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A Call to a Life Devoted to Worship

Psalm 122

Years ago, I heard a sermon that had a profound impact on my life. I was a college student used to staying up late on Saturdays only to arrive the next day to church sleepy and distracted. Yet, I chalked it up to the college life. But then in the sermon that morning on worship, the preacher made this comment, “One of the characteristics of this Christian generation is that it worships its work, works at its play, and plays at its worship.”

How convicting! For truly, if we are going to work at anything in this life, let it be that we work at our worship! That's THE priority of the Christian life. God told His people:

Isaiah 43:6b-7a, "Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory..."

God made us that we might worship Him. That is why we are at our best when Christ is the center of our existence! Listen to how Paul defined the Christian:

Philippians 3:3a, "For we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus..."

Our identity as believers has nothing to do with our occupation, education, talents, gifting, weakness, or sin. Our identity revolves around "worshipping... and glorying in [or 'making much of'] Christ"! John got it when he said this, speaking of the Lord:

John 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

When the weightiness of Christ's character, His work, and His grace is that which drives us, that is when we are at our best and in the best place! C. S. Lewis put it this way:

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human 'machine' to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. (Lewis, 1960, p. 50)

That is the focus of this third Song of Ascents. The first song we are called to sing, as we make our way to Jerusalem, Psalm 120, spoke of the Impetus for our Worship, the fact that we live in a fallen world founded and built on lies. That makes worship the ultimate respite and oasis for the soul Burdened by the lies and deceit of this fallen world. That is the song God wants us to sing, as singing will engrave this message on our heart.

Psalm 121 picked up where Psalm 120 ended by answering THE question frequently raised in light of the Burden referenced in Psalm 120, "God, why do you allow difficulty? Don't You care about me?" The answer God gave in Psalm 121 was a resounding, "Yes! I care for you more than you could ever know!"

With Psalm 122, the Psalmist — which in this case was David¹ — arrived at Jerusalem, and it evoked in him a strong sense of excitement on account of what Jerusalem provided- chief of which was the worship of God!²

The Psalm begins with the priority of worship.

The Priority of Worship, vv. 1-2.

Psalm 122:1, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord³.’”-

This represents the first thought of the Pilgrim when once he set his foot in Jerusalem...

Psalm 122:2, “Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.”

And so, when the pilgrim entered the city, they were to be overwhelmed NOT by its size, its fortifications, its wealth or splendor — all of which would have been significant to the pilgrim who lived in the diaspora... for the city was amazing. Recall years later the awe of Christ’s disciples that time when they walked together with the Lord in Jerusalem.

Matthew 24:1, “And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him.”

The foundation stones of the temple measured 40x12x12 ft — which no doubt is why the Babylonian Talmud wrote, “He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building.”

Yet it wasn’t this or any other marvel that increased the heartbeat of the genuine servant of God entering the city. What was it? The fact that finally, after so long, they were able to “go to the house of the Lord” and worship! You will note, “the house of the Lord” is THE FOCUS of this Psalm as it NOT ONLY is in the emphatic position in v. 1, “To the house of the Lord let us go” BUT bookends this Psalm, appearing in the first and last verse!⁴ This is another literary tool utilized by the biblical writer known as Inklusio.

Inklusio is a device, in which a section of scripture is bracketed by a word, notion, or theme with the implication that everything in between the brackets are to be interpreted in light of the brackets. According, in Mark 11 we read of Christ’s cursing the fig tree (vv. 12-14), the cleansing of the temple (vv. 15-18), and then a mentioning of the fig tree again (vv. 20-21). The implication is that the cleansing of the temple must be interpreted in light of Christ’s cursing of the fig tree.

Accordingly, as Psalm 122 utilized we must understand everything in this psalm in light of vv. 1 & 9 which reference “the house of the Lord” and so God’s worship. Truly, it is God’s intention that “the house of the Lord” — His worship — be central to the lives of His people⁵ whether they are at the beginning of their journey or near its end! And why is that? Because we were designed to run on this fuel! That is the emphasis NOT ONLY of this Psalm, BUT all of Scripture.

