

The joyful wonder of life in Christ's church

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[0:00] Now, having sung it, let's now read it together. If you're using a church Bible, it's there on page 622. This one has a title that reminds us that it's a psalm that was written by King David, now being sung by a group of exiled believers.

Psalms 122, a song of ascents of David. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statutes given to Israel.

There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be secure.

May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, peace be within you.

[1:11] For the sake of the house of the Lord, our God, I will seek your prosperity. Amen. So in Psalms 122, we're going to think about the joyful wonder of life in Christ's church.

But just to begin here, I wonder if we can identify with the pilgrims in their sense of joy of arriving. Finally, we're here.

Here's the final of a trio of Psalms. Psalms 120, we thought about. Here they are far from Jerusalem and they're living with great distress, surrounded by lies and enemies and aggression. Psalms 121, they've been on the journey and there's been many dangers that God has protected.

But now, Psalms 122, they've reached their destination. And there's joy in arriving because now here they are, God's people. They're in God's city and they get to praise together with others.

And for us here today, I hope that we'll get to experience some of that joy in miniature, the joy of Jerusalem, as we gather together knowing we meet with God today.

[2:47] And also that it will give us a sense of expectation and longing for the perfect joy in that perfect city that we read about in Revelation 21.

But a second way to think about this psalm that might be helpful for us is to ask the question, what makes a city great? You know, why does David have joy in this city of Jerusalem in particular? Some of you may see this every year. The Economist magazine does a livability report trying to decide through various factors.

So they'll look at education and transport and infrastructure and culture and climate. They'll put these 30 things together and they'll decide what's the best city in the world to live in. And this year, according to The Economist, the best city to live in is Copenhagen over in Denmark.

Edinburgh comes in quite a lowly 64th, but it's still a nice city to live in. But for King David, as he's approaching and then reaches Jerusalem, what does he celebrate about his city?

[3:52] What makes it such a great, livable, wonderful city? He's got a different set of factors to The Economist. For him, it's the joy of worship because Jerusalem represents God's physical address on the earth.

Here is where sacrifice can be made to atone for sin so that people can be reconciled to God. What gets him excited is the joy that he finds in gathering with others to meet with God to sing his praise. So as we come into Psalms 122, it's highlighting for us something of the wonder of what Christ's church offers to us and to the world, as we will see.

And it also causes us to look forward with a sense of anticipation to the city to come whose builder is God. So let's get into our text.

First couple of verses, let's think about the joy of Christ's church. So we've been told that David is the writer, so he is the worship leader. And the theme of his journey and his song is joy.

[5:00] There's the joy of arriving, and there's also the joy of access. So think about the joy of arriving. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let's go to the house of the Lord.

So that's a statement of faith. Here is David saying, being among God's people, getting to be in God's presence, that's what makes me glad and joyful. And there's a determination, let us go. This is a journey that's going to be hard, but it's a journey worth making for David and for those pilgrims who will go with him. But he is delighted to do it because he gets to meet with God. Jerusalem, you may know, is a city that was special to David. You can read about it in 2 Samuel 5 and 6. One of the first acts that he does as king is he conquers the city of Jerusalem, and he makes it his royal city.

Jerusalem is the place where the 12 tribes are united together to acknowledge that David is going to be their true king. And David very quickly takes the ark of God, representing the presence of God, and he brings that to Jerusalem.

[6:10] And so the rule of King David is connected with the rule of the one true God and his worship. And so he has this joy. So he's been far away. Maybe he's been on a military campaign, and now the enemies have been defeated.

Now the war is over, and he's told, let's go back. It's time to go home. And he's got joy because it's about God's people and God's praise. So there's the joy of arriving, but there's also the joy of access because we notice there in verse 1, the focus for him is, let's go to the house of the Lord. And you notice Lord is in capitals. That's the personal covenant name of the Lord God. So there is joy because he gets to meet the covenant God who meets with his people there.

He gets to worship the holy God, the almighty maker of heaven and earth, who has acted to become their redeemer. He has joy because when he goes to the house of the Lord, he knows sacrifices are made so that that right relationship between God and people can be restored and people can be reconciled.

