

Prepared to love (Nick Freestone)

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder, friends, if you arrived at church today feeling ready for it. I imagine the rain kind of would have put you off a bit. But it's very hard for us to know whether we're prepared for church or not.

If you go looking, you can find lists of things to do to be ready for church. They're mostly good lists, and they help you remove emotional and physical distractions before a Sunday.

Things like leave your phone on night mode from the night before. Don't look at Facebook until church is over. And my favourite, go to bed early Saturday night.

And that point was actually titled, it's okay not to have fun. These lists, these lists are useful, but they miss the point.

As we prepare for church, we are actually like sprinters preparing for a race. Each runner trains differently, but their training has the same goal.

[1 : 0 6] They want to win. And their training has the same preparation principle. They want to get faster. When we prepare for church, there's no right way of doing it, no list we must follow.

But like those runners, we commit to the same principle of preparation that helps us achieve our weekly goal, which is to engage with God together his way.

So let's pray together before we look at God's word. Heavenly Father, please speak to us in your word today by your spirit.

We long to engage with you together your way. Show us how to be ready for church, prepared to love each other and love you. Amen.

Cast your mind back to Sam's sermon from last week. Do you remember what our five goals of corporate worship are? Anyone remember?

[2 : 0 9] Sam remembers. Well done, Sam. We're focused on God. We're centred on Christ. We're driven by the word. And we want to do worship together excellently.

The thing we haven't talked about in detail yet is engagement with God. When we come to church, we want to be engaged. We want to do that his way every week at church.

But to do that, I want to say to you today that we've got to be ready. So let me show you a preparation principle for gathering together to worship. This principle is how God prepares us to engage with him and with each other.

So keep your finger in 1 John 4. And if you've got a phone, it doesn't matter. You're going to be flicking through menus anyway. We're going to go to Psalms. And let me just say now, when we turn to Psalms, I'm going to flick through a number of Psalms today.

They're going to be on the screen. If you've got a phone, it's probably going to be too difficult for you to flick through all the different places. So they're going to be on the screen.

[3 : 1 7] And if you're making notes, write them all down. You can look at them later. Let's go to Psalm 121. Take note of the title of this psalm.

A Song of Ascents. This psalm and 15 others are a collection called Ascent Songs, compiled for Israel to sing as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship together.

These psalms are steps, steps that ready Israel for corporate worship. God's word here outlines a three-part preparation principle that we can follow where God prepares us, his church, in his word.

And the three parts are come, remember, and gospel. If you're writing notes, three things that prepare us. Come, remember, and gospel.

So we've got five come psalms that call us to lift our eyes to God. As life rages around us, we're prone to turn away.

[4 : 36] So these psalms encourage us to look to God and keep on walking. So let's look at how each encourages our faith and lifts our eyes up to God.

So let's go 121. Psalm 121 is a call for those who question God. Lord, who is there to help me?

Where are you, God? The psalm lifts our eyes to the sovereignty of God. Let me read verses 2 to 8. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you.

The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life.

[5 : 35] The Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore. Guys, here God promises us answers when we come to him.

So bring the cries of your heart with you to church. Come and lift your eyes to the throne of a sovereign God who has answers. Psalm 123 is a call for God's subjects to come ready to do his will.

We're encouraged to look at our master for mercy, remembering our place in his care. Let me just read the first two verses. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord, our God, till he shows us his mercy.

We come on Sundays to our master to obey his voice. He is a merciful master and he cares for us. So let's come and lift up our eyes to his mercy.

Psalm 131 is a call to humility. We don't look towards Sunday with pride, trusting in our own works or abilities. Rather, our hope is in the Lord's greatness.

[6 : 59] My heart is not proud. Lord, my eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me, but I have calmed and quieted myself.

I'm like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child, I am content. Israel, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore. Guys, we must not trust ourselves, but we hope in God.

So the call is come and lift your eyes to his greatness. Psalm 132 is a call to remember God's promises.

Let's just read the first 12 verses together. Lord, remember David and all his self-denial. He swore an oath to the Lord. He made a vow to the mighty one of Jacob.

I will not enter my house or go to my bed. I will allow no sleep before my eyes or slumber to my eyelids till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the mighty one of Jacob. We heard it in Ephrathah.

[8 : 01] We came upon it in the fields of Jar. Let us go to his dwelling place. Let us worship at his footstool, saying, Arise, Lord, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.

May your priests be clothed with your righteousness. May your faithful people sing for joy. For the sake of your servant David, do not reject your anointed one. The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke.

One of your own descendants I will place on your throne. The Lord promised he would dwell in the temple, and he was found there.

He keeps his promises. And for Israel, the promise to come was an eternal throne in Israel with David's descendant as king.

