

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Aug. 21, 2005
Psalm 122 – Worship

*I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
Jerusalem- built as a city that is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
“May they be secure who love you!
Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”
For my brothers and companions’ sake I will say,
“Peace be within you!”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.*
English Standard Version

*When they said, “Let’s go to the house of God,”
My heart leaped for joy.
And now we’re here, oh Jerusalem,
Inside Jerusalem’s walls! Jerusalem, well-built city,
Built as a place for worship!
The city to which the tribes ascend,
all God’s tribes go up to worship,
To give thanks to the name of God –
this is what it means to be Israel.
Thrones for righteous judgment are set there,
famous David-thrones.
Pray for Jerusalem’s peace!
Prosperity to all you Jerusalem-lovers!
Friendly insiders, get along!
Hostile outsiders, keep your distance!
For the sake of my family and friends,
I say it again: live in peace!
For the sake of the house of our GOD,
God, I’ll do my very best for you.*
The Message

Imagine yourself in this scenario:

You’re an eighteen-year-old young woman, just moved to Norman. You’ve decided you wish to join a sorority, so you come a week early and go through “rush.” Rush means that you visit each sorority house for an hour or so, where the women there make judgments and decisions about you and you make judgments and decisions about them. There are various other parties, meetings and such, so you and they can whittle away your choices and make your picks. The pressure is high – pressure to look good, speak well, carry yourself, get the house you want, connect in just minutes. And it’s raining, and there are 1000 other girls doing just the same thing.

So Sunday rolls around. You have your first house meeting at eleven o’clock. This is your first Sunday at OU ever. Do you go to the optional worship service?

The answer is no. You don’t. Of the 1000 rushees, only 40 showed for the optional worship service. 4%. I know this because I was the speaker at this optional worship service at 9am last Sunday at the Wesley Foundation. I talked from James 1:1-4 about how Jesus is Lord and how looking to Jesus brings us steadfastness in trials. I talked about the gospel, the most important thing that these women could ever hear. I said this to the forty who were there. I’m going to guess though that that is fairly typical of *all* the student population on *any* given Sunday. 4% seems about right. I might guess that 7.5% of the OU students attend church on a normal week.²

And you know what? I’d like to think I’d be different, but my guess is that I would have made the same exact choice when I was eighteen. Or when I was twenty eight.

Why do people worship at all? Why are there even 4% going to church? Much in the lives of Christian behavior is forced, but worship is not forced. It cannot be exacted. There may be temporary coercions, but these fade away after a few years. Even to the child or teenager or spouse or grandparent coerced into attending church on a Sunday, the attitude of the heart, the attitude of worship, cannot be made to happen. The truth is that most Christian worship is utterly voluntary. And when you consider that, in the state of Oklahoma, that next weekend, more people will worship God in a stated place and time than will attend one of the many high school and college football games, that is pretty amazing.

In Psalm 120 we talked about repentance. Repentance gets us going on the way to God. In Psalm 121 we talked about trusting God’s providence in our lives. God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass; he overwhelms the bumps and bruises, the tragedies of our pilgrimage. In Psalm 122 we start to see the target of our walk – worship. We see Jerusalem up over the hill; we begin to think that we may actually get to worship him. We’ve seen Jesus of course in repentance; we’ve seen Jesus as we’ve considered how he guides and directs all things for his glory. Now, can we worship him? Please?

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² That’s a guess of 1500 out of the 20,000 students

Is that the desire of your heart? Are you glad when they say, ““*Let us go to the house of the LORD!*””? Are you glad to say that to others, to invite them to this place, the place where we worship God?

The psalmist, when considering the destination of his pilgrimage, begins to think of what he will find there. Let's look.

Worship gives us a workable structure for life.

We're all searching for the answers of how life works. This is especially so at the college campus, where (supposedly, at least) big questions are being asked and answered. And so often, too often, there is a disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually do.

Psychologists are all too aware of this phenomenon. In many studies, people claim to be better than that are. They say they don't lie or cheat or steal or hurt people. But then, when watched, the opposite is found to be true. Self-reporting often cannot be trusted.

So it is with us. Believing in Jesus is easy to say. Committing to the Bible is easy to affirm. Living a nice, moral life is a nice way to think of yourself. But when the answers are right there, when he or she hasn't left late at night, when justice or mercy or forgiveness or compassion is needed – we act differently to our stated beliefs.

Steve Turner muses on this in his poem:

Creed, by Steve Turner

We believe in Marxfreudanddarwin.
We believe everything is OK
as long as you don't hurt anyone,
to the best of your definition of hurt,
and to the best of your knowledge.

We believe in sex before during
and after marriage.
We believe in the therapy of sin.
We believe that adultery is fun.
We believe that sodomy's OK
We believe that taboos are taboo.

We believe that everything's getting better
despite evidence to the contrary.
The evidence must be investigated.
You can prove anything with evidence.

We believe there's something in horoscopes,
UFO's and bent spoons;
Jesus was a good man just like Buddha
Mohammed and ourselves.
He was a good moral teacher although we think
his good morals were bad.

We believe that all religions are basically the same,
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of
creation sin heaven hell God and salvation.

We believe that after death comes The Nothing
because when you ask the dead what happens
they say Nothing.

If death is not the end, if the dead have lied,
then it's compulsory heaven for all
excepting perhaps Hitler, Stalin and Genghis Khan.

We believe in Masters and Johnson.
What's selected is average.
What's average is normal.
What's normal is good.

We believe in total disarmament.
We believe there are direct links between
warfare and bloodshed.
Americans should beat their guns into tractors
and the Russians would be sure to follow.

We believe that man is essentially good.
It's only his behaviour that lets him down.
This is the fault of society.
Society is the fault of conditions.
Conditions are the fault of society.

We believe that each man must find the truth
that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust. History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.

We believe in the rejection of creeds.

Steve Turner

In his book, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, Steve Garber writes: “Our current social condition – the maelstrom of modernity – makes it incredibly difficult for Christian students to form a life that integrally connects their personal and public worlds. Characteristically, it is not that they choose to disconnect; rather it is in the air they breathe as they grow up in America.”³ He continues, “Our answers to the cosmic questions – beliefs about God, human nature, history – form the pretheoretical framework for how we understand and interpret the world around us. With them and from them we make sense of our lives. Because this is

³ Steve Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1996), 88.

true for every person under the sun, we can understand Iris Murdoch's assertion that "at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over."⁴

How do we make sense out of life? How do we answer these questions? How do we connect things instead of continue to live in the disconnect? How do we pursue integration instead of disintegration?

Garber suggests: "Two factors stood out: their desire for coherence and their belief in the truth. No other issues seemed as central to their articulation of their worldviews as these two; together they are woven into the fabric of faith of those who still believe and who act on what they believe."⁵ "The college years need to help students develop ways of thinking and living that are coherent, that make sense of the whole of life. It is the difference between a worldview which brings integration to the whole of one's existence and one which brings disintegration. . . . It was the integrity between what they believed about the world and how they lived that marked them as so deeply different."

Our psalmist agrees with Garber. *Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem- built as a city that is bound firmly together,*

Worship brings all of life together into a cohesion, a unity. It makes sense of things. It is the uttermost reality.

"When you went to Jerusalem, you encountered the great foundational realities: God created you, God redeemed you, God provided for you. In Jerusalem, you saw in ritual and heard proclaimed in preaching the powerful history-shaping truth that God forgives our sins and makes it possible to be free without guilt and with purpose. In Jerusalem all the scattered fragments of experience, all the bits and pieces of truth and feeling and perception were put together in a single whole." