

The Glad Gathering of God's People
Psalm 122
June 4, 2023

As I mentioned the other day, over Memorial Day weekend we made our annual trip to Sparta, TN to attend a family reunion on Julie's side. As many of you know, her roots in that particular zip code run deep. Both sets of her grandparents grew up there. Her dad's side still live on a 4th-generation dairy farm. So, in the world of family reunions, this one carries a good bit of weight. There's a shared *place*—acres being worked *now* that her great-great-great grandparents worked. There's a shared *history*—everything from people in their 80s that remember her first birthday to cousins she went to elementary school with. And, as with most families, there are shared *leaders*, patriarchs and matriarchs that work to keep the group united. There's a shared place, a shared history, shared leaders, and, often, a shared gladness in that gathering. And for the Sligers there's a journey that precedes the gathering, a trek along I-40 ascending to the Cumberland Plateau.

We called the first Psalm of Ascent—120—“A Song Far Away.” Because in *that* song the Psalmist lamented his distance from Jerusalem as well as his nearness to lying lips (Ps. 120:2, 6). With the next Psalm—121—Jim reminded us that, though the Psalmist moved from lament to confidence, he and his fellow pilgrims remained on the journey. And they sang about help, in part, because that journey remained fraught with peril.

It's important to point out that the point of the journey *wasn't* to merely journey. The pilgrims are not aimless. They've typed an address into the navigation and head *toward* a particular place. So, after far being away in Psalm 120, and then seeing the hills in Psalm 121, in today's Psalm—122—their feet finally arrive.

And once they've arrived, this Psalm will show us that *not only* are they far from aimless in direction, they're far from aimless in the *reason* for that direction. The *destination* was also a *gathering*. And this gathering was for a purpose.

1. A Rejoicing People: Present Gladness in Gathering

Jesus wasn't the first to care about what's going on *within* us as we do what's been commanded of us. Verse 1: **I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”**

As just mentioned, the destination was also a gathering. The pilgrims headed to, ascended toward, Jerusalem three times a year for three particular festivals. There won't be a quiz, but, first, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they gathered to remember God's redemption at the Passover. Secondly, at the Feast of Weeks they gathered to remember God's provision at harvest. Thirdly, at the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths they gathered to remember God's care for them in the wilderness.

It doesn't take much reading of the Old Testament to ascertain that these pilgrims had quite the shared history—wilderness wanderings, blood on doorposts, and parted seas. They'd gather during these festivals at a shared place—Jerusalem—to recall that shared history together. By commanding them to do so, God shows us His desire that His people gather to remember Him and what He's done. And in verse 1 we see something of the spirit with which God desired they journey and ascend. They sang, **I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”**

A few years back I was talking with a pastor that grew up in a neighborhood riddled with violence. And we were talking about how we think about the gathering of the church. He told me that in the community he grew up in, Sunday was a safe day. Though Monday through Saturday he and his friends looked over their shoulder on street corners, the unwritten rules in his neighborhood were that Sunday morning was off-limits. So, in *that* setting, gathering for worship was also a

sanctuary from the pressures that accompanied all the other days. It was a haven, a refuge from the world they lived in.

That was *years* ago, but I think about that image often. And while maybe we're not ducking bullets, I do long that this be a place where the peace of Christ reigns among us, where grace washes over us as we recall redemption together. The world might assault us Monday through Saturday, but Sunday is, as George Herbert writes, "the next world's bud."¹ And because *that's* what Sunday ought to be, we too might say, **I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"**

There are things we can do as leaders to facilitate that kind of gathering. But there are also things individuals can do to stir gladness in gathering. From a content standpoint, would reading the next section of Micah increase your desire to learn from it? I've loved aiming to memorize these Psalms with some of you in preparation for worship. There are certainly things we can do to stir gladness. Because, in the end, we bring our personal worship with us.

Yet, the gathering of God's people isn't a podcast to be downloaded, or a stream to consume. So, what might we do *relationally* to stir gladness in gathering? To address it negatively, if you're harboring bitterness/unforgiveness toward someone, it's going to be harder to gather *gladly*. Or, from another angle, maybe you're not offended by anyone, but that's because you've not actually engaged with anyone. In fact, it doesn't matter one iota whether you see this or that person on Sundays or not. So, what's something you can do to stir gladness in gathering? Know and love God's people in tangible, thoughtful, biblical community.

