

August 23, 2020

“God’s Plans for His Church”
Psalm 122

FCF: A low view of the church

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The Lord has a great vision for His church.
(anchor) We need to adjust ours to His.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

True news story from just a few years ago. Off the shores of the Philippines, a fisherman discovered a very large, misshapen pearl. It was not pretty. It looked more like an amoeba, with blobs and folds everywhere. The man took the unusual find home and stowed it under his bed. When he moved ten years later, he had no use for it, so he gave it to the local tourism office. It turned out to be the world’s largest pearl, with an estimated worth of roughly \$100 million.

It’s easy to miss the value of something when it’s not what you are expecting, when its worth is not clear. With that in mind, let me say something that might surprise you. In terms of institutions and organizations, the world’s greatest hope has been hidden under the bed. It’s not a political group or a charitable foundation. No, the greatest hope our world has is the church.

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 122**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

It’s official. Joe Biden is the nominee for the Democratic Party. And Donald Trump will soon be for the Republicans. Each man will represent their party, heading the tickets, as they run for the presidency. So buckle up. For the next few months, we will be treated to ads, interviews, debates, and commentaries. It’s part of the process. Each side will try to win the voters. Each side will try to convey their vision for the country and why they feel they are right. Of course, it’s possible that neither man has the right vision for the country but we will still need to vote.

Psalm 122 is about vision - not the vision of opposing candidates for a country but the vision of the living God for the church, the place and purpose of His people in this world. This is the third in these songs of ascent, these songs sung by the people as they made their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual feasts. What do we learn from this psalm? The Lord has a great vision for His church. He has a great vision for His church. We need to adjust ours to His.

How is the Lord’s great vision shown forth? In three ways. First, in the destination described. Second, in the admiration shown. And then, third, in the supplication that is given.

I. DESTINATION

First, the destination. The psalmist has made his way to the city (**READ Psalm 122:1-2**).

A) Joyful Arrival

1. Jerusalem the city

There is a feeling of joyful arrival. The hazards of the pilgrimage are finally over. He has made his way, made the ascent, and is actually standing there within the city walls, walking its streets.

2. Jerusalem the people

He is there in Jerusalem the city. But Jerusalem is more than a place. It is a people and this is important for us to see. What Old Testament Jerusalem was to the Israelite, the church is to the Christian. The temple, the very presence of God, is now in our midst. We'll come back to that.

B) Great Anticipation

1. Reaction

The reaction is worth noting here. There was great anticipation, even before setting out on the journey. The thought of being in Jerusalem had lightened and brought great joy to his heart.

2. Reasons

And the reasons for this reaction are worth noting. Politically and spiritually, Jerusalem was center of Israel. The festivals established a framework. They had a way of pulling together the fraying strands, the scattered pieces. Coming together this way made life come together - origin, identity, meaning, purpose. These pilgrimages re-made a sense of such things for the people.

We can see the Lord's great vision for His church as we look at the destination.

Illustration:

Think of homecomings, perhaps for a family or a school. When they are at their best, they are not just for the sake of nostalgia but are a reminder of essentials. They reset our focus.

Application:

That's partly why these festival pilgrimages were important for the ancient Israelites. It's partly why our coming together now is so important. Such assemblies can serve as reminders of faith, a recasting of hope, a rekindling of love. Which means, rightly understood, our response should be that of a joyful arrival with great anticipation every Lord's Day. Rightly understood.

Of course, we struggle here. So, if that is not where you are, ask yourself, "Why not?" And take that question to Jesus. "Lord, what is impeding this? I know what I should feel but I don't." He can handle that. "Help me understand my heart better. Help me grapple with this."

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II. ADMIRATION

Second, admiration. He stands in the city. What does he see? (**READ Psalm 122:3-5**)

A) A Diversity of People

1. Marveling at the sight

The buildings and the bustling of people. The traveler is taking it all in. He marvels at the sight.

2. Various tribes

Israel was made up of 12 tribes, each with its own character. They are "the tribes of the LORD," bound together as much as the city, a reflection of the tri-unity of the living God Himself.

B) A Unity of Purpose

For this diversity of people was marked and set apart by a unity of purpose.

