intentional attentiveness to the other "grapes" that are around me. Because, after all, their fate is connected to my fate. Because if there's a problem with them and their personal connection to the source of life, likely that's going to be connected somehow, in and through to something that's about me, too. And so I need to be involved. I need to pay attention. It's *attentiveness*.

And so you can just—as we go through these, I would just jot down mentally—or if you take notes, or whatever—just jot down: are these character traits that mark me as part of Door of Hope? Do I come in with a mindset of attentiveness to the people around me? I'm considering who's around, who's here. I'm considering who's in my home community group. I'm considering, I pay attention, I remember them. I remember their stories. I'm thinking about their well-being. It's a very simple practice. But that's the first mark right here. It's a community of consideration.

Let's keep going. What are we considering how to do? So what does he say here? He says, "First here, let's consider, intentionally, how to stir up one another." That's the English Standard Version. Any other translations of that little phrase? How to "spur one another on." How to "provoke"—that's my favorite translation. I think that gets the idea.

So this is a word that's typically used of a farmer dealing with a group of stubborn oxen or cows. And so it refers to what a farmer will do. Like there's a whatever-ton bull sitting there, and it

doesn't want to go to the water trough, or something. I don't know. [Laughing] I clearly did not grow up on a farm. You have a stick, or a staff of some kind. But very often, on the end of the staff, there'll be like a nail or, like, a sharp point. And the verb that he uses is doing *this*. [Laughing] Doing *this* to the stubborn ox. It's irritating, provoking to move forward. This is, kind of, a harsh word.

We're paying attention to lots of different things. One of the things we'll pay attention to is how to, in love, have the hard conversations with each other—basically—about areas in our life where we are making really bad choices. We need to shift course, right? So we don't like this. So in the name of individual liberty and privacy, religion, and so on—like, “Don't talk to me like that.”

It's just that real, base, that—when my wife and I are having tensions, or miscommunications, and so on, we'll often alleviate the situation, and just be like, “Don't tell me what to do.” Because it's just, kind of like, yeah, that's really what we're all feeling is: “Don't tell me what to do,” you know?

What the author of Hebrews is saying is that's precisely the sign of healthy, alive Christian community—is saying, “Tell me what . . . I actually don't know what to do.” And the moment that I think I do, I'm naïve and I'm blind. And part of it, too, is that I don't think we actually believe what the Scriptures are trying to tell us—mostly through its narratives and stories—about just how screwed up we are, right? And just how pervasive sin has distorted our ways of thinking about ourselves. We're just intensely self-absorbed people.

And it's precisely the character flaws in us that we are most blind to—the ones that we rationalize and minimize and say, “That's not really a big deal.” Those are precisely the character traits that are most likely to shipwreck us—you know what I'm saying? Because you just think it's normal or whatever. And then when your friend lays eyes on it and they're like, “He talks to his mother that way?” Like, “Well, that's how we've always talked to each other.” “No, dude, that's, like—you shouldn't talk to your mom that way.”

“You're always broke, but you're always wearing brand new clothes. Do the two not go together?” Like, “you should probably find a way to change it.” “Well, that's how I've always done it.” “Exactly, and that's—” they're always broke. So it's these blind spots. “Well, that's how my parents did it” It's these blind spots, these flaws in our character that we think are normal. Those are precisely the areas where I need another set of eyes studying my life and paying attention. And if need be, that I've invited to say the hard things to me.

There are some Christians who like this verse a lot. [Laughing] You know what I mean? So they're too good at obeying this—about doing this “provoking” thing. There's some Christians who like to do this, but don't like to do the action that matches it. Go down to verse 25. “Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but”—doing what to one another?—“encouraging one another.”

There's only two “one anothers” in these two verses. “Provoking,” you know, “prodding” one another. And then “encouraging one another.” And “encouraging” is about coming alongside and sympathizing, listening, consoling, speaking the encouraging word. Some people like to provoke—provoke and prod, and get in the face, and have the hard conversation—but they don't have a clue about how to console and sympathize.

