

# “Not Forsaking the Gathering of Ourselves Together...”

*A Fresh Look at Hebrews 10:24-25*

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**WHEN** you hear one of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” quoting Hebrews 10:24-25, you immediately recognize that they are speaking in reference to Christian “meetings,” and how it is commanded that we not “forsake” the meetings, since that is “where Jehovah’s spirit is,” and that is where we “incite to love and fine works.” Most religions of the world emphasize the importance of their service meetings and gatherings for their adherents, and the counsel given at Hebrews 10:24-25 seems to lend itself to the soundness of the application, does it not?

Still, what you are about to read in the material which follows will definitely require you to challenge your preconceived notions and at least acknowledge the possible validity of the conclusions herein. If you don’t grasp things at first, feel free to go over the material again. It may be easier to understand the approach to the scriptures in question once you have an overview of the discussion.

Regardless, it is vital that you take the time to actually *examine* the scriptures which will be discussed in this article, even if you think you are familiar with them already. In most cases, the scriptures will be cited—but even if they are, you have an obligation as a disciple of Christ and as a student of God’s Word to examine the context of scripture and make absolutely certain that what is written here is in agreement with what you yourself read. I cannot emphasize this enough especially in the case of this particular article, as we will be attempting to overturn a “strongly entrenched” teaching which is hardly limited to that of “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” but most Christian-based religions. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

One final point needs to be considered before you get to the article. This article is based upon conclusions arrived at by me. Although I wish that I could say that some angel spoke these words to me, or that God spoke directly to me and revealed these things to me, I can claim neither. This approach is based upon my own prayerful examination of the scriptures and the power of reason using what I have learned from the Bible, what I *thought* I knew about the Bible, and what I feel the writers of the Bible were trying to relate to the reader. I am not inspired, although the uniqueness of the conclusions herein might be considered by some as definitely inspired in freshness and harmony. But, in all honesty, you are free to either agree or disagree. By committing my research and conclusions to paper, I am exposing myself to criticism and scrutiny. Some will definitely take issue with what is written within this article, and such is their right. I ask only that you, the reader, consider the *possibility* that I’m right.

A brother in Christ,  
Timothy Kline

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***And let us consider one another to incite to love and fine works,<sup>25</sup> not forsaking the gathering of ourselves together, as some have the custom, but encouraging one another, and all the more so as YOU behold the day drawing near.—Hebrews 10:24-25 (NWT)***

**AS** mentioned in the introduction to this article, “Jehovah’s Witnesses” (and other Christian-based religions) apply the above scriptures to support the need for regularly-scheduled service meetings, Sunday meetings, and other religious meetings. Since this article will specifically address the teachings of “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” as published by the Watchtower Society (who has retained the sole authority for determining teachings of “Jehovah’s Witnesses”), what *other* religions do is outside the scope of this article, although if you were to present this scripture to any church-going Christian, you will undoubtedly get a similar understanding to that which we, as “Jehovah’s Witnesses” have.

Still, the importance of attending meetings *regularly* and *consistently* is heavily emphasized among “Jehovah’s Witnesses” for the simple reason that according to current Society understanding the year 1914 and the events surrounding that year provide clear and incontrovertible evidence that we have now entered the foretold “last days.” This, in turn, supports the need for regular attendance at meetings to the exclusion of all other things in our lives. This is, in the literature, referred to as “putting Kingdom interests first.” Anyone that decreases their meeting attendance apart for exceptional reasons is viewed by “Jehovah’s Witnesses” as downplaying the importance of this scriptural counsel. Throughout the literature which we are provided from the Society, it is the first outward sign of one’s being “spiritually ill” or “spiritually weak.”

Follow-up visits from either elders or perhaps a brother or sister will almost invariably start with, or at least include, the expression “We missed you at meeting.” Probing questions will sometimes follow, but this is usually something more likely to be seen with elders calling on the Witness as part of their round of stops while they are out in service or on their way to or from a Bible study.

Indeed, the vital importance of keeping up with the meetings can be seen from the publications, as mentioned a moment ago, and what follows are some of those statements.

<sup>17</sup> Today, the “interior rooms” of the prophecy likely have to do with the tens of thousands of congregations of Jehovah’s people around the world. Such congregations are a protection even now, a place where Christians find safety among their brothers, under the loving care of the elders. (Isaiah 32:1, 2; Hebrews 10:24, 25) This is especially true in view of the nearness of the end of this system of things when survival will depend on obedience.—Zephaniah 2:3. (*Watchtower*, March 1, 2001, p. 21)

An unceasing program of spiritual feeding at Jehovah’s table and wholesome association with God’s people will help you to strengthen your faith and overcome discouragement or other negative feelings. (Hebrews 10:25) (*Watchtower*, April 15, 2001, p. 23)

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Also necessary for strong spiritual health is regular meeting attendance. The apostle Paul admonished fellow believers ‘not to forsake the gathering of themselves together, as some had the custom.’ Let that not become our custom, for young and old alike benefit greatly from regular presence at Christian meetings. (Hebrews 10:24, 25; Deuteronomy 31:12) (*Watchtower*, May 15, 2001, pp. 23-24)

These are but three of the hundreds of similar examples of how the scriptures in *Hebrews* are applied to support the arrangement of meetings and the “command” to keep in attendance. Admittedly, it’s commendable that a religion emphasize how beneficial it is that we gather together as an opportunity to encourage one another, and to exchange faith-building experiences as well as to instruct the congregation.

It is important to note that regardless of what you are reading or will read further on in this article, the information herein is not intended to *dismiss* the need we have to gather with others of like-faith. Feeling the compulsion to gather with those of like-faith is one of the signs that we are experiencing Jehovah’s spirit in our life, because we feel compelled to talk of those things which the spirit inculcates within us, including our faith and personal account of how we’ve been changed by God’s Word and the operation of Jehovah’s spirit in our life. (Luke 19:37-40)

But does the end (getting people to the meetings) justify the means (possible or probable misapplication of the scriptures we are examining)? That *is* the contention of this article, along with the suggestion that we have misunderstood this scripture, due to the emphasis on the perpetuation of organizationalized religion.

