

Ascend:
The High Priority of Going to Church

Psalm 122

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Text Introduction: We are considering Psalm 120-134 this summer. This is a collection of Psalms each bearing the heading, “A Song of Ascents.” The songs of ascents are a compilation of Psalms in the larger book of Psalms.

To what does this heading refer? Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sang as they made their way to Jerusalem (being on a higher plain) for thrice annual special times of worship.¹ If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. This thought will guide us in the weeks to come. As we have been learning, this is not so much as a practical guide to the “how to” of worship, but instead a theological mine for what prompts earnest worship.

Our Psalm today is Psalm 122.

Text: I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

²Our feet are standing
within your gates, Jerusalem—

³Jerusalem, built as a city should be,
solidly joined together,

⁴where the tribes, Yahweh’s tribes, go up
to give thanks to the name of Yahweh.
(This is an ordinance for Israel.)

⁵There, thrones for judgment are placed,
thrones of the house of David.

⁶Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May those who love you prosper;

⁷may there be peace within your walls,
prosperity within your fortresses.”

⁸Because of my brothers and friends,
I will say, “Peace be with you.”

⁹Because of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

¹ Other ideas include: Psalms that reflect entering the Promised Land the first time, re-entering after Exile, correlating to the climb up the steps to the Temple (one Psalm for 15 steps), and/or figurative for the journey back to God.

Introduction: Let's start with a question this morning. Don't answer publicly. You might not give the real heart-felt answer if we do that. No, this is a question for your heart and for my heart. How many of you are really glad to be here this morning? How many of you would say with the Psalmist, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let's go to the house of the Lord.'" I know our circumstances are much different from the Psalmist's, but it is a question worthy of our consideration this morning. As we consider this question and as we recognize that this is listed as a song from David, I cannot help but think about the scene in 1 Chronicles 15. David was approaching Jerusalem with the ark of the Covenant.

David, the elders of Israel, and the commanders of thousands went with rejoicing to bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the house of Obed-edom. ²⁶ While the Levites were carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD, with God's help, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams.

²⁷ Now David was dressed in a robe of fine linen, as were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, as well as the singers and Chenaniah, the music leader of the singers. David also wore a linen ephod. ²⁸ So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouts, the sound of the ram's horn, trumpets, and cymbals, and the playing of harps and lyres. ²⁹ As the ark of the covenant of the LORD was entering the city of David, Saul's daughter Michal looked down from the window and saw King David dancing and celebrating,

Now, I know that there are many ways to express our rejoicing. Genuine rejoicing does not have to be expressed by everyone the same way, but these texts (both Psalm 122 and 1 Chronicles 15) indicate a genuine spirit of joy regarding worship.

I want to talk to you today about "The High Priority of Going to Church." Again, our circumstances are greatly different from the circumstances of the worshippers described in Psalm 122, but there is still much that we can learn and apply to our lives.

Reminding ourselves of the rule of Biblical interpretation which says that we must first learn what a text meant to them (original hearers) before we can know what it means to us, let's quickly look at this Psalm from the vantage point of the original worshippers using this song as they came to Jerusalem for a corporate, national gathering of worship.

The General Atmosphere of this Text

The general atmosphere of this text is joy and therefore priority. Some have seen these Songs of Ascents forming even more of a unit than we have noted thus far. We have noted that there are 15 of these so-called songs of ascents. Additionally, some interpreters have noted that these 15 songs come in 5 triads (groups of 3). If this is the case, then Psalm 120-122 form the first triad. In the first song, the worshippers are a long way from Jerusalem. They are just starting their journey. They are in places like Meshech and Kedar—the furthestmost points of Israel. In Psalm 121, they are close enough on their journey to begin to see the mountains that they will ascend to arrive in Jerusalem. Now, in Psalm 122, their feet are standing within the city of Jerusalem. And, it is glorious.

There is no denying that for some, there is attachment to a place. For some it might be the beach. For others it is the mountains. Maybe you have been to Israel, and there is just a different kind of feeling that comes over you when you arrive. For some of you, it is your hometown. When you go back there, it is special.

All of this is the experience of the worshippers arriving in Jerusalem, except for a most specific reason. They recognize in their pre-Jesus, pre-cross, worship experience, that Jerusalem, the city of David, but also the city of God, is the place where God, in His holy Temple, dwells. And, so, the general atmosphere is JOY! They have been in Meshech and Kedar—very far away from God—but now they are in the very place of God.

The General Attitude of this Text

So, what are they going to experience?

Praise for the City (3-5)—This might seem odd to us, but not for them. They are mesmerized at the city—solidly built (3). They recognize that all 12 tribes are coming together to this one place to give thanks to the Lord (4). They recognize that from this place, judgments, rulings are being declared and sent out that controls the rest of nation (5).

Prayers for the City (6-8)—They pray for the prosperity of the city. They believe that “so goes the city of Jerusalem, so goes to the entire nation” (6). There are prayers for the peace of the city (7). There are prayers for the people of the city (8). And there are finally prayers for the ongoing progress of the city (9).

Now, by the way, there is a pretty good prayer outline for you and me. You can pray that for your family, for your church, for your company, for your city, for your state, for your nation.

The General Application of this Text

Again, our situation is not the same because we have opportunity to gather often. Of course, we no longer recognize that presence of God is tied to one place. However, I think there are some real points of application that we can make from this Bible passage. There should still be joy today in the public gathering of worship!

Public gathering of worship will be a high priority . . .

- When we view worship as a privilege rather than a burden.

When worship is a “get to” instead of a “have to” everything changes. The Psalmist does not have to go to Jerusalem. His travel is not a burden to him, it is a joy.

Here is a picture that communicates worship as a privilege not a burden. (Put picture on screens of a flooded church building.)

How do you restore joy to the public gathering of worship? Begin to see that gathering as privilege not a burden.

- When we are vested to the people with whom we worship.

The Psalmist loves the idea of the people gathered. The architecture of the city perhaps is even symbolic of the unity of the tribes coming together to worship.

Here is the beauty of corporate worship. We are all different. We are from different places, we have different personalities, we have different gifts, but we have this in common—we are unified by the blood of Jesus Christ.

This morning, we are from different states and even different nations, but the beauty of corporate worship is that we are brought together under the banner of Christ. It is a foreshadowing of Heaven.

Cults want everybody to be the same. The Church implies that everybody will be different.

- When we value the purposes of worship.
 1. We meet God.
 2. We join others in praise of God.
 3. We are instructed in the Word of God.

I am reminded of that old Puritan prayer. “Does God have anything to say about the matter? What is it?”

4. We pray together.
5. We seek God’s will together.

So, we understand as the Psalmist did that what happens when we worship has far-reaching implications to what happens after we have gathered.

Beth Moore writes, “No, I don’t always feel like going, and something monumental doesn’t happen every time I go. Still I am blessed and built up in spirit enough to tackle another vicious Monday morning.”²

One last word, and we find it back in 1 Chronicles 15. David was glad, but Michal was mad. (and she despised him in her heart.)

Such will still be the case when we find our joy in gathering to worship.

Tomorrow morning, we gather for Vacation Bible School. There will be joy in these children. May there be that same joy in all of us.

² Beth Moore, *Stepping Up*, Masterwork Sunday School Series, Fall 2010, p. 21.