And then there are lots of people who are great at being the listening ear, and the shoulder to cry on, and the sympathetic . . . They are so insecure or worried about how they're going to be viewed, or whatever, they never have the hard conversations that might create some tension in the relationship.

And both are marks of all of the members of genuine Christian community. It doesn't just say, like, "Extroverts, consider other people and go, like, initiate relationships," you know? And then, "Those who are particularly, kind of like, snarky or whatever—kind of mean, you should go provoke." We should all aspire to be doing all of these things for each other.

Now, here's the thing—again, the cluster of grapes. Not every grape is immediately surrounded by every other grape. Most of us max out at one to five, or so, close relationships in our lives. There's always broader circles, and so on. It's the same as in a cluster of grapes—most of us max out. Here's the real question—I just put it to you practically. Have you paid attention to who's around you, and initiated intentional relationships? Not just like, watching movies together, or whatever, like, growing kombucha together, or whatever—although that's totally cool. Do that, that's great.

But is there an intentional, considered, set-aside time or space in that friendship to talk about the things that matter most? Where there's space where you can invite and listen to, and offer prodding words and encouraging, consoling words that are Jesus-centered?

And for many people, that's a cup of coffee every two weeks, every week. It's breakfast once a month, with two or three people—whatever form that takes. It's not happening right now. How well can you do the "one another's," like, right now—this very moment? No, you're listening to a guy talk. [Laughing] You know what I'm saying? And this gathering has an important role in the community of Jesus, where we hear from the Scriptures together.

But it's precisely in the *working it out*—of studying each other's lives and inviting those difficult words and offering the consoling words—that's where growth happens. That's where people begin to find real traction and change in their lives. When somebody will put their set of eyes on your life—have you done that? Are you doing that?

And it may be one of those things—you might get in the mindset of, "I would love somebody to do that for me." And of course, who wouldn't want to initiate a friendship where somebody genuinely loves and cares about my well-being to be able to invest in me in that way? And how rad, if I could have a chance to do that for somebody else?

And so I think what it comes down to is this—is, if we want to be a community, a genuine Christian community that's marked by those kinds of practices, it's kind of—I mean, it's totally cliché. It's the Gandhi quote. It's like, "Be the change you want to see in the world or something." But I think that's really true. You can complain that no one does that for you, or you can just start doing it for some other people and just see what happens. And you're likely to see the favor returned at some point.

And the end result of it is the fourth mark. It's in verse 24. So we're "considering how to stir up one another." We're also "encouraging one another." To what result, to what goal and end does he say here? "Love and good works."

"Love" is—maybe the other Greek word, you know: *agape*, love. And in English, love is a feeling, and it's something that we're passive to. Love *happens*, we "fall in love"—it happens to

you, in English, and in our culture. It's not "love" in the Bible. We should, maybe, find a different word, because it's just a total... "Love" is an action in the Bible. "Love" is not a feeling. It's an action that demonstrates loyalty, and choice to seek the well-being of another, regardless of what I get out of it. That's *agape*. It's a choice.

And so if we're intentionally gathering together, if we're saying the hard things and the encouraging things in love, what will result? This others-centeredness—love, and then a community—a cluster of grapes that just oozes the well-being of others. You know what I'm saying?

And so good works—which is the phrase in the New Testament that just means "acts of sacrificial service"—most often for the poorest in a given community. This is what will naturally result. These are the traits of genuine community: consideration and intention, poking and provoking, encouraging, resulting in love and good works.

So there you go. Good luck. And I'll pray now, if that's good? [Laughing] All right, so I'll pray. So what's your batting average here? You know what I'm saying? How good are you doing? You know, I'm not trying to be a jerk or anything, but just, even if your response is, "Well, no one's doing this for me," that tells you a lot about yourself, actually. It's just like, well, okay. But if this is an others-centered community, what if I begin to take on the mindset of "how can I do this for others and then just see what happens"?

