

# Wallowing in the Goodness of God

## A Sermon on Psalm 122

by Rev. J. Scott Lindsay

Theme:	Understanding <i>about</i> worship is a prerequisite for joy <i>in</i> worship. Reflecting on the significance of drawing near to God should lead us to joyful anticipation and prayer for the preservation of our times together as God's people.
Subject:	Worship
Doing:	Expressing joy at the prospect of worshipping God.

### I. INTRODUCTION

I have this book called *101 Things to Do During a Dull Sermon*. The book's suggestion is that you should amuse yourself during a dull sermon. Obviously, this is just a book of humour, not a serious suggestion. In contrast to the premise of the book is Psalm 122 — a psalm in which the worshiper is anything but bored with the notion of worshipping God. This morning we'll be taking a look at this Psalm to see if we can discover the source of the psalmist's joy and enthusiasm for the worship of God.

### II. BACKGROUND

We are continuing in our study of Psalms 120-134, focusing our attention especially on Psalm 122. This particular collection of psalms is known as the "Songs of Ascents," which were sung by the people of Israel as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the various feasts required by the Old Testament. Jerusalem was so important because that is where the temple was — the place which represented the presence of God. To journey to Jerusalem was to draw near to God, and was therefore no small thing.

The occasion of making this important trip was marked by these songs — road songs. The first song (Ps. 120) marked the beginning of their journey. The next song marked their progress near the end, as the city of Jerusalem was just coming into view on the horizon. The Psalm before us this morning — Psalm 122 — most likely was sung as they entered into Jerusalem itself, passing through the gates and marveling at the bustling city that lay before them. As the psalmist looked at the city and thought about the prospect of God's people

coming together, gathering at the temple to praise God, he became excited, almost overwhelmed at the thought of it.

### III. FIRST MOVE

In order to understand this passage we first need to think about it in its Old Testament context as a song sung by a pilgrim entering into the city of Jerusalem at the end of a long journey. There are several things worth noting here:

- A. Notice that the psalmist is excited about the prospect of worshiping God. But more than that, the psalmist is excited about worshiping with other people: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. . . Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.” Notice also verse 4 where he comments about the city of Jerusalem: “That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord.” And then again in verse 8 the psalmist says that one of his motivations to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, among other things, is for the sake of his brothers and friends.”

The point here is simply that the psalmist saw his worship as a corporate activity. It involved other people. He was conscious of his brothers and sisters as he went to the temple. He was motivated to pray and act out his concern for them. This was no exercise in individualism. Worship was not a “me and God” thing. It was “us,” “we,” “our.” That was one reason for the joy. For the psalmist it was a family reunion. A coming together of one’s own people, held together by a common bond — they were the people of God.

- B. A second thing to note is the brief remark in verse 3: “Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.” Now, the New Living Translation (NLT) puts it like this, “Jerusalem is a well-built city, knit together as a single unit.” It seems to me that the image we are meant to draw from these rather cryptic words is one of unity. In other words, here are these pilgrims coming from places far away, places way out in the country, places where you might see a couple buildings scattered here and there, and then nothing but land, trees and bushes for miles and miles. It’s kind of like what you see when you drive through country Victoria: a house here, a barn there, a petrol station, etc. And then you come into the city and everything seems to be all crammed together, every nook and cranny is filled. It’s one interconnected chunk of steel and concrete.

I remember the first time I drove into Dallas, Texas. Coming from the east the last major city you pass through is Shreveport, Louisiana, and that’s not very

big at all. After that it's just miles and miles of nothing much for about three hours. The land is flat, not many trees. And then you start noticing this lump on the horizon, getting bigger and bigger. As you start to make out that it's the city, the topography changes and you enter a valley, losing sight of the city for a while. I can remember traveling down Interstate 20, about sunset, getting close to the city, and yet unable to see it, when all of the sudden I came around this curve and almost out of nowhere appeared this massive city, covered with mirrored buildings, the sun reflecting off it like something you'd see in a science fiction film. It just looked like one huge mountain of glass with the sun reflecting everywhere.

In this psalm, there is a similar sort of experience. Coming from the wide open spaces of the country, the psalmist is overwhelmed at what appears to be one gigantic, interlocking collection of buildings — an image of solidarity, oneness, unity. True, it is an *architectural* image, but the psalmist does not leave it there. He goes on to say, “That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord.” This coming together, compacting of buildings into a seemingly single unit is mirrored in the tribes coming together. The one is a picture of the other. The various clans of Israelites came together for the one purpose: to be *united* in their praise and worship of God.

- C. A third thing to notice, as we continue to think about the psalm in its Old Testament context, is verse 5 where the writer talks about the fact that it is in Jerusalem that “the thrones for judgement stand, the thrones of the house of David” This refers to the fact that during his reign David established courts in Jerusalem that were the place of final appeal for the Israelites (see Sam. 8:15 and 15:2-6). It was there that judgments were made. The basis for making those judgments would have been the application of the Word of God which had come to them through the prophets.

