

Faith Comes by Hearing

Throughout time God's children have desired to gather in the hearing of God's Word. There the gospel is preached and believed, and there we find Christian fellowship, which is so important on our endeavor to heaven.

When life is busy it can feel easy to not gather at services as often as we would like. We know regular attendance alone will not get us to heaven, but does it help and encourage us in faith to be in the hearing of God's Word? How has it been for you? On these Home and Family pages, writers share their thoughts and experiences.

It's Sunday morning at the Longview church. The benches are nearly full. The service director announces the first song. Festive singing fills the sanctuary as the remaining empty places are filled with service guests. The overflow room is also full. As I ready the bookstore for after-church sales, I watch those who are just arriving at the church find seats on folding chairs in the foyer. It is such a wonderful sight: so many have arrived to hear God's Word and to become refreshed and strengthened in their life of faith.

I close the bookstore door and walk up the aisle to the seat my husband is saving for me. We sit near the front where we always have since this church was new thirty-three years ago. The song ends, and a young minister begins the morning prayer. In my heart I feel grateful for this building, these people, this congregation.

Afterwards, we drive home for lunch: down the hill, through the industrial area, across the Columbia into Oregon and back up the hill on the other side. In the evening, we again drive the 35-minute route, which takes us back over the river and through the woods. The church parking lot is half full. Inside, many benches are occupied, but there are many seats still available. Once again we sing, and then we pray. As the minister speaks, my thoughts wander.

I recall how my daughter and I discussed once that coming to services is always a choice. Those who are here right now, as the sun sets out the left-hand windows, have made a decision to set aside their Sunday-afternoon activities, ready themselves and their families for church, step out the door and into their cars and drive here, to the church on the hill. How beautiful, I think. The two rows of youth to my right. The elders behind me, and the young families behind them. My cousin and his wife across the aisle. They all chose to be here, endeavoring yet for this evening on the road to heaven.

On a bench near me, a small girl with thick braids argues with her brother. Her dad picks her up and holds her tight, murmuring shushing noises into the top of her head. She struggles for a moment, but then sits restfully. Her head against her father's shirt pocket turns and she looks straight at the minister. He tells of a young Joseph and the colorful coat he wore. The girl with braids appears to listen intently.

I too have been brought to the hearing of God's Word as a little girl, for as long as I can remember. At that age, I maybe didn't realize the significance of our weekly visits to area churches. Our home congregation was the Quincy Association of Peace, where Tapani Ojalehto served us twice a month. We also attended services in Longview, Wash., and Astoria, Ore. Most sermons were in Finnish, with no translation.

I am a grandmother now, and I suppose I am one of this congregation's elders. The noises of children beside and behind me form a familiar, comforting backdrop to the sermon in front of me. How different this moment is from some of my childhood experiences at church services. In Astoria, for example, the church was filled with adults, many of whom were elderly. I recall that one whole side of the church was filled with old women. Sometimes one of them would pass a cellophane bag of sweets to her bench-mates. The cellophane crackled as the bag was passed hand to hand. That noise was tolerated, but if a child in the audience made any noise, many heads would turn to look. It seems to me that at that time in that place it wasn't the custom to bring children to church. I recall adults saying that children cannot understand and should therefore be left home so they don't disturb others with noise during the sermon.

When I think of current and former children in my life, it is clear to me that precious little ones clearly grasp what is most important. They are even often able to express matters of faith clearly and succinctly. They have implicit trust in God and Jesus. Heaven is a treasure they hold dear. Sin and wrongdoing weigh heavily on their little hearts, and they feel so much joy when their sins are forgiven! And they are quick to forgive: many times my own shortcomings have been forgiven by little ones who wrap their little arms around me and preach the gospel in sweet, clear voices. I look around at children near me and think: these children are fortunate. Their parents brought them to services.

I remember seeing some families with children at services in Astoria – the Makis, the Uunilas, Jurvakainens, the Philips family. For each of us children, the time came when we had to make our own decision whether to attend services or not. I am thankful that my parents helped me make that decision by stressing the importance of attending services and also practicing what they preached. God blessed with the desire to continue the habit of attending services regularly, even when I was in nurses training in Portland and only had one free weekend a month.

