

Glad To Be Here!
Psalm 122:1-9
Series: The Psalms [#21]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
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Theme: **True, Joyful Worship Flows From A True, Sharp Focus.**

Introduction

As we turn our attention to Psalm 122 this morning, we come to another one of the *Psalms of Ascents*. These fifteen Psalms were written at different times and by different people. We don't know all we might want to about the origin of each Psalm and the early use of this section of Israel's hymn book. We do know that people sang these Psalms as they traveled to Jerusalem for the three required-attendance festivals each year—Passover, Pentecost, and Booths. The people from all regions, families and social classes made their way to Jerusalem. There they would be bound together in worshipping God. There they would be challenged to live their faith and serve God. As they spent those days walking in family and community groups, they prepared for the times of worship in Jerusalem in part by singing these *Psalms of Ascents*.

Why are they called *Psalms of Ascents*? While we are not absolutely certain, remember that no matter what the direction or elevation, one always went *up* to and *down* from Jerusalem, since it was the center of Israel's national and spiritual life. They sang these Psalms on their *ascent* to Jerusalem.

Psalm 122 is about worship. As we look at the Psalm as a whole the theme of worship comes through, the theme of glad or joyful worship. One Mom tells of the time when her son was a preschooler and she was teaching him about the Sunday church service and worship. The next Sunday morning she reviewed this with him, including why the church takes an offering and why we give. Then in church she gave him a dime, and strict instructions—“Don't put in your mouth and don't drop it!” They were sitting on an aisle. He held the coin tightly in his fist until the usher came with the offering plate. When the usher put the plate in front of him, he held both fists over the plate and, with a big smile and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, said, “*Pick a hand!*” To him, this *worship* was fun! He was *glad* to be there.

Little children aren't the only ones who sometimes don't have a sharp focus on worship, on *true, joyful worship*. Psalm 122 helps us. We can sum up King David's opening statement with the exclamation “*Glad To Be Here!*” He was glad to go to the house of the LORD, to the place of worship and to worship with others. The main message of the Psalm is that *true, joyful worship flows from a true, sharp focus*. Let's begin getting at that message with thinking about what this true gladness is.

True Gladness.

Look at, think about the word itself. *Glad*. Many different pictures can come to our minds.

- When the Eskimoes or Oilers win, many in Edmonton are *glad*— and that hasn't been often lately.
- When you receive a compliment, words of encouragement or a special gift, you are *glad*.
- Where there is money left at the end of the month instead of month left at the end of your money, you are *glad*.
- When a long awaited, special day or event comes, you are *glad*.
- When you survive a long, difficult week and the weekend finally comes, you are *glad*.

But what does King David mean here in verse 1? When we trace this word through the Psalms, we find it frequently refers to being glad because of God, His truth and His works.¹ As well it is connected to the heart and soul, as in Psalm 19:8 where David wrote, “The precepts of the LORD are right, *rejoicing* the heart ...”² When the King said, “I was *glad* when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord,’” he was telling us he was glad or joyful at the core of his being, with all of his being. It was neither superficial nor partial, but deep and complete. We could say that he was “*glad through and through*,” or, “*totally glad*.”

Some related truths highlight its importance. This gladness or joy goes beyond a brief good feeling. It is this joy in and of God, you may recall from Nehemiah 8:10, that is our strength. On the other, contrasting side, there is a lesson and warning from Israel. God told them that if they failed to worship Him with “joy and a glad heart,” they would bring God’s discipline on themselves.³

This points us to another aspect of this gladness. Joyful worship is not limited to a response to good circumstances. We are to choose to, determine to find joy in God. The writer of Psalm 104 tells us, “Let my meditation be pleasing to Him [God]; as for me, *I shall be glad in the LORD*.” (34)

True gladness or joy in coming to worship with others, in worshipping with others, is from the heart, with all of our being because of who God is and what He does.

With this in mind, look again at King David’s example in the opening verses. Verse 1.

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’ Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that is built as a city that is compact together; to which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the LORD —an ordinance for Israel—to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

For there thrones were set for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.” (1-5)

Think of all the travelers to Jerusalem for the festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Booths. They knew the dates and prepared for the trip, which could be costly and time consuming. Then the word came, “It’s time to go! Let’s get going!” As they traveled, talked and sang, their anticipation grew. They pictured themselves standing inside the gates of Jerusalem where the house of the LORD was—first the Tabernacle and later the Temple. As they got closer and closer, as the time of celebration and worship got closer and closer, their joy grew more and more.

Is our experience of coming together here to worship anything like that? Has your experience in coming and being here this morning been anything like that? You might think, “Wait a minute! Those people were on their way to the special place where God’s presence dwelled. They were on their way to special, big events of worship.” We don’t have to wait to travel to *Jerusalem*, to church, three times a year.