Now, as one commentator suggests, it was likely that for the psalmist or perhaps someone that the psalmist knew, the journey to Jerusalem was a “journey of justice.” That is, they would have made their way to the city in obedience to the law regarding the feasts, but also in order to bring before the courts some matter which had been un-settled in the country courts, or which had been referred to the officials in Jerusalem.

This too was in the psalmist's mind as he entered the city. This too was one of the things which caused him to marvel at the city of Jerusalem and, from there, to praise God for the provision of his law and for the provision of these “thrones of judgment” where justice was administered.

- D. Fourthly, notice the prayer for peace in verses 6-9. The psalmist's joy at being in Jerusalem has not caused him to forget or neglect the need to pray for God's provision and protection. The prayer for peace mentioned here has both an external and an internal focus.

The external focus is seen in verses 6-7 where the psalmist prays for security within the walls of the city. The psalmist knows that all the wonderful things he has just mentioned — the unity, the praise of God at the temple, the exercise of justice — all these things are only going to happen as long as the city is secure from enemies.

The internal focus is seen in verse 8 where the psalmist prays, for the sake of his family and friends, "Peace be within you." It will not do for Jerusalem to be at peace with those around her but have war within her own walls, nor will it be any good to have peace within, between family and friends, and yet have war and chaos outside. The psalmist desires the peace of Jerusalem — both within and without.

#### IV. SECOND MOVE

Now, in thinking about how we might understand the significance these verses hold for us, it is important to say something at this point about the matter of worship as it relates to God's people in the New Testament and in our own day. This is a big subject and so, at best, we are only going to think for a few minutes about some of the important issues. Still, even though what we look at today is only a summary of sorts, once we have done this it should clear *how* these verses in Psalm 122 can be applied in our own situation.

Probably the best way to start is to simply say this: all the things in the Old Testament which were associated with meeting with God in the temple are, in the New Testament, now relocated in the person of Jesus Christ. Let me expand on that.

- A. For starters, meeting with Jesus is the equivalent of meeting with God. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only." Likewise, in John 14:9b Jesus says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Again, meeting with Jesus is the equivalent of meeting with God.
- B. Secondly, just as there was a high priest in the Old Testament, there is a high priest in the New Testament. As Hebrews 5:14ff. says,

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.”

Jesus is our high priest.

- C. Thirdly, just as there were sacrifices in the Old Testament, so too is there one in New Testament worship — only this time it is different in nature and character. Jesus is not only the high priest, but he is also the thing that is sacrificed. He places himself, as it were, on the altar. Jesus is the final and complete sacrifice. Again, Hebrews is helpful,

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins . . . we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb. 10:1ff.)

- D. Fourthly, just as praises and prayers were offered to God in the Old Testament on the basis of what he had done, so too are praises and prayers offered in the New Testament on behalf of what Jesus has done. For example, in Ephesians 3:14-21 you have Paul expressing prayer and praise to God for the person and work of Christ. In other words, Jesus is a focal point for praise and prayer. (See also Rom. 11:33-36.)
- E. Fifthly, just as there was a temple and tabernacle in the Old Testament, so too is there a temple and tabernacle in the New Testament. However, this time the temple is not made of brick and mortar, but flesh and blood. Properly speaking, the temple in the New Testament is Jesus Christ himself, and all those that are incorporated into him, who make up the “body” of which Christ is the “head.” John 2:19-22 says,

“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said.”

Again, all the things in the Old Testament which were associated with meeting with God in the temple are now relocated in the person of Jesus Christ. So, on the one hand, the roots of New Testament worship are all found in the Old Testament worship that centered around the temple. Those things were “shadows” or “types” of what was to come in the person of Christ. In that sense there is continuity with the worship of the Old Testament. However, there is also a very great difference between worship in the Old Testament and worship in the New Testament. The Old Testament worship all looked forward to something yet to be done by God, whereas in the New Testament we look back to something already done. The whole system of worship in the Old Testament was a kind of pictorial representation of what Christ would one day be and do.

Now that Christ has come and done his great work, we no longer need sacrifices, and therefore we no longer need a physical temple, we no longer need a special class of people to look after the physical temple, and we no longer have the feasts and other celebrations associated with the temple. Christ’s coming has changed all of this — forever. Jesus’ death on the cross has completed and fulfilled all that the Old Testament system looked forward to.

What that means, practically, is that when worship is spoken of or referred to in the New Testament, it has a much broader, more general sense about it. It is not focused on the temple and tabernacle anymore, but rather refers to the whole of one’s life being an act and arena for worship — the manner of one’s daily obedience to God is an act of worship, the giving up of ourselves for the sake of the Gospel is an act of worship.