Let’s take the time now to explore Hebrews 10:24-25.

### Context: Getting the Big Picture

**HAVE** you ever been wrong? How did you respond when you realized it? How did it make you feel? Happy? Angry? Frustrated? Sad?

Do you realize that the first thing that you needed to do in realizing that you were wrong about something was allow for the *possibility* that you *might* be wrong. Some people are unable to do that, even though they will argue to the contrary.

But when it comes to our system of belief, to those things which we accept as *truth*, it is sometimes impossible to get some people to look at things in a different light, to accept the possibility that they have a mistaken understanding. They may *say* that they are open-minded to such a possibility, but after talking with them you begin to realize that, short of God Himself speaking out of heaven directly to that person, the person simply refuses to allow for *possibility*. Views, right or wrong, become “strongly entrenched” in our mind, and often this is because we hold as precious what we believe to be truth.

Imagine, if you will, how difficult it must have been for Jews to open their minds to Christianity, after millennia of holding to the Jewish system of worship. Imagine how challenging it must have been to abandon the Jewish system of worship, after investing generations of lives in perpetuating the Jewish way of life, of belief, of government, everything neatly covered by the Law of Moses as to the when, how often, and to what extent. Similarly, today people cling to “orthodoxy” and “church tradition”—and for the same reasons that it was impossible for so many Jews to become Christian and subsequently perished when Jerusalem was laid waste by the Roman armies, these ones often find it impossible to leave such things behind as obsolete.

If you are an individual who has difficulty allowing for possibility, you will not stand to gain much from this article. Odds are that you are quite satisfied with your current understanding of Hebrews 10:24-25 and the application made of the scripture. You may even read the article and, by the time you get to the end, decide that the conclusion is an unacceptable understanding of the scripture, in spite of the scriptural evidences provided to show that it *is* an acceptable understanding.

Still, I’m not asking you to change your mind anywhere in this article, nor am I implying or claiming that *my* understanding is the correct one. But, by rejecting it, you might actually be suggesting that so firmly entrenched is your current understanding, that nothing short of God speaking directly *to* you will change your mind. Yet, isn’t that what the Bible is: God, speaking *to* us.

There is no shame in being wrong or mistaken about a Bible understanding. In fact, we can expect it, for we are imperfect humans operating with imperfect minds, trying to comprehend the “perfect will of” a perfect God. (Romans 12:2, NWT) Paul wrote that “we have partial knowledge” and that this partialness will continue until “that which is complete arrives, and that which is partial is done away with.” (1 Corinthians 13:9-10,

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NWT). This certainly goes to explain why it is necessary that we meet with others of like-faith and offer expressions of faith and experience between one another, as well as talk openly of our understanding of God’s Word as it speaks *to us*—and not subject ourselves to a single understanding (which may or may not be accurate, but most *certainly* is not “complete” understanding in any sense of the expression). If precious gems, such as diamonds and rubies, are able to reflect beauty by their multi-faceted appearance and composition, how much more so is the beauty of God’s Truth reflected on the hearts of Christians, who provide for a multi-faceted expression of Truth, each with its own unique facet or aspect or reflection of God’s Word speaking to them. And just because there are numerous facets or angles to a diamond, it remains, nonetheless, a diamond. It is the same with Christianity.

When we examine a diamond ring, for example, that we are going to purchase for a loved one, do we hold it up and look straight-on at the diamond and focus only on a single facet? Or do we hold it up, turning it this way and that so that we get a look at the whole, so we might detect any flaws which might detract from its beauty or lessen its value? Similarly with our system of beliefs: if we allow only one view, straight-on, we will inevitably miss any flaws or imperfections in the body of beliefs. We must be willing to hold it up, turn it this way and that, and see if it is flawed before we invest in it.

More specific to our discussion now, if we take a particular scripture, look at it, but do not look at surrounding scriptures, we may mistakenly understand what the scripture means because we are looking at only a facet of the whole.

Have you ever looked at a picture, guessed what it was, and then later find out that you were mistaken?

What picture do you see?



Likely, you will say that you see four different types of animals: a squirrel, a donkey, a fish, and a mouse. And how difficult would it be, honestly, for someone to come along and tell you that these are really pictures of a rabbit, a dog, a child, and an elephant. That’s because you already have a pre-conceived idea of what you are seeing. It was taught to you, either by your parents, your school teachers, or a friend, or *someone*. And, short of God Himself speaking directly *to* you, nobody is likely to change your mind, because you are convinced that you are right about what you see.

It’s the same with the Bible. When we read a scripture, we read it with pre-conceived ideas which probably were taught to us by someone else who themselves had someone teach *them*, and on it goes.

When we read Hebrews 10:24-25, we call up an image in our mind, based on the details provided by the words we are provided, which make up the scripture itself. We read the

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words, and we acknowledge that it agrees with what we understand it to mean, when the question we *should* be asking is whether our understanding agrees with what it says. But, to do that, we can't look at the scripture alone. We need to consider the *context* of the scripture, and we do that by looking at the *big* picture.

But as long as we look at individual verses and say that they say this or that, we *may* be right some of the time, but we aren't seeing the harmony or the whole of what is to be seen. The Bible is made up of scriptures, such as Hebrews 10:24-25, but the Bible is much more than individual verses. There is an overall message in God's Word to be found. But, one wrong understanding can skew that message so that we get the wrong idea about that message, even if we are convinced that we can clearly see the meaning of the individual verses.

Remember those four pictures on the previous page? What if I tell you that you guessed the contents of those pictures correctly, but that you were wrong? The first thing you might ask is how that can be. How can a person have guessed correctly, *but be wrong*?

It is because you did not answer the *question*.

Do you remember what I had asked? I asked “What picture do you see?” You told me what the pictures *you* saw were, but I didn't ask that you do that. Otherwise, I would have asked what pictures you see. Now look at the picture I have provided below:



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This is what is commonly called a “picture mosaic.” It is a picture that is created with hundreds of much smaller pictures, all joining together in such a way that a new picture is brought into view. And, if you look *real* closely, you’ll see the four animal pictures which I presented to you a couple pages ago and that you identified. The further back you move away from the picture, the clearer it looks to you, right? Conversely, the closer you get, the more detail you can make out in the picture.

