

Why Gather?

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Preacher: Jonathan Gemmell

[0 : 00] Please have a seat and let's pray together. Father God, we're astounded by what we read in Ephesians chapter 3. That it was your sovereign will that through the church, your manifold wisdom might be made known to everyone.

Might be made known to your world. Might be made known even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. So Lord, I pray that our time tonight would put your manifold wisdom on even more display to a watching world.

Father, that through this message you might excite us about the awesome privilege it is to be church and that we might be committed to playing a full part in it.

Father, bless our time and build your church, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. This is the first Sunday night of Why Church.

We're going to do about nine. We're going to look at lots of different things. Why gather? Why take communion? Why do we sing? Why do we pray? Why do we preach? Why do we give?

[1 : 11] Why do we go? Why do we share? It's going to be great because I guess many of us have grown up in church and we've just kind of always done these things without ever thinking quite why.

And why is a good question. So tonight we're on Why gather? Why do we say to you the word Moby? Why do we say to you the word Moby?

Why do we say the word Moby? I think you think of one of two things. Either you think of a giant white sperm whale, the arch nemesis of Captain Ahab in the film Moby Dick, sometimes called the whale.

Or, if you were cool in the 90s, you think of Moby, the Harlem-based electronic DJ, singer, songwriter, whose number one album play is still on my iPhone because I was cool in the 90s.

The thing you may not know about Moby is that his real name is Richard Melville Hoare. And that middle name Melville is because his great-great-great-uncle was Herman Melville, the 19th century American novelist and author of Moby Dick.

[2 : 31] But what you may not know about Moby is that Moby is a Christian. He became a Christian in college. And he became a Christian simply by reading through John's Gospel with his friends.

And as he read John's Gospel, he realized that Jesus was not an ordinary man. In fact, he was God in flesh come to rescue us from our sins. However, Moby is not very conventional.

And in the editorial on Relevant Magazine, we read this. Moby, why he loves Jesus but not the church.

And we have to say that is quite a popular attitude in our generation. There are a lot of people. We have a phrase called churchless Christians.

People who have time for Jesus but don't want to set foot in church. There was a book written earlier this year called The Invisible Church Learning from Experiences of Churchless Christians.

[3 : 39] That to me seems a bit of a misnomer. You can't be a body part apart from the body. A lonely sheep is just a lonely sheep. It's not part of a flock. And there aren't many temples in the world that are just made of one brick that stands there by itself.

That it does seem that in and through the gospel, we're not only saved and reconciled to God, but we're placed in a family as well.

There is a horizontal thing and necessarily, there is a vertical thing and necessarily a horizontal thing as well. Families are made up of more than one person.

And so, my real thoughts tonight are about why do we gather? Why is this a corporate thing? Why can't it not just be me and Jesus, the church of two?

And I've really struggled to write this talk. How on earth do you go about answering such a huge question? I thought about doing a biblical theology from Genesis to Revelation about the gathering

and scattering of people.

[4 : 46] And then I thought some of us have got stuff to do on Monday, so let's not do that. I thought of looking at the 56 one-anothering statements in the New Testament and decided against it because .56, we'd all be dead.

I thought of doing an overview of Ephesians. I told Tim about that earlier in the week and that's where Ephesians 3 came from. And I thought about doing a purely topical lecture-style talk on ecclesiology and why gather as the church.

But I binned all of those. And I thought we'd have a look at Psalm 122. So if you've got a Bible, please turn there with me. And I think this is a great psalm to get us excited about the joy and privilege of being church together.

Psalm 122. The third of the Psalms of Ascent. A psalm of David. And it says this.

Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

[6 : 02] That is where the tribes go up. The tribes of the Lord to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There stand the thrones for judgment.

The thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.

For the sake of my family and friends, I will say peace be within you. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity.

New York. Concrete jungle where dreams are made of. There's nothing you can't do.

Now you're in New York. These streets will make you feel brand new. The lights will inspire you.

Let's hear it for New York, New York, New York.

[7 : 04] Istanbul was Constantinople. Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople. It's been a long time gone, Constantinople. Now it's Turkish delight on a moonlit night.

I belong to Glasgow. Dear old Glasgow town. Well, what's the matter with Glasgow for it's going round and round? I'm only a common old working chap, as anyone else can say.

But when I get a couple of drinks on a Saturday, Glasgow belongs to me. There is an incredible number of songs about the cities of the world.

If you Google it, you can be there for hours. Barcelona, Vienna, Amarillo, London, San Jose, Las Vegas to name but a few.