So here's the challenge. How do you create a community that's marked by these traits? And there's a sense in which I don't think we can create community, because the fundamental trait of this community is people who are just completely others-centered. They're not self-absorbed. They don't come just because of "what I can get out of it," or that "I get to be around that girl, and so now I can ask her out," or whatever. Or "I can listen to cool music," or whatever.

It's like, "No, I'm here because of what Jesus is doing inside of me, and how can I help and serve and be involved in that process in other people's lives?" That's what this is about: a rewiring of our hearts. I can try to give inspirational messages—so can Josh. But it seems to me, what's required here is a fundamental rewiring of our hearts. Because our hearts tend towards self-absorption, in "me" and "my little story." Our hearts tend towards the well-being of myself and my little group, my little ring or circle, to the neglect, or even sometimes, the expense of you and your little circle.

And so whatever it's going to take to make us all into these kinds of people, I don't have the power to generate that. And there's certainly no program we can do for that. You know what I mean? It's not like—we have, as our first pillar, the Gospel and the cross, here at Door of Hope. Our second pillar is community—life together. And so you can't just be like, "Okay, everybody sign up on a Website, and you'll meet your best friend ever and have amazing, life conversations." No, like, no, you can't do that. There's a sense in which it just has to happen.

But that just raises the question of *how* does it happen? What is the source? What's the power that generates people beginning to look outward for the well-being of others? And that, my friends, is the first half of the paragraph.

Let's read it again, verses 19 through 23. How do you generate that kind of community? He says, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, that is, through

his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let's draw near with true hearts, in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, our bodies washed with pure water. Let's hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who promised is faithful."

Now, this is a very powerful statement here. Some of us might be hung up about the stuff about blood on curtains. "What? Blood and curtains, whatever—don't you wash blood out of curtains? Like, what—I don't get it." So . . . strange imagery here. So remember this was the challenge all the way through the book of Hebrews, when we did it this summer, was: he just assumes that you're just immersed and know the Old Testament Scriptures like the back of your hand.

He's assuming a little mental picture that we all have of Old Testament worship, of the temple and the place of worship in ancient Israel. And so you can just draw it very generally here. The structure of the Israelite temple: there is a . . . a fence or curtain that created a large courtyard. And in this courtyard, there was an altar. There was on the altar, bloody, slaughtered animals. It's like your ancient butcher shop. And so those are being offered up.

Who among the Israelites can enter into the courtyard for the sacrifices to be offered, be standing right here? So the priest—there's a priest there. He has to officiate and so on. So we'll give him a beard. He's a Bible guy, a priest. But then, you know, your average Israelite—Joe, you know, Moshe or Esther, or whatever—they can come in too—right?—they can come in too, or, you know, the dress. So they can come in too, and if it's their sacrifice, they can go with the priest, because it's their sacrifice being offered right here.

Now, behind the altar and in the courtyard was another structure, and it was a two-part structure. This was called the Holy Place, and in it were a number of other, kind of, ritual things, like bread and incense and so on, that the priest would use. And then a place called—what?—the Holy of Holies, which is a Hebrew way of saying "the most holy place."

And so the concept here—I think of it kind of, like, analogous to "radiation" for us. It's sort of like, if you had a little God-o-meter, or God's presence-o-meter, or something. And so there's a sense in which, anywhere you go in the whole universe, there's a low reading everywhere, as God creates and sustains molecules and quarks and stuff like that, right? And so he's everywhere. But there are certain places that are "hotspots" of God's presence. Little places where heaven and earth overlap a little more intensely than elsewhere in the creation. And those are called "sacred" or "holy" spaces in the Bible.

And so this backspace was like, if you had a little God-o-meter, it would just be going Richter right here, because it's the "hotspot" of God's presence. Who can go into this structure here in Israel? So actually, priests—multiple priests—can go in here, into this room. But who can go into this space right here? Only one of the priests, the high priest. And how often? Like any old time he wants, whatever? No, one day. A moment of one day, once in the year.

This space, the Holy of Holies, was separated by a huge, thick curtain, right here—huge curtain. It cuts off the inner space. Now, this is strange because the whole point of the story was God wanting to be with his people, right? And so why is it that no Israelite can go into the presence of God? Well, he says we're able to do, because of Jesus, what in Israel nobody could do. So that's weird—but it's weird because the presence of God is precisely what we need.

