

I WAS GLAD WHEN THEY SAID UNTO ME...
Psalm 122

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What are you doing, right now, that will last forever? Your time, your energy, your talent, your focus, your emotions – all are being invested into what that lasts forever?

Indeed, everything around us seems temporary. We build buildings, even monuments, to eventually realize they are only momentary. There is no permanency to our palaces. Chaos comes sometimes in the cataclysmic form of a violent storm or sometimes in the still, small voice of erosion and deterioration – but it always comes.

Consider the city of Pripyat, near Chernobyl, in the Ukraine. Abandoned after the nuclear disaster years ago. Ronald Chesser, an environmental biologist at Texas Tech University, worked extensively in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl. When you first see Pripyat, you believe it's a living city. But as you get closer, you realize that the plants, whose root systems get into the concrete and behind the bricks and into the door frames, are rapidly breaking up every structure.

Reclaimed by nature.

You and I don't imagine, as we walk around our house every day, that we have big impact on keeping that from happening, but we do. If you disappear, the plant community invades every nook and cranny of both your home and your city. With no one making repairs, every storm, flood, and frosty night gnaws away at an abandoned building, and within a few decades, roofs begin to fall and buildings collapse.

It may take a long time for a concrete road to disappear, maybe even more than 1,000 years, but it will surely be covered over by crawling foliage, dirt, and debris. You build an empire, and the forces within and the forces without will eventually cause the crumbling of everything that once seemed so powerful and permanent.

Have you realized how temporary everything you do really is?

At Yahoo Answers, someone posed a question to the public: "What lasts forever?" The answer voted best, or most accurate, was "Nothing." Nothing lasts forever.

"Nothing Lasts Forever." That's more than just the name of a two-bit comedy produced in 1984, a sci-fi directed by Tom Schiller. It's more than a break-up, love-be-gone song sung by the Maroon Five in 2007. It's really the right answer. Nothing lasts forever. Other answers were diamonds, memories, and – tattoos.

In Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the revolutionaries, Defarge, says to a comrade who is cheering on the parade of the king and queen: "You are the fellow we want. You make these fools believe it will last forever. Then they are the more insolent, and it is ne'er ended."

Among Dickens's many messages is the subtle word that only fools (even foolish kings) believe something will last forever.

It's almost right that nothing lasts forever. Evangelism will one day end. That's right – the reaching out and winning people for the kingdom of God will one day come to a close. It's over.

One day education will end. No more Sunday School. No more classroom. No more university.

One day prophecy will end – it will all be fulfilled.

One day social service will end.

The day will come when we will not hand out any more hot meals or warm coats in the name of Christ.

What is the one thing you can do, every week, that is eternal? The one thing that lasts absolutely forever?

Worship is forever.

Of all the things we do in the church – education, evangelism, helping those who are in need – it's astonishing to realize that worship is the only thing that really lasts forever. But those already in the "forever" realm know this. John's vision of heaven (Revelation 4) has four terrifyingly magnificent and wise creatures singing day and night, without ceasing. They're worshipping. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come." That's what they do for ever and ever and ever and, then, forever again.

As you study Revelation, every time you turn a page you're confronted with a scene of worship. Here it involves 24 elders; there it is ten thousand times ten thousand angels. Elsewhere it is a myriad of saints. But they are all worshipping.

Worship lasts forever. Worship alone is an end in itself; it is not a means to something else.

The praise you bring this morning and offer to your King is something that is eternal. Every word of praise uttered lasts forever. Psalm 122 is a Song of Ascent, included in the group of psalms that begins with Psalm 120 and goes through Psalm 134. Songs that were sung by pilgrims in ancient Israel as they left their towns and their villages, and marched up to Jerusalem three times a year for the sacred feasts, the sacred time of worship. They sang these songs, perhaps even in sequence.

Today we look at the third of those songs, as the pilgrims declare, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'"

Striking how many people do worship. Many people – weekly, rhythmically – worship God faithfully and devotedly. It one of the most important acts and marks of a disciple of Jesus. Gathering, journeying to worship.

Today we join this throng of Hebrews as they march upward. As they ascend to the temple, they begin to sing, “I will be glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’” There is joy in the hearts of these pilgrims as they begin to praise God. They are anticipating being able to focus on God. They have the capacity to appreciate God so much that they can think of nothing more delightful than singing of their love to Him as they make their way – preparing their hearts to worship.

The psalmist says three things about worship.

I. Worship gives us a workable structure for life.

To worship is:

- To quicken the conscience by the holiness of God.
- To feed the mind with the truth of God.
- To purge the imagination by the beauty of God.
- To open the heart to the love of God.
- To devote the will to the purpose of God.

(William Temple, *The Hope of a New World*, p. 30)

They were going up to Jerusalem, firmly bound together. These great worship festivals were the rhythm of life. In Jerusalem they would remember everything that God had said. They would celebrate what God had done.

Isn't that what worship is – remembering what God has said, celebrating what God has accomplished?

When you journey to Jerusalem to worship, you encounter the great foundational realities. God created you. God has saved you. God has provided for you. It was there in worship. It is here in worship that you experience ritual and hear proclaimed the preaching of the powerful history, the shaping truth that God forgives our sins and makes it possible to live without guilt and with purpose.

As Eugene Peterson has said, “In Jerusalem, all the scattered fragments of experience, all the bits and pieces of truth and feeling and perception are put together in a single whole.”