- The Fall revolved around whether or NOT Adam would be satisfied with God — His Person and His claim of authority over him, Genesis 3:1-7. Adam chose independence and thus a life fueled by his own autonomy and so the decisions and actions of himself.
- The first murder that occurred arose on account of an argument about worship, Genesis 4:3-8.
- Worship was THE stated reason of the Exodus. God told Moses:

Exodus 8:1, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, “Let My people go, that they may serve Me. [literally: ‘worship me’]””

- In the wilderness when God’s people set up camp, worship was the organizing principle!

Numbers 2:1-2, “Now the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ‘The sons of Israel shall camp, each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ households; they shall camp around the tent of meeting at a distance.’”

In other words, God’s worship was to be at the heart and so the heart of the nation! Now, there are many more things that God prescribed and arranged throughout redemptive history which place His worship at the center of His people’s existence. Yet consider lastly the stated purpose and focus of Christ’s ministry.

- Worship was the stated purpose and focus of Christ’s ministry.

John 4:23, “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”-

What is the essence of Christ’s redeeming work? It was and is bringing true worshippers to God! Accordingly, it is NOT surprising to read that the focus of the third Song — which God would have us to sing in this state of sin and misery — is the privilege, glory, and priority of God’s worship, where we make much of God, where His Person and His work is that which fuels us!

Because of this, when the Pilgrim finally set his foot in the city of Jerusalem “he was glad” — NOT because the journey was over — because he now could go to “the house of God” and worship! With that, David used the city of Jerusalem as a teaching tool to reinforce the point he just made.

Psalm 122:2, “Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.”

The reference to “Jerusalem” is important. In fact, David placed it at the center of this Psalm (v. 5) which tells us that while Psalm 122 is all about God’s worship, David has chosen to use the “city of Jerusalem” as a primary teaching tool.

No doubt “Jerusalem” ought first to be taken literally, most likely a time when David arrived at the capital city after a battle or an extended journey. Yet we’ve seen in this series that “Jerusalem” in Scripture is used more broadly than the physical city. In the New Testament when the gospel was being preached, “Jerusalem” was used in reference to salvation. Speaking of Hagar and Sarah, Paul wrote:

Galatians 4:24-26, “This is allegorically speaking: for these *women* are two covenants, one *proceeding* from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free [this is the city into which we enter upon salvation]; she is our mother.”

In this regard, “Jerusalem” is understood as the city into which we enter upon salvation which, like the Old Testament Jerusalem, also has a temple.

Ephesians 2:19-21, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.”

Do you understand? Jerusalem can be used of the city into which we enter upon salvation whose temple is the body of Christ — you and me!

Yet, it also is used of what we as Christ’s body will constitute in the Next Age.

Revelation 21:9-10, “And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, came and spoke with me, saying, ‘Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

Accordingly, this song has direct application to all in Christ as we live in Jerusalem and, in the age to come, as we become the Jerusalem of God! With that, notice how this song begins.

Psalm 122:1, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”-

The word for “glad” is **שמח** (*samach*) and speaks of a rejoicing that encompasses the totality of our lives. Harris wrote:

The root *ś-m-ḥ* denotes being glad or joyful with the whole disposition as indicated by its association with the heart (cf. Exodus 4:14; Ps 19:8 [H 9]; 104:15; 105:3), the soul (Psalm 86:4); and with the lighting up of the eyes (Proverbs 15:30). (R. Laird Harris, 1999, p. 879)

In other words, David here is beside himself NOT because he arrived at Jerusalem, BUT, once again, because he finally could enter into the house of God and so make much of His Lord!

Isn't this the inclination of your heart when this world beats you down over and over again? It was the inclination of Mary and Martha. After their brother died, we read of their passion.

John 11:20a, “Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him...”

When Mary heard that Christ had arrived, what do we read?

John 11:29: “And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him.”

We see it in Asaph. After coming to the end of himself in his struggle over what he perceived to be the inequity of this world, notice where his heart went.

Psalms 73:28a, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge...”

This was Paul. After beholding the emptiness and shallowness of worldly achievement, he wrote this:

Philippians 3:7-8a, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing [fellowshipping and so worshipping] Christ Jesus my Lord...”