It arrests our attention. It gives us this big perspective. I'm self-absorbed. I'm selfish, or whatever. Take a drive an hour east of here, and just get into the foothills of Mount Hood, and get on one of those peaks where you can just see Mount Hood right there. And all of a sudden—what? My problems are still there, but they begin to be fitted into a larger perspective.

It's like, "Wow, I'm small." The world—the universe is huge, and my problems are real. But lots of other people have problems and this mountain doesn't have problems. [Laughing] It's just—it's its own thing, you know? It's what transcendence does—transcendence. And so there's—when you encounter something that is so wholly other and just huge and big, then it has a way of—wow—it has a way of reorienting us in a moment.

And so that's precisely what we need. What we need is the presence of God. But the whole storyline of the Bible, of course, is: how are—this inward turn—sin, the inward turn of the human heart. The self-absorption that we have, it creates lives full of relational distortion, and so on. It creates the bag of marbles, not the cluster of grapes, in our lives and in our world. You times that inward turn of the human heart times seven billion of us now, and there's just a lot of havoc and mess, and relational mess in our world.

And so in that sense, humans have estranged ourselves from the very being who can help us and heal us. And so the scandalous claim—we are used to it now, if you've been around this. There are a few of us for whom this is really a new idea, and I really like being around those people at Door of Hope. There's lots of us for whom this is a genuinely new idea, and I love that—that what's happened when Jesus has completely shifted this whole deal.

What he says is—you remember that scene, when Jesus is dying on the cross? His last breath, and what happens in the temple? What happens to that curtain in the temple? It's ripped in two. And it's ripped in two, he says, because the cross of Jesus does away with this separation. Somehow access into this is now *fully* available to anybody who comes to the cross.

Why? Because it's on the cross that God has come among us to absorb into himself all of that havoc, all of the pain and the tragedy of that relational distortion, and all of the ways that we poke and provoke each other without love. And all of the ways that we console each other and just, you know, whatever—validate each other, even though we're really broken and screwed up, and making horrible decisions—we just don't want to talk about it and avoid it, right?

And all of just the screwed up stuff that happens, that creates havoc—it creates violation of relationships in our world. And the pain and the death of all of that, Jesus absorbs into himself, and it opens up the way for anybody to waltz right in. Because Jesus removes the curtain. He absorbs our sin into himself. He takes the hit, we get the reward. That's the meaning of the cross.

And so what he says right here is that we have confidence to just go right in. What nobody could ever do back then, we can all do now. Just go right in. And so he says in verse 22, "Let's draw near." He says in verse 23, "Let's hold fast." Verse 24, "Let's keep meeting together." We have full access to the presence of God—this is good news, amen? Amen.

But hold on, there's a whole bunch of us who ask a question that I always ask right now, which is like, "Okay—this actually would've been easier if there was still a temple. Because at least I could *know* when I'm in God's presence. [Laughing] You know what I mean? So how do I do that now?"

“Like, that's cool. If I have access to God's presence, how do I access the access?” [Laughing] You know what I mean? So is it like, “Do I read my Bible or something and wait for rays of light, or something? Do I go pray? Do I go read my Bible on a mountaintop? Maybe that will get me a little closer. How do you gain access to the access?”

Has anyone ever struggled with this? It's like, that's really awesome that that's true, but like... *how* is it true? Where do I experience that presence of God? And to me—this is what someone pointed out to me in how the paragraph is put together—and it's just like, that's what he's saying. I never noticed that.

He's saying, “We have confidence to go into God's very presence, because we have the high priest.” The cross has broken down the curtain. “We need to draw near,” verse 22. How do you do that? What does that actually look like? And he says, in two ways.

First of all, he says, “Let's hold fast to the confession of our hope.” In other words, there's a personal element that nobody can do for you. There's a personal element, through what we might call, the more traditional practices of spiritual growth—of immersing myself in the Scriptures, of treasuring in my heart Scripture passages that speak the truth about God's love and grace to me in the cross, right?

