

# When God's People Gather

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[ 0 : 00 ] And this morning we're continuing our series in the Psalms of Ascents.! We have come to the third psalm of Ascents.

! Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

Their thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May they be secure who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers. For my brothers' and companions' sake, I will say, Peace be within you.

[ 1 : 23 ] For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. Let's pray together. Father, we bow our hearts in this moment as we look to your word.

And we do so because we need you. Lord, I need you. I need you to help me to bring your word to your people, that ultimately your name will be glorified.

So, Lord, would you hear us this morning, and will you do for us what only you can do? We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. In his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, deceased pastor Eugene Peterson wrote the following.

One of the afflictions of pastoral work has been to listen with a straight face to all the reasons people give for not going to church. My mother made me when I was little.

There are too many hypocrites in the church. It's the only day I have to sleep in. There was a time when I responded to such statements with simple arguments that exposed them as flimsy excuses.

[ 2 : 46 ] Then I noticed that it did not make a difference. If I showed the inadequacy of one excuse, three more would pop up in its place.

So I don't respond anymore. I listen with a straight face and go home and pray that person will one day find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God.

I go about my work hoping that what I do and say will be usable by the Holy Spirit to create in that person a determination to worship God in a Christian community.

Many people do. They decide to worship God faithfully and devoutly. It is one of the important acts in a life of discipleship.

And what is far more interesting than these reasons, excuses, people give for not worshipping is discovering the reasons they do. Psalm 122 is the song of a person who decides to go to church and worship God.

[ 4 : 00 ] It is a sample of the complex, diverse, and worldwide phenomenon of worship that is common to all Christians. It is an excellent instance of what happens when a person worships.

Eugene Peterson was right. Psalm 122 is about worshipping God. And although the psalm appears to be a celebration of the city of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the only reason for that is that Jerusalem was the city where the temple of God was and where God's people were commanded at that time to go three times per year and worship him there.

And God promised to meet them. He promised to manifest his presence to them. And so Jerusalem was the place of the house of God. And without God's house, it would be like any other ordinary city.

And so Psalm 122 is a song that celebrates the blessings of God's people worshipping in God's house. And more specifically this morning, what I want us to see in Psalm 122 is that when God's people worship, it is an occasion for gladness an expression of obedience and a display of community.

And there are many things that the psalmist could have highlighted, but he highlights under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in this particular moment, on this occasion, these particular aspects of corporate worship.

[ 5 : 49 ] That it is an occasion of gladness, an expression of obedience, and a display of community. And so in our remaining time this morning, what I want to do is I want us to consider these three aspects of corporate worship which Psalm 122 celebrates.

And if you're taking notes this morning, I've organized this sermon, this short sermon, under three points, using three words to describe these three aspects of corporate worship.

The first one is gladness. Look again at verses 1 and 2. The psalmist writes, I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. The psalmist responded to the invitation to go to God's house with gladness.

He said he was glad when it was said to him, let us go to the house of the Lord. And why was he glad? The psalmist was glad because he had an informed gladness.

[ 6 : 59 ] He was not glad in a vacuum. He wasn't being invited to go to some strange place that he knew not of. He was being invited to go to a familiar place, one that he knew about.

He knew well the experience of gathering together with others in the worship of God, and the invitation evoked gladness of heart. But the gladness of the psalmist, we see in verse 2, is not a singular gladness.

In verse 1, he expresses for himself that he was glad. But in verse 2, he switches to the plural and he says, our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

And in these words, the psalmist seems to capture the corporate anticipation of others being with him in Jerusalem and worshipping God.

It's almost like someone who is eager to eat and they say, I could taste it even before they've eaten it. The psalmist is saying, though he is glad, he's anticipating, he says, our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

[ 8 : 12 ] They were not there physically, but the psalmist, in anticipation, said that their feet were standing there as a matter of speaking about the eager anticipation they had about gathering in God's city and in God's house.

Now, exactly what should we make of this gladness that the psalmist speaks about? that was his response when he was invited to go to the house of the Lord. Is that always your response when opportunities to gather and worship come about?

Was that your response this morning? Was that the anticipation of your heart last night? I think for us, if not all of us, most of us, the answer would be no.

That's not always the response of our hearts when times to gather with the people of God come around. As a matter of fact, I think if we were able to ask David whether that was always the response of his heart when he had the opportunity to go to the house of the Lord, I think David would also tell us no.

However, he was glad on this occasion. He was glad on this specific occasion that he writes about. And hopefully, he was glad on most occasions. And hopefully, we are glad on most occasions.

[ 9 : 47 ] But the reality is we're not always glad. The reality is that sometimes when we approach and come to corporate gatherings, we do so with sadness of heart and weariness of soul.

And some of the Psalms of a sense remind us of this reality like Psalm 123 which we'll look at next week where the psalmist is lamenting the contempt that he and the community of worshipers had experienced at the hands of the wicked.

And he cries out to the Lord to have mercy on them. This would have been one of the songs that they would have sung at some particular point where the wise priest or the wise leader in the midst is able to tell and discern the pulse of the community.