And if we're not careful, as we dig into Psalm 122, we're in danger of just treating it like a song about one of the cities of the world. An ode to Jerusalem by the chart-topping success of King David and his mighty men.

[8 : 09] And never really go on from there. But I want to say to you that there is much more about Jerusalem going on in this psalm than we see at face value.

So to orientate our time, I want to give you four points about what we mean biblically when we use the word Jerusalem. Here's the first one. Jerusalem is not found in the Middle East.

Jerusalem is not found in the Middle East. I have an A-level in geography. And yet I think I can say with confidence that that is true.

There is great tension in the Bible between the Jerusalem as seen and the Jerusalem by faith. The most purple passages about Jerusalem we find in our Bible are never really a reality on the ground. Even on its best day, Jerusalem doesn't live up to the brochure standing that it gets in God's book, the Bible.

[9 : 15] Something Isaiah picks up on page one when he describes Jerusalem like this. The city, as is seen in the Middle East. If that is what David was thinking about, I don't think he'd sing Psalm 122.

If that was where you were going, you'd be straight on TripAdvisor writing a nasty review telling people not to waste their time or their money coming here.

Jerusalem below never lives up to Jerusalem as seen in its biblical billing. First thing, Jerusalem is not found in the Middle East. Point two, Jerusalem is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.

Everything Old Testament Jerusalem represented theologically is now ours in and through Jesus Christ. It is the place that God's presence dwells, that we have access to God not by going to Jerusalem but through the Lord Jesus.

It is the Lord Jesus who is the one at once and for all sacrifice. Meaning we don't need to take our pigeons and our doves and our rams and our bulls to the temple in Jerusalem.

[10:37] That we can say now, this side of the cross, that a time now really has come when we worship neither on a mountain nor in Jerusalem but in the Spirit and in truth.

Second point, Jerusalem is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. Point three, Jerusalem is foreshadowed by the local church. Jerusalem is foreshadowed by the local church.

This is what the writer to the Hebrews is saying in chapter 12, that Jesus has now established a new spiritual temple by the sacrifice of himself on the cross. And he has brought us not to Mount Sinai or the old Mount Zion but to the new Mount Zion and the new Jerusalem.

So you get things like 1 Corinthians. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, that God's Spirit lives in you? Or 1 Peter 2 verse 5.

You are like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[11:43] The final point about Jerusalem is that Jerusalem is finally waiting to come down and fill the earth. That is the end of the story. That is Revelation 21.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. Jerusalem is not found in the Middle East.

Jerusalem is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jerusalem is foreshadowed by the local church. Jerusalem is finally waiting to come down and fill the earth. So with those foundations in place, I think we'll see that Psalm 122 is a brilliant song to encourage us and help us think about why we should gather as church.

And if you look at the psalm, it beautifully splits into two bits. Verses 1 to 5 in praise of Jerusalem and verses 6 to 9, a place in Jerusalem.

We see what Jerusalem looks like and what it means to have a part in it. And as I said, Psalm 122 is the third of the Psalms of Ascent.

[12:58] And the Psalms of Ascent are songs that we think the pilgrims would sing on their way to Jerusalem. And there's certainly been a progression.

If you just flick back to Psalm 120, the psalmist is describing that they've journeyed from metaphorical Meshech in the far north and metaphorical Kedar in the southeast, where they've dwelt too long amidst pagan hordes who are hostile to them.

That's where they started. And then Psalm 121, they're in transit. So Psalm 121, we describe the fact that they've journeyed through the hill country over treacherous terrain, enduring boiling hot days and freezing cold nights.

Psalm 121. And in Psalm 122, they finally arrived. They've got there. When the kids in the back of the car say, are we there yet?

The parents strike up the happy tune of Psalm 122. I will see five things about in praise of Jerusalem.

[14:08] Five things. The first one is the house. I rejoice with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

The pilgrim thinks back to where he's come from, that he comes from a hostile place, a place where to be a Christian is not comfortable. And so when his friends turned up and said, let's go to Jerusalem, he was like, that's brilliant.

That is an exciting prospect. He's excited by the idea of going somewhere where he fully belongs. To be excited to gather with God's people in God's special presence.

I rejoice with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. First person singular, I met them and together we became an us.

And we went to church together. That's a nice thing, I think. I think. And it's a place of joy. That being together on pilgrimage, to be God's people together in God's special presence, is a place of overflowing joy.

[15:25] That's quite unusual in our world, I think. Because in our 21st century world, we all live like we're an island. In fact, we're the Ibiza of islands. We have places like coffee shops where lonely people go to be alone together.

