
The Pilgrim's Gathered Worship

Psalm 27¹

Russ Kennedy

Thank God we are here. Thank God, we are able to be together and in the same space, face-to-face again. It has been hard. We love being with God's people. I think many who might have been a bit casual about the purposes and power of assembling now have a much stronger sense of why God called us to be a community.

I know many of you are concerned about how long it took and the pace of the phased plans. And I am sure, some simply disagree. For the Elders, let me assure you that these have not been easy decisions. However, all of the decisions have been in the wisdom area. We have prayed much and have felt the burden of what we were choosing to do. And, we have provided through live-streaming and Zoom at least the ability to stay connected. I want once again to publicly acknowledge and thank John Ambro who has spent hours and hours being sure that you were able to participate in the limited worship we were able to do.

So, we are here. We are thrilled. And I hope you like what we have done with the space...

What drives your worship? Why are you here gathered under God and with God's people? Listen to this quote and see what you think.

...I go to church, first of all to renew my covenants I made with Heavenly Father at my baptism. It is a weekly reminder that I have covenanted to keep his commandments and always remember him. Remember is an often used word in the scriptures, and any method to help us keep the example of Jesus in our minds is a good thing.

Secondly, I go to hear the good word of God. Listening to talks giving advice and encouragement is uplifting. Hearing someone tell how they have overcome trials in their lives gives me encouragement to keep going.

Third, I go to be with my fellow Christians. I go to associate and work with them to help our community and the world which coincidentally helps us to develop our talents and abilities. It was Jesus who said that if you lose yourself in the service of others, you will find the real you and be happy.

Going to church is no more a crutch than, for example, going to a Karate studio to learn techniques for self-defense. The humble seek for instruction, the haughty follow their own will and we can see where that has led our world today.ⁱ

Except I left out the first phrase: "As a Latter-day Saint (Mormon), I go to church..."

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Well does that make you pause? What makes the difference between this person involved in a pagan cult and people involved in this Biblical church? Why does the true believing pilgrim gather to worship? This Psalm helps us...

Life's Context

(v.1-3)

This question is asked in the midst of life as it is...

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

Theology – Here is your God

(v.1)

The pilgrim's view of God is critical:

God is the light dispelling fear-causing darkness...

God is the fortress defending life-taking enemies...

Problem – Here is your Situation

(v.2)

Disliked... Hated... Opposed... Attacked... Criticized...

Sound familiar? Do you feel this way? Maybe you don't. Maybe in this warm fuzzy comfort driven western Christianity the idea of enemies and adversaries is hard to imagine. Yet Jesus was threatened by those who, throughout his ministry, sought to destroy Him.

We may not be in this kind of situation, but most of us have issues and problems in our lives. Sometimes these come because of a fallen world. Sometimes they come because of a chastening God. Sometimes they come because of wicked people. But all that comes is directed and orchestrated by the Lord God.

Now, here is a careful word to many of you. Our lives over the last three months and right now are our "situation". COVID, job loss, government overreach, church closure, slow reopening of everything... This did not just "happen." None of it. Did God leave? Has He abdicated His throne to handed it over to a disease? Or over to a government?

Response – Here is your Response

(v.3)

Speaks here of his attitude. His theology controls his emotions. He will not fear and will be confident even when surrounded. He may be in danger, but he is not in the dark and he is well defended (v. 1).

"The secret of David's public confidence was his private obedience: he took time to fellowship with the Lord and get directions from Him. David knew that the most important part of his life was the part that only God could see, and this was one priority he would not negotiate." (Wiersbe, p. 109)

Is your response primarily governed by the Word? Or is it primarily informed by your view of politics? Or even worse, social media?

In What We Pursue

(v.4-6)

David actually expected to see the Lord. Remember, the Shekinah glory was behind the veil.

⁴ One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.

⁶ And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Our Driving Purpose

(v.4)

David had a single-minded purpose that caused him to go to the tent of meeting. It gave shape and passion to his praying. It fueled his desire and his dedication.

He was committed to the assembly, not because of people, but because of God. He has a Godward focus in his going to the assembly. He wants to see God. He may see a pillar of fire hovering over an old tent. But he knows that beyond that outward form there is a glorious Presence. Because of that, he will go up day after day until all the days of his life are passed.

