

# What's the Big Deal About Church? (Psalm 122)

**Big Idea:** Don't lose sight of what the church is and how it brings people together. Pray for the church, and seek the good of the church.

Have you ever met someone who's a little too excited about something?

I have. Years ago I had a friend who heard one of my sermons. He came running up to me after and said, "You have to see this movie. It illustrates everything that you just said so well!"

So I went to the movie with him. I can't even remember the name of the movie anymore, except that it was sort of okay and that my friend was way more excited about it than I was.

Sometimes other people get really into things, and it's not always clear why.

That seems to be the case in Psalm 122. We're looking at this group of psalms – Psalms 120 to 134 – that are pilgrim songs, written by the people of Israel. They were most likely used by people as they traveled to Jerusalem three times a year for Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. These are pilgrim songs, meant to help us make our way home as we go through the ups and downs of living in this broken world.

You see the progression in these psalms. In Psalm 120, we start in a foreign land far from home. In Psalm 121, we are on our way, and need God's protective care. Then in Psalm 122, we arrive in Jerusalem. And as we do, the psalmist is very excited. Listen to what he says:

I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the LORD!"  
Our feet have been standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem!  
(Psalm 122:1-2)

Do you feel his excitement? The psalmist recounts the whole pilgrimage experience from start to finish. Someone in the past said, "Let's go." Now he's arrived, and the gladness he anticipated has been fulfilled.

Read the whole psalm, and you pick up on his excitement to be there.

Why would the psalmist be so excited? Let's be honest. It's not always easy to get excited about worshiping God or being part of the church. Sam Allberry writes:

Being honest, on some Sundays, the park looked like a better option.

I was working for a church in Oxford, and my walk to the morning service every Sunday took me through a park. It was lovely ... On a sunny Sunday morning the place was full: everyone doing their thing and having a great time...

Church is an effort. It is sometimes hard. And it's far from normal. So why bother going at all? Why bother making it a priority in your week, every week?

Great question. This psalm helps us answer that question, and helps shape our hearts for what God intends.

First, a note. We obviously don't live in Jerusalem, and even if we arrived there today, we wouldn't be able to go to the temple. It was destroyed in 70 A.D. and no longer exists. But the temple represents something bigger. The temple is a recovery of Eden. It's the place where we get to dwell with God together. The temple isn't just a place to attend. It's a little piece of the Garden of Eden in our broken world. It's where God's space and our space overlaps, a place where heaven and earth meet. It's the most important place on earth, the place where God has chosen to live with his people.

What do you do with the fact that the temple no longer exists? Well, the Bible says that it actually does still exist. When Jesus came, he said he was the temple (John 2:19-22). Ephesians says that we've become part of the temple too – that:

...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom *the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.* (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Christians together are the temple of God collectively. As we gather, we meet with God. Our gatherings are part of a new Eden, where God meets his people in joyful

worship and fellowship in the middle of this broken world. When you put your faith in Christ, you become part of this living, growing temple. “God has drawn closer to his people by actually dwelling with them, that is, by making the corporate body of believers his holy habitation” (Clinton Arnold).

We have something even better than the temple in Jerusalem. What the pilgrims hoped to see, we have present in Christ, who has done everything necessary to save us, and is present with us. Jesus didn’t just come to die to forgive our sins. He came to create a new community, and this new community where God has chosen to live in this world. It’s a bit of Eden in our broken world.

Not only that, but we look forward to when God will dwell on earth again and Eden will be restored. Revelation looks forward to the new earth, where there’s no temple, “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22).

Here’s what I want to do as I look at this psalm. I want to look at two reasons why church matters, and then one action that we can take.

## **Two Reasons Church Matters**

### **Church matters because of the wow factor**

I have a pastor friend who can’t believe that he gets to be part of the church. It’s been good for me. He is practically giddy when he gets to worship with God’s people. It’s

contagious. It's made me reexamine my attitude to the church and recapture the wow factor.

That's what the psalmist does in verses 1 and 2. If I were to summarize verses 1 and 2, it would be something like this: I can't believe that I get to be part of this! This is way better than I deserve. This is amazing!

It's so easy to lose sight of the privilege. I went through a phase when I felt very cynical about the church. I lost the wow factor. Verses 1 and 2 help us get it back.

Why should we be amazed that we get to be part of the church? So many reasons.

- It was purchased by Jesus at the cost of his life.
- It is the place where heaven and earth overlaps, and God dwells with his people.
- It's where God shows his wisdom to the spiritual world (Ephesians 3:10-11).
- It's our family, where we can be loved, where there's no such thing as a misfit. We never have to be alone.
- It's where we can be encouraged and built up.
- It's his bride, who will live with him on the new earth.

This is a big deal! And we get to be part of it. This psalm reminds us that it is a very big deal that we get to be part of this. What an honor. It's not a chore. It's a privilege. It's one of the biggest privileges of our lives.

Why does church matter? Because of the wow factor. It is a privilege. But here's another reason why church matters.

## **Church matters because it brings people together.**

Verse 3 speaks of the beauty of the city of the Jerusalem, which is integrated together. The psalmist loved the city itself and the way that it provided protection for the people as they gathered.

But the really great thing about Jerusalem is the way that it unified the nation and brought people together to praise God and to pursue justice. That's why he says:

Jerusalem—built as a city  
that is bound firmly together,  
to which the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the LORD,  
as was decreed for Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.  
There thrones for judgment were set,  
the thrones of the house of David.  
(Psalm 122:3-5)

What's really great about Jerusalem is that it's a place where tribes lay aside their tribal identities and take up the identity of being part of God's people, unifying around worship of God. And it's the same as church, where God's people lay aside their tribal identities and pick up their identity as God's holy people.

I love how D.A. Carson describes church:

The church is... made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together... because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

Church is the place where God calls us to lay aside all of our tribal identities and prejudices and unite around Jesus. It's where everyone who trusts in Jesus belongs, and where things like prejudice, division, and hostility have no place. We don't always measure up to this, but that's what God has called church to be. And it's amazing.

Why does church matter? Church matters because of the wow factor and because it brings people together.

# Two Actions

In light of this, there are two actions we can take.

## Pray for the church.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

"May they be secure who love you!

Peace be within your walls

and security within your towers!"

For my brothers and companions' sake

I will say, "Peace be within you!"

(Psalm 122:6-7)

The psalmist prays for peace, and then personifies Jerusalem and speaks peace to it.

As the psalmist called Jews to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, I call you to pray for the peace of the church. Please pray for Liberty Grace to be what God calls it to be.

Pray that God will work in us and through us.

## Seek the good of the church.

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,

I will seek your good.

(Psalm 122:9)



Play your role in helping the church live up to what God has called it to be. "If we honor our God we desire the prosperity of the church which he has chosen for his indwelling" (Spurgeon).

Don't lose sight of what the church is and how it brings people together. Pray for the church, and seek the good of the church. That's what Psalm 122 teaches us.

Father, thank you for Jesus, who has made us a living temple. Help us not to lose the wow factor over who you have called us to be together. Unite us and help us to live up to this calling. And help us to be faithful in praying for your church and seeking the good of the church. In Jesus' name, Amen.