

Worship: much more than a word!

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[0 : 00] Folks, can we turn again to our Bible, please? Psalm 122 is really well known. We sung it there, I joyed, when to the house of God go up, they said to me. Let me read again just the first two verses. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

Lord, our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Well, it is true, they say, isn't it? You never miss the water until the well runs dry.

And that was certainly our experience this year, which one of us thought in March that we would be stopped going to church for almost six months. And even here we are in church, and it's frankly more like a bank robber's convention, as I look around in a sea of masked people. And it's really not the same. Yes, it's an attempt to try and bring back some degree of normality, but certainly from my perspective, it's not a quality experience. I can't read your expressions, I can't see your wonderful open yes faces, and it is very difficult sometimes to preach to a wall of surgical masks.

But yet we see here that here we are. It's very, very difficult. And maybe God is saying to us something. Perhaps for some of us, not all of us, that pre-March, that we had been taking worship for granted. And maybe even post-March, or maybe even in the last few days, we've realized that that six months where we weren't worshipping in public together has taken its toll. So it could have been the case that before COVID we had begun to forget what the wonder of worship was. It had become, instead of ineffably sublime, it had become somewhat dry and pedestrian and routine. And maybe for others, that during the experience of not being able to meet, we rather began to like it. Maybe there was something rather novel in having jammy days in front of the pulpit while you supped your coffee and ate your quassel while the preacher preached. There was something strangely utilitarian about that. It really suited the way we were. And so we'd lost that sense of wonder, the sense of the magnificence, and even the sense of the transcendence of God. Well, this psalm is written that we would recover again that sense of amazement. And that's our subject this morning, not the recovery of sense and amazement, because that's not a topic that you can actually generate. But as we look at the text of the psalm, we will be drawn once again to the centrality of what worship is. What's happening here?

Well, many of you know that this is one of the songs of ascent. And the songs of ascent, as every schoolboy knows, were sung as the people went up to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a city on a hill, and you travel up to it. And as they would go up to it, they would sing these songs representing different areas of Christian experience. Psalm 120, they started there in that faraway land. Psalm 120 is a psalm of repentance, isn't it? Psalm 121 is a psalm of being aware of the dangers round about.

[3 : 39] And Psalm 122, as they arrive at Jerusalem, it really is quite remarkable, as they see the site of Jerusalem again. When I lived in Inverness, for those of you who may know Inverness, you come up a hill. It's called the Ramosi Bray. And the top of the Bray, you look down, and you can see the city before you, and its lights, and you think, I am home. In Edinburgh, there's a point just after the Amazon building that you just turn a corner, and you see the bridges of crossing the river Forth, and you say, we are home again. And that's the same idea that you have there in Psalm 122. The pilgrims are coming in within the site of Jerusalem, and there they are. Wow, we are home again. Now, this meant even more because the people had been involved in exile. This is such a relevant psalm for where we are just now. For years, for generations, they had been exiled in Babylon.

And I don't know if you've ever seen these programs like changing rooms. You know, there's a pretty run-down house, and the people have to go away, and they're away for a week or two weeks. And it's always the same, isn't there? They've left this dull, dingy house, and they come back, and they're blindfolded, and they open up, and they're like, wow! And many of them cry as they see the new building.

Imagine the people in exile in Babylon. There is no temple. There is no Jerusalem. There is no holy place. And then through the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, they are rebuilt, and it's now pristine. It's now brand new. And the pilgrims are back in their new building, perhaps a little bit like this renovated Bon Accord building. It's new, and it evokes something within their own hearts. And so, from 516 BC, there would have been a rebuilt house of the Lord to go to, and now they are amazed as they come to worship. Let's look at the passage, and let's notice five things. Five things, fairly briefly, that the text is saying to us. Number one, we notice that the attitude of worship is joy. The attitude of worship is joy. I joyed when to the house of God. Go up, they said to me.