There's a reason I began with the family reunion stuff. Because some of the same dynamics are in play. The more I cultivate *those* relationships, the more likely I'll be glad to go. One of Julie's cousins is a long-time friend of mine. From Sparta, he still reads nearly every one of my sermons and sends me thoughts. He's a gift of the Lord to me in encouragement. So, at this reunion my gladness is *increased* because I know he'll be there. We know that the more a room is full of people I never think about or engage, the less likely I'll be glad about gathering with them.

Does that mean if I read Psalm 123 before next Sunday and text a few friends from South Woods this coming week I will *automatically* feel glad when I awake next Sunday morning? No, it doesn't. There are weeks I've deeply meditated on the passage to be preached, talked to dozens of church members, and still felt things less positive things. So, what do we do? Our emotions don't dictate. We do what God commanded, and pray those fickle feelings catch up.² In fact, what we do often prompts the proper affection. I've lost count of how many times during congregational singing or the Scripture readings that the Lord has given me grace to preach.

So, what would make you glad to gather with God's people? And what are you going to do when you don't feel glad to come?

Verse 2 is an expression of joy—almost as if it's too good to be true:³ **Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!** They've arrived. And they're glad about it. Note secondly,

2. A United People: Historic Oneness in Gathering

Note how verse 2 *ends* and verse 3 *begins* with the same word, the destination these pilgrims headed toward: **Jerusalem**. There's much we might say about this city, but to begin both verse 1 and verse 9 of this Psalm—like bookends—refer to the **house of the Lord** being in Jerusalem. Whether this

¹ Jim Scott Orrick, *A Year with George Herbert*, 77.

² See a wonderful article here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/most-important-time-to-go-to-church/>

³ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 368.

means the tabernacle or the temple,⁴ it pictured *for* and conveyed *to* the Israelites His dwelling with them. To put it simply, Jerusalem was where His house was. For that reason, we might call it the city of God.⁵

You might also notice that the last five letters of Jerusalem sound quite a bit like the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. In that sense, the city of Jerusalem might be called the city of *shalom*, the city of peace. That will have some bearing on verses 6–9 in a moment.

Jerusalem is the city of God. It is named the city of peace. But, also, in the superscript at the top of this Psalm, note the songwriter: **A Song of Ascents. Of David.** That warrior–poet knew the intricacies of Jerusalem. In fact, in 2 Samuel 5 it was called the city of David. In that same passage we’re told that he helped build it (2 Samuel 5:9), which is significant for what verse 3 will say in a moment.

But, first, if you’ve read the book of Exodus recently, you recall the detailed instructions God gave Moses concerning the tabernacle,⁶ including the acacia wood, the altars, the gates, the courts, the fine twined linen, the bronze basin, and on and on.⁷ God revealed this seeming minutiae to Moses in *precise* detail so that—even in something built—*He* might be revealed to His people. The outer court, the Holy place, and the Holy of Holies communicated who this Holy God was and how we might have access to Him.

Why point that out? Because David helped build Jerusalem. And if we read 1 Chronicles 28:11, we’ll see that David passes down precise, detailed instructions concerning the Temple and that which surrounds it to his son, Solomon. God gave both Moses and David a blueprint. And they didn’t take creative license. Because God intended to picture something—and accomplish something *through*—what was built. What is it in this case? Note verse 3: **Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together.**

We know what it’s like to see a building and the design prompt awe. This is, of course, because God made us that way. The height of that cathedral ceiling evokes transcendence and the intricate beauty you behold provokes wonder because the creative God of order and beauty made you. We know, as well, that some designs facilitate the goals of a building better than others. Even the set-up of furniture *within* a room can hinder or promote certain goals.⁸ You might move a desk. You might move a couch. You might tear down a wall to achieve it.

Whether realized or not, buildings, rooms, and décor picture something *to us* or prompt something *within us*. In this case, Jerusalem was built—purposefully—**as a city that is bound firmly together.** Motyer translates that phrase, “designedly integrated together,”⁹ explaining that, “The very architecture and town–planning enhance an idea and an ideal: the one city of one people.”¹⁰ The location of the Temple, the layout of the houses, the wall around the city all intend to facilitate unity.

Does this unity necessarily mean uniformity? Verse 3: **Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up.** We shouldn’t think the various Israelites headed to these festivals were cookie–cutter, or monolithic. Israel was a family of tribes, each with something of their own character.¹¹ And this Psalm reminds us that these tribes would go up—

⁴ Which would depend on the time period.

⁵ See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 80ff.

