

COMMUNITY

When you signed up for Growth Track, you likely expected us to talk about all the topics we have covered so far. They all make sense. We talked about Jesus, learning to love Scripture, and learning to love the gospel. All of these are both essential and somewhat obvious to anyone with a church background.

However, one piece of context can easily be missed when talking about discipleship. Why? Because it's less of a practice and more of a concept. We were designed to be discipled together. Community is crucial if we want to accomplish growth and stay accountable. This is the way Jesus did everything. How did He live? With a bunch of friends. How did He do ministry? By teaching the disciples how to do it with Him. How did He teach us to pray? By saying, "OUR Father in heaven." Even the Lord's Prayer speaks to this crucial truth. Christianity is about community.

Gathering with people is pivotal for a healthy, happy, and whole life. Sadly, many people choose to live in isolation instead of with others. Some people desperately want community but can't seem to make it click because our culture has become so isolated and consumed by distraction. We are not designed to live this way. The importance of community shows up all over nature—especially in the animal kingdom.

This is perfectly illustrated by a recent nature documentary I watched. It was wild. A dude with a thick Australian accent was narrating the image of a sea lion that was separated from his pack. The poor little guy had a faulty flipper, so he was flopping around in the water away from his friends. The camera zoomed in on this sea pup doing his best to swim to the shore, but he was struggling to keep his head above water.

Then the camera panned to an underwater shot that made my heart sink like the *Titanic*. It was a clip of a fast-moving shark heading right toward the wounded sea lion. Immediately, I started screaming at my television, "Swim away, little buddy! Get out of there!" The music in the show started building up like a scene from, well, the *Titanic*. And then it got silent.

The camera jumped to the shark, then the sea lion, then the shark, then the sea lion... and then the music stopped. The diabolical shark jumped out of the water with my little

buddy in his mouth. Then, the camera cut away before I could see anything. I would like to assume the little guy survived. I would love to think that he prevailed. I would love to imagine him sitting on the beach right now sipping some sardine juice. I know none of that is true, though. He was in a weak place. He was alone. The shark targeted him—and won.

Nature proves that we need community. No, I'm not saying that failure to attend your small group will make you get eaten by a shark or something. But I know that you weren't designed to do life alone. Our ministry is all about authentic community and supportive circles. That's why the early Christians put such a big emphasis on their identity as a collective — not just individuals. Let's explore how Hebrews illustrates this. The author identifies three key benefits of community right here in this small passage: protection, correction, and connection.

READ: Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Community Provides Protection

Do you see it? The author of Hebrews commands that we live in community. We should not give up “meeting together”; rather, we need to be “encouraging one another.” Why would the author command it instead of suggesting it? Christians need community because life is always in conflict. This was especially true for the people of the ancient world. Due to increased Roman hostility toward Christianity, Christians were hunted like wounded sea lions. Every day, they heard rumors of people being arrested, harmed, or even killed by the occupying empire in Jerusalem. Tragically, as we can infer from the author's warning, some people gave up on gathering. The hostile environment of the Roman Empire was likely playing a role.

How sad is this? When we're scared, we need the support of others. When we're confused, we need company. When we're hurting, we need healing conversations. All of that happens within the context of community. However, most people isolate when they face fear. The author of Hebrews wanted to warn Christians against that. Why?



Because we are far more vulnerable when alone. Simply put, isolation is not an option for a Christian.

Attacks happen when you're alone. Good people protect you. It's true with the sea lion, but it's also true for you. Have you ever noticed you're far more likely to fall into dangerous habits when you're lonely? Sadly, so many people don't realize this reality until it's too late. Addiction takes hold in isolation. Depression grows in isolation. Condemnation hurts worse in isolation. So how do we protect ourselves from the devastation that comes from isolation? We make an intentional effort to form a faith-filled community all around us. Good friends are pivotal to a growing faith. So, please, be open to people often and always invite people into your process.

Community Provides Connection

The author of Hebrews says we need to hold unswervingly to hope. What is that hope? It's found in Jesus. However, look at the communal language used. Who needs to hold on unswervingly? We do. It's a collective effort.

First of all, how awesome is the word "unswervingly"? Like a car staying straight on the road. How do you ensure you get to your destination safely? By staying on the road and in between the yellow lines. It's easy to feel like life has you swerving all over the place, and that's normal. This passage gives us the solution. If we want to be unswerving, we need to be unified.

Do you want to maintain steadiness in life? Do you want to stop swerving? First, the passage answers how not to succeed. If you fail to gather, you will fail. Second, the author says we need to "encourage" each other, which is impossible to do alone. Encouragement is done collectively, not individually. You've likely seen this play out in your life. An encouraging word came at the perfect time. A comforting hug helped you feel safe. An optimistic friend helped you see the truth.

You were created for connection because it will keep you from swerving off your Growth Track journey. Life is difficult, and we need each other. It's as simple as that. Looking at the message of Hebrews, we can see that community is God's solution in times of crisis.



Community Provides Direction

Hebrews 10:24 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” The author of Hebrews encourages us to spur each other onward.

What is a spur? In a Western movie, it’s the jingle-bell-sounding attachment on the back of the cowboy’s boot. Spurs are those little metal hooks that horseback riders kick into the side of a horse to help them race forward faster.

I’m not an expert on horses or boots, but I read that spurs are used as a last resort. You use them only when you need them because they are a little uncomfortable. Just like spurs, authentic community is a little uncomfortable, but it’s always beneficial. If you want to move forward, you might need a little nudge.

But, what is the nudge toward? We are being spurred toward “love and good deeds.” That’s the direction God has for you. It would be best if you had a community that is willing to push you toward your purpose when you are tempted to retreat to your room. You need friends who will lead you to love when you’re going into a dark place. You need friends who will spur you toward wise decisions when destruction is knocking at your door. Community is not just powerful because it connects us and protects us. Not at all. We also need people because they help correct the course of our calling.

There are so many things that try to take us off our growth path, from heartbreak to habits to hurts. Good friends will help spur you along in the right direction and keep you on course. Pain makes us withdraw, but Jesus wants us to draw close. When times are tough, we need each other more than ever. If you’re feeling lonely or isolated, reach out to some friends or a trusted youth leader. If you notice someone has isolated, reach out to them. You will grow when you commit to gathering within a Christ-centered community. When you do, I know that it will help get you through.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week, and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Communities are rooted in friendships. What do you think are the top three characteristics of good friends?

Q2: Why does the author emphasize the importance of community in Hebrews 10?

Q3: In what ways does isolation impact individuals? How have you seen this play out around you?

Q4: What are some mindful habits you can develop to avoid isolation during challenging times and support others when they may be in need?

Q5: How will you apply the concept of spurring one another toward love and good deeds in your life? What might that look like in real life?

Application: How can you ensure you stay connected to your faith community regularly?