It's about practices of meditation and prayer, and getting away and immersing myself, speaking . . . It's about preaching the Gospel to yourself in whatever form that's going to take for you. No one can do it for you. You have to personally engage and develop those habits. That's the first way that we experience and enter the presence.

What's the next way? This is verses 24 and 25. How do you experience the transforming power and presence of God?—it's his description of community. The description of community—with each other, apparently. In other words, some of those powerful moments of God's presence in my life might be when you are brave and courageous and, in love, come confront me about my anger problem. When, in love, I might confront you about this clear relational issue that everybody can see, but no one loves you enough to tell you about it. That—that's a moment where you can encounter the transforming love of Jesus through another person.

It's like C.S. Lewis said, “Christ works on us in many different ways, primarily through each other.” And so it may be that—and this is why the cluster is so crucial—because you guys, if you're not sourced in the source of life personally, you're going to have all this weird stuff going on when you come try and help me grow. Your heart's all messed up too. And if I'm not sourced in the truth of the Gospel, and I'm going to come try and help you and speak into your life, and I have all these mixed motives . . .

The Gospel is always personal. Each grape must be connected to the Source. But it is never private. I can't grow without people in my life to speak into it. His description of what it means to draw near into the presence of God—does that make sense?

And it's so powerful. It's like, “How do I access the access into God's presence?” Well, who are you meeting with? Who are the closest people in your life? And are you really, together, discovering the depth of God's love for you together, and how that's just working over every area of your life? Show me that friendship and you'll have a real reliable indicator of how directly you're encountering God's presence and love in your life.

It goes hand-in-hand: drawing near to each other happens both personally, but then also through drawing near to Jesus. Happens personally, but happens also through drawing near to each other. But drawing near to each other will always be flawed and screwed up in some way, if we don't also, at the same time, draw near to Jesus—and it becomes this symbiotic, yeah, whatever—it becomes a grape cluster—a grape cluster. Our fates belong together. We have a common fate because we have a common source of life.

And so how do you generate this? There's the personal element, but there's also an element—C.S. Lewis talked about this, we'll conclude with this thought here. What is it that's going to generate such a transformation in my heart, that I have such an other-centered point of view that I can just focus on being—considering them—how to encourage them or challenge them, and it's just not driven from an agenda. It's purely for their well-being and their good?

C.S. Lewis—he explores this in a little essay called “The Inner Ring.” Do you guys know this essay, “The Inner Ring”? It's short, like, ten pages or something. One of the fundamental drives of human beings is not, as Sigmund Freud thought, sex—although that's very powerful. And it's not, as Karl Marx thought, just money or economic status—although that's very powerful too.

He argues that there's something even more fundamental that drives both of those things, and that's the desire to be *known* by another—to be fully known and to fully know, and to be accepted and even admired and validated. Because that's the fundamental human drive. And he calls it, “the quest of the inner ring.” Because in any group of people, it's happening here right now, and it will happen—it happened before we gathered, it's going to happen after the gathering releases.

There's what he calls “the inner ring.” There's all of these invisible “circles” in a room. They're the relational boundary lines of the inner ring. And some people are in it, and some people are not in it. None of you have any idea what I'm talking about, right? This is, like, the stuff of life. You get introduced to this in like second grade—you know what I'm saying? As we get socialized into this—and it's barbaric, right? Because it's all these unspoken rules.

And part of it is we begin to find our own identity and value by what rings that we belong to. And it's this—we're like relational black holes, right? And we just are, you know—have you ever been in a situation where you're talking with someone, and you can tell as they're talking with you [that] someone else walked by that they like more, basically. Or that's in a ring that they want to be in, and they just find a way of just kind of dropping you and moving on over there? Has that ever happened to you? It's a horrible feeling.

And of course, we've all done it to other people, too. You know what I'm saying? Why is it that we seek out certain people—to try and hang out with them, but not others? There's almost always the inner ring going on there.