Yes, it probably was easier for the people of Israel to be glad for the big and special events as it is for us when we approach Christmas and Easter. But we have the privilege of God being with and within each of us by the Holy Spirit, and God meeting with us in a special way when we worship together.⁴ And God directs us to come together regularly, consistently to worship Him.⁵

True joy, wholehearted gladness should saturate our worship. Gladness through and through because

- we have come to meet with eternal, almighty God who loves us, has saved us, and wants to meet with us as a group of His people;
- because we know God’s care and provision and want to state that with our presence, in our songs, prayer and words;
- because we come to encourage and be encouraged by each other.

And so, with hearts overflowing with happiness or weighed down with difficulties, when we come together in this place, we should be *glad to be here*.

True, joyful worship is not just an emotional high from big and special events that touch or move us. *True, joyful worship flows from a true, sharp focus*. Let’s see what this Psalm teaches us about that focus.

True, Sharp Focus.

Psalm 122, of course, does not cover all the bases on joyful worship, but it gives us four bright beams of truth which must be active and focused together for a *true, sharp focus*. The first one is a special place for worship. For King David and the generations of travelers who

sang this song, the place was Jerusalem and the Tabernacle or Temple. Those buildings, it goes without saying, were dramatically different than church facilities today. Most of the people in Israel were there only a few times a year at best. Their regular Sabbath observances and worship were in their homes and communities. As well, prior to the church, the Holy Spirit did not permanently reside within each believer. There was, however, an ongoing real and awesome presence of God in “the house of the LORD.” So we can understand that they could have a sharp focus on that special place which helped lead them to joyful worship.

What about us today? It is easy to look at the differences between then and now and dismiss the whole point. It is easy, and *wrong*. Ideas about church facilities have been diverse—from great cathedrals to a piece of ground under a shade tree, from being revered and almost worshiped to being rejected as a waste of resources.

Church facilities *are* special. They are special because they have a special purpose: whether rented, purchased or built, they are

- places where the people of God come together to worship God;
- places where the people of God come together to be taught about God and His truth;
- places where the people of God come together to minister for God.

The point is not that the facility is special because it is a cathedral or a community centre, but that the facility is a place dedicated to God, for these special purposes and, as a result, it *is* special to God and His people.

Is that in our thinking about this place as we gather here? We have a beautiful and historic building. But far above and beyond that, this place is special because it is dedicated to our worship and service. Because of that we should think of it, treat and care for it accordingly.

Then a sharp focus for true, joyful worship includes a special gathering in worship. King David, and then the generations of travelers sang, “Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem”(2). They went on to sing of Jerusalem, “to which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord” (4). They came collectively “to give thanks to the name of the Lord” (4). Those were special times for them individually, but more than that, they were special gatherings, a coming together of God's people.

God's desire and commands to the church are the same. Beginning with Acts 2, we find a strong emphasis on the church gathering together regularly for worship. Luke wrote, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (42). Later in the New Testament record, Hebrews 10:19-25 tells us to do four things:

- draw near to God (22);
- hold fast the confession of our hope (23);

- consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds (24);
- and, not to forsake our own assembling together but to encourage one another (25).

These things go together. And because they go together, we cannot fulfill any one of them as we should without the others. So,

- we cannot draw near to God as we can and should,
- we cannot hold fast to our confession of hope as we can and should,
- we cannot think about and actually stimulate each other to love and good deeds as we can and should,
- we cannot truly and fully encourage one another as we can and should...

if we forsake, get careless or sloppy about our own assembling together, if we fail to gather together regularly, consistently, with the church in worship.

It is not the kind of building, it's not what's on the program, nor how it is done that makes times like this morning special and important. It is the worship of God as we come together that makes it true and joyful worship.

Times, opportunities, pressures and even priorities change. Some changes are good, while others are indifferent or not good. It is good that the sometimes legalistic attitude of having to be in the church every time the doors were open for some service or activity is pretty much gone. It is not good that some of God's people no longer place a high value on gathering together for worship, and so do not set their priorities and manage their time to consistently join with the church in worship.

The third beam of a sharp focus is having a special purpose for worship. Look at verse 4 again. "To which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the LORD—an ordinance for Israel to give thanks to the name of the LORD." Those travelers to Jerusalem were:

- *glad* to be part of a group going to worship together;
- *glad* to see Jerusalem, the center of their faith and nation;
- *glad* to be a part of a crowd that packed the city;
- *glad* to experience the celebration and God's presence.