[6 : 08] Look at Psalm 120, 5 and 6. That shows you the mindset that they had before this. Woe to me. That's never a good start, is it? That's what they were saying. Woe to me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar. Verse 6 of Psalm 120. Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace, but when I speak, they are for war. So, before they were amongst, they were aliens in a strange land. They are expats. They're living far away from God now.

They are in the house of God, and their primary attitude, the attitude of worship is joy. Now, it says here, this is a template for all Christian worship. They joyed there when they came to the temple of God. The temple of God today is not a building. The temple of God today is a person. It's Jesus. And whenever we come into the house of God, we come into the presence of Jesus himself. And so, our fundamental, our core attitude is joy. Many of you will work in businesses and companies, and they're always rabbiting on about core values. That used to be a thing back in the day. You know, our people are our greatest asset, and you've got all these core values. Our core values is excellence. That's what they say. They'll never say our core value is mediocrity. There's always a core value there. One of the core values or the core value of worship here at Bonaccord is joy. I rejoiced, line one, with those who said to me, let us go to the house of God. This is the gospel. Not only that we have been made by God, but we have been redeemed by God. They've been singing about it. They were in a foreign land, and now they have moved on. There is something to rejoice about.

Language has been so demeaned in Christian circles over the years. We don't talk about the word saved anymore. It seems to be somewhat of an embarrassing word, and yet it's a great word.

[8 : 32] We have been saved. We have been redeemed. We have been taken by God. God has come down to us. He has rescued us. In the words of another psalm, He took me from a fearful pit and from a clay of mire, and He set me on a rock. He's rescued me. He's made me a new person. So, that's why at our core, there is redemption song. There is this song that we have been released. You get it? And the next one of the psalms going on, Psalm 126, Psalm 124, sorry, we have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare.

You know, if you're skimming YouTube, you come across quite often these clips of a trapped animal. Maybe it's a deer, maybe even it's a lion, and it's been trapped in some trap, and someone comes along and releases it. And you can sense that sense of exhilaration and freedom as it is released to be what it was made to be. And that's what happens to us when we are saved. And that is something that makes us rejoice. It's fascinating, isn't it, that Christianity is marked out by its addiction to song. It is a faith above all other faiths that has got song, and it's very hard. That is why it is frustrating for us behind our masks. We cannot sing. Yes, we can sing internally, but there is this, we want to burst out, and we want to sing. We want to sing joyfully.

John Piper, who is a New Testament scholar and one of, you know, the world's liveliest preachers. Not everyone agrees with his views and this or that. But he said this, writing in the Psalm, he says, I really don't have a lot of patience, frankly, even with Christians who want to put a lid on music and singing or put it back five centuries or limited to one kind of instrument. I think that all that is hopelessly defeatist because he says, we humans have explosive souls.

Folk, can you resonate with that sense of an explosive soul? Now, your preference for music is just that. It's your preference, but within it, whatever genre appeals to you is their sense of explosion that you want to tell out your soul the glory of God. And so, that's what we're saying here, aren't we? We are saying here that the attitude of worship is joy. There's a very well-known American agnostic called Robert Ingersoll. His story is fascinating. When Robert Ingersoll, he lived at the end of the 19th century and when he died, the printed funeral program contained these words, there will be no singing. Because what's there to sing about? What is there to, if you plan to attend the funeral

of an infidel, agnostic or skeptic, you don't look for hymns, anthems, psalms, carols, spiritual songs, spiritual songs, without God, without Christ, without a divine revelation, without hope?

[12:23] What do we have to sing about? You go along to the creme and you hear some humanist celebrant say, let's sing, I did it my way.

We are the champions. We are the champions. There is nothing to sing about. But this morning, there is something to sing about. And so, at the very core of our worship, there is joy. This is so positive. This is self-affirming. So, ask that God would give us that sense of joy and praise, that motivation. But the wonderful thing is, and this is really quite a twist, the great thing in worship is not us singing to God, but it's God singing to us. Did you know that? That the very central element of worship is not our praise to God, but God singing to us. Have you ever heard God singing?

