

“IN THE CONGREGATIONS”

Psalm 26.12

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.

We live in the second-largest metropolitan area in the United States. If you ignore the artificial political boundaries that divide our region into cities and counties, the Los Angeles metro area reached a population of 16.4 million by 2000, according to the United States Bureau of the Census’s Economics and Statistics Administration.¹

How did we arrive at our current state? From a spiritual perspective, what is occurring with this relentless urbanization throughout the world? It seems that almost everyone born on the farm grows up and wants to move to the city. However, some city dwellers want to return to the farm. What is at work in all of this?

Turn to Genesis chapter 4 in your Bible, and I will share my considered opinion, 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 onto any sidetracks at this juncture, I want to point out to you that, 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 Cain built the first city 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, they began to replenish the earth. Noah’s great-grandson, Nimrod, by name, started to build an empire, constructing cities as a means to expand it. This is all in Genesis chapter 10.

In Genesis chapter 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’ account:

- ¹ And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
- ² And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
- ³ And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
- ⁶ And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* 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.

¹ <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2001/cb01cn64.html> (U. S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office, Last Revised: April 02, 2001, at 10:32:53 AM)

- 7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
- 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
- 9 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.

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 gather 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 "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 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. 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 Kirjathjearim. Between the time the Ark had been in Shiloh and the time it arrived in Kirjathjearim, 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 relocated the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, which had become Israel's capital and the place where God wanted the children of Israel to congregate, in compliance with the demands of the Law given to Moses.

As well, God provided for cities of refuge and what were called Levitical cities, cities which would suit God's purposes for His people by providing safe havens for whose lives were in danger, and cities in which 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 hothouse for conspiracies to commit vile acts of sin and wickedness.

I know that many people will jump to the defense of the city they love and 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. At the same time, scholars and historians will defend ancient Athens, that place where democracy was born and enjoyed by the 5 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 14, where we will read a famous portion of Scripture describing Satan's rebellion, his works, and his demise:

- 12 How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

- 13 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 also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:
14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.
15 Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.
16 They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, *and* consider thee, *saying*, *Is* this the man that made
the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms;
17 *That* made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; *that* opened not the house of his
prisoners?
18 All the kings of the nations, *even* all of them, lie in glory, every one in his own house.
19 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 carcase trodden under feet.
20 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 renowned.
21 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 wicked people inhabit, 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. That is not what you should do.

As God wanted the children of Israel to gather into a congregation to worship and serve Him, so God likewise authorizes the Churches of Jesus Christ to congregate to worship and serve God.

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 town 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? The city of Antioch. Where did Paul establish Churches? In cities such as Philippi, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth.

New Testament Christianity is a city religion. 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 is very clearly seen that Christianity was a city religion.

Why so? Because cities are where the mission fields are located. Cities are where the sinners who need to be reached for Christ are concentrated. People indeed gather in the towns to do wrong, to satisfy their longing for money, to fulfill their lusts, to bolster their egos, to make a name for themselves, and to become famous. But it’s in cities where we see Churches planted in the New Testament, grown amid the cities to reach people in those cities for Christ and influence surrounding regions.

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 due to their geographical location in cities, as they are also out of God’s will in many other ways, Christians are supposed to be in the cities, at the crossroads of cultures. And in the cities, we are also considered to be in our congregations, our Churches.

It was the responsibility of the Church of Philippi to reach the city of Philippi. 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 metroplex.

We don't do this as individuals, but as congregations, 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 10.25 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.

Here is an example of a difference: The children of Israel were *not* to mix and mingle with the heathen. They were to separate from them and have nothing to do with them unless it was absolutely necessary. But God's will for our lives is quite different in this regard. We *are* to be in the world, but not of the world, John 17.15. And to discharge our responsibility to preach the Gospel to every creature, we *have* to go to where the creatures are. And where they are in abundance is in the cities of this world.

My message this evening concerns one aspect of our congregating that parallels 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 to Psalm 26.12, our text for this evening. When you find that verse please stand for the reading of God's Word:

"My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the LORD."

We exert ourselves to bring visitors to Church. Before the illegal and medically unnecessary COVID-19 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.

Just about every able-bodied Church member, as well as some who are not Church members and are not so able-bodied, saw the imperative to get out to work to bring in visitors. 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.

However, sometimes there is a loss of awareness among Church members about their role in a Church service. "Okay, I got a visitor here to hear you preach the Gospel, pastor. What do I do now?" Another version might be, "I did my best to get someone here. What part do I play in seeing lost people come to Christ while we are all sitting here in Church?"

Here, we see a parallel between the congregation of Israel during that period before Christ and the congregation of the Church in this period after Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of His Father in heaven. The purpose of the congregation is to "bless the LORD," *Krb*, to adore with bended knees.² This is what the gathered Israelites *and* the gathered congregation of Calvary Road Baptist Church have in common. They did, and we are to "bless the LORD."

I will make three observations in connection with our text for you to keep in mind:

First, KEEP IN YOUR MIND THE PEOPLE WHO BLESS THE LORD

The verse begins, "My foot standeth in an even place."

² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew And English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), pages 138-139.

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 is standing on the spiritually smoothed surface that has been prepared for those who come before God to worship Him, to serve Him, to adore Him, to bow before Him. This person knows that he shall not stumble, neither shall he fall.

May I suggest that this speaks to someone who is genuinely converted? May I suggest to you that this speaks of someone whose feet are set on the solid Rock, which 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, 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.

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. However, sometimes Hebrew plural words convey a singular meaning, and I believe this is one of those instances. David, in my opinion, has in mind the congregating of all the congregations here. 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 free-lance Southern California evangelical tries to persuade you that a small group meeting is reasonably sufficient, or listening to a live stream is an acceptable alternative to Church. It may be reasonably enough 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 a 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. Instead, this has to do with one who is redeemed appropriately blessing his LORD, blessing his LORD in a way that pleases the LORD ... not in a way that especially gratifies that individual’s own wants and desires.

Excuse me, but blessing the LORD is all about what *God* wants, not about what you want, not about what I want, and 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? Consider getting over yourself. The Christian life, some loners are reluctant to admit, is a life that God has decreed is 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 to bless the LORD.

It was so in Moses' day and David's day, and it is as much so 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 fitting way, not in the way 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 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 stand in an even place.

Do you recognize what this means, my friend? David is showing 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. 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 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? 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. 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 are living 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. 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? 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:

“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 evil doers,” Psalm 26.5, or “the place where thine honour dwelleth,” Psalm 26.8.

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 to engage 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.”

My prayer is that you will consider the claims of Jesus Christ, so that your feet will stand in an even place, and in the congregations you will bless the LORD.