1. Common submission

They were bound by common submission, yielding to the throne, the rule, of the house of David.

2. Common worship

They were bound by common worship. Unlike the peoples around them, theirs was a worship in one place of one God. This was a unity that went far beyond blood ties. This unity was rooted in the gracious initiative of God and a common covenant He had made. “The tribes of the LORD.”

We see something of the Lord’s great vision in this great admiration felt by the psalmist.

Illustration:

Can we say that of ourselves? Think of it this way. To really love someone is to treasure what they treasure. I’m assuming healthy attachments here, not anything destructive. To really love someone is to treasure what they treasure. Our son recently adopted a shelter dog he has been fostering. What will that mean the next time I’m in Chattanooga? I need to befriend this dog. Why? Not just because I like dogs but because he’s my son and this is his dog. You see?

Application:

This psalm is guiding us as to the right way to see God’s church, the way He does - the admiration we should feel. We should rejoice at her diversity and marvel at her unity. Not a uniformity but doxological diversity. That is a testimony to the power of the gospel as every wall and barrier is knocked down. It is a testimony and a preview of the coming kingdom as all are gathered before the Lord with fully renewed hearts, finally unified in worship and service.

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III. SUPPLICATION

We know where the psalmist stands. We know what he sees. How then does he respond? (READ Psalm 122:6-9) Now we move from destination to admiration to supplication. He prays.

A) The Peace of Jerusalem

He prays for “the peace of Jerusalem.” What does that mean? I alluded to this earlier.

1. Not a place

Ultimately, Jerusalem is not a place. A fulfillment of purpose has come about. What this city once was to the Israelite, the church is now to the Christian. Jerusalem as a place and Israel as a nation have fulfilled their purpose in God’s redemptive plan. So we need to use that lens here.

2. But a people

Ultimately, Jerusalem is not a place but a people. So to pray for “the peace of Jerusalem” is to then seek the shalom of God’s people. That is the sense of security being sought after here.

B) The Prayer for Peace

The idea being that, given what he has seen, the psalmist is deeply impelled to pray.

1. Human flourishing

“For my brothers and companions’ sake.” He prays for human flourishing, a wholeness and wellness. He prays for the health, strength, and the deepest wellbeing of God’s people. “Peace

be within you!” A peace within mentioned three times, within the members and between them as well. You get a sense this is so much more than is meant by the road signs and bumper stickers.

2. Divine purposes

“For the sake of the house of the LORD our God.” This house was the temple, the presence of the living God which is now the church. The church is to be seen and known as a living signpost, a city on a hill. There is a longing here for the church to be what she is called to be.

So we see something again of the greatness of the Lord’s vision in this supplication.

Illustration:

Or do we? We tend to pray for what is important to us. Some of you know my brother-in-law was experiencing a significant health crisis last week. So I prayed for him. My wife made the round-trip drive to Virginia to be with her sister through all that. So I prayed for her.

Application:

We tend to pray for what is important to us. Have you caught sight of what the psalmist saw? This is a real challenge to the ethos of our day that puts such a premium on the individual - *my* faith, *my* relationship with God, instead of *ours*. We tend to distance ourselves from the church, not just because of scandal but because of the worship of the personal individual self.

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CONCLUSION:

Let’s end by again pressing this question. How do we see the church? We know how our neighbors do. Surveys show that while most are willing to hear what people have to say about Christianity, the majority sees the church as a place full of hypocrites. Jesus may make a positive difference in a person’s life but the dominant view of “tolerance” means that all religious and spiritual beliefs are just a matter of personal opinion. So, ultimately, it doesn’t matter what you believe. Pressing that a little further, ultimately the church is just one voice among many.

So we know what our neighbors think of the church. And we have a pretty good idea as to what the angels think as well - even the demons. I mentioned C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* last week. Let me come back to that again. We read this in letter two ([READ quote](#)):

I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; indeed, in your better moments, I trust you would hardly even wish to do so. In the meantime we must make the best of the situation. There is no need to despair...All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour.

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.

“Spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners.”

That’s quite a vision. Is it yours? How do you see the church? Psalm 122, this song for the road, as it speaks to the destination, the admiration, and supplication, points the way for us.

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