We have social media, which just compounds our loneliness as we see just how popular everyone else is, except us. And yet Psalm 122 says this, that lasting, satisfying and overflowing joy is found by being amongst God's people, all together in God's special presence.

I was stoked when they said to me, let's go to church. I was overjoyed. I was cock-a-hoop. I was giving high fives all around.

The best I've ever seen of this was a couple of summers ago, I was in Washington, D.C., hanging out with Mark Dever at Capitol Hill. And I was staying with a guy called Matt Schmucker, who had three young children.

And on the Saturday night before the Sunday morning, Matt Schmucker's youngest daughter came in and said, Daddy, I'm going to bed because tomorrow we're meeting with church and I want to be wide awake.

[16:40] And it was ten past six. It was like that Christmas Eve sense that to be with God's people together is a place of joy.

And I don't want to miss it. I don't want to miss it at all. Going in alone is futile, foolish, joyless, stunted and a quickly curtailed journey.

Going together, gathering together is a place of joy. A place of joy where we can be together forever. God has made the life of faith one where joy is amplified when we're together.

Second thing we see is the gates. Look at verse two. Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem. I don't think that's the most boring diary entry that the pilgrim's ever conceived.

I think it's this sense that he's a bit overwhelmed by it. That he's almost saying, our feet are standing in your gates. I can't believe it. We've got here. We've arrived.

[17:43] We've come from a strife-filled, hostile world. And now we're here. We have made it. He's overwhelmed that his feet are there.

And he's not there with a selfie stick, taking pictures of himself. He's there as a group photo. Our plural feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.

He's in awe that he's come into God's special presence with God's people. It's a beautiful thing. And he's kind of a bit overwhelmed.

I think Paul picks this up in Romans 5. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access into this grace in which we now stand.

That just as the Old Testament pilgrim was saying, I can't believe we're standing in your presence. So Paul says, because of Jesus, I can't believe that we can stand in your presence.

[18:43] He's come from a strife-filled world into the communion of saints and God's special presence. He finally finds himself fulfilling the very purpose for which he was made, which was glorifying God.

And he gets to do that with loads of other people. It's a beautiful picture. It's a place of joy, a place of togetherness, a place that he's always conscious that he's there, but not on his own merits.

And the third thing we see is the city. I think this is quite odd. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

I don't think the psalmist is saying, I got to Jerusalem and it's a bit of a squeeze. It's like a celestial Singapore where we're all kind of tightly packed in. And to get the bus means that you get to know people in very close fellowship.

I don't think he's talking about population density. I think he's talking about that Jerusalem is a place where people are invincibly knitted together. Where there is real unity.

[19:45] A place where everyone makes every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. That they are together. They're on the same team. A place of real and absolute and impenetrable unity.

And that is very different, isn't it, to the world we see. Where Brexit is going to mean Brexit. Where the Indy Ref 2 is hovering on the horizon.

Where we live in a world that is fracturing and fragmenting quicker than we can imagine. The entropy seems to be going out into the world as order becomes chaos.

But in God's people, through the Lord Jesus, we see that Jerusalem is a city that is closely compacted together. And always will be. That because of Jesus, there is unity intrinsic in the people of God.

And that is a beautiful thing. A beautiful thing. That diversity is brought together as unity in the Lord Jesus.

[20:51] Francis Schaeffer will say that the greatest apologetic for the gospel is the community that the gospel produces. Nowhere else in Edinburgh today, outside of a church, will there be such a wide range of people gathered together.

I mean, I find it incredible on a Sunday morning that newborn babies are passed around the congregation like polo men. No one else sees that. When I see those that are older chatting to those that are six, I think that is amazing.

You don't see a family like this anywhere else. I walk past the Bowling Green this afternoon on Regent Road. And there's a sizable group of people there.

They're all slightly senior gentlemen wearing chinos and a white shirt. They're all exactly the same. It's a monoculture.

And here there's incredible diversity in and through. The Lord Jesus Church is made beautiful by the gospel. And the church makes the gospel look beautiful.

[21 : 58] It's a beautiful, virtuous circle. And the world looks in and they think it's weird. But they're compelled by it because no one else has got it. No one else at all.

The fourth thing he says about Jerusalem is the tribes. That is where the tribes go up. The tribes of the Lord to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel.

That Jerusalem in the Old Testament would be the place that everyone would go on pilgrimage for special festivals and occasions that God had prescribed in his law. Jerusalem is the place for this.