David sees beyond his own time into our time. Even beyond that, he sees into eternity. This is one of those places where the Psalmist is saying more than he knows or understands. He may have a hope of seeing God face-to-face one day. That dim hope he may have had, for us is a promised surety. If you believe and bow to God, you will one day gaze upon the magnificent beauty of our God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God's Sheltering Protection

(v.5)

He found security in the tent of meeting. Being among God's people with God present there brought safety and release from fear. There was a deep sense of *being with God*.

Our Responding Praise

(v.6)

His head is lifted up so he lifts up the Lord. He was encouraged. He was able to see above the situation and not be mired down in it. The encouragement received enabled praise to be raised. This is the result of seeing the Lord.

What happens when you gather with God's people? Are you so committed that being with God's people becomes a permanent place of protection where you praise God? What does it take to keep you from gathering with God's people?

In How We Worship

(v.7-10)

The response of prayer here is the result of hearing God. We seek God because He tells us to.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek."

⁹ Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the LORD will take me in.

Our Highest Pursuit

(v.7-8)

Our worship engages God. This is not some mystical, inner vision or voice. It is the simple reality that He loves to be *with* His people.

We lift our requests to the Lord. We want to be heard, not just in our prayers but in our praises.

We choose our response to the Lord. We believe what He says about seeking Him and respond by seeking Him.

God invites us to seek Him and we respond by seeking Him. Neither in David's day nor in ours do we expect a *physical* manifestation of that engagement. We seek God by faith and by faith we believe that He responds.

Our Deepest Concern

(v.9)

Our worship of God sometimes brings great comfort. It also brings great fear and awe. In fact, it should bring reverence - maybe even fear that we have offended such a God as ours. Sometimes our sin is the problem. Sometimes our low view of God is the problem. But it should matter a lot to us whether we have the smile of our heavenly Father.

Our Greatest Comfort

(v.10)

This is the sense of *being received*. He will assemble with us. Though forsaken by the closest of human relations, we will not be abandoned by our heavenly Father. We may be earthly orphans but God opens His home and takes us in because of Jesus. He does not leave us as orphans, but rather has sent us His Spirit so that we may be recognized and respond as true sons.

What happens when you come to church? Do you actually worship God here? Do you sometimes tremble because of Him? What does it take to keep you from this place?

In What We Learn

(v.11-13)

Even in David's day, one of the reasons to go to the tent of meeting was to learn. He came prepared and expecting to learn. Do you?

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹² Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.

¹³ I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Notice that this is verbalized in a series of requests. This is what we expect to learn. So we ask God to teach us these things. We want to be instructed in:

God's Paths

(v.11)

The word *way* refers to the *way God is*. As a result of knowing what God is like, we can know His paths. We need to be on those paths for on other paths, evil lie in ambush.

God's Protection

(v.12)

God defends us in the midst of the attack and the false accusations. It is not His intention to prevent that from happening; but to protect us from their desired consequences.

God's Provision

(v.13)

There can be no despair when we believe that God is going to show His goodness. Sometimes, God shows His goodness through the grace in one who is suffering. Witness the martyrs.

Reflect and Respond

In the light of all this, here is the exhortation:

Wait on the Lord

The root of this word means *to be bound together*. Being bound to the Lord, we patiently wait for Him to move on our behalf.

Be Strong

The root of this word means *to fasten upon*. Our strength comes from our connection to the Lord.

Take Courage

The root of this word means *to be alert, to watch*. Our courage comes from an awareness of the Presence and Power of God.

We too often have low expectations when we come to our gatherings. We are not expecting to see God, hear from Him, tremble because of Him nor see His great goodness. Often, this is simply because we are here for ourselves.

I know we have had a season of being apart. Being together now is so good and so great. And it is so tempting. It is tempting to make this all about us. We are here for God with each other. God is here with us for each other.

The strength and courage we have in the midst of pressure and accusation comes from our vital connection with God. This connection is maintained by our corporate fellowship with God.

Why are we so surprised at the mounting pressure against God's people? I believe it is good for us. Maybe in the midst of persecution we will see again God's power.

Do you come **to behold** our God, **to worship** the Lord and **to learn** what our God is like?

² www.fiath-theology.com/2013/10/why-go-to-church, comment by Charles Smith