And we see that promise fulfilled in Jesus' eternal reign. So the call is, come, lift up your eyes to his promises. And 134 is the final call to worship.

[9 : 03] It's the psalm of arrival. If you notice these psalms, 120 to 134. 134 is when you get to church. Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who minister by night in the house of the Lord.

Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is maker of heaven and earth. Here we praise the Lord in his presence together, for it is right and good.

Lift up your eyes and praise. So these first five psalms outline the first part of our preparation principle for church.

In your week, as you journey toward another time of corporate worship, lift your eyes, see the greatness and mercy and promises of God, and dwell on his sovereignty and rule.

The next three psalms we're going to look at are remember psalms. They call to mind times of unity in corporate worship. When something great and joyful happens, we long to experience it again.

[10 : 17] Psalm 128 is a reminder that blessing, peace and prosperity are from God. Verse 1 to the beginning of 5.

Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat of the fruit of your labor. Blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house.

Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion. Let's catch those last two words.

From Zion. The psalm reminds us that our source of blessing is God as a benefit of worshipping together.

Israel worshipped at Zion's temple, and for us, we meet together at church. Our benefit of gathering at church is God's blessing. So first, we remember that when we gather, we are blessed.

[11 : 23] Psalm 133 takes the reminder of the previous psalm, remember when we gather, we are blessed, and hints how unity together, now, in worship, points toward heaven's blessings that are to come.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. It's like oil poured on the head, running down the beard, running down Aaron's beard, down the collar of his robe.

It is as if the Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. Guys, the unity of God's people at church is a picture of eternal life and blessing together.

So remember, when we gather together, we glimpse our future, our blessed future together. Psalm 122 is our reminder of the joy and gladness that worshipping God has brought us in life, in our life at church.

Just the first two verses. 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.

[12 : 49] Guys, here the psalmist has arrived in Jerusalem. He's there, and he hears people around him saying, let's go up to the temple. And he's so excited to engage with God, and he's with his people again, that they go together rejoicing to the temple.

Imagine if people came in from the car park, overflowing with rejoicing together to get here. Wouldn't that be incredible? Probably have to open the gates wider.

Just be a flock of crazy, rowdy, happy people coming into church every week. Remember, when we gather, we are joyful.

So next Sunday, when you wake up, and you forget what day it is, and you look at your phone to remind you, or your wife has to remind you, or your husband has to remind you, does your heart leap for joy when you realise it's Sunday?

I invite you to dwell in daily remembering that the blessing church is from God, the overflowing joy that we share, and the glimpse of a blessed eternity, that this is for us.

[14 : 05] If you've been doing the math, we've got seven psalms left. And these are just, they're just breathtaking. Together, they portray Israel's thirst for God.

And that thirst is in the shape of the gospel. We can't help but see Jesus as we read these words. He is like the water that quenches Israel's thirst as we read them.

So I'm going to move fairly quickly. Even if you've got a Bible, let's just look at the screen. I'm going to power through these. But I want you to look at how Israel is just hoping for the gospel here.

120. Sin is rooted deep in us and we need God. Verse 2 from the ESV says, Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.

Psalm 129. Man's sin-born wickedness has no place in his kingdom. Verse 4 of ESV says, The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked.

[15 : 11] But Psalm 130. God hears our cry for mercy and forgives his people. Verses 3 and 4 say, If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can with reverence serve you. Psalm 124. Without him we're trapped in sin, but with him we are saved.

Verses 7 and 8 of 124 say, We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare. The snare has been broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Psalm 125. God is trustworthy and protects us, his people. Verses 1 and 2 say, Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken, but endures forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forevermore. Psalm 127. As a saved people, we're now free to work and parent our children, knowing he does the work through us that lasts.

[16 : 29] First two verses say, Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand, watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat, for he grants sleep to those he loves.

And lastly, on 26. Life's road is going to be painful, but God's promises remain. Our joy is not yet, but we're looking forward ahead to a coming joy.

Verses 5 and 6. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out with weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Can you see here Israel's thirst for the gospel? Sin, judgment, mercy, forgiveness, freedom, protection, leadership, and a future hope.

It's all there. Part three of our preparation principle, guys, is the gospel. When we dwell in the word of the Lord daily, reminding ourselves of his salvation, as Jordan Coughlin says, the hand of the gospel lifts our eyes to God.

[17 : 54] The gospel lifts our head. Our eyes glimpse the greatness of God, and we remember the great promise of God to meet with us when we gather.

That's three-part principle to get us ready for church. If you've got a Bible with you, you've probably got your fingers still in 1 John 4.

Let's turn there together right now. 1 John 4, verse 9. This is how God showed his love among us.

He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. As we look to the gospel, we see God's love, and in turn we love one another.

[19 : 06] God's commanded and correct response to the gospel is love one another. Guys, he wants us reflecting on the gospel on our own in the week so that when we gather, his love for us in the gospel overflows to the one another that is church.