See, you were correct about four of the elements of the picture, and you did well, based on the amount of information you had available to you. I asked you to look at something, and tell me what you saw, and you did. But I didn’t give you enough information to arrive at the correct answer to the question I posed to you. You answered, then, with incomplete information.

And the reason I went through the trouble of presenting this point is because you have, time and again, been asked to look at Hebrews 10:24-25, and to say what you see. Your answer has been based on incomplete information, however, provided to you to make sure you can arrive at only a certain answer: that Paul is talking about the importance of Christian meetings.

So, we are going to examine the rest of the information and see if our answer changes, or if it remains the same.

### The Elements of Hebrews 10:24-25

I **KNOW** that the scripture has been cited already, but let’s do so one more time as we now begin to closely examine it:

And let us consider one another to incite to love and fine works,<sup>25</sup> not forsaking the gathering of ourselves together, as some have the custom, but encouraging one another, and all the more so as YOU behold the day drawing near.—Hebrews 10:24-25 (NWT)

To simplify our discussion, we are going to first dissect this passage, to get a sense of its elements. This will help us to get an idea of what the whole specific scripture is saying here. Next, we will step back and look at the “big picture,” to see what the *context* of the scriptures is, and afterwards, we will return to the elements of the verses in question to see if we can better identify the answer. The rule used here will be: If it doesn’t fit, we can’t accept it.

Here are the elements:

1. *...let us consider one another to incite to love and fine works...*
2. *...not forsaking the gathering of ourselves together...*
3. *...as some have the custom...*
4. *...but encouraging one another and all the more so as YOU behold the day drawing near.*

Currently, the understanding of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” is that “the gathering of ourselves together” is a reference to our weekly meetings, circuit assemblies, and district conventions. At these meetings, we “consider one another” in order to “incite to love and fine works.” Concerning those who “have the custom,” Witnesses recognize that this is speaking about those who make it a habit of missing meetings, presumably in pursuit of worldly things, even if work-related. Additionally, Witnesses understand that “encouraging one another” is the entire reason why we meet together, arriving early before the meetings, and leaving late after those meetings. And this understanding is accentuated by the fact that we need to do this “all the more so as YOU behold the day drawing near,” showing that the closer we are to the end of the current system of things, the more we are going to need the meetings to stay strong spiritually.

At first glance, this is a truly reasonable explanation for the verses that are being looked at here. And, as was indicated earlier in this article, there is no doubt about the importance of our doing this, unless we miss out on aspects of God’s Word which might be related to us from our Christian brothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, we haven’t yet considered the *context* of these two verses, so there remains the *possibility* that we’re wrong about the “picture” being painted here by Paul, even though we recognize the elements of that picture and may be right about those elements from our current perspective.



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So, what *is* the context in which these two verses are written?

Well, before I ever thought about writing this article, I admit that I must have read those two verses hundreds of times, and somehow still managed to miss the context in which they were written. I was reading the book of *Hebrews* because of a debate I was having with someone concerning Hebrews 10:26, and, unexpectedly I read that section of Hebrews and realized that it didn't fit. It was as though the writer of Hebrews had inserted a totally unrelated thought. I read it several more times, alone and in the context of the chapter, and was convinced that it didn't belong there. Verses 24 and 25 were inconsistent with the remainder of what the writer of *Hebrews* was relating.

That's when I began to realize that it wasn't the verses which did not “fit,” but my then-understanding of those verses. *I* was the one who was wrong.

### **The Context of Hebrews**

The book we today refer to as *Hebrews* was written to the Jewish Christians of the first century who were faced with the reality that everything they had held dear and believed in and which made up their system of worship would all pass away. The Jewish system of worship had run its course, replaced by Christianity. And while that was the message they heard from Christians, they saw around them that the Jewish system of worship continued to persist. Sacrifices were still taking place, the Pharisees were still the Governing Body of Jews, the Sanhedrin was still casting people from the synagogues, the Roman Empire still dominated the Jews, an alleged Messiah had been put to death, and was claimed to have been seen by those who had been his followers.

The underlying issue was that they had always believed and worshiped that which they could see and feel. The Temple at Jerusalem was *real* and *physical* and was the center of their worship. The Mosaic Law had been in effect for millennia, passed from generation to successive generation, determining for them what was acceptable and what was not.

Now, they were being expected to have faith in *unseen* things. A Messiah who had visibly been put to death, but afterwards was said to have risen from the dead, unbeknownst to the general public, and then “returned” to heaven, leaving unfulfilled dozens of prophecies that were recorded in the scrolls. It sounded too incredible for most hearers. And unless God Himself spoke directly out of heaven, they weren't going to believe it.

To make matters even more difficult, after millennia of being separate from non-Jews, or Gentiles (peoples of the nations), this new movement was saying that there was no longer any such separation between Jew and non-Jew because Jesus' sacrificial death had taken away that barrier. Where before only the Jewish nation was the special property of God, now *all* who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were acceptable to God.

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The writer of *Hebrews* discussed these important issues at length in his letter, tackling the doubts, offering encouragement, and explaining why it was necessary to have faith concerning everything that God was revealing now with the Christian congregation. The writer touched on the old covenant and the new covenant, what the Tent typified, how Jesus became the Mediator, and even spent a good deal of time relating how many of the people from the ancient days had acted in faith. Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and numerous others left their mark on history, examples to those who would come after them. Their faith was noteworthy because they did what they did, gave up what they did, endured what they did, without ever obtaining the Promise—because they knew that even if they died, Jehovah God would, without fail, restore them to life for their faithfulness.

This is but a brief overview of *Hebrews*, as a whole letter. But let’s step in a little closer to the picture now.