And so there's joy here. Verse 2, our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem. And the joy of standing in those gates is because this is the city of God.

[7:29] These are the gates of God. And those gates wonderfully are open so that sinful people saved by God's mercy and grace, well, they can draw near. And even in that picture, there's a great recognition of here is what Jesus offers in the gospel.

Jesus himself will tell us he is the true temple. He is the true house of God. To meet with God, we need to know Jesus. He gives us access to life with the true and living God as the one true and living God.

He offered not an animal but himself as the sacrifice so that our sin can be covered and we can draw near. And it's through Jesus that we're brought into covenant relationship with the living God. So the joy of arriving and the joy of access are here. But we need to think about ourselves today because David connected his joy to physical, geographical Jerusalem, but we don't do that.

Our hope is in a different city, isn't it? As Paul writes in the New Testament to Christians in the letter to the Galatians, the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother.

[8:42] Or in Philippians, our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. So for us as Christians, we read Jerusalem in Psalm 122 and the joy there and we think about the joy of the new Jerusalem.

The new heavens and the earth that we read of in Revelation 21. But at the same time, we need to understand that the church every Sunday is for us a tiny slice of joy.

Because every time we gather here, God meets with us. Every time we open the Bible, God speaks to us. Every time we think about Jesus, we're reminded that He's made that sacrifice so that we have access and can draw near.

So we share something of this joy. Just take a moment and think about this. Why do we do what we do? For many of us, we've been Christians for a long time. We come to church week by week. What are we doing here? Think of the church, something like an oasis in our city. Here is a moment to rest and be refreshed away from all our busyness.

[10:00] Away from all the pressures that we live in day by day. Away from those attempts to make a name for ourselves. Here is an invitation to the living God to come and be refreshed.

And to find the life that we were made for and the God that we were made for. And so we come eagerly because we want to taste and see that God is good.

And we want to experience the peace and the joy that He offers in Jesus. So it's a reminder that as we come to church, we come ready and eager to receive joy from our good God.

To make this a place of joy for ourselves and for one another. Because while what happens in here can often seem so ordinary. You know, maybe thousands of times we've sung a psalm or a hymn or we've opened the Bible together.

But truly it's also at the same time extraordinary. Ordinary building. But we're met with by an extraordinary God.

[11:02] We have the promise that Jesus comes to meet with us. That the Spirit is at work through His Word. And He is the one who would fill us with this joy. The joy of knowing Him.

The joy of having our sins forgiven. The joy of King Jesus ministering to us in His Word and through His people. So Psalm 120 reminds us of the joy of Christ's church.

Secondly, it speaks to us of the wonder of Christ's church. There in the center, verses 3 to 5. So Alec Mateer, the Bible commentator, he makes a striking comment.

He says, The church is a place where the world's problems are solved. Full stop. Now I don't know how you react to that.

Maybe if we are inclined to be cynical, we might say, Well I thought the church sometimes, well that is the problem, not the solution. Or maybe if we think about a skeptical approach to that statement.

[12:04] Well, I think the church is irrelevant to the needs of a modern world. Maybe the church just needs to kind of mind its own business and do its own thing.

And let the world get on with its work. But what we have as we look at the center of Psalm 122 is a reason why we can humbly say that the south side of Edinburgh, that the city of Edinburgh needs us and churches like us.

Because we're given a vision of God's design for His church and God's wonderful goal for our life together. That we're seeing this is who God wants us to be and there is a goodness in this for ourselves and for our weary world.

Three things Christ and His church offers the world. First of all, security in an uncertain world. Look at verse 3. Think about the image.

Jerusalem is built like a city that's closely compacted together. So, the image. Here's a city with well-constructed walls and towers. Everything in its right place. So, that means protection.

[13:16] That means security. That means community on the inside. That Jerusalem, representing Christ's church, is to be a place of security and safety in a sometimes dangerous and often uncertain world.

These pilgrims, as they've been traveling, well, they've been living in a war zone and they've been traveling through hazards. But Jerusalem, well, that's peace and rest and security.