It's so simple and it's so effective. Being prepared by God for church means that we're prepared to love.

Being prepared by God for church means we're prepared to love. Let me share a story of such love in action from summer camp earlier in the year.

Hands up if you're at summer camp. Yay! We were reading a big, hefty passage from Romans, the beginning of Romans, the really hard bit to read of Romans, and a kid called Christian Whale saw a first-time camper really struggling to even find Romans in the Bible.

He probably had it upside down, probably really struggling, and Christian saw it, and he just got up from his seat while we were reading it together, went up quietly next to this kid and just whispered help to get him to find the passage.

[20 : 23] And this kid found the passage and was able to read along with us. And without making a big deal, he just went and sat back in his seat as if no one had noticed. But we were so excited to see that because he was so keen to see others see God that he went out of his comfort zone and loved.

When you land at church prepared by God in the gospel, you, as verse 11 says, ought to love others.

And I guarantee that if we are not prepared for church this way, verse 11, we ought to, that's going to feel like a duty.

But if we're prepared by the gospel, loving others will flow just like having to breathe in and out. Let's have a look at verse 12.

No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

[21 : 35] God is seen when we love each other. Could this be a clue as to how God's presence is uniquely experienced when we engage with God together, his way?

That's exactly it. We see God as God's love in the gospel, which compels us to serve the church and love each other.

Whether it be serving on morning tea in the mornings or our music team or prayer team or a myriad of other, even background ways of serving. It overflows from us in our speech, eagerly encouraging and praying for one another, seeking to hear what God is doing in the lives of our neighbours and sharing his love in your life with others.

Loving one another is the picture of an engaged corporate worship gathering. It is God's people loving and serving one another.

Well, let's catch this. If loving one another is the command of God in response to his love for us, it follows that without that love for others, we will not engage with the service, the songs, the sermon, the prayer, etc., if we are not actively loving each other.

[23 : 02] Loving God together authentically will not occur without love for our neighbours. We show love for God at church by first loving others.

With love for others as our priority, we are released from selfishness completely to love God responsively and authentically at church. Our prepared hearts are already looking to God, craving the blessings church brings and overflowing with love and praise in the gospel.

so authentic singing and prayer, listening, reflecting, declaring God's truth together can actually happen. God is doing the work to prepare us for church.

He is putting love for others in us by his gospel and his love for us in the gospel makes authentic worship possible and irresistible.

And that is a rightly engaged ideal church service. And I say ideal because it's not what church looks like every week for us, is it?

[24 : 13] It is what we, rather, it is what we as a church aspire to be. And here's where I stand in my preparation for church.

I have this built-in sinful attitude. I don't know if you're like me but I know me and I know how sinful I am so I can talk about that. But here it is.

As long as people around me let me, I'll be able to engage with God and with his people. As long as circumstances and people allow me, this is my selfishness speaking, I'll be able to engage with God.

That means my wife and kids have to be okay. I have to get to church on time. Without struggle of any kind, traffic and weather must flow perfectly. My outfit has to match the weather so I don't get too hot because I get super grumpy.

Technology, music and volunteers, all that kind of stuff has to go perfectly because I'm in ministry and it's very stressful. And if any of these fail, I'm distracted and grumpy when church starts.

[25 : 16] my struggle at church is against being dependent on people and circumstances allowing me to engage. But his word shows me that he prepares me in the gospel.

He prepares us for church in the gospel. I bet today, more than many days, it was a battle just to get here for you guys.

Whether you're 15 and you're still asleep on a Sunday or you're battling through traffic and six foot of water in a storm which basically was what my daughter said was happening when she arrived so it was very difficult for her.

She's two just so you know. being ready for church is actually a week long journey. Let me encourage you to start that journey right now.

Let's start it together. Look around the room. Look at the good looking people either side of you. Love these people. Let the love of God you know in Jesus overflow.

[26 : 30] Sing loud. Show your love for God. It might encourage one who has never sung before to actually join in.

And in your week use that preparation principle from the Ascent Psalms that we looked at. Come remember gospel. Looks like this.

Look to God in whatever ways that he leads you to do it. Look to God craving the blessings that church brings. Let the gospel fill you with the love of God till it overflows and you land at church ecstatic on a Sunday.

Liberated from the selfish dependencies of our normal church experience so that we can wholeheartedly love and praise our God together. Friends, that's what I want God to do in you.

That's what I want God to do in me and my family. As we prepare for church and engage in corporate worship together, let us look for God to prepare us to love.

[27 : 37] Let me pray. Lord, we long to be the church that your word here shows us. Show us ways to let the gospel shape us and ready us and prepare us Lord to love each other.

Prepare us Lord to love you. Amen.