Jerusalem is a bit of a weird city in the Old Testament. It's mentioned first in Genesis 14 as you get this mysterious Melchizedek priest king figure. Who is the king and priest of Salem.

Jerusalem. We find that when Joshua conquers the promised land. There's a city that they never quite get control of. Because the Jebusites live there.

[23 : 00] And they're not going anywhere. They're kind of in for the long haul. And so when the nation is divided up among the tribes. Jerusalem is never really properly allotted.

Because they never properly own it. It's in the region of Judea. Judah. But they never quite take control of it. Because the Jebusites live there. Finally when David conquers it in 2 Samuel 5.

It becomes the place of his throne. And it almost has this neutrality to it. So that when everyone goes there to worship. They don't feel like they're trespassing or in somebody else's house.

They feel like they all own it together. And I think it's a wonderful thing that everyone goes there on the same footing. That everyone is humbled under grace.

That everyone is welcomed there by God. But not because they deserve it. But because his grace is sufficient. This is not one-upmanship. Everyone goes there at God's invitation.

[24 : 06] Into God's presence. It's the same for us. No one's coming to church today. Because they've earned favor from God. Nobody's walking in as the big cheese.

Oh I've got all the answers. God is really pleased with me. Everyone's coming in as sinners. That have found grace in the Lord Jesus. People are coming in as treasonous rebels.

That have been rescued and reconciled by Jesus. Everyone's coming in not on performance related acceptance. But as those that are accepted forever in Jesus.

That means that we can do away with pride in the church. That there is nothing like salvation by grace alone. Through faith alone in Christ alone. To make us think less of ourselves.

More of Jesus. And as we think less of ourselves. We can unite together. Because I don't find myself as nauseating as I actually am. It's a wonderful thing.

[25 : 11] Where there's real unity. That when we come to church it's not about us. Which is so good. It's all about Jesus. And the place of unity is in and through him.

The final thing we see is the thrones. In verse 5. There stand the thrones of judgment. The thrones of the house of David.

This is the place where God's king rules. That was true of Old Testament Jerusalem. But that is especially true. Of the church of Jesus Christ.

That here. In a very real way. The kingdom of God is here. It is an outpost. Showing what the future will look like. That in the church Jesus rules and reigns.

And he does it now. But one day he will do it fully. And absolutely. Over absolutely everything. This is the place where Jesus is king. The place where we worship him.

[26 : 13] Where we adore him. Where we listen to him. Where we commit to obey him. Where we learn what it is to be a citizen of his kingdom. And we go and live like that in the world.

What gather as church? Well because it's a place of joy. As we meet together in God's presence. It's a place we're constantly in awe of.

That we can come together not because of us. It's a place of real unity. A place where grace abounds and humbles us. So we can be unified. And a place where Jesus reigns.

And so David praises the earthly Jerusalem. On behalf of the Old Testament pilgrim. We praise and love the prototype Jerusalem. Which is seen here in the local church.

And one day soon we will inhabit. And praise in the perfect Jerusalem. As pilgrims finally home. God's people gathered in God's place.

[27 : 18] Under God's rule. And that's what we do here. Together. The Jerusalem that was. The Jerusalem that is.

And the Jerusalem that will one day forever be perfectly. A place of joy. Or universe. Unity. Diversity. All under the perfect rule of Christ Jesus.

And the song finishes with two aspects. Peace. And I think the first one is security. Look at it.

Verses six and seven. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May those who love you be secure. May they be peace within your walls. And security within your citadels. One of the things about being together.

It's a place where we belong. We spend six days of the week. In a very hostile world. A place where you're conscious. That you don't really fit in.

[28 : 16] You kind of dance to a different tune. To the rest of your fellow people. That you love a different Lord. You live according to a different set of rules. You have a different attitude to life.

You have an intolerance to sin. You have a new heart. A new Lord. New desires. New powers to fulfill those desires. You kind of feel a bit like you stick out like a sore thumb.

In a strife filled world. And yet when we come together. We feel we're. This is. These are my people. This is a place where we fully belong.

This is the hope filled alternative. To the way the world is doing life. A place where we can be ourselves. And know that grace will be sufficient.

That grace will cover all my oddness. It will cover all my rough edges. And that people are committing to loving one another for the sake of Jesus.

[29 : 16] We're not trying to earn their love. It's intrinsically there. In and through the gospel. And it's a place of shalom. That word peace. That word that is a bit more like.