The sermon gives way to the closing prayer. After the final song, the service director announces next week's service schedule. Will next Sunday be the same, I wonder, with a packed church in the morning and a smaller number of service guests in the evening? Sometimes the happenings of temporal life keep us away from services. There are seasonal activities, family gatherings, vacations...and in this mill town there are those on a rotating shift at their workplaces.

I follow a young mother juggling several small children down the stairs to the church basement for coffee. I am happy this woman brought her children here. I think of my believing children in other states and in Finland. I hope they also made an effort to attend services today. Nevertheless, I know I can only

believe for myself. This thought stays with me as I pick up a cup of coffee and find a place to sit down at a table nearby. What can a person do, I think, besides attending services herself and taking care of her own faith life.

I ask my cousin this question as he sits down across from me. We visit and reminisce about the days when we had our own vans full of children. Though decades have passed, it seems like just days ago when we had to race the clock on a Sunday morning to get children dressed and fed, hair brushed, church shoes on, our own selves ready and stray Sunday school homework and Bibles rounded up before dashing out the door to church. We can pray, he says. We can pray that we and all of God's children would be given the heart and the mind to attend services. It comes to mind that we can also invite others to join us on the church bench.

We wonder if there are more obstacles nowadays to attending services. People sometimes seemed so rushed and busy. But I feel there were plenty of obstacles previously as well. And I know how busy I was in years past. In all stages of life there are other things to do too besides attending services and other church events. We carry this double portion, so even when part of a person wishes to go to services, the other part – the sin-corrupt human side – can think of many other duties, errands or activities.

Life is full of many things, and many times we are faced with choices. We make our schedules, we plan ahead, we prioritize and then we act accordingly. Hopefully we prioritize attending services. After all the most important thing in our life is to know God and Jesus Christ, to become and remain a child of God. We have been taught this since childhood.

My husband drives us out of the church parking lot and into the dark evening. Again I think of how life is full of decisions. When we decide to attend services regularly, our undying souls receive nourishment on a regular basis. Going to services helps protect us in faith. Can it become a habit, I wonder. If so, it is a good habit. I remember elders in my life who advised my peers and me: go to services, they said, there you will find all you need. I have found that this is true. Living faith is not a habit, it is a gift. The owner of this gift wishes to go where he or she will find God's people and where he or she can hear the gospel.

Faith comes by hearing. These words are etched in my heart. I have heard them so many times. I am not sinless; no one is. I, along with all my believing brothers and sisters, need to hear the gospel of forgiveness. I need those words of grace, so I need to go where they are preached. Hearing God's Word strengthens my faith – the faith that never stays strong for long.

We turn off the highway on to the winding road towards Mayger. How many times have I raced along this road in the opposite direction, I ponder, headed toward church with a mind and a heart full of anything but holy thoughts; the hurry and worry and stress and disappointments of everyday life have clung with me. And yet most often on my way home I'm filled with gratitude and love toward God for

the great gift I have been given. I don't know if I'd remember that so often or so well if I weren't able to make it to services so often. God knows what I need, and He leads me there where I can find it.

Even weak faith carries us to heaven, if we can only trust in the joyous message of the forgiveness of sins. Through faith we believe those things we have been promised. God has promised us eternal life after our stay on earth is over. I thank God for allowing me to live where there is a church just over the river and where I have believing family and friends nearby. I thank God that I can attend services regularly and that, for this moment, I yet believe.

Sandra Keranen

A Seeking One Hears and Believes

Of the traditional five senses, hearing is often the last to leave. Extensive medical research bears this out. Even one in a coma can hear, as related in the following story by Finnish minister, Lenna Anttila, at Minneapolis services in 1972. I will add a brief historical background to his story.

Based on the context of this event, it likely took place during Finland's Winter War with Russia. On November 30, 1939, Russia attacked Finland without any provocation on Finland's part. As the Russians advanced, they burned homes and villages of the Finnish people in the eastern part of the country. Villagers had to evacuate their homes.

Russian troops carried parade uniforms in their rucksacks with the intent to hold a victory parade after three weeks' time on the streets of Helsinki. God protected Finland and the victory parade did not happen.

Among the evacuees were a mother and her young son. Travel was by horse and a sled loaded with all their belongings. That winter was extremely cold, well below zero for long stretches. The boy suffered to such an extent that he went into a coma. In a moment of consciousness, he realized his condition in his dying state. He asked his mother: "What is the right way to die?" The mother had no answer, for she and her son were not believers.