Look what he says in verse 3. “Jerusalem, that is built as a city that is compact together.” Perhaps it is the very early Coverdale translation, earlier than even the King James Translation, that says it best: “Jerusalem is at unity with itself.” All the masonry fit compactly together. The stones fit perfectly, harmoniously. No leftover pieces. No awkward gaps in the wall or towers. It was well-built, compactly built, skillfully built, at unity with itself.

Yes, worship gives us a framework. What was true of the city was also true of the pilgrims. They had a harmonious relationship as they marched to worship. They were different in so many ways, but they were alike in their focus on worshipping God.

One pastor was asked to make a pastoral visit to a home. The lady that he came to see was sitting at a window, embroidering a piece of cloth held taut over an oval hoop. She said, “Pastor, while waiting for you to come, I realized what is wrong with me. I don’t have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities – everything is loose and sloppy. There’s no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life, like this one I have for my embroidery.” (Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, p. 48)

How do we get that framework – those core values, that solid sense of structure – so that we can go out into a world so filled with anxiety and stress? We get that by worshiping each week, by focusing on God as part of our rhythm. It’s not one pilgrim marching to worship, it is a community marching to worship. We come here to say that God created us. God redeems us. And then we know where we stand as redeemed children of the only One who matters.

Give your children the framework for life with weekly worship. It works.

II. Worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God.

Look at verse 4

To which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord – an ordinance for Israel...

Why do we worship? Because we cannot help but worship. Worship is not a human invention; rather, it is a divine offering. Right understanding of God demands right worship.

Notice this commandment. The commandment is to go and worship. God had commanded Israel to worship. We don’t worship just when we feel like worshipping. Our feelings are great liars. We may feel like staying in bed instead of getting up to focus on God.

A mother woke her son up on Sunday morning and told him he needed to get ready to go to church. The son replied that he didn’t want to go to church this morning. She told him nonsense, he should get up and go to church.

“But mom,” he replied, “nobody there likes me, the sermons are tiring, and none of my friends ever come.”

His mother replied, “Now, son, there are three reasons you should go. First, a lot of people like you at church. Second, the sermons mean a lot to many people. And third, you have to go – you’re the pastor!

Herbert Hendin, in *The Age of Sensation*, states that the Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel. That’s right. Sometimes we’re fooled into believing that if we don’t feel something, there is no authenticity in doing it.

The wisdom of God says something different. It says that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting.

Yes, worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God.

The New Testament, likewise, calls us to worship when we're told that we should not forsake "our own assembling together, as is the habit of some..." (Hebrews 10:25).

Worship is not a time for us to entertain you. It should not feel like, or be like, a concert. The only question that matters in worship is how can we best focus on God? Not how can we meet one of your needs this particular hour.

We perhaps are the only, or at least the first, generation to make our worship songs about ourselves – about me, myself, and I. Herein, we've missed the whole point.

And yes, our purpose here this morning is not to attract people but, rather, to adore God.

Will Willimon has said that the way we worship now, especially in America, the focus is on me, my feelings, my commitments, my guilt, my needs. I am the center of worship, the focus of a carefully orchestrated series of Sunday morning activities that are designed to do something to or for me. We are so busy looking at ourselves it is no wonder we can worship and miss God.

The psalmist finds in Jerusalem a well-built unity, a frame for life. He sees here that he can nurture his relationship with God and obey the commandment of God.

III. Worship centers our attention on the decisions of God.

Look at verse 5

For there thrones were set for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

Our psalmist describes worship as a place where thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. The word "judgment" means a decisive word by which God straightens things out and puts things right.

Yes, in worship we hear the word of God. In the call to worship, we hear God's first word to us – even as Sunghwan plays the prelude. In worship, we hear God's last word to us as Sunghwan plays the postlude. It is here that we come to worship the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

It is in this discipline, this gathering to worship, that a real sense of humility is seen in a willingness to allow ourselves to be led by and possessed by not our reality, but God's reality. Not our word, but God's word. We come seeking the decisions of God, the face of God through song and prayer and preaching and through the ordinances.

"Pastor, I can stay home and focus and worship God."

You should have your private devotion and your private prayer. That's certainly part of discipleship, but it can never substitute for the community, the corporate word and worship of God. Worship is, most often, a community event.

These Songs of Ascent are not a private matter but a gathering of ancient Israel to go together, as one body, to worship the God of Israel.

If we stay home by ourselves and read the Bible, we are going to miss a lot. Our reading is conditioned by our own minds, limited by our ignorance, conditioned by our culture, distorted by our own cold prejudices. That's true for me, and that's true for you. But when we come together as a congregation, it is here that all the writers of scripture address us.

The hymn writers use music. The praise-song writers use biblical truths to touch us in our heads and our hearts. It is here where the preacher who has just lived through six days of doubt, hurt, faith, and blessing with the worshipers speaks the truth of scripture, speaks the word of God.

There is no possibility of the church's being Christian without worship. The essence of worship is the self-portrayal of the congregation, whom God has called to be His people in the world. In fact, worship is the power from God that enables the church to be the church. W. T. Conner states, **"The first business, then, of a church is not evangelism, nor missions, nor benevolence; it is worship. The worship of God in Christ should be at the center of all else that the church does. It is the mainspring of all the activity of the church."** (W. T. Conner, *The Gospel of Redemption*, p. 277)

What are you doing that lasts forever. Well, you spent the last hour doing something that will transcend eternity. Yes, gathered in God's kingdom – not individually, but corporately – we will sing praises. "Holy, holy, holy; the whole earth is full of His glory."