But the truly joyful worshipers were those who also had a *special purpose* for being there—"to give thanks to the name of the LORD." The word "give thanks" King David used here (translated *praise* in the NIV), had the idea of publically acknowledging something. Here it was to publically acknowledge the greatness and goodness of God. Think of it in terms of the three mandatory-appearance festivals.

- Passover was time to remember, acknowledge and thank God for His miraculous *passing over them* when He struck dead the first born in Egypt, and freed them from slavery.

- Pentecost, or the festival of Weeks, came fifty days after the celebration of First Fruits, both acknowledging and thanking God for His provision of the harvest.
- The festival of Booths celebrated and thanked God for delivering Israel from Egypt, and keeping and leading them as they lived in tents in the wilderness.

Yes, it is good to be glad for all the other things, but true, joyful worship flows from that central, uncompromising focus on publically acknowledging the greatness and goodness of God. We can do that by our presence here, in our prayer and singing, in our response and testimony to God's greatness and His great works in our world and our own lives.

Question: Is this our purpose and practice of worship? It does not come easily in our culture which is more and more self-focused, focused on what I need, even on what I can get out of or from God and worshipping God. It takes dedication to develop and maintain this important focus of purpose for worship, the purpose of acknowledging and declaring the greatness and goodness of God.

And, finally, a true, sharp focus of worship includes a special commitment to peace for worship. Aside from verse 1, the other phrase many people recognize from this Psalm is the first part of verse 6, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem."

At first glance this may appear to be out of place, if not then, certainly now. But it was and is a vital part of true, joyful worship. The prayer here, we see in verse 9, is for peace "for the sake of the house of the LORD our God", that is, asking God for a place of peace for worship. They also prayed in verse 8 for peace for the sake of their brothers and friends so that the people gathered together would be at peace with God and each other, be peacemakers, experiencing righteousness and peace together, and so be able to truly and fully enter into worship.

Again, this is an abiding truth, an ever-shining ray of truth which is as vital today as it was then. Jesus told us,

"if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."⁶

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4,

"...walk [live] in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

(1-3)

No, we cannot come to the place on earth where all the things and people we touch and that touch us will be peaceful. But we can and need to stretch and strain to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We also can, and need to face all the instances and

issues where the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace has been broken, and deal with them. We can and need to be at peace with God and each other. We can and need to be peacemakers.⁷ We can and need to obey God's command through Paul, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."⁸

Conclusion

"Glad To Be Here!" Are we glad to be here today? Is that our usual experience? Do we regularly come here and enter into true, joyful worship? If not, we can. *True, joyful worship flows from a true, sharp focus.*

Sometimes, perhaps often, our hearts long for true, joyful worship, but we see something, or a number of things we think prevent it. Some may be things within ourselves. Not feeling worthy, Not having everything cleared up with God, and knowing it. Then there may be other things outside of ourselves. Other people. Things that aren't up to par, things I don't agree with. "If only these would change, could be changed!"

Hear this clearly: *no other person, no facility or ministry drawback, no imperfections in how things are done are the real reason for us not entering into true, joyful worship.* When we focus on these things, we will find emptiness, disappointment or boredom. And it is the result of our own choice of focus. There is no perfect worship facility or approach, just as there are no perfect worshipers this side of heaven.

The story is told of a man who had run a small and successful business for many years. Same business, same location. Finally he wanted a change. So he listed his business for sale and started looking for another. After a short time he read an ad in the paper, "Great business, ideal location, plenty of parking, up-to-date furnishings and equipment, great bottom line, good businesses and services all around." "That's it!" he thought. He excitedly called his realtor, "This ad describes the business I really want! I want to see it today!" His realtor responded, slowly, "Well, you see... that ad is the one I placed for *your* business." The man thought about it. Took his business off the market. Refocused. And rediscovered joy and contentment right there.

"Glad To Be Here!" Each one of us can say that when we accept and live by the truth that *true, joyful worship flows from a true, sharp focus.*

As you now reflect and respond to God, begin by thanking Him that as imperfect as you are, as our facility and ministries are, as everyone else in the church is, that you *can* enter into true, joyful worship here, regularly, week after week. Then, ask God to help you identify any barriers to true, joyful worship you have accumulated in your heart, and turn loose of them, *now*. Finally, ask God to help you have a true, sharp focus and to keep it.

¹ cf. 5:11; 9:2; 19:8; 21:1; 31:7; 32:10-11; 64:10; 66:6; 92:1-4; 104:34; 118:24, etc.

² cf. Psalm 16:9; 33:21; 34:2; 86:4.

³ Deuteronomy 28:47-48; context: 28:15-68.

⁴ cf. Matthew 18:20; context: 18:15-20.

⁵ cf. Hebrews 10:19-25.

⁶ Matthew 5:23-24.

⁷ Matthew 5:9.

⁸ Romans 12:18.

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