

In The Congregations

Blessing the Lord in the Gathering of Believers

Sing that song, don't you? That was great. Please pray for Pastor Kim. He is about now getting on his plane headed for Nashville so that he can go to the ACE U training. He was supposed to go the following week, but they changed his schedule. He was planning on participating in VBS and then going for his AC training, but they canceled next week and they moved him to this week, and he's obviously upset about that. But nothing can be done. Tonight's message from God's word focuses on a principle by which God has planned for his people to live out our lives through time and eternity with joy, purpose, success, and great delight. Some people don't like delight. Some people don't like success. Some people don't like joy. So, they'll go against this big time, but I'm just telling you, we live in the second largest metropolitan area of the United States.

If you ignore the artificial political boundaries that divide our region into cities and counties, the Los Angeles metropolitan area reached a population of 16.4 million by the year 2000 according to the economics and statistics administration of the United States bureau of the census. So how did we get to where we are now from a spiritual perspective? What is occurring with this relentless urbanization throughout the world? Because people are moving from countries to cities everywhere. It seems as though almost everyone born on a farm grows up and wants to move into the city. But some of those who live in the city want to move back out onto the farm. And what is at work in all this? Turn in your Bible to Genesis 4 and I'll tell you what my considered opinion is without trying to be too dogmatic. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell into sin. And by their sin, the entire human race was plunged into the darkness of depravity. In Genesis 4:8, we read that Cain, Adam and Eve's firstborn son, slew his younger brother, Abel. God punished Cain for murdering his brother, but he also protected him from being killed for revenge by anyone. Rather than getting into any sidetracks at this juncture, I want to point out to you according to Genesis 4:17, Cain then built a city which so far as we know was the first city ever to be built. Do you find it as interesting that the first city to be built was built by Cain as I do?

But this was before the great flood that God sent to destroy all flesh with only the ark, preserving Noah and his family from God's judgment. After the waters of the flood subsided, and Noah and his family left the ark and began to replenish the earth, Noah's great-grandson Nimrod by name began to build an empire and built cities as a means of building his empire. And this is all in Genesis chapter 10. In Genesis 11, we see this whole process summarized by focusing on a single city and the events that took place there. The city was Babylon. Let's read Moses's account. And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass as they journeyed from the east that they found a plain in the land of Shinar. They dwelt there. And they said one to another, "Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Excuse me. God wanted them to be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth. This was so that they couldn't do and wouldn't do what God wanted them to do. Verse 5. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold the people as one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do, and now nothing will be restrained from

them which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence from the face of all the earth and they left off to build a city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. They didn't want to scatter, so he scattered them against their will. It appears that sinful men came together in the city to do wrong, to unite with each other in idolatrous opposition to the plan and purpose of God for humanity, and that this sinful activity interfered with God's design to send people forth to replenish the earth. God then intervened by confounding their language and scattering them.

This suggests to me that God generally does not want people congregated into cities and that when sinful people gathered together in cities, it is generally for the purpose of doing wrong, not for the purpose of doing right. Not that God doesn't want anyone to congregate. After all, he did gather the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage into a congregation and instructed that a tent be built while they were in the desert that was called the tent of the tabernacle of the congregation in Exodus 27:21. But God gathered the children of Israel into a congregation for the express purpose of worshiping and serving him, not so they could commit sin. Later, after he settled the Israelites in the promised land, he dispersed them into their tribal lands and directed them to live out their lives there. But they were to congregate from time to time as he had outlined in the law he had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The children of Israel were supposed to congregate wherever the ark of the covenant was located. But through a series of mishaps, the ark had been moved from Shiloh, more than 20 miles north of Jerusalem, where it had been during the prophet Samuel's youth, and ended up in a city about 10 miles west of Jerusalem called Kirjath Jearim. Between the time the ark had been in Shiloh and the time it arrived in Kirjath Jearim, it had fallen for a time into the hands of the wicked Philistines. When David became king and solidified his hold on the throne of Israel, he moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, which became Israel's capital and the place where God wanted the children of Israel to congregate in compliance with the demands of the law that had been given to Moses as well. God provided for cities of refuge and what were called Levitical cities which would suit God's purposes for his people by providing safe havens for those whose lives were in danger and cities where priests from the tribe of Levi lived which served as teaching centers for God's people to be instructed in the law. But except for Jerusalem and those designated cities, it is unlikely that any city in the world was much more than a hot house for conspiracies to commit vile acts of sin and wickedness. Every city on the planet was a hell hole. Now, I know that many people will jump to the defense of the city they love, and they will defend it almost to the death.