And instead of perhaps raising one of the more joyful ones, they would raise the lament because they're coming to the place of worship beaten down. They're coming to the place of worship oppressed in so many ways by sin and fallenness in this world.

But I think the psalmist would also probably reflect upon the times when he would have come in that way. Beaten down and sad in heart and weary in soul.

[ 11 : 14 ] And he would leave glad. He would leave refreshed and strengthened and encouraged. And that's because when God's people gather, God meets with them.

And then I'm just going through road and routine. God meets with them and something happens when they gather together that doesn't happen when they are scattered apart. And I think many of us will testify to that this morning.

will testify this morning that, yeah, our hearts are not always glad when there's the opportunity to gather with God's people. But we can testify to the faithfulness of God to meet us time and time again and encourage us and strengthen us.

God's people and even sometimes when our very circumstances don't change, we are aware of this dual reality of gladness and joy even in the midst of circumstances that may press us down.

and so when we consider the gladness that the psalmist speaks about, we hear realistically this morning that it is not always the reality in the moment.

[12:35] But there is a gladness that marks the gathering of the people of God because in the kindness of God somehow we find ourselves that not all the time we are in the same place.

and though some of us even in this moment may be pressed in our souls just as we sang this morning of eternal truths as we were prayed for this morning and our hearts were able to be strengthened we are reminded that there is a corporate gladness over the people of God even though in the moment that may not be the very experience of all of us.

The gladness of heart whether in the moment or in anticipation is not the only reason that God's people gather in worship. Psalm 122 highlights a second reason for us and that is the reason of obedience.

And this brings to my second point. The corporate worship of God's people is an expression of obedience. The psalmist tells us in verse 4 that the reason that they were going up to Jerusalem was because God had decreed it.

It wasn't because they were glad. It wasn't because of the gladness that they were anticipating from doing so. It was because God had decreed going up to Jerusalem and that there they would give thanks to his name.

[14:13] That's why they were going. They were going to Jerusalem not based on preference, not because it was optional, not because they liked it or felt like it.

Three times per year the Lord said to them you are to appear before me at the feast of Pentecost. sorry, the first one Passover then Pentecost then Tabernacles and they were to rhythmically come every year because they were commanded to do so.

Come to the place where God had placed his name and he said he would meet with his people.

There was a time when that place was Shiloh some 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem but because of the unfaithfulness of Eli and his sons the Lord rejected Shiloh and he chose Mount Zion as the place that he would meet with his people Mount Zion being one of the hills of Jerusalem.

And so ultimately while one of the benefits of God's people in gathering is gladness of heart the ultimate reason for them doing so was obedience to God.

God decreed it. He decreed it in his authoritative word. In verse 5 we read their thrones for judgment were set.

[15:41] The thrones of the house of David. Jerusalem was not only the place where they gathered to worship but Jerusalem was the place where the king lived and the king was the chief judge in the land.

God and these words in verse 5 remind us that the place of worship was also a place of authority. It was not a free for all and it was the basis of and the basis of the authority was the word of God.

The basis of the king's authority and all those who governed with him was the word of God. And it was the word of God that they were going to be judged by. It was the word of God that everyone was called to live by.

It was the word of God that the judges would use to bring their judgments. Now while Psalm 122 is speaking about Old Testament worship I trust that we're able to make some connections this morning.

I trust we're able to make some connections to our own worship in the New Testament this morning. Listen to the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 12 verses 22 through 24.

[17:04] But you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God the judge of all and to the spirit of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel and then also in Hebrews 10 24 through 25 we read and let us consider how to stir up one

another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more that you see the day drawing near this meeting together that the writer to the Hebrews refers to is the corporate gathering of God's people in worship to God and brothers and sisters a common mark that is to be upon the people of God in their worship is the mark of obedience this is true in the Old

Testament this is true in the New Testament they gathered then because God said so we gather now because God says so the gladness that we experience the gladness that is associated with it is really a bonus and a wonderful thing but underneath that we do so in obedience to God's word and we do so in accordance with God's word and so in Psalm 122 we see that corporate worship is an occasion for gladness it is an expression of obedience and then third and finally it is a display of community look again at verses 6 through 9 pray for the peace of Jerusalem may they be secure who love you peace be within your walls and security within your towers for my brothers and companions sake

I will say peace be with you for the sake of the house of the Lord our God I will seek your good peace the psalmist says pray for the peace of Jerusalem there are those who take this to mean that we are to even today pray for the physical city of Jerusalem but clearly it is not the city of Jerusalem in isolation that the psalmist is calling for prayer for he is not so much fixated on the city itself instead he calls for peace and security within Jerusalem because it is the home of the people of God the true home of the people of God that is where their life really existed even though they lived in different places in the land their true life was when they were together in the city of Jerusalem it's the place where

God's people gathered and it was the essence of their existence I don't think the point can be clearer than in verse 8 where the psalmist desires peace in Jerusalem because of his brothers and companions he says for the sake of my brothers and companions I will say peace be within you these are expressions of care these are expressions of love and concern and community a love for the people of God and the house of God which connects them together and brothers and sisters we as a church community can pray for God's blessings upon one another when we're absent from one another but how much more can we do that how much more should we do that when we are together as we are this morning sometimes we may see a brother or sister and not have the opportunity to maybe interact with them but just wonder how are they doing and we have an opportunity to pray the shalom of