### The Context of Hebrews 10

In what we read as Chapter 10 of *Hebrews*, the writer explains that the Law of Moses has “a shadow of the good things to come, but not the very substance of the things.” As the apostle Paul said on one particular occasion, if it had not been for the Mosaic Law, he would not have come to know sin. (Romans 7:7) Still, the Law could not restore humankind to perfection, could not actually *remove* sin, in spite of the offering of “the same sacrifices from year to year. Otherwise, those who were supposedly cleansed by the sacrifices would eventually have all been fully cleansed. Instead, the writer explains, the sacrifices were “a reminding of sins from year to year, for it is not possible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take sins away.” (Hebrews 10:1-4, NWT)

It was “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all time” that those sacrifices came to their end, for the Christ *was* the fulfillment of everything which the sacrifices pointed to or illustrated. (Hebrews 10:5-10) And where with animal sacrifices we could only representatively be cleansed, we *truly* are cleansed and sanctified with Jesus’ sacrifice.

The writer then drew a comparison between how every priest would take their station “from day to day to render public service and to offer the same sacrifices often,” sacrifices which “at no time” were able to “take sins away completely,” and Jesus, who offered “one sacrifice for sins perpetually” and has even “sat down at the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 10:11-14, NWT)

Next, we read about the establishing of a *new* covenant which was formerly just a promise under the old covenant. Under Mosaic Law, Jehovah’s laws were written down on scrolls and to be read daily. Under the new covenant, Jehovah says He will “put my laws in their hearts, and in their minds I shall write them.” (Hebrews 10:15-17, NWT)

The writer brings out something else: Jehovah will “by no means call their sins and their lawless deeds to mind anymore.” And to demonstrate that this is a Truth, the writer points

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to the fact that, apart from Jesus’ sacrifice, “there is no longer an offering for sin”—a point that he will return to shortly. (Hebrews 10:18, NWT)

This new arrangement or system of worship opens the “way of entry into the holy place.” The writer says that we “have boldness” in being able to do this, which indicates that we must be convinced of the value of Jesus’ sacrifice and what it means. Of Jesus, the writer relates, “he inaugurated (the way of entry into the holy place) for us as a new and living way through the curtain, that is, his flesh.” (Hebrews 10:19-20, NWT)

Because of this, we are commanded to have “true hearts in full assurance of faith.” Likewise, we are commanded to “hold fast the public declaration of our hope without wavering,” because Jehovah is faithful in His promise. (Hebrews 10:22-23, NWT)

Which brings us to Verses 24 and 25.

However, we’ll pass those over and finish looking at Chapter 10’s remaining verses.

In Verse 26, we see the writer returning to the point he raised earlier, in that since sacrifice has been offered for the forgiveness of sin, we are not to *willfully* sin, because there is no sacrifice for sins which can be offered in our behalf. The warning is given that this kind of errant thinking or reasoning actually tramples Jesus’ sacrifice and outrages grace itself, and is something which Jehovah God will not take lightly. (See also Romans 6:1-2) Paul talks about this aspect of the new covenant in his letter to the Romans, where he says that we are “under obligation” to live in accord with the holy spirit, not in accord with our flesh. (Romans 8:1-13) If we, then, are under obligation, a willful rejection of that obligation is rebellion or apostasy. (Hebrews 10:26-31)

In Verses 32-34, the writer of *Hebrews* wants to commend his listeners and readers for their endurance in the face of sufferings and tribulations, as well as their fellow-feeling for those who they knew were suffering such things. Following in the steps of Jesus had caused both grief and loss, but these things were considered a joy because of the realization that there was a “better and an abiding possession” to be had by Christians. (See also Hebrews 11:10) Not that they were happy to go through it all, but that it was happening because of their following the Christ, because they were Christians. (See Acts 5:41)

And with all of this being true, the writer admonishes them not to “throw away” the “freeness of speech,” which was paid for dearly. Still, there remains a “need of endurance,” in order that they may receive the promise. Jehovah will certainly be mindful of such things and note them. In any case, the writer says next, “we are not the sort that shrink back to destruction, but the sort that have faith to the preserving alive of the soul.” (Hebrews 10:35-39)

### Where Does Hebrews 10:24-25 Fit In?

There are those who argue against Paul being the writer of the letter to the Jews which we refer today as the book of *Hebrews*, but there are noteworthy parallels between *Romans* (another letter written by Paul) and *Hebrews*, including many of the points just discussed from Hebrews Chapter 10. While it is outside the scope of this article to spend time presenting the similarities, I would encourage the reader to read the two letters specifically, and compare both the approach and the appeal to a common ground on the part of Paul. Here was an apostle who worked hard to bring Gentiles and Jews together in Christianity, and debated at length over the long-standing customs and thinking which detracted from the beauty and simplicity of Christianity.

One of the things Paul constantly had to argue against in his missionary travels was *customs*. And having been taught “at the feet of Gamaliel,” Paul was very familiar with the customs of his day, having been “instructed according to the strictness of the ancestral Law.” (Acts 22:3, NWT) He, in fact, used to *defend* those customs himself, and hunted down Christians to be dealt with harshly in their apparent defiance of the custom or Law.

In addition, we must keep in mind that *Hebrews* was written to *Jews*, not to Gentiles. Therefore, it is illogical for Paul to make reference to “some” “forsaking the gathering” because of “custom,” if he was speaking of *assemblies*, since it *was* the custom to assemble under the Jewish system of worship. Through assemblies, the Law of Moses was taught to the people, the Passover was observed, the Sabbath was observed, as well as other integrated aspects of the Jewish system of worship. Occasions for meeting together literally *inundated* the Jewish system of worship!

It makes little sense, then, that Paul was saying that some had the custom of *not* meeting if he was writing to Jews themselves, due to the heavy emphasis on meeting together for the occasions which the Law required of them. A Jew who resisted the obligations to assemble as proscribed in the Law of Moses would be demonstrating themselves *disobedient* to custom, and likely face stoning or some other harsh measure of discipline for flagrantly disregarding the custom of meeting together.

And as will be seen shortly, Paul *wasn't* making reference to meetings at all. Therefore, when he said “as some have the custom,” he could not have been making a reference to those who habitually disregarded meetings.