New Yorkers will defend the Big Apple. Those from New Orleans will defend the Big Easy. Parisians will defend the city of lights. Romans will defend the eternal city. People who like homeless encampments will defend Los Angeles. People who like to relieve themselves on sidewalks will defend San Francisco. People of certain predispositions will defend WeHo while scholars and historians will defend ancient Athens that place where democracy was born and enjoyed by the five or 10% of the population who weren't slaves. But what does God's word seem to suggest about these large gatherings of humanity that we call cities? Let's turn to Isaiah chapter 14 where we will read a famous portion of scripture describing Satan's rebellion, his works, and his demise. Beginning with verse 12 of Isaiah chapter 14. How thou art fallen from heaven, oh Lucifer, son of the morning. How art thou cut down to the ground which didst weaken the nations. For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven. I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will sit upon the mount of the congregation in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will be like the most high. I will. I will. I will. I will. I will. That's what Lucifer said. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell to the sides of the pit. They that see thee shall look narrowly upon thee and consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms, that made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof? That opened not the house of his prisoners, all the kings of the nations, even all of them lie in glory, everyone in his own house. But thou art cast out of thy

grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword that go down to the stones of the pit, as a carcass trodden under feet. Thou shalt not be joined with them in burial, because thou hast destroyed thy land, and slain thy people. The seed of evildoers shall never be removed. Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers that they do not rise nor possess the land nor fill the face of the world with cities. In short, Lucifer, Satan as we now know him, is the destroyer of cities. Verse 17. And God does not want the face of the world filled with cities that are inhabited by wicked people set on doing wrong. Verse 21. So pastor, we should make our pile of money here in the city and then figure out a way to retire to the hinterlands. Figure out a way to move to the suburbs or even better buy some farm in a green valley somewhere and grow peaches. No. No. That is not what you should do. As God wanted the children of Israel to gather in a congregation for the purpose of worshiping and serving him, so churches of Jesus Christ are likewise authorized by God to congregate for the purpose of worshiping and serving God. We are authorized to be here tonight. Authorized by God. And if you're not here, shame on you because you were authorized to be here. But where are churches supposed to congregate? Where was the first church? The city of Jerusalem. Where was the second church that we know of? Probably in the city of Damascus or the city of Samaria. Where was the first predominantly gentile congregation with members from different ethnic groups as far away as Africa? Well, that was the city of Antioch. If you recall, Acts chapter 13. Where did Paul establish churches? In cities such as Philippi and Ephesus and Thessalonica and Athens and Corinth and others. New Testament Christianity.

Hey, listen carefully. New Testament Christianity is a city religion. Now, don't misunderstand. The Christian faith is a relationship that exists between a believer and the savior. But the Christian faith cannot be divorced from Christian churches. And in the first century, it was very clearly seen that Christianity was a city religion. A city religion. In the first century, in the second century, in the third century and the fourth century, Christianity was a city religion. Say, "Well, why so?" Because cities are where the mission fields are located. It's not complicated. Cities are where the sinners who need to be reached for Christ are concentrated. It's true that people gather in cities to do wrong, to satisfy their longing for money, to fulfill their lust, to bolster their egos, to make a name for themselves, and to get famous. That's all true. But it's in cities where we see churches planted in the New Testament, planted in the midst of cities for the purpose of reaching people in those cities for Christ and influencing then surrounding regions because cities are the focus of influence. This notion of abandoning cities so that churches might be built in the suburbs and rural regions does not reflect the New Testament pattern. So while it is true that the unsaved are typically out of God's will by being geographically located in the cities as they are out of God's will in so many other ways. Christians are supposed to be in the cities.