This was David in Psalm 122. When first he — or any pilgrim — entered the city, what ought they want to do? Worship!

And so it is with us. I love the reference that Derik Kidner made to Jude 24 as “a miniature of this gladness”. Listen to it!

Jude 24, “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.”

Truly for the Christian, a foretaste of this benediction happens every Lord's Day when we gather for worship, because of Christ we stand each week before the Lord "blameless with great joy"!

Accordingly, let me encourage you. When this world presses hard upon you such that you find it hard to stand, work with the pain and burden such that it brings you closer to Christ and so more zealously to His worship!^{6,7} That is the focus and calling of this Psalm.

With that, the rest of this Psalm revolves around cultivating and so providing for this passion — which brings us to an illustration of connectionalism/unity.

An Illustration of Connectionalism/Unity, vv. 3-4a.

Psalm 122: 2-3, "Our feet are standing⁸ within your gates, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that is built as a city that is compact together."

What does that mean? The word for "compact" (חָבַר [chabar]) means to "to join or unite" two or more things together making them one. It is the word used in Exodus 26:11 for how the temple curtains were "bound together" to form one curtain.

- Used of the literal city of Jerusalem, the connotation is the appearance of one massive building.⁹ And what did this "compactness"- this joining together of building after building- provide? Protection and so a safe place for the worship of God.^{10,11,12,13}
- Now if we take this as New Testament pilgrims, the "Jerusalem" we are talking about here is the salvation granted us in Christ by which together we constitute a temple unto the praise and glory of God.

In this context, what provides for our safety and security by which we worship the Lord? Our "compactness"... OUR UNITY! Now to help us in our understanding, David wants us to view Jerusalem from another angle. David observed, still speaking of Jerusalem:

Psalm 122:4a, "To which the tribes go up, *EVEN* the tribes of the Lord¹⁴- an ordinance for Israel..."

David here is speaking of the place and importance of a capital city to a nation. It is what our flag became generations ago as well as our national anthem — both of which provided a corporate identity for those in the US. In David's era, that was what "the city of Jerusalem" did for God's people.^{15,16,17} That is why David here did NOT speak of an individual tribe, BUT the corporate body — "the tribes of the Lord"- that made up God's people. Derek Kidner wrote, "The unity was never meant to be uniform; Israel was a

family of tribes, each with its well-marked character (cf. Genesis 49; Deuteronomy 33). But the ties were more than those of blood or convenience: these were the tribes of the Lord, and Jerusalem was where they were to meet Him, not simply one another.”
(*Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, p. 469)

Think of it: when David became king, the nation was divided. Not only was it composed of twelve tribes all of which had a history (which included events and traditions which bound each tribe individually together), BUT it also was divided along the lines of those who favored Saul and his line and those who favored David’s line. So, what did David do? He conquered a Jebusite city and made it the capital of the theocracy. He also changed the name from “Salem” (which translated meant “peace”) to “Jerusalem” (which translated means “Foundation of Peace”). David intended that this city be the foundation of peace for the nation and so that which united the tribes.¹⁸ James Boice put it this way:

Jerusalem became a Jewish city and achieved biblical prominence under King David, who wrested it from the Jebusites and made it both his political and religious capital. He made it a political center by constructing his palace and other governmental buildings there (see 2 Samuel 5:6–12). He made it the Jews’ religious center by bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, a story told at length in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 15 and 16. It was placed within the relocated tabernacle. Later Solomon built the glorious golden temple, which David had wanted to build, and the ark was placed in its Most Holy Place. The temple thus became the center of the city, which was the center of the nation...

So by choosing it as his capital, David chose a city that would belong to the entire nation. Here people from each of the tribes could go up and know that he or she belonged to one united people- people from Judah and Benjamin, from Dan, Ephraim, and Manassah, from Reuben and Naphtali, and from all the tribes.
(Boice, 2005, pp. 1082-1084)

As David contemplated the worship of God, he knew that it rested or, better, was nestled in a city which protected it NOT ONLY on account of its tight construction, BUT ALSO on account of its role in bringing unity to a nation filled with differing tribes and so histories and mores.

So, with Jerusalem as the unifying agent (as we’ve seen, for us it is our salvation in Christ), what was/is the result? When we are a unified body, what happens?

[The End/Telos of our Connectionalism/Unity, v. 4b.](#)

Psalms 122:4b, “To which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord — an ordinance for Israel — to give thanks¹⁹ to the name of the Lord.”

The unifying principle of “Jerusalem” provided for the corporate worship of God — giving thanks with one heart, mind, body, and soul! Though Israel was a people of varying backgrounds, social standings, education, and jobs, nevertheless it united around their capital city which had its heart the Temple of God and so His worship. This enabled the people of God to lay aside their differences- and all other distractions — in order that together they might make much of God. And so it must be with us!

Think of it! The church is composed of different peoples with different gifts and passions, of various ethnicities, male, female, rich, poor, Democrat/Republican, liberal/conservative with this gifting and that. If we allow any of these to become our identity, we will compromise our highest purpose and greatest privilege: Making much of God together as a body!

That is NOT to say that we do away with our differences. In fact, we rejoice over our differences knowing that in our differences there is strength. That was Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 12:17-20: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body.”

So, we do NOT endeavor to do away with our differences. That being said, we also do NOT allow them to become our identity. Yet that is what is going on right now in the Evangelical Church (of which we are apart). In the name of relevancy and growth, many evangelical denominations and churches have made much of the winds blowing in our culture: CRT/Woke, Race Reconciliation, BLM, and many more. Yet from this Psalm, do you see how dangerous these movements are? To embrace them — or any other identity outside of being “sinners saved by the grace of Christ”— will mean the compromise of the worship we offer to God. Because rather than making much of God we will be making much of ourselves!

Truly, our focus when we gather as a body and when we live our lives as individuals is to make much of Christ, nor ourselves! That is point of this Third Song. When we rally around the redemption we have in Christ (Jerusalem) when we understand that we have been saved to make much of Christ (and so be the temple of God), that is when together we are able to “give thanks to the name of the Lord”!

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End Note(s)

¹ Though Psalm 122 begins with the words, “A song of ascents, of David” many reject his authorship since this portion of the Psalter was given to encourage pilgrims in the Diaspora as they travelled to Jerusalem. Since David lived well before this era, it is argued that none of the Psalms in this section could have been written by him. Yet that is wrong as it presupposes that each of these Psalms in this section were written at the time of the Diaspora. They could just as easily have been written earlier and then at a later time arranged by God for His people in the Diaspora. Accordingly, we understand that this Psalm was written by David and then later, when the Psalter was being assembled, it was placed in the third position in the Songs of Ascents as the perfect song for the Pilgrim as they took their first step into the city after their long journey.

² “Ross observes, ‘This psalm begins where the last one left off—the pilgrims are now standing in the city of Jerusalem, recalling the delight at the prospect of going to the sanctuary, and observing in amazement all the wonders of the holy city.’ The voice of an individual pilgrim (cf. ‘I’ in vv. 1, 8–9) reflects on the corporate experience in Jerusalem as he stands inside the gates of the city in the throng of worshipers in front of the temple.” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 455)

³ “As Isaiah 66:1 states, the Lord cannot be confined to any specific location, but the temple in Jerusalem was the house of the Lord because it was where he chose to dwell among his people (cf. Deuteronomy 12:4–5; Psalm 135:21).” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 456)

⁴ “The phrase *the house of the Lord* occurs in vv. 1 and 9, forming an *inclusio* that directs the hearer’s attention to the main emphasis of the psalm.” (Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 900)

⁵ “As the subsequent verses indicate, for the psalmist Jerusalem was far more than just the political capital of his nation, and his love for Jerusalem was more than patriotism. In fact, his heart was drawn to Jerusalem by his devotion to the Lord who dwelled there.” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 456)

⁶ “Do you share the pilgrim’s excitement about gathering with the redeemed in your local assembly? We should desire this tremendous blessing. In corporate worship, we bring our tired, broken, desperate selves before God, thanking him for redemption and provision and asking him for his help. Corporate worship is an unspeakable blessing to traveling pilgrims.” (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 194)

⁷ “We love our Lord, and therefore we love his house, and pangs of strong desire are upon us that we may soon reach the eternal abode of his glory. An aged saint, when dying, cheered herself with this evidence of grace, for she cried, ‘I have loved the habitation of thine house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth,’ and therefore she begged that she might join the holy

congregation of those who for ever behold the King in his beauty.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 27)

⁸ “Many feet are running the downward road, or kicking against the pricks, or held by snares, or sliding to an awful fall; but our feet, through grace divine, are ‘standing’- an honourable posture, ‘within thy gates, O Jerusalem’- an honourable position, and there shall they stand for ever- an honourable future.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 27)

⁹ “During David’s reign and for some time thereafter, Jerusalem was a small city located on the crest of Mount Zion and Mount Moriah, bounded on two sides by steep descents to the Kidron and Tyropaeon valleys, and thus no more than half a mile in breadth. It had a dramatic setting for one approaching it from a distance, and its tight structure would have impressed anyone observing it.” (Boice, 2005, p. 1084)

¹⁰ “The description conjures up impressions of Jerusalem as a safe place, a place to which people could go in times of trouble and oppression and find security. In the ancient Near East, city walls provided protection and sanctuary for inhabitants and loyal subjects against invading armies.” (Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 901)

¹¹ “Securely enclosed by its protective wall (cf. Psalm 48:12–13), Jerusalem draws to itself the worshipers of the Lord who long to participate in the unity that pervades there.” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 456)

¹² “Outside the gates all is danger, and one day all will be destruction; but within the gates all is safety, seclusion, serenity, salvation, and glory. The gates are opened that we may pass in and they are only shut that our enemies may not follow us.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 27)

¹³ “The city of God had this peculiarity about it, that it was not a long, straggling street, or a city of magnificent distances (as some mere skeleton places have been styled), but the allotted space was filled, the buildings were a solid block, a massive unity: this struck the dwellers in villages, and conveyed to them the idea of close neighbourhood, sure standing, and strong defence. No quarter could he surprised and sacked while other portions of the town were unaware of the assault: the ramparts surrounded every part of the metropolis, which was singularly one and indivisible.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 27)

¹⁴ “Note that Israel was one people, but yet it was in a sense divided by the mere surface distinction of tribes; and this may be a lesson to us that all Christendom is essentially one, though from various causes we are divided into tribes. Let us as much as possible sink the tribal individuality in the national unity, so that the church may be many waves, but one sea; many branches, but one tree; many members, but one body. Observe that the tribes were all of them the Lord’s; whether Judah or Benjamin, Manasseh or Ephraim, they were all the Lord’s. Oh that all the regiments of the Christian army may be all and equally the Lord’s own, alike chosen, redeemed, accepted, and upheld by Jehovah.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 28)

¹⁵ “The unity of the nation was not merely political. In fact, the outward political unity fractured early on, in the days of Rehoboam, Solomon’s successor. The real unity was spiritual, for regardless of the tribal or political divisions, every Jew came to Jerusalem to worship one true and the same God.” (Boice, 2005, p. 1084)

¹⁶ “The pilgrim now takes the city tour of Jerusalem, and he marvels at the unity of the city... He notes the essence of this city is its unity. The shape of the city speaks of its togetherness (v. 3).” (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 194)

¹⁷ “Throughout Israel’s history the tribes were the basis of identity and often of conflict. In Jerusalem, however, unity in the worship of the Lord transcended the factors that tended toward disunity. In its worship the tribes of Israel obeyed his command as they together praised his name, his character described in Exod 34:5–7. This verse, then, discloses the theological significance of Jerusalem and the worship that took place at the temple.” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 457)

¹⁸ “King Jeroboam, with his breakaway kingdom, feared this rallying-point (1 Kings 12:26ff.), forgetting that what was decreed for Israel (Deut. 12:13f.) could never be at odds with what was conditionally promised to him by the same God (cf. 1 Kings 11:38).” (Kidner, 2014, p. 469)

¹⁹ “Note that the object of these pilgrim feasts was to give thanks, not primarily to seek unity or prosperity. These were gifts over and above the occasion, not its *raison d’être*; whereas pagan worship was all too blatantly a means to securing what one wanted: cf. Hosea 2:5.” (Kidner, 2014, pp. 469-470)