Zephaniah 3, verse 1,

On that day, they will say to Jerusalem, do not fear, O Zion. Do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing. The sorrows for the appointed feast I will remove from you. They are a burden and reproach to you.

Thank you. This morning, our song to him is silent. His song to us is thunderous.

They can stop, in some measure, our outward song. And we, perhaps not happily, we acquiesce in that for the greater good. But they cannot stop that great voice of the one who rejoices over his people with singing.

[14:43] Yes, the attitude of worship is joy. But the second thing we see here, and this is really quite counterintuitive, not only is the attitude of worship joy, the second thing here we notice in verse 4 is that the motivation for worship is command. The motivation for worship is command.

Verse 4, that is where the tribes go, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. Now, that's a surprising one.

Often we read verse 1 as a kind of spontaneous invitation to go up to Jerusalem. You know, that it's just, come on folks, I feel like worshiping, let's give God praise, let's go up to Jerusalem and to worship. But verse 4 says, no, to praise God according to the statute, but it could be a reference to Deuteronomy 12, where God commanded the people specifically to go to the temple to worship God. Now, so what we're having here is a command to worship. Now, the modern or whatever we are, post-modern or some of your Gen X, millennials, whatever, we kind of react against that. We don't like rules, bizarrely. We're surrounded by them, we've got a sea of them. So, our first reaction is, man, this is heavy, a command to worship. Oh, man, we don't want that. We want it to be free-flowing.

It's all about feelings. This is not heavy. The command to worship, far from being heavy, restrictive, is actually liberating. Let me explain. The command to worship is liberating because if we have a faith or an outlook that is feelings led, that will lead us into the road to despair, how often have we maybe said, oh, I don't feel like going to church? And even if I did go to church, it would be hypocritical because my spirit's not there. I'm just not in the mood. I'm not in the right place.

Now, it is liberating to have that removed. Have you noticed how little the Bible says about feelings? I don't know where you are politically if you're a Republican or a monarchist. Did you see the interview a few years ago with Prince Philip? Prince Philip, what is he, 99?

[17:28] A bit of a character. And he married the queen. They've had some extraordinary wedding anniversary this week. It's 70-something years. 73 years. My, it's amazing. And he had to give up his naval career. And the interviewer said, how did you feel about that? Feelings? Feelings? He said, what do feelings have to do with it? You just do. You're duty. Now, you may think that's noble. You may think it's ignoble. I don't know. But in terms of Psalm 122, our coming to God, our motivation for worship is command. We're not to feel, we're not to worship when we feel like it because, frankly, I love the frankness of Eugene Peterson, he says this, feelings are liars. Aren't they?

Feelings are liars because feelings say I'm not loved. Feelings say nobody loves me, everybody hates me, think I'll go and eat worms. Feelings say I'm in a dark place when the reality is no, you're in a good place, you're in the light. Feelings say no, I'm in the dark place.

If we only went to church when our forms was good, the place would be empty. And so there is this liberation of coming to God when we have to. Herbert Hendon calls this age the age of sensation. Let's be counterintuitive. Let's rebel against the age of sensation and move it into the age of obedience. Now, the Psalms often don't begin with an act. Sorry, the Psalms often don't be, rarely

begin with a feeling, but they begin with an act. So you have Psalm 73 as a classic example. Psalm 73, I saw the wicked prosper. You know, I saw someone who's godless and they're going on really well in life and they're thriving in every single level, emotionally, apparently spiritually, sometimes materially. They're thriving. There's me. Yeah, Psalm 73, I saw the wicked thriving and I thought, where is God? Then I went into God's house.

Perhaps there's even someone here today and this is your first time here for a long time for various circumstances. Maybe you didn't feel like coming here because it reminds you of maybe happier days.

[20 : 17] It reminds you of other people who were once there with you and they're no longer here and you just didn't feel like coming here. And yet you are here. And here is God singing to you. God is saying, it's great to see you. He's saying, I'm in control. It's not a mess. This is not a place of death. This is a place of life. This is a place where I delight to dwell. God is calling us to go less by our feelings and more by his commands. Get this. God in worship does not satisfy our appetite for him.