Christians are supposed to be at the crossroads of cultures. And in the cities, we are supposed to be in our congregations. In the cities, we are supposed to be in our churches. It was the responsibility of the church of Philippi to reach the city of Philippi and surrounding regions. It was the responsibility of the churches in Rome to reach the city of Rome. It was the responsibility of the church in Athens to reach the city of Athens just as it was the responsibility of the church in Ephesus to reach the city of Ephesus. And it is our responsibility to reach as many people as we can in our part of the Los Angeles area metroplex. That's our job. We don't do this as individuals. We do this as congregations. We do this as churches. Thus, as lost people are not authorized to gather together and to congregate because they characteristically sin when they do so. We are not authorized not to gather together and to congregate because we sin when we do not do so. Hebrews chapter 10 verse 25 is very familiar to most of us. Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is but exhorting one another. What about this congregating that God's people are supposed to participate in? Though there are some differences in the specifics of what God's congregated people are supposed to do at different times in history, there are many parallels. And here is an example of a difference. The children of Israel were not to mix and mingle with the heathen. They were not to do that.

They were to separate from them and have nothing to do with them unless it was absolutely necessary. But God's will for our life is quite different in this regard. We are to be in the world but not of the world according to John 17:15. And to discharge our responsibility to preach the gospel to every creature, we have to go to where the creatures are. We have to mix and mingle. We're supposed to. We sin when we don't. And where they are in abundance is in the cities of the world. So, we go to where they are. You heard about the guy that used to go deer hunting every year in Northern California and he could never catch a deer. And so he was complaining to one of his friends and one of his friends said, "Well, you know, I know a guy that gets his buck every year and why don't you just go out with him next time?" And so they went out and within a couple of hours of going out deer hunting, they got this guy got his buck and he said, "This is just wonderful. How'd you do it?" He said, "I find that it's most successful to go deer hunting if you go to where they are." He just went to where they are. That's what you need to do and that's what I need to do. We need to go to where they are. My message this evening deals with one feature of our congregating that is parallel to the congregation of the assembled Israelites in Old Testament times. Something God does not want changed because it is a timeless principle.

Turn in your Bible please to Psalm 26 and verse 12 which is our text for this evening. And when you find that verse, I invite you to stand for the reading of God's word. Psalm 26:12, notice what it says. My foot standeth in an even place in the congregations will I bless the Lord. Won't you please be seated? We exert ourselves to bring visitors to church. I'm hoping you'll be doing that this evening and tomorrow to get kids to vacation Bible school before the illegal and medically unnecessary COVID lockdown. Many of our congregation went out Saturday evenings in what was for us a massive effort to bring the lost under the preaching of the gospel. I was very pleased with how we turned out before the COVID lockdown. Just about every able-bodied church member, as well as some who were not church members and who were not so able-bodied, saw the imperative to get out, to work, to get to bring visitors in. Most sinners who are saved are saved under preaching. So, we must look for ways to get sinners under the preaching. That's why we want a good turnout for evangelism. We want to get sinners under the preaching. But sometimes there is a loss of awareness on the part of church members about our role in church services. Okay, I got a visitor here to hear you preach the gospel, pastor. What do I do now? Another version might be, "Well, I did my best to get someone here. What part do I play in seeing lost people come to Christ while we're all just sitting here at church? May I recommend one thing after church is over? Please don't stay inside the auditorium for any reason with your family. Please do not stay inside the auditorium for any reason with members of your family. Please do not stay inside the auditorium for any reason with members of your family. You can gather with your family any time of the week. Anytime, any place you can do that after the church service, we want you to help us get everybody in the auditorium to the fellowship hall. If you fail to help us get people into the fellowship hall and there interact with people who are not members of your family, who are not members of your family, who are not members of your family, then you have succeeded. That's the goal. That's the goal. We can talk to family anytime.