Now, I think many of us, we can easily identify with the sense of uncertainty. We worry about our kids growing up. We wonder as young adults about our employment opportunities or housing situation or relationships.

Or we switch on the news and we see tragedy seems to be ever present. And we need to remember that into this uncertain world, God sent His Son Jesus and He came to be a Savior by giving His life as a sacrifice so that trusting in Him we might have eternal security.

What Jesus offers the world is a secure salvation, life with God now and forevermore. What Jesus offers is a secure identity to be known as a child of God.

[14:40] And what Jesus offers is a secure hope with no prospect of losses. So there is security in an uncertain world.

There's secondly, the offer of harmony in a divided world. Look at verse four with me. That's where the tribes go up. They're the tribes of the Lord to praise the name of the Lord.

And just to recognize this is unity but not uniformity. So these 12 tribes, so we live in Scotland right now. We're in Scotland. Scotland's a small nation. But we have many different cultures.

You know, Edinburgh is not Glasgow. The central belt is not the same as the highlands. And the same was true for Israel. Different regions, different clans, doing different kind of works. What bound them together, their common bond, was a unity forged in worship.

They gather together as one to praise the name of the Lord. A reminder that for us as Christians, our unity is found in Jesus.

[15:44] All of us can see fracturing and division within the world. That's really easy to see, isn't it? At the global level of conflicts, in our realms of national politics, we see fracturing and division in our

communities and on our streets.

And for many of us, we feel the pain in our own family circumstances. And what God gives by way of an answer is His Son and His church.

So think again about Jesus coming into a divided world, a hostile world. And how did Jesus live? Jesus lived a life of love, didn't He? A love that covers over wrongs.

Read the Gospels and you discover in Jesus a love that crosses difference and boundaries and barriers in order to bring people into God's kingdom.

In the good news of the Lord Jesus, there is a love that binds up where often we tend to break. And now as the church, we are the people of Jesus.

[17:01] And we are called to make that love visible. A love that's a blessing to us and to our world. Jesus came as the Prince of Peace, making peace with our God, but also bringing peace with people as our sins are forgiven and as the Spirit is poured into our hearts.

And so churches are called to be places of healing and harmony. Places in a community where everyone can be welcomed, where people can feel able to belong before they believe.

So there is security, there's harmony. And thirdly, there is the promise of justice in an unjust world. Verse five, there stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

So the picture here is a reminder of the connection between Israel's king and Israel's justice. That one of the key duties of King David and other kings was to deliver and to secure God's justice for God's people as he lived out and practiced God's law.

Now, we need to be very careful. So we absolutely say the church should be a place that pursues and practices justice for all.

[18:23] It should be a place that defends the cause of the weak and helpless. It should provide a safe space for any and all who come through our doors. But as we take a look through church history, as we think about church scandals across the world and in our own nation, we recognize that all too often we fail.

That the name of Jesus is dragged through the mud by those who profess the name of Jesus. But yet, by God's grace, we do offer real hope to our world because we point not to ourselves in our imperfection, but we point to Jesus as the true and perfect king.

And to that promise that he will return one day and he will establish true and perfect justice, that a day is coming when every wrong will be dealt with, when everyone will stand before his judgment seat.

But it's also important for us to recognize and to be thankful for the fact that Christians and churches do work. And I think the OM work, the Logoship is one example of that, that churches and Christians do work to care for the poor, that they do pursue justice for the oppressed, that they do promote dignity for all of life, here and across the world.

And all of that done in the name of Jesus, the King who rules with justice. And for us as Christians too, here is a hope that we can cling to when we are treated badly for being Christians, when we're slandered, when we're overlooked or shamed because we own Jesus as Lord, the judge of the earth will do right.

[20:18] That justice and salvation is coming. Last week, we were in another chapter in Revelation, Revelation 7, that beautiful picture of worshipers gathered from every nation and tribe and culture and language all around the throne of Jesus, the King who brings justice and salvation for all those who trust Him.

So, we've seen the joy, we've seen the wonder. Let's finish thinking about the peace of Christ's church. It's there in verses 6 to 9. So, again, we've been following these pilgrims on their journey. They've come from an environment filled with lies and hate. They've come through the dangers of life on the road and now they've reached their goal and their goal is Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is the city of shalom, the city of peace.