And it's a primary human drive, which—it's a good thing to know and to be known, but it makes us miserable. It makes us miserable because we despise ourselves for not being in the rings that we think we ought to, to justify our existence in the universe, right? And to validate ourselves. So we despise ourselves for not being good enough to be in the rings of the people that we admire. And we're envious of the people inside *that* ring. And then once I get into that ring, if I do, I despise all the people *outside* the ring. And like, why is it that I find certain people boring, or just uninteresting, or kind of despicable, or whatever? It's the ring—it's a network of rings. We're black holes, man.

And so here's what happens. In a bag of marbles, you have all these little, invisible rings and boundary lines. And if I try and initiate—my relationship with you isn't about you, it's about me. It's about me jockeying for position to make myself feel good about myself, really.

And you might say, “Well, no, I do like being around those people.” Yeah, that might be true, but you're also doing it for the high of how you feel being around those people. Because you wouldn't be around those people and not those others unless you saw some benefit for yourself in being around them. You know what I mean? We can't escape it. We can't escape it.

And so C.S. Lewis, he says—this profound line at the end of the essay—he says, the quest of the inner ring will always break your heart, unless you find a way to break the inner ring's hold on your heart. And how do you do that? What is it that's going to so rewire my thinking to make me so others-centered that I'd stop caring about the rings?

And I would argue that it's this story right here. It's this story. Because what's happening on the cross—what's happening on the cross is that God has an inner ring. It's what the biblical authors call—when I come into contact with this—it's an experience with true *shalom*, wholeness, harmony. I know and I am known by my creator.

And there's a bunch of screwed up stuff in me, and so that's going to have to go, or whatever. But it's just, the first initiative step is, to me, is that you're an image of God, a creature made in God's image. You're brought to the inner circle. And what the author of Hebrews is saying is that through the cross of Jesus, you and I are standing in the inner ring that matters most in the universe already, right? I mean, that's exactly what he says. You have already been included in the most important inner ring that there is. And it's when I forget, or I neglect, or I don't personally keep myself sourced in this truth right here that I go looking for validation and worth and identity, and all of these other different rings and so on.

And so what's happening on the cross? What's happening on the cross is Jesus—when he cries out, when he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—what's happening right there? What's happening? It's this mystery at the heart of the Gospel. It's that God so absorbs our loneliness, and the relational distortion that we create and have created and that happens to us—he's absorbing it. God's allowing our relational, just, havoc and pain to tear him in two. I don't know how else to say it. The Son feels estranged from the Father, inside God's own very being. I don't know how to explain that other than just to say that.

Jesus is excluded from the inner ring so that you and I get to be included in the one inner ring that matters in the universe. Why? Because this is the one word the New Testament authors use to describe the act of the cross, and that is *agape*. It's *agape*. It's an act of love for your well-being, at Jesus' cost. It will not be until you and I are dead-convinced of Jesus' overwhelming love for me, and that I already stand inside the most important inner ring, that these inner rings will lose their power. It won't happen until I root myself in this truth.

And what it means is that any church community will always be a bag of marbles until, one by one by one, we are converted—personally grafted into the grape vine, and understand our identity in the inner circle of God's love. It's my prayer for myself and it's my prayer for you. Because it's when you have a critical mass of people finding themselves here because of the cross that a church community just begins to ooze service and welcome and others-centeredness.

I pitched a number of practical questions to you. Who are the people in your life that you could invite to be intentional, to speak into your life? Who are the people in your life that you could initiate that with? Before you even get there, you have to ask a much more basic question—just, how are you doing right here? Are you spending most of your waking hours jockeying for position inside of different inner rings, or are you daily, hourly, reminding yourself of your personal inclusion into the inner ring of God's love and grace for you?

[EMSB Theme Outro fades in]

You guys, thanks for listening to the “Strange Bible” podcast. I hope this is helpful for you. If you find these podcast episodes helpful, feel free to pass them along or leave a review of them on iTunes. That helps. And cheers. Yeah, we'll see you guys next episode.

[EMSB Theme Outro fades out]