Do you understand what I’m saying? The whole of your life is one, on-going act of worship — giving honor and glory to God through your love for *him*, through obedience to him through his Word, through building up your brothers and sisters in Christ, through participation in the work of the Gospel — it’s all one big act of worship. As Peterson rightly points out in his book *Engaging with God*,

“This revolutionary use of the terminology of worship with reference to a Christ-centered, gospel-serving, life-orientation is obscured by the common (and un-helpful) practice of restricting any talk of worship to what is done in a church service. Furthermore, people who emphasize that they are ‘going to

church to worship God' tend to disregard what the New Testament says about the purpose of the Christian assembly. If Christians are meant to worship God in every sphere of life, it cannot be worship as such that brings them to church service."

True enough, it is only through coming together that we can worship God corporately, as a body of believers. But this is precisely the point. What exactly does it mean for Christians to come together, in the name of Christ, and to honor him? What is it that honors God when we come together? Is it the fact that we sing songs about him? Is it the fact that we pray to him? Yes, these are good and important things for us to do when we are together. But the evidence of the New Testament seems to indicate that when Christians met together, the main purpose was not singing or going through an order of service with all the bits and pieces, but rather on building up and encouraging one another in Christ.

When you look at the New Testament, in various places, you will find that whenever a Christian meeting is mentioned it is never described as a worship service. This was not because the things that happened there did not honor God. Rather, it was because the New Testament writers did not want to create the false idea (which has arisen anyway) that worship is divorced from the rest of your life, or that worship should be understood as some sort of ceremony. What you will find when you look at the New Testament is an emphasis upon that fact that when Christians get together they are to build up and encourage one another in faith and in faithfulness to the Gospel. This is not because there is anything wrong with singing, prayers, etc., but because the thing that is most honoring to God is when his people respond to him with a life of consistent, faithful, glad obedience. As Romans 12:1-2 says,

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship."

And so, when we come together, the most God honoring thing I can do is offer myself to God in obedience and faith, and the most God honoring thing I can do for you, by implication, is to encourage you to do the same, to build you up in the faith. Now there are many ways this can happen. It can happen through my prayers for you and with you, it can happen through the teaching of the Scriptures, it can happen as we talk with one another during morning tea, it can happen as we sing songs which bring to mind the greatness of God and what he has done, especially in the Cross of Jesus Christ. All of these things are vehicles for honoring God by building up his people so that they live sacrificial lives, holy and pleasing to God.

Now, as I said before, that is only the briefest possible sketch of how worship in the New Testament has changed because of Christ. But enough has been said, I think, to draw a few practical implications before we go back to Psalm 122 to make some final connections.

1. Because there is no longer a temple building, because the temple is Christ and his body, his people, therefore there are No sacred buildings, places, or objects.
2. Because the most God honoring thing we can do is build up one another for a life of faithful obedience, then we have to let that reality shape how we think about and conduct our meeting together. It means that we cannot draw artificial boundaries that say that what we are doing *now* is worship, but what we do *afterward* (morning tea) is not worship. To make that sort of artificial distinction is to separate the vertical and horizontal dimensions of worship.
3. This also means that we cannot fall into the trap of thinking of worship as some sort of experience or feeling that is generated through the right combination of music, light, words, and silence. Worship is service, both to God and to your brothers and sisters in Christ.
4. It means that, as building up other Christians is a primary vehicle for honoring God, we will have to think of “coming to a church service” in terms of what we intend to give, and how we intend personally to build up another person in the Lord when we are together.
5. It means we may need to think about our terminology some. In what ways is it helpful to describe our meetings on Sunday as a “worship service”? In what ways is it *unhelpful*? Is there some other way that might convey what we are doing here with less confusion?

Those are just a few implications for us today, as a result of the changed circumstances regarding worship in the New Testament. Now let’s see if we can go back to Psalm 122, with this understanding of how worship has changed, and appropriate or apply what is being said there to our own day.

## V. THIRD MOVE

Now obviously, as we’ve already seen, because Christ has “fulfilled” the Old Testament system with its temple, sacrifices, etc., there is now no physical temple to which we must go, no required feasts, no sacrifices to be made. So, the pilgrim’s journey to Jerusalem is not something for which there is any direct parallel for the Christian today.

However, while we do not go to a temple, we nevertheless are a temple. We are the temple of God's Spirit, which we become through our union with Christ. And so there is a very real sense in which our coming together as the body of Christ to honor God through serving each other parallels the psalmist's situation. It is certainly the closest thing to it in our Christian experience. Thus, there are some connections that can be made between this psalm and our own day. Let me just tease out a few of them.