In verses 6 to 8, we find the church at prayer, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, seeking the peace of God, seeking it for the sake of friends and family, for the wider community.

And in verse 9, we find the church getting to work to seek peace and prosperity. For the sake of the house of the Lord, our God, I will seek your prosperity.

[21:41] Here is a people filled with joy. Here is a people filled with prayer. Here is a people getting to work, wanting the good of others for the glory of God.

And it all ties up with this idea of peace. So, what does the word peace mean? Why do we struggle with it? And how can we have it? Now, people often ask with a sense of longing, but also perhaps a sense of despair, how can anyone find real peace in a world of chaos?

When bombs fall, when cars are torched, when disease and tragedy strike without warning, when friendships can be shattered by cruel words and deception.

We long for peace, but can peace be found. Psalm 122 ends with us in the city of peace with prayers for peace and a commitment to seek peace.

And all of it takes us, verse 9, to the house of the Lord. And that's key for us because the Bible teaches us over and over it's with our God and with His Son, the Lord Jesus, that deep and lasting peace is found.

[23:03] Now, when the Bible speaks of peace or shalom, to use the familiar Hebrew word, what is that pointing to? What is it saying to us? And we need to understand, so I guess in English when we think about peace, we often think about the absence of hostility or warfare.

That's part of it, but it's more than that. Peace, according to the Bible, is a flourishing in all of life. It's where everything under God is in its right place.

It's well-being in all aspects of life, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. It's a peace that runs deeper than circumstances because it's a peace that's rooted in a life with the God of peace.

So what Psalm 122 introduces us to and closes us with is God's peace, a peace that we can have, that we can have peace with God through Christ because we have been reconciled through His blood, that we can have in Jesus peace in our hearts through prayer and through worship, and we have a peace to pursue with others in a divided world.

So we hear the church being called to pray for peace, to be peacemakers, to seek the best for others, to call one another into life with this God who offers peace with Himself and peace in our hearts.

[24:38] and we're called to work for that peace, to make what God offers visible, to be as a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, a community that shows a love that reconciles, to practice a unity and a harmony that cuts across differences, a security that is rooted in a relationship with our Creator.

Because we understand as a church that people in every age, every generation, in every culture and community needs this God and needs this peace in their lives.

Are we persuaded by that? For King David and the Old Testament pilgrims, Jerusalem was like a safe haven. It was an oasis for them. It was a place of rest in a world of war and aggression of suffering and death.

I can find peace because the God of peace is here and I'm invited to know Him. Some of you will be familiar with the Oxford mathematician John Lennox.

He's been a great spokesman for the Christian faith for decades now. I came across a snippet from an interview just a few weeks ago and he said, I've been interrogating the Christian faith for over 30 years.

[26:01] The claims of Christianity for 30 years and he said to the guy he was talking with who wasn't a Christian, Jesus offers a peace I could find nowhere else.

this man who'd done so much for Jesus, lived for decades, great wisdom into the world of mathematics. What he came back to was the joy of having peace in his heart.

when I know I have real forgiveness from God then I have peace. Jesus came to fulfill that longing to be the prince of peace who gives peace by his sacrificial death to establish an eternal kingdom of peace and it's a kingdom that he invites us into to begin to taste it right now to know that all is well between us and our God and to practice peace and unity with one another and all the while knowing the best is still to come.

Let's pray to our God together. Lord, we thank you for what Jerusalem represented for David, the place where he could meet with you, be with your people, to have the joy and rest of being with the God of peace and Lord, we ask that you would give to us a slice of that even today the joy of knowing that you are here and that you are meeting with us, you're speaking to us from your word and by your spirit that you would give to us and give to our world that peace that passes all understanding, that peace that we so badly need to be reconciled with our God and with others.

Now Lord, we ask that you would help us as a church to practice and to pursue and to pray for peace, to be a place known for security and harmony and justice, that we would point to the King who gives all that for now and forever.

[28:13] Teach us and help us, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.