We can get together with family anytime. The only opportunity that we have to interact with our visitors is just before church, a little bit during church, and just after church. We must not ever pass up on that opportunity. Amen. So here's where we see the parallel between the congregation of Israel in that period of time before Christ and the congregation of the church in this time period after Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to his father's right hand in heaven. The purpose of the congregation is to bless the Lord, not strengthen family ties, not strengthen family ties, not catch up. It's to bless the Lord. To adore with bended knee is what the word literally means. To adore with bended knee. This is what the gathered Israelites and the gathered congregation of Calvary Road Baptist Church have in common. Both then and now. We gather to do the same thing. They did it and we are to do it also. We bend the knee to bless the Lord. I'll make three observations in connection with our text for you to keep in mind

hopefully to be a blessing to you. First, keep in your mind the people who bless the Lord. The verse begins, "My foot standeth in an even place." This is the self-description of that individual who can and will bless the Lord. His foot stands on an even place. He is not on the rough terrain of the wilderness. He is not on the uneven ground of conflict. Neither is he navigating uncharted territory. This is the testimony of someone who was standing on the spiritually smoothed surface that has been prepared for those who come before God to worship him and to serve him and to adore him and to bow before him. This person knows that he shall not stumble, neither will he fall. May I suggest to you that this speaks of someone who is genuinely converted. May I suggest to you that this speaks of someone whose feet are set on the solid rock who is Jesus Christ. In Psalm 40:2 we read, "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit out of the miry clay and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings."

This cannot be a lost person. A lost person, you see, stands on the pitching deck of a small boat in the violent storm of life. A lost woman walks along an uncertain and uneven path in the darkness, stumbling here and tripping there and stubbing her toes yonder. Only the child of God has sure footing and can say my foot standeth in an even place because thy word is a lamp unto my feet. So only the child of God can bless the Lord after the fashion that is described here. This is talking about Christians. Next, keep in your mind the place where the Lord is blessed. David wrote, "My foot standeth in an even place in the congregations." The literal Hebrew word translated in the congregations is plural. But sometimes Hebrew plural words carry with them a singular idea. And so I think it is here. David, in my opinion, has in mind here the congregation, the congregating of all congregations. This is the great congregation. This is when the entire congregation is gathered together. This is where the Lord is blessed. Keep this in mind in our present distress or when some freelance Southern California evangelical tries to persuade you that a small group meeting is a quite sufficient or listening to a live stream is an acceptable alternative to church. They are not. They are not. It may be quite sufficient for him to play the part of an important

Bible study leader, but it is quite insufficient, I promise you, for the Lord to be blessed in a manner that he does not find fitting. Keep this in mind when some fellow expresses to you that he does not feel any particular need to attend church because he gets quite enough out of personal Bible study and communing with God in the woods by himself. This has nothing to do with a felt need, folks. Rather, this has to do with one who is redeemed blessing his Lord in an appropriate manner. Blessing his Lord in a way that pleases the Lord, not satisfies himself, not in a way that especially gratifies the individual's own wants and desires. This is for God. Excuse me, but blessing the Lord is all about what God wants. Not about what you want, not about what I want, not about what anyone else wants. One of the things God wants. One of the things God clearly wants. One of the things God undeniably wants is to be blessed in the congregation. Is to be blessed by his gathered people. Is to be blessed in the crowd. You may find someone correctly asserting that he was converted alone and by himself as was the case with me. But you will not find anyone standing on solid scriptural ground who claims to serve God alone, who claims to obey God alone, who claims to bless God alone. No way. You don't like groups of people, even church people.

You say, "Well, I just don't like people. I just don't like church people." You might consider getting over yourself. Probably a good idea to just get over yourself. The Christian life, some loners are reluctant to admit, is a life that God has decreed to be lived in concert with other believers. And one of the things that is rightly done with other Christians specifically in the congregation is bless the Lord. It was so in Moses' day. It was so in David's day and it is so much in our day as it was in Paul's day and Peter's day and John's day. The Lord is blessed in the congregation by his people. If it's a congregation but not his people, then he is not blessed. And if it's his people so-called, but it's not in the congregation, then again, he is not blessed, at least not in the way that is fit, not in the way that he has chosen. So before the church service and after the church service and during the church service, bless the Lord. Finally, keep in your mind the purpose

why the Lord is blessed. My foot standeth in an even place in the congregations. Will I bless the Lord? To bless the Lord literally means to get on your knees and bow before him. It does not mean to plead with God. For David's pleadings are found in verses 2 and 9 of this psalm. Neither does it mean to ask as in ordinary and routine prayer. What David means when he says, "Will I bless the Lord?" is that he will praise the Lord for making his foot to stand in an even place. I thank God that he has placed me on level ground where I can worship him. Do you recognize what this means, my friend?

David is showing to us the propriety of publicly praising God in the congregation for saving us. To be sure, you can praise God in private by getting on your face before him and expressing your gratitude and thanksgiving in a private time of rejoicing. That's a good thing. But there is an aspect of the Christian life that requires God's people to be gathered together so that public expressions of praise and thanksgiving to God can be made in the midst of the congregation. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so. That's what Psalm 107:2 declares. But where should the redeemed of the Lord say so? Where should they say so? Our text shows us where in the congregation. Therefore, bless the Lord in the congregation before the church service. Get here early enough to actually do that. Hey, there's an idea. There's an idea. Show up early like it's important. Bless the Lord in the congregation after the church service. Stay long enough to actually do that. Bless the Lord in song and with amens in the congregation during the church service. Participate so that you can actually do that. Bless the Lord during a salad social. Bless the Lord during evangelism when the congregation goes out to do God's business. Gather when we gather and in the gathering bless the Lord.

Our text also suggests to us why we are to bless the Lord. We bless the Lord as an expression of gratitude and as an act of thanksgiving for his great salvation wherewith he has saved us and is saving us and will save us. The people, the place and the purpose of people blessing the Lord. The people are the redeemed. The place is the congregation. The purpose is gratitude, expressing our thanksgiving for his great salvation. We're living obviously in a challenging era. People find themselves forced to make decisions they do not want to make and to exercise their faith in ways they'd rather avoid. In the short term, each person is a free moral agent, a believer priest, responsible to God for the conduct of your life and personal ministry. And Baptists have historically referred to this reality as soul liberty. That position recognized, espoused, and advanced. Be mindful that God's plan for his people is for him to be worshiped in the congregation. In Old Testament times, it was three times each year for adult males on high holy days. In our era, it is every believer gathering on a weekly basis the first day of the week. Why so? Why? So what is the alternative? What is the alternative? It is God's prerogative to be worshiped in a manner that suits him, not in a manner that suits either you or me. And his desire is for his people to worship him, not by live streaming, but in the congregation. What then is the timeless principle related to the worship of God? Why did the Lord Jesus Christ bring the church into existence during this era? What will his use of the church be in eternity? Ephesians 3:21 to give glory to God. Listen to what he says. Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

With very few exceptions, human beings have always tended to gather. From David's spiritual perspective, there are only two kinds of gatherings: the congregation of evildoers, Psalm 26 and verse 5, or the place where thine honor dwelleth, Psalm 26 and verse 8. Before Christ brought his church into existence, one had to go to Jerusalem three times each year to gather in obedience to God to bless the Lord. Now, however, we are authorized to gather far more frequently and far more conveniently to bless the Lord. That said, the principle has not changed. Only the privilege of engaging in the practice more frequently. My foot standeth in an even place in the congregations will I bless the Lord. If you are not a believer and not a church member, understand what we have gathered to do. Each of our members can say with David, "My foot standeth in an even place. In the congregations will I bless the Lord." That's your reason for coming. That's the reason for being here before you go home. My prayer is that you will

consider the claims of Christ as well. So that your feet will stand in an even place and in the congregations you too with us will bless the Lord. Let's pray. Thank you father for your goodness. We thank you for your eternal purpose for the redeemed of all ages, that we are suited and prepared for congregational worship both then and now and in eternity. And so I pray that you might help us to take to it like a duck to water because that's the way it's going to be for us for all eternity. So we'd best get used to it now. Dismiss us now with your blessings. Work in the lives of those who perhaps do not know the savior that they might consider the claims of Christ and trust him. We pray this in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.