As they traveled to the west they were welcomed by families on the way. The boy's questions continued during brief moments of consciousness. They found no answer.

Finally, the mother and son found the answer. The lady of a house they arrived at was a believer. When the mother of the sick boy asked her of the right way to die, she knew her son was pleading for an answer for his undying soul. When she preached the forgiveness of his sins in the name and blood of Jesus, an amazing thing took place. The boy never again asked for the right way to die, even though he lived for another two weeks. By finding the right way to die, he found the right way to live, a life that never ends in the glory of heaven.

Grace is available to all until the end.

Ernie Lehtola

I Can Believe as a Child

How easy it is to turn to our own understanding regarding matters of faith – I have fallen in this way many times. One memory of such a time is from a confirmation school lesson I sat in on some years ago as a staff member. I don't even remember the topic, but I remember something causing confusion in my mind. When the lesson was over, I approached the teacher and told him I was a little confused. I'm pretty sure I even formed my confusion into a question. I felt if he could answer this then I could understand. His response was not what I was expecting. He must have sensed my doubting and responded, "You can believe your sins and doubts forgiven in Jesus' name and blood."

Trying to put understanding before believing is close to me. It has been so easy for me to try to understand certain points of faith by searching the Bible for answers and by joining discussions that bring the topics up in an intellectual discussion format. I am thankful God has given me a tender conscience that pricks me when things don't feel right, even though my brain is telling me otherwise. For example, it seems easy to reason the simplicity of forgiveness. Since Jesus died on the cross for all of my sins, are those I haven't committed yet already forgiven too? Yet conversations I have been part of regarding this have left me feeling troubled. I thank God for sending me a believing friend who could help me to see the error in trying to understand before believing.

This reminds me of how Jesus says to believe as a little child. A child doesn't comprehend the mystery of faith, nor do we or will we ever. God has meant this to be so. But as a little child, I want to hear often that my sins are forgiven. I want to hear God's Word through the Holy Spirit in the congregation, also in times that I study the Bible alone.

The Bible says that many hear the Word of God, but few believe. And those that hear will not comprehend unless they are converted and their sins are forgiven them. Only to the disciples, the believers, will the mystery of God's kingdom be known (Mark 4:11–12). "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

It is good we gather often, even in troubling times. Jesus reminds us that sheep will not follow a stranger's voice (John 10:4–5). Jesus is our Shepherd; may His voice never be that of a stranger to my ears.

Sarina Siljander

Living Faith Needs to Be Fed and Nurtured

Faith is something we believe in and trust. Faith is something we cannot see – it is revealed by and through the Holy Spirit and God’s Word. “Faith cometh by hearing, and by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

Growing up on a dairy farm in northern Minnesota created childhood memories that I cherish. We learned to work hard and care for the cows and for the crops we raised to feed the animals. The cows were milked two times each day. They required much attention in order to maintain a good level of milk production. If we didn’t feed the cows their proper nutrition, or water the crops that fed them, they would suffer greatly and eventually the milk production would begin to suffer.

This is to me a picture of living faith, of how I need to feed and nurture it. Attending services and Bible class is a way for me to strengthen my weak faith. I am often refreshed when I attend services. Singing songs of Zion also strengthens me.

How quickly time passes. Now I have my own family and these same lessons that were taught to me as a child are passed on to my own children. My wife and I try to make it a priority to attend services. We are encouraged to take our family to the hearing of God’s Word where they can learn about living faith.

Jesus teaches, “Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come onto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:14).

My weak faith do Thou encourage, with thy love may I be blest, keep this hope, my only solace ever burning in my breast (SHZ 563:4).

Bruce Keranen

Discussion Points:

1. Why is it important to attend the hearing of God’s Word on a regular basis? What blessings come of this?
2. How can we teach our children and young ones the importance of regular attendance at gatherings of God’s children?
3. We know faith is a personal endeavor, and fellowship is important too. How does gathering with other children of God help you in your personal life of faith?
4. Do you feel there have been changes in attendance at church functions over the years? If so, what might explain these changes?
5. How can we encourage others in a constructive, loving way to attend services?