### “...as some have the custom...”

So, what *was* Paul speaking about when he wrote the words “as some have the custom”?

We know that he was writing to Jews in his letter, but more specifically, he was writing to Jews who had converted to Christianity: Jewish Christians. These Jewish Christians

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were facing struggles of doubt at *abandoning the customs provided by the Law*. With this being the case, it again makes little sense that Paul was speaking commendation to those adhering to “the custom” that is being referred to in Hebrews 10:25.

Now, as mentioned already, Paul had encountered troublesome insistence on “customs” throughout his missionary activity. Issues of custom such as circumcision (Acts 15:1), and whether a woman needed to wear a head covering (1 Corinthians 11:16) were among those addressed by him.

But Paul was not the only one having to deal with the powerful influence of long-standing customs of the Jewish system of worship and the accusation of apostasy for suggesting that it was no longer necessary “to circumcise their children nor to walk in the [solemn] customs.” Stephen was accused of attempting to “change the customs that Moses handed down” and martyred for walking in the Way.

The question again is asked, *what custom was Paul referring to*, if he was not talking about meeting together for worship? And who held to that custom whereas others did not among Jewish Christians.

Do you remember the earlier illustration of the picture mosaic, and how you couldn’t see the full picture without stepping back to look at the sum of its elements? That will prove useful counsel in determining our answer.

If you have your Bible handy, you’ll need to turn to *Acts*, Chapter 21. I’ll cite the specific scripture we will be including in the discussion.

After hearing this they began to glorify God, and they said to him: “You behold, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews; and they are all zealous for the Law.”<sup>21</sup> But they have heard it rumored about you that you have been teaching all the Jews among the nations an apostasy from Moses, telling them neither to circumcise their children nor to walk in the [solemn] customs.—Acts 21:20-21 (NWT)

Here, we find that there were “thousands of believers” among the Jewish population. They had heard of Christianity, of Jesus, and they *believed* the witness given to them, perhaps because they themselves had seen Jesus during his brief ministry and the miracles he had performed, as well as heard the wonderful gospel which he brought. But while they had become believers in the matter of the Messiah, they all continued to be “zealous for the Law” of Moses. In spite of whatever it was they felt about Jesus, they still viewed it as apostasy to no longer circumcise “nor to walk in the [solemn] customs.” This was clearly going to create a problem when they learned that Paul had arrived, for they had heard rumors that he was himself teaching such views.

By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Jews (the Bible book of *Hebrews*), it seems that while not *all* remained zealous advocates and defenders of the Law, there remained “some” who *did*, among the Jewish Christians. And this seems to be what Paul is speaking about when he said “as some have the custom.” More on this in a moment.

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As he had said on so many other occasions, this adherence to custom was causing the more important matters to be overlooked. Rather than being united by love, it was creating division due to custom.

Again, we can get a better idea of what Hebrews 10:24-25 actually says if we take into consideration a similar problem Paul had elsewhere needed to address. This time, we are going to look at Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian congregation:

But, while giving these instructions, I do not commend YOU because it is, not for the better, but for the worse that YOU meet together. <sup>18</sup> For first of all, when YOU come together in a congregation, I hear divisions exist among YOU; and in some measure I believe it. <sup>19</sup> For there must also be sects among YOU, that the persons approved may also become manifest among YOU.—1 Corinthians 11:17-19 (NWT)

Paul is here calling attention to “divisions” and “sects” being present among the Corinthian Christians. In this case, Christlike love was not the prevailing feature, but rather varying views are, due to stubbornly holding to views which shouldn’t exist.

Therefore, in his letter to the Jewish Christians, Paul is trying to point out that this insistence on custom is a divisive influence when Christlike love and appreciation for the new covenant should be creating bonds of love and unity and mutual appreciation.

Apparently, then, there was a division existing between those Jewish Christians who had let go of the customs and their zeal for the Law, and those Jewish Christians who persisted in promoting custom and a zeal for the Law.

Allow me to explain.

Now, in the original Greek, the word “custom” is *ethos*, and refers to an activity or teaching “prescribed by law, institute, prescription, or rite.” (*Strong’s*) This would seem to confirm that whomever it was that was “forsaking the gathering” was doing so by reason of something dictated by the Law of Moses. It cannot be emphasized enough that this rules *against* the scripture applying to a “meeting together,” since under the Law, the Law’s adherents were required to meet together for worship, and since the individuals who were “forsaking the gathering” were doing so *by reason of something in the Law*, it does not follow that what they were rejecting was meeting together.

### “...not forsaking...”

When you think of the word “forsake,” does it call a particular meaning to mind? Perhaps that meaning is the same as that which we find in our modern-day dictionary, where we find that it means “abandon: to withdraw companionship, protection, or support from somebody.” It can also mean “give up: to give up, renounce, or sacrifice something that gives pleasure.” (*Encarta Dictionary*)

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But the word “forsake,” comes from an Old English word, *forsacan*, which literally means “to abstain from disputing,” based on *sacan*, “to dispute.” It wasn’t until later usage that it came to mean what we use it for today.

Further clarification can be obtained from *Merriam-Webster*, which shows that “forsaken” comes from “*for-* and *sacan* ‘to dispute’ and relates that it refers to *sacu* “action at law” and, more interestingly, is in reference to a *question of guilt*.

Why is this interesting? Why all the scrutinizing and elaborating on the meaning *behind* the word “forsaken” and where that word comes from?

Because, remember, we are stepping back to get a picture of the *whole*. And the whole is composed of numerous *elements*, all which play their part in providing a unique picture. Change or mistakenly identify one of those elements, and the picture may *look* the same, but it won’t *be* the same.

So, what have we found so far in our close examination of Hebrews 10:24-25?

For one, we have established that “as some have the custom,” is actually speaking of those who, by reason of the Law, and their clinging to it, are “forsaking the gathering.”

Second, we have established that what is meant by “forsaking” is that they were *disputing* the matter of “guilt” as established between the old covenant (the Law of Moses) and removal of that guilt under the new covenant (the sacrifice of Christ). This directly ties in with all the time that Paul spent in *explaining* how sacrifices worked under the Law of Moses, and how the guilt of sin couldn’t possibly be removed through animal sacrifice, and how Jesus’ sacrifice was perpetual, and *did* remove the guilt of sin.