God upon them the wellness of God upon them in every single aspect of their lives as we join our hearts together in worship of our triune God the cry of the psalmist can be our cry praying for God's blessings praying for God's peace to rest upon the people of God friends if this doesn't happen when we are gathered together if being together doesn't evoke these kinds of desires for one another when we're together when will they be evoked there's a saying out of sight out of mind and we know how well that can be true and so when we are together in community community is an opportunity for these kinds of prayers these kinds of cries to the Lord interceding for one another to be far more effective and far more possible and so let us embrace it let us embrace it that when we are together that our hearts are longing for God's blessings to rest upon brothers and sisters in the fullness of their lives as I reflected on

[ 23 : 40 ] Psalm 122 and the times that the people of God would have sung this song it is easy for us to take for granted where we now live in the time of God revelation in which we now live we live at a time when the revelation of God's plan of redemption has been fully revealed there's nothing else for God to reveal to us he has revealed it in his word we have the fullness of his plan of revelation there is no additional revelation to come but the reality is that for the psalmist David and the people of God in his day they didn't have the fullness of God's revelation when they gathered in Jerusalem when they went up at Passover and Pentecost and Tabernacles they didn't have it yet they were going and they were glad when they would go and they rejoiced and their revelation was not a full revelation but today we have a full revelation they were worshipping the shadow of what we now worship we worship the fullness of the shadow that they worshipped when the pilgrims celebrated the shadow of Passover in the sacrifice of an animal that was slain in their place who was the basis for their deliverance out of

Egypt the land of bondage when they would be going up at Passover they would be thinking about that how because of the land they escaped death and the Lord delivered them out of the land of bondage but friends when we gather we gather Passover having been fulfilled having been fulfilled

in the person of Christ who was slain in our place who's the substance of what David and the other pilgrims would have celebrated and he is the basis upon which we have been delivered from sin and bondage the pilgrims celebrated Pentecost which marked the first harvest of the land the first fruit of the harvest we celebrate Pentecost fulfilled we celebrate Pentecost fulfilled in Christ's ascension and ascending of the spirit and on the day of Pentecost almost 2000 years ago when that first harvest of the earth to God came in from the preaching of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost we celebrate the fullness of that this reason for joy and for gladness of heart and the pilgrims celebrated tabernacles by constructing these temporary booths and for seven days they would live in these makeshift places which reminded them of their journey in the wilderness and how the Lord protected them and how the Lord provided for them but we celebrate today the fullness of that and John the apostle captured it so well in John chapter 7 speaking about the feast of tabernacles the apostle John wrote these words on the last day of the feast the great day Jesus stood up and cried out if anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink whoever believes in me as the scriptures has said out of his heart will flow rivers of waters brothers and sisters this is God's provision

God's provision for us is in Jesus Christ he is our feast of tabernacle we tabernacle in him and God sustains us in him all that we need to sustain us in this life Jesus is the fulfillment of that and so this joy that's associated with the Old Testament saints celebrating the shadow of what we now celebrate as the substance how much more should our hearts be overwhelmed with joy Jesus on one occasion was speaking he said the there was one who was greater than Solomon standing in the midst of the people that the queen of Nineveh had come a long distance to see the wisdom of Solomon and now there was one who was greater than Solomon among them brothers and sisters we have the greater of the feasts when we gather because they've all been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ the reality the substance of what we now celebrate they were celebrating just a shadow of it may this evoke in our hearts a sense of how privileged we are how blessed we are to enjoy this the community that the children of Israel had is nothing like the one that we have friends we have been joined not only to God but we've been joined to one another through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and so I pray for us that as we continue to gather that there may be this awareness upon us of the privilege that we have to do so and that we do so not out of mere habit not out of mere preference or circumstance but we do so our obedience to God and his word and that we will do so even when there's the absence of gladness in our hearts and that when we do so our hearts and eyes will be turned to our brothers and sisters in community and like the psalmist we would cry out for my brothers and companions sake

[ 30 : 21 ] I say shalom may the shalom of God rest upon you and what a sufficient prayer that is because that is saying for every single area of your life every aspect of your life that I don't understand may the shalom of God rest upon you in that area may God evoke these things in our hearts as we gather let's pray Lord Father thank you for your word would you help us to recognize how blessed we are to be those who are gathering around the substance while the psalmist and the children of Israel only gathered around the shadow we thank you this morning for the Lord Jesus Christ who has fulfilled Passover and

Pentecost and tabernacles for us and oh Lord we pray that every time we have an opportunity to gather we would recognize how blessed we are to be able to do so and Lord may that be reason enough for us to be faithful to gather week by week in the worship of your holy name we pray these things in Christ's name and now as we leave today may the God of grace and peace fill our hearts with gladness and our minds with obedience and may our love and concern for one another abound more and more in the worship of our triune God to whom belong blessing and power and glory and dominion forever amen amen ho