- A. Just as for the psalmist for whom going to the temple in Jerusalem was a way of drawing closer to God, so too is our coming together in Jesus name a way of drawing nearer to God. The New Testament makes it clear that the most important way in which we have drawn near to God is through our coming to Christ, by becoming Christians and therefore becoming part of the body of Christ. Christ's work on the cross has brought us near to God. But there is also a sense in which, as we come together, we are drawing nearer to God. In other words, there is something going on when Christians come together that is not going on when, say, the rotary club meets.

Passages like Matthew 18:20; 1 Corinthians 14:24-25; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13 and others suggest that God is, through his Spirit, especially present when his people are gathered together. This was one reason for the psalmist's joy and excitement at the prospect of "going to the house of the Lord." He was drawing near to God, to where God was especially present in the midst of his people. In the same way, we too should realize the awesome significance of what it means to meet together as the people of God. There is more going on here than meets the eye. And so, if the notion of coming together with God's people bores you, then can I gently suggest that perhaps you have lost sight of the significant thing that is happening when we get together.

- B. Secondly, the psalmist's remarks about the impressive unity of the city of Jerusalem, and in particular how that is a picture of the unity of the tribes gathering to praise God, encourages our unity in the body of Christ, as expressed here in Bundoora:

"Just as the psalmist, and indeed all the tribes, were to show a one-ness in honoring and praising 'the name of the Lord' — we too must do this in our own coming together. We must rally around the 'name of the Lord' — the 'name that is above every name' — Jesus Christ. There is a remarkable unity that comes when we fix our eyes on Jesus, when we say along with John the Baptist, 'He must increase, I must decrease.' And, conversely, there is a remarkable *disunity* that comes when we

rally around anyone or anything else. If we rally around a historical figure, we will soon go to pieces. If we rally around a particular tradition — like being Presbyterian — we will fall apart.”

I had the privilege of speaking last week to a group of Presbyterian ministers from all across the state of Victoria. And during our three days together, God did a remarkable thing. In the providence of God, and certainly not due to any great wisdom on my part, I chose to give four messages centering on the person of Jesus Christ. I talked about knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, working for Jesus, and waiting for Jesus. And the amazing thing was that, even though we (sadly) have a number of pretty divergent factions in the Presbyterian church of Victoria, there was a coming together around the person of Jesus. There were people there who were poles apart on certain issues, but they came together around the person of Jesus Christ, there was a unity that was happening as God’s Spirit worked on people’s hearts.

If we can keep the mission of the church centered upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if we can make the driving pursuit of our lives the imitation of Christ, if we can make the driving concern of our meetings together the building up of one another *in* Christ — if we will do these things, then we too will find ourselves, like the psalmist, rejoicing at the remarkable unity that comes when we rally around the “name of the Lord.”

- C. Thirdly, the psalmist’s awareness of and concern for his brothers and sisters in Christ is a challenge for us all. We need to ask ourselves: Do we share and demonstrate the same concern when we get together with our brothers and sisters in Christ? What is the visible evidence of that concern? Was building up your brother or sister on your mind as you walked through those doors this morning? Is it on your mind as you speak with one another over a cup of coffee? Do you come prepared to speak, but not prepared to listen? Are you aware that the conversation you have in the car park is an act of worship?
- D. Fourthly, the psalmist’s praise of Jerusalem as the place where justice is administered according to the Word of God speaks to us as we consider how in our own gatherings we too submit ourselves to the Word of God, and therefore to the judgment of God as we have spiritual truths impressed upon our consciences, sometimes affirming us and sometimes rebuking us, but at all times serving to build us up, to make us more like Jesus. And as we respond to his Word, we are led back to praise God and thank him for the gracious

provision of his Word and for his on-going work in our lives and the lives of those around us.

- E. Finally, the psalmist's prayer for the peace of Jerusalem becomes for us a prayer of peace for the church, both from without and from within. We too must pray and give thanks to God for the fact that we are in a peaceful land that is not threatened by enemies on the outside. When we come together as God's people, we do not do so in fear or trembling, not yet at least, and for this we should be thankful. But not only thankful, we must continue to pray for God's provision. And as we do we will be reminded of those places around the world where there is no peace outside "the walls," where their gathering together is either dangerous or simply impossible. We must pray for them.

And we must pray, as well, for peace within and among ourselves. On numerous occasions in the New Testament, the apostle Paul rebuked various churches for the quarreling and fighting that went on amongst them as they gathered together. Because of these things, their coming together was anything but honoring to God as they were prevented from encouraging one another by their own stubbornness, anger and bitterness. We too have to be wary of these things. We need to pray for the peace of this church from within, and be willing to defer and submit to one another for the greater good of building up God's people.

My prayer is that as we grow in our understanding of what it means to worship God, in the shadow of the Cross, that we will discover (or maybe rediscover) the joy and anticipation of the psalmist so that our coming together, like the journey to Jerusalem, will be anything but dull — so that it will be, in fact, a real Celebration of the goodness of God.