Even without getting into actual etymology, we can get a *vague* idea of this, when we recognize that those who Paul said “have the custom,”—that is, held to the Law of Moses as their removal of sin—are *forsaking*, that is, “abandoning” or “withdrawing the protection” from guilt of sin provided for through Jesus’ perpetual sacrifice.

Did you grasp that? If not, read the previous paragraph once more. We’ll get into more detail about this shortly. But, suffice it to say that what Paul is talking about in Hebrews 10:24-25 is *not* that some people were making a habit of not attending weekly “meetings,” but that they were arguing about the ransom sacrifice and whether or not it actually removed guilt of sin, or if sacrifices needed to continue. This is evident from the amount of time that Paul spent covering the issue of sacrifices rendered under the Law of Moses and that Jesus *was the one represented by those sacrifices*. [EndNote #1]

But keep in mind that we have yet to tie this in to what Paul meant by “the gathering of ourselves together.” Indeed, we still have more work to do to unravel the pre-conceived notion which has caused us to think that Hebrews 10:24-25 is a reference to abandoning weekly meetings or irregularly attending them.

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**“...not forsaking the gathering of yourselves together...”**

Turning again to the original Greek of this scripture, we find the word *episunagoge* as the word which is usually translated as “gathering” or “the gathering,” but in some translations is translated as “the assembling” or “meeting.” The Greek word itself translates as “a gathering together in one place.”

This has been taken to mean a Sunday service, assembly, convention, or meeting of worship by organizationalized religion.

Unfortunately, we *also* have come under this perception due to the inculcation of organizationalized religion’s perpetuation of a need for organized religion. Now, isn’t *that* a mouthful?

Thankfully, a proper understanding of the scripture does not require complication!

Having laid the groundwork for what was happening with “the gathering,” let’s now approach the final aspect of Hebrews 10:24-25 and finally harmonize it with its context.

When we realize that the problem was not that some weren’t coming to “meetings,” but that there was a divisive issue over whether sacrifices needed to continue, whether guilt of sin was removed, and why Jesus’ sacrifice was pointed to by all of the sacrifices which took place under the old covenant and explained within the Law of Moses, we can *then* begin to understand what Paul was speaking about when he said “the gathering of ourselves together.”

Do you remember that Paul said that everything about the Law pointed forward to Jesus as the Messiah and as the Lamb? Do you remember what Paul said was so *unique* about Jesus’ sacrifice, something which could never come to pass under the old covenant or the Mosaic Law?

If not, then let’s take a few minutes to go back over this important element in our discussion of Hebrews 10:24-25.

For its part, then, the former [covenant] used to have ordinances of sacred service and [its] mundane holy place. <sup>2</sup> For there was constructed a first tent [compartment] in which were the lampstand and also the table and the display of the loaves; and it is called “the Holy Place.” <sup>3</sup> But behind the second curtain was the tent [compartment] called “the Most Holy.” <sup>4</sup> This had a golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid all around with gold, in which were the golden jar having the manna and the rod of Aaron that budded and the tablets of the covenant; <sup>5</sup> but up above it were the glorious cherubs overshadowing the propitiatory [cover]. But now is not the time to speak in detail concerning these things.

<sup>6</sup> After these things had been constructed this way, the priests enter the first tent [compartment] at all times to perform the sacred services; <sup>7</sup> but into the second [compartment] the high priest alone enters once a year, not without blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of ignorance of the people. <sup>8</sup> Thus the holy spirit makes it plain that the way into the holy place had not yet been made manifest while the first tent was standing. <sup>9</sup> This very [tent] is an



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illustration for the appointed time that is now here, and in keeping with it both gifts and sacrifices are offered. However, these are not able to make the [man] doing sacred service perfect as respects his conscience,<sup>10</sup> but have to do only with foods and drinks and various baptisms. They were legal requirements pertaining to the flesh and were imposed until the appointed time to set things straight.

<sup>11</sup> However, when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come to pass, through the greater and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation,<sup>12</sup> he entered, no, not with the blood of goats and of young bulls, but with his own blood, once for all time into the holy place and obtained an everlasting deliverance [for us].<sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and of bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who have been defiled sanctifies to the extent of cleanness of the flesh,<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of the Christ, who through an everlasting spirit offered himself without blemish to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works that we may render sacred service to [the] living God?

<sup>15</sup> So that is why he is a mediator of a new covenant, in order that, because a death has occurred for [their] release by ransom from the transgressions under the former covenant, the ones who have been called might receive the promise of the everlasting inheritance.—Hebrews 9:1-15 (NWT)

<sup>24</sup> For Christ entered, not into a holy place made with hands, which is a copy of the reality, but into heaven itself, now to appear before the person of God for us.<sup>25</sup> Neither is it in order that he should offer himself often, as indeed the high priest enters into the holy place from year to year with blood not his own.<sup>26</sup> Otherwise, he would have to suffer often from the founding of the world. But now he has manifested himself once for all time at the conclusion of the systems of things to put sin away through the sacrifice of himself.<sup>27</sup> And as it is reserved for men to die once for all time, but after this a judgment,<sup>28</sup> so also the Christ was offered once for all time to bear the sins of many; and the second time that he appears it will be apart from sin and to those earnestly looking for him for [their] salvation.—Hebrews 9:24-28 (NWT)

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness for the way of entry into the holy place by the blood of Jesus,<sup>20</sup> which he inaugurated for us as a new and living way through the curtain, that is, his flesh,<sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God,<sup>22</sup> let us approach with true hearts in the full assurance of faith, having had our hearts sprinkled from a wicked conscience and our bodies bathed with clean water.—Hebrews 10:19-22 (NWT)

As can be seen not only by the sections which are underlined for emphasis, but the overall *theme* of Paul’s letter, guilt from sin has been removed through the merits of Jesus’ sacrifice, which holds infinitely more value than any sacrifice of “bulls” and “goats.” This has opened a unique opportunity for Christians, in that we are now allowed “entry into the holy place” by means of “the blood of Jesus.” Under the Law of Moses, the former covenant, only *priests* were allowed to do so. Now, though, *all* were being invited in, because the new covenant brought with it the perpetual sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the promise of everlasting life. (John 3:16; John 6:40)

Which brings us back to the Greek word *episunagogue*—which means “a gathering together in one place.” The “one place” being spoken of by Paul is that of the “holy place.”