In worship, God whets our appetite for him. And that's one of those lines that you've got to really mull over. That in worship, it's not that God satisfies because will we be fully satisfied?

But our appetite is whetted. We begin to say more, more, more. Thirdly, we've seen the attitude of worship is joy. We've seen the motivation for worship is a command. Thirdly, the context for worship is unity. Verse 3 and verse 4, Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

I was raised in the free church, kind of old school when it was exclusive psalmody. And this is one of the psalms that, you know, I memorized off my heart back there in Sunday school in Paisley.

I joyed, went to the house of God, go up, they said to me. And then there was that line, Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together. Unto that place the tribes go up, the tribes of God go thither.

Now, when I was five, I hadn't got a clue what that meant. But it was, that's one of the things about the 1650 version of the Psalter. The language is so beautiful and weird that it's memorable. And actually, if you kind of like words, there's something that sticks.

[22 : 34] And that, I think, will stick to me as long as I'm blessed with memory. Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together. And here it says here that it's closely compacted together. The city, the Hebrew word suggests it was a city in unity with itself.

If I were not a minister, what would I be? I would be a dry stone dike somewhere in the highlands. I mean, you see these dry stone dikes, these walls made with different types of stone. That's bon accord. Dry stone dike made with people. People of different shapes and sizes and backgrounds together. And so, into this unity flowed diversity. That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord. They did the same thing together. And so, what does it say in the United States and in the South that the hours between 11 and 12 are the most segregated hour in the whole nation of the United States? Well, that may be so there. We are not there. We are here. But we can celebrate not segregation, but we celebrate togetherness. God has built this unity. God has built this unity. As individuals, we often need to say, there are times I need to get my head around this. I need to get my head together. And we speak of together people. Here as we worship, we put all the differences behind us.

And here we are, worshipping. There's a book. I never read it. I've never even seen it. But I think it does exist. In fact, I know it exists. The title is Building with Bananas.

And it kind of describes what the Church is. Now, I've never built anything with bananas, but I would think it would be quite challenging because they are irregular, misshapen. They are not naturally given to go together. It's a bit like a dry stone dike image times 10. God is saying, your times of worship are together. A time when we meet and we celebrate our differences.

[25 : 11] We're not all the same. And let's not force everybody to be the same. And whoever you are, whatever your background is, here or out there watching on Zoom or YouTube or whatever, there is a place here for you. Whoever you are in the city of Aberdeen, whether you just, you know, in some serendipitous way watching the TV screen and say, when that place opens, will I ever go back there? Will I fit there? Is there a stone that doesn't fit a dike?

Fourthly, the orientation for worship is the Bible. The orientation for worship is the Bible. We'll look at verse 5. See that line there? The thrones of judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.

Now, this needs a little bit of unpacking. The thrones of judgment there are basically, it's a synonym. It's a reference to the Word of God, the Bible, if you get the drift.

When we talk about pulling ourselves together, there's a kind of self-centeredness, isn't there? But, you know, celebrities have discovered the joy of self-discovery. From a Christian perspective, that's a living nightmare, self-discovery. We want to have God discovery, don't we?

Now, again, I'm thankful to Eugene Peterson. He's got this great exposition of verse, you know, verse 5. There the thrones of judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David. He translates it this, the thrones of judgment as the decisive word by which God straightens things out and puts things right. So, as we come to worship, we are under, we're exposed to the Bible, and the Bible is that decisive word that straightens things out and puts things right.

And it's a dynamic thing. The power of the Bible doesn't just say things. The power of the Bible does things. That's the, I don't know if it's the romance of preaching, that's one of the things that makes a service a dynamic thing, that as the Word of God is proclaimed, folk are not just informed, it's not an infomercial, but as the Word of God is proclaimed, people are often changed within their being. The default settings of our lives are adjusted and recalibrated, and we see things differently.