⁶ Many scholars believe the tabernacle was modeled after the garden of Eden.

⁷ See Exodus 26–40.

⁸ Because seeing the back of someone’s head is less likely to prompt discussion, on Wednesday nights we generally move the chairs in the back of this room into arcs.

⁹ Motyer, 367.

¹⁰ Motyer, 368.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, 469.

ascend—to Jerusalem. And in that city—designed as it was—it was clear that He was the reason for their gathering. They would gather, *not* because they were uniform in every jot and tittle, but because of the next clause, **to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord.** He brought them together.

And these tribes demonstrated this unity—their shared faith in God’s Word—by doing what the Lord had instructed. It wasn’t merely tradition that led them to take the journey. Verse 4 tells us why they did: **as was decreed for Israel.** Each year, at the same time, they expressed their unity by doing what He commanded them to do.

Yet, the object of these feasts was not *merely* to seek or express unity. What was the purpose of their gathering? Verse 4: **as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.**¹² Being in the city, going to the Temple, and experiencing these feasts reminded these pilgrims of all that God had done on their collective behalf. I found helpful one man’s words, “When you went to Jerusalem, you encountered the great foundational realities: God created you, God redeemed you, God provided for you.”¹³ In response to those reminders, they were to return thanks, yet another expression of the unity God created within them.

And their unity wasn’t only within their generation. Each group of pilgrims singing this Psalm knew they weren’t the first to do so. Jerusalem had been built long before. Tribe after tribe of the Lord had gone up to give thanks because it had been decreed for Israel generations prior. In fact, kings had come and gone, David writes in verse 5: **There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.**

Without living in a monarchy, we’re at something of a disadvantage in thinking through these Psalms. We hear “thrones for judgment,” and shudder. But **thrones for judgment** being set meant that a ruler had been installed to maintain justice.¹⁴ This is *good* news. Though outside the city, chaos reigned, within the walls this people with a shared *history* and a shared *place* had a shared *leader*.

Maybe we swim in so much anti-institutionalism that we shudder at *that* too. In the passage from Bible Study this morning, we heard that Micah condemned rulers for detesting justice (Micah 3:9–12). But authority is *not* always a bad word. Good rulers are, in fact, good. Hear 2 Samuel 8:15: **So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity to all his people.** The peace of that community—and any community—depends in large part on justice being established.¹⁵ In Jerusalem, verse 5 asserts, **thrones for dominion were set, the thrones of the house of David.** If I might quote Motyer again, “In Zion the tribes are not an aggregation but a congregation, bound together by the given unity of the one city, the one revealed truth, and the one throne.”¹⁶

Speaking of the house of David, in Luke 2 we’re given a glimpse into how serious Mary and Joseph took their Jewish faith. Though it seems obvious, it’s worth being reminded that they were far from tepid in their devotion. In fact, they were scrupulous concerning the Law, including obedience to the ceremonial aspects (Luke 2:22–24). So, would *they* have been some of these zealous pilgrims making the trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem for these feasts? It’s an unquestionable yes. And not only as an inference, but from Luke 2:41: **Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.** So, the question should be asked, would Jesus have grown up singing Psalm 122 with Jewish pilgrims as He ascended to Jerusalem alongside them?

It’s an old song, a song that has been sung for thousands of years. And as it was decreed for them, all the tribes went up—ascended—to give thanks, glad to go to the house of the Lord in

¹² Kidner, 469.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 45–46.

¹⁴ Greidanus, 80; Kidner, 470.

¹⁵ See Walford, Jacobson, Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT, 901.

¹⁶ Motyer, 368.

Jerusalem. In fact, in regard to that house, one from the tribe of Judah—a Son of David—said at the age of twelve, **Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?** (Luke 2:49). More than anyone else that had ever made that journey, and sang this Psalm, He loved that *place* and those *people*. He’d done so from eternity past.

3. A Praying People: Future Peace in Gathering

Back in Psalm 120, in the song far away, the Psalmist lamented that **too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace** (Ps. 120:6). Enmity, hate, and war *surrounded* the city of Jerusalem. Those things threatened those *within* Jerusalem as well. As it is today, it’s almost always been.

And it’s important to think through the consequences for these Old Testament pilgrims if invaders broke down the city walls. Would they be able to gather at the house of the Lord if the Assyrians tore it down brick by brick? Of course not. So, the Psalmist prays in verse 6: **Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!”** He desires that peace reign within the city, in part so that they might gather and worship the God of that city.