It is intriguing to note that this word, *episunagogue*, is used differently than another word which carries a similar meaning.

For example, a very well-known scripture reads:

“Not Forsaking the Gathering of Ourselves Together...”

For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.”—Matthew 18:20 (NWT)

In this verse, for “gathered together,” we find the Greek word *sunago* applied. Yet, it is clearly evident that the above scripture is making a reference to an actual “meeting.”  
**[EndNote #2]**

This is confirmed by another scripture:

<sup>3</sup> At hearing this King Herod was agitated, and all Jerusalem along with him; <sup>4</sup> and on gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born.—Matthew 2:3-4 (NWT)

Again, in the original Greek, the “gathering together” is found within the Greek word *sunago*. An actual meeting was taking place on this occasion.

We are perhaps very familiar with Matthew 25:32, where we read that “all the nations will be gathered before” Jesus when he arrives in glory. Yet, there, again, we find that *sunago* is used to for the gathering taking place. Indeed, due to the separating work which will take place on that occasion, we can be assured that a “meeting” is being called to order at Matthew 25:32.

So, *contextually* and based on other examples of meetings taking place, it is a mistake to say that the “gathering of ourselves together” is a reference to “meetings,” because the word *sunago* would have been used if Paul had *meant* a meeting or Church service or a convention.

Which leaves us with the unanswered question of what *was* Paul talking about here, this “gathering of ourselves together”?

According to the *Friberg Lexicon*, the word *episunagogue* is “strictly, in a passive sense; an action *being gathered together* as an end-time event at Christ’s return.”

Notice how this is confirmed as the proper understanding of how Paul is using *episunagogue* by turning in your Bible to Matthew 24:

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>30</sup> And then the sign of the Son of man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will beat themselves in lamentation, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send forth his angels with a great trumpet sound, and they will gather his chosen ones together from the four winds, from one extremity of the heavens to their other extremity.—Matthew 24:29-31 (NWT)

In the above scripture, the word *episunago* is used for the gathering which Jesus’ angels will be doing of the “chosen ones.”

Now, turn in your Bible to 2 Thessalonians 2:

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However, brothers, respecting the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we request of YOU <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken from YOUR reason nor to be excited either through an inspired expression or through a verbal message or through a letter as though from us, to the effect that the day of Jehovah is here.—2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 (NWT)

Here, once again, we find Paul’s use of *episunagogue* in reference to being “gathered together” upon Jesus’ return.

We should arrive at the conclusion, based on the evidence set before us, that the “gathering of ourselves together” that Paul is making reference to is that gathering which will take place upon Jesus’ return.

Not only that, but this *episunagogue* takes place because of the fact that Jesus has removed “the curtain” that formerly prevented it, successfully removing our guilt of sin and cleansing us. We have been washed clean by the perpetual offering. Holding to “the custom,” that is, the insistence that we are still under Law (a point that Paul also drew attention to in *Romans* because some still didn’t understand the point, or refused to) is not only rejecting the ransom, but also retains one’s guilt of sin, because the Law couldn’t actually remove guilt of sin. Those clinging to the Jewish system of worship were *forsaking* not only the removal of guilt afforded by Jesus’ perpetual sacrifice, but also what it meant: the glorious provision which will lead to the *episunagogue*, that is the gathering together which will take place upon Jesus’ return.

Paul is saying that if they truly understand what he is trying to explain, they will show appreciation for the provision by *inciting* to love and fine works, by “encouraging one another,” not just at the present time, but actually “all the more so as” they beheld “the day drawing near.” They would “hold fast” to its *reality*, “without wavering.”

In light of this, we should now put the pieces together and see if it *fits*.

To do this, we will cite the entire passage one final time:

Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness for the way of entry into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> which he inaugurated for us as a new and living way through the curtain, that is, his flesh, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us approach with true hearts in the full assurance of faith, having had our hearts sprinkled from a wicked conscience and our bodies bathed with clean water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the public declaration of our hope without wavering, for he is faithful that promised. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider one another to incite to love and fine works, <sup>25</sup> not forsaking the gathering of ourselves together, as some have the custom, but encouraging one another, and all the more so as YOU behold the day drawing near.

<sup>26</sup> For if we practice sin willfully after having received the accurate knowledge of the truth, there is no longer any sacrifice for sins left, <sup>27</sup> but [there is] a certain fearful expectation of judgment and [there is] a fiery jealousy that is going to consume those in opposition. <sup>28</sup> Any man that has disregarded the law of Moses dies without compassion, upon the testimony of two or three. <sup>29</sup> Of how much more severe a punishment, do YOU think, will the man be counted worthy who has trampled upon the Son of God and who has esteemed as of ordinary value the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and who has outraged the spirit of undeserved kindness with contempt? <sup>30</sup> For we know him that said: “Vengeance is mine; I will recompense”; and again:

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“Jehovah will judge his people.”<sup>31</sup> It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of [the] living God.— Hebrews 10:19-31 (NWT)

Paul says of his readers, “we have boldness for the way of entry into the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” That blood “inaugurated for us as a new and living way through the curtain, that is, his flesh.” We now “have a great priest over the house of God.” We are invited to “approach with true hearts in the full assurance of faith” the “holy place” where formerly only priests could go. We can do so because we have “had our hearts sprinkled from a wicked conscience and our bodies bathed with clean water.” So *wonderful* is this new arrangement, this new provision from our Grand Creator that we should want to “hold fast” our acknowledgment of this hope “without wavering,” because we *know and are convinced* that “he is faithful that promised” that this would be so.

Not *only* that, but we need to “consider one another” (the original Greek word here is *katanoeo*, which means “take note of, perceive” –compare Philippians 2:1-4) in order to “incite to love and fine works.” Reasonably, we won’t be able to properly do this unless we start taking a personal interest in one another, actually taking the time to get to know one another and assisting those who need our assistance. (Compare Galatians 6:2; also James 2:15-17)

We won’t want to be found “forsaking” (that is, “abandoning” or even “rejecting” by reason of disputing over its validity or value as having removed the guilt of sin in relation to the former covenant or Law of Moses and the sacrifices offered under that arrangement; refer to pages 14 and 15 of this article) this *episunagogue* (being gathered together upon Jesus’ return as “chosen ones”). Unfortunately, this is exactly what was happening in the case of those having or taking ownership of “the custom,” that is, the Law and how things were done under *it* and not how things are being done under the new covenant.

The reason for the futility of choosing “the custom” over the promise of the *episunagogue*, which comes by means of Jesus’ perpetual sacrifice, is that there is “no longer any sacrifice for sins left” *apart* from Jesus.’ This is because Jesus’ sacrifice *ended* the former covenant arrangement. It “no longer” is in existence, as far as God is concerned. (See Hebrews 10:5-9)

Instead, by adhering to “the custom,” one remains under “a certain fearful expectation of judgment,” and why not, for the person who rejects the value and applicability of Jesus’ sacrifice is actually *trampling* “upon the Son of God” and comparing it to as ordinary of value as the worthless offering of bulls and goats called for under the Law of Moses, the former covenant. Such contemptuous thinking outrages “the spirit of undeserved kindness” and will *not* go ignored nor will it be dismissed!

We also will not want to be “forsaking” (that is, “removing the protection of”) this undeserved kindness by continuing to sin *willfully*, which will also bring the wrath of Jehovah God upon us for dismissing the great cost that has been paid for us.

### Concluding the Discussion

**I HOPE** that you can see how much more harmoniously the above material fits together with the *context* of the scriptures we’ve been discussing than the idea that Paul is talking about a Church service, or a Witness meeting or circuit assembly or district convention. The idea behind Paul’s use of *episunagogue* far transcends such organizationalized, religious thinking as “meetings,” where using *sunago* would have been sufficient.

The thought of enduring under all the persecution, the trials, the material loss was not due to persisting in and regularly assembling together (*sunago*) whether in the temple, synagogues, or even homes, but rather was due to the faith and the hope of *being gathered together* at the time of Jesus’ return, when the reward for such faithfulness would be rewarded, and the “city having real foundations, the maker of which is God” will have finally arrived. (Hebrews 11:10)

It is the conviction of the truth of this promise which Paul goes on to demonstrate as he provides numerous examples of those who, by such faith, are remembered by the Jews as well as by God Himself—because their faith was a *living* faith. If Paul had been merely talking about “meetings,” there is no such indication anywhere in the context in which Hebrews 10:24-25 finds itself.

We have the hope of the *episunagogue* because finally, once and for all time, a priceless sacrifice has been offered up in behalf of those who were guilty under sin. To afterwards insist that such a sacrifice isn’t enough, that we must adhere to the former covenant, is to flatly *forsake* the undeserved kindness—something which will earn us *nothing* except dire judgment by God. Similarly, to use that sacrifice as an excuse to continue to sin *willfully* under the delusion that “once-saved, always-saved” is good enough because it gives God a chance to show just how loving He is of a sinner will result in wrath coming upon such delusional thinkers. (Romans 6:1-2)

In closing, allow me to say this:

Do we, in our modern-day consideration of the value of Jesus’ sacrifice, sometimes feel that we don’t deserve or measure up to such a precious sacrifice, that there is no hope for us because we are *too* imperfect, *too* worthless, *too* undeserving?

If so, are we not actually telling Jehovah God that as precious, as *dear* as Jesus was to Him—as hard as it was for the great and almighty Jehovah God in all of His limitless Power to restrain his rage as He watched His only-begotten Son being put to death in spite of his innocence—that all of that *still* isn’t enough to open the way for *us* to *episunagogue*, that is the real hope of being gathered together when Jesus returns in exalted glory and rulership? That something *more* is needed in our case. Is not this sacrifice of His only-begotten Son *enough* if He says that it is, and that in spite of our own miserable wickedness, the value of that sacrifice has been found meriting worth

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sufficient to not only cover our sinfulness, but to open the way to true reconciliation with our Grand Creator.

By recognizing the profound Truth of what Paul was striving to share through his discussion of the *episunagogue*, and what it means for us, this does not mean that suddenly we will not have our personality flaws, our thorn in the flesh, our sinful inclinations, our doubts and our fears. But what it *does* mean is that we now have a True high priest appointed in our behalf, one who can, to the exclusion of all others, sympathize with us and who will willingly speak in our behalf as our Mediator with his Father. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

May Jehovah continue to bless!

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## ENDNOTES

1. It is of great interest that the issue over the value of the Ransom and who has guilt removed by means of it was a topic which led to the parting of ways between Charles Taze Russell and Nelson Barbour. It is also noteworthy that according to current teaching of the Society, only the 144,000 (heavenly class) immediately are entitled to gain from the sacrifice at the present time, and that those of the “great crowd” (earthly class) will not have it applied to them until some indefinite time in the future and subsequently remain under guilt of sin. If you research the subject in Hebrews, the Watchtower Society’s view emulates the arrangement under the Law of Moses (only those of the priestly class may enter the “holy place”), but not the arrangement that *replaced* that former arrangement, the arrangement which Paul describes as taking place with the Christ.
2. Although *episunagogue* contains *sunago* as a root, it is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that there is a *uniqueness* between how one is used in the Bible in relation to how the other one is used. The use of *episunagogue* appears to be reserved in use, speaking *specifically* of those who will be gathered together as righteous ones when Jesus returns in full glory and power—*as a group*; in other words, those who have placed their faith in the merits of the Ransom sacrifice and have doing the Will of Jehovah God and not the will of their sinful flesh.