[28 : 06] That's what happens when they come to worship. The thrones of judgment stand. Now, I've got a colleague, and this particular colleague, he is one of the best people I know for running meetings. I spend my life, most weeks I would have 10 meetings. Don't tell anybody, but most of them are pretty inefficient. There's this one colleague who's great at running meetings.

If I had my way, he would run all the meetings that I'm involved in. Because he's always pushing through the agenda, and he's always got this expression, okay folks, what are the outcomes here? You know, how are we going to change things? What's going to be different? Is Satan going to tremble because of this committee meeting? Are the powers of darkness going to quake because of the outcome of this particular meeting? Most of them probably not.

But it all depends on the outcome. What are the outcomes of this morning? Now, that's why going to church is better. No, I'll rephrase that.

Going to church is essential along with private worship. So, if you worship privately on your own, it's suboptimal. Because one of the things about public worship is that we are exposed to the Bible This morning we've had some, it's perhaps pretentious to call it teaching, but we've had some exposure from Psalm 122.

[30 : 01] And if the preacher is worth his salt to everything he said, he can prove from the Bible it's not his own opinions. I have opinions in everything under the sun, but you're not interested in them. I'm not interested in them, frankly.

But we're interested in what the Word of God says. So, God is speaking through His Word and that challenges us.

Something strange has happened to me as I become older. I like the company of people I don't agree with more. When I was in my twenties and thirties, I'm annoyed being in the company of folk I don't agree with.

But now, I quite like it. Because it challenges. It challenges me.

And that's what it's like when we come to the Bible. Because the Bible is above us all. That's why we're saying here that the centre of our worship is the Bible. And so, maybe it's the preacher, not always, but maybe it's the preacher who's taking something out of the Bible that annoys you.

[31 : 24] Maybe that's the one that's changing us. Maybe that's the outcome. Finally, briefly. The outcome of worship is peace and prosperity.

The outcome of worship is peace and prosperity. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadel.

You see, this is the thing about the psalm. The psalms spill out into the whole of life. A good worship service spills out.

The old Gaelic folk have got an expression about a sermon. A sermon that follows you. Where I go to in Worship and Edinburgh, Cornerstone, Neil McMillan's always got this thing.

In every single sermon, he's got his thought for Thursday. That thought on Thursday, when you've forgotten all about the service. There's a Thursday thought. One thing that will follow you.

[32 : 23] And the idea here is that the worship service spills out. It's not just us and God. We pray for the peace of Jerusalem. We're in this together. I, for good or for bad, love the United States of America.

Maybe it's just growing up, watching too much TV. And it's got a great culture. And one of the phrases that you have in America is, okay, maybe 99% insincere, but I still love it.

Have a great day. Have a great day. Can you imagine that said in a Christian context with absolute sincerity? Verse 6.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls. That's have a great day to the max. The psalmist will pray for the good of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Yiri Shalem. You know what Jerusalem means? Yiri Shalem means the abiding place of peace.

[33 : 34] The abiding place of peace. In a city of busyness, as we come to worship, unapologetically to worship together, this place, this modest building can be a place of peace.

And the good of Jerusalem is worked out in Hebrews 13. Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers. For by doing some, some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Folks, let's spill out this morning. Let this worship service spill out to one another as we bless with one another, as we pray for our peace and prosperity and shalom.

Peace there in the Bible means so much more than the absence of war. I will seek your prosperity. I will seek your prosperity.

I will seek your prosperity. Who do we praise Him? I think of Psalm 67. We praise you so that your praise may be known through all the air. The praise of Jesus.

[34 : 49] We see Jesus in this Psalm. He is the house of the Lord. He is the one who, we are united to Him so that we have unity with Him.

Many tribes in one body. The thrones of judgment in Psalm 122 is now the Word made flesh. He is our peace, our shalom, the prosperity of God's house, the prosperity of this congregation, the group of young and old, men and women, rich and poor, small and tall, together in the perfumed, saturated presence of the Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but I rejoice to come to God's house today. Father, we bow in your presence.

Thank you for today, for church here and for folk looking at home. May we adore you, may we meet with you, may we love you. Amen.