A bit more than an absence of war. It's a place of wholeness. It's a place where I can be fully me. As I was meant to be. A place where I'm fulfilling my purpose.

Of glorifying God. And being amongst his people. It's a place of prospering. And flourishing according to God's grace. So the beautiful thing is.

About having a part in Jerusalem. Is it's a place you belong. Just as you are. As a sinner saved by Jesus.

And that's a beautiful thing. In a world that doesn't feel very secure. This is secure. In a world where we don't feel like we belong. We belong here. In a place that seems to be crumbling.

[30 : 16] We get to be part of a community that will last forever. And that is beautiful. To have a part of Jerusalem. Is to have a part in a place that is utterly secure.

Because it is guaranteed by Jesus. And he never fails. See the second thing is sacrifice. The final two verses. Just see how other person centred.

The last two verses are. For the sake of my family and friends. I will say peace be within you. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God. I will seek your prosperity.

It is a place where everyone considers others better than themselves. It is a place that's truly biblical. And therefore anti-capitalist.

That it is a place where we truly know that it is more blessed to give. Than to receive. It is a place where we get to serve one another. As those that have ultimately been served.

[31 : 16] By the Lord Jesus. It is a place where I don't need to be about myself. That by Jesus I am freed from that. I can be about other people. It is a place.

Where greatness is truly achieved. By sinking right to the bottom. And being a servant of all. And in a world where it's all about getting to the top.

All about being the name at the top of the door. The way of the world. To make much of ourselves. To pedestal ourselves.

Not in this community. That we're saved into. That we're gathered to. It's about sinking right to the bottom. And being a servant of all.

It's a wonderful picture. Psalm 122. It's a compelling picture of what God's people gathering together. Looks like.

[32 : 14] And therefore I want to finish with this guy. His name is. Haidetsugu Uneha. I think. And he is a Japanese architect.

And the reason he is infamous. Is because he falsified. A lot of earthquake proof documents. In Japan. And the scandal of that is.

That when there was an earthquake. Which there often is in Japan. People would run into his buildings. Thinking they were safe. But they were actually putting themselves in a lot more danger. And the truth that we see in Psalm 122. Is that lots of people. Think they're safe. In lots of things. Safe in their money.

Safe in their reputation. Safe in the nest egg they've produced. Safe. Because of any number of things. And Psalm 122 tells us.

[33 : 14] That the only safe place. Is to be found in Jesus Christ. And amongst his people. And therefore this is not just a community. That we're welcomed.

Into. This is a community that we each need. As we live life for each other. A place where we truly belong. In a hostile world.

Why gather in church. Because it's a place where joy is amplified. Where it's a place where awe. Is instilled and refreshed. It's a place where we exhibit the power of the gospel.

It's where we find a family. Made from every family. That's closer than most families. And definitely weirder. It's a place where we live out. And live under the perfect rule of Jesus.

It's a place where we find. That we truly belong. And are eternally secure. And it's a place where we get to serve. And through our service.

[34 : 11] And sacrificial service. Be truly blessed. I just want to read a paragraph from this book. And then I'll hand back to Tim. Do you want to see what the kingdom of God looks like?

At least before it's made perfect. Do you want to see the life of the kingdom. Lived out in this age. Look at the church. That's where God's wisdom is displayed.

Where people who were formerly alienated. Are reconciled and united because of Jesus. And where God's Holy Spirit is at work. Remaking and rebuilding human lives.

It's where God's people learn to love one another. To bear one another's burdens and sorrows. To weep together and rejoice together. And to hold one another accountable. Of course it's not perfect. But the church is where the life of the kingdom is lived. And showcased to a world desperately in need of salvation. Let's pray together.

[35 : 11] Father God we want to thank you so much. That you've not just called us to yourself.

But you've called us into fellowship with each other. Father I thank you for the joy it is to gather as church. Father to be this community that is all about Jesus.

Lord I pray that this would be a church where your manifold wisdom is put on full display. Where joy is tangible. Where awe is a reality.

Where unity is invincible. Where service is commonplace. And where Jesus reigns. And so Lord we're conscious that this is your work in progress.

Father we're confident that you have a perfect track record of completing everything that you begin. And so Lord may your Holy Spirit have free reign. May he make us what you would have us be.

[36 : 17] And would Jesus gain the maximum glory from our corporate life together. Father may we never lose the wonder or the privilege of being church together. And we're so conscious that there are many brothers and sisters in our world.

Who would give anything to me as we do like this this evening. So Lord bless us. And make us constantly thankful for what you're doing amongst us. In Jesus name.

Amen.