However, that doesn’t mean we should limit peace—or *shalom*—to the absence of arrows. It certainly *includes* that, but not *only* that.¹⁷ The prayer here is asking for “unanxious rest” and even “tranquility.”¹⁸ Peace also means the absence of war *within*. It’s more than the absence of armies; and the city of peace—Jeru-*shalom*—is intended to embody *more* than that as well. The Psalmist prays for it. The pilgrims sing it.

Why does the Psalmist pray this? For at least two reasons, the first one noted in verse 8: **For my brothers and companions’ sake I will say, “Peace be within you!”** He prays for peace on behalf of the people of God. It was for their good that they journey to Jerusalem, gather with God’s people, remember God’s works, and give Him thanks.¹⁹

The second reason, and the *primary* emphasis of this Psalm, is in the verse 9: **For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.** As noted already, the **house of the Lord** was mentioned in verse 1, **Let us go to the house of the Lord** and then again, like a bookend, it appears in the final verse. That bookend is one way poets tell us the essence of the song.

Keep in mind that the destination—Jerusalem—was also a gathering. And that gathering had a purpose, seen in verse 4: **to give thanks to the name of the Lord.** But, *where* did these pilgrims give thanks to the name of the Lord, primarily? Where He dwelt, the Temple. The significance of the city—and the reason for the journey—is to arrive at the **house of the Lord**. That’s why the Psalmist prays for Jerusalem’s peace and seeks its good. So that God’s people might be in God’s place doing what they were created to do, give Him glory.

Now, I could tell you to go read G. K. Beale or Desmond Alexander on a biblical theology of the house of the Lord.²⁰ Or we could read 1 Corinthians 3:16: **Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?** In the Old Testament, God dwelt *among*, primarily. Yet, in the New Testament, with the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, He dwells *within*.²¹ Alongside 1 Corinthians 3, we could read Ephesians 2:19–22: **You are fellow citizens with**

¹⁷ Peterson, 50, “You can no more define it by looking up its meaning in the dictionary than you can define a person by his or her social security number.”

¹⁸ Motyer, 369; Kidner, 470.

¹⁹ See Psalm 92.

²⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*; T. Desmond Alexander, *The City of God and the Goal of Creation*.

²¹ Alexander, 143.

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. Alongside both, we could read 1 Peter 2:5, where the man that preached on the day of Pentecost wrote, **you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** As 1 Peter goes on, we see that the cornerstone of the Temple in Jerusalem anticipated the Cornerstone God would one day send (1 Peter 2:6). Yahweh's presence among His people in Jerusalem anticipated the day when God Himself put on flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). And gathering to Jerusalem to give thanks anticipated a *better* day when God's Spirit would indwell His people so that travel was no longer not commanded, it was not even needed. God with us, indeed (Matt. 1).

With that in mind, can we—should we—still pray for the peace of God's people? God's enemies haven't let up. Sometimes it looks like we're *surrounded* by flames and bows; sometimes, instead, they Trojan Horse in to divide. We can and should pray that God would protect His people from our enemies, in Maine, in Mosul, and in Memphis. And can we—should we—still seek the good of God's people? Absolutely. We hope our team headed to Vermont in a couple hours will serve churches in the most unreached part of our country. And I trust we together seek the good of God's people in this room.

Conclusion

One of the reasons we should consider 12-year-old Jesus singing Psalm 122 on His way to Jerusalem is because of this Psalm's last line. He knew those words better than anyone ever has. And no one ever sang it more truly. He sang *this*: **For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.**

Jesus grew up journeying to Zion, singing Jerusalem's songs. And during His final weeks, He made that trip one more time. Luke tells us what happened when He finally arrived. Did He sing Psalm 122, rejoicing to be standing within its gates? Luke 19:41: **When He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!"**²² In this city of *shalom*, was there peace? In this city **bound firmly together**, was there unity? What does a "no" to both those questions tell us? *That* Jerusalem isn't it. It points to another, a city to come (Heb. 13:14), a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10).

And we can be granted entry to *that* city—given citizenship in it even *now*—because Jesus sang and accomplished, **For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.** He *sang* it. And then He *did* it, so that our future might be certain. A shared place—a *new* Jerusalem, a shared history—redemption, and a shared Ruler—a Resurrected Son of David seated on a throne.

²² Interestingly, Greidanus says that this verse is a quotation of Psalm 122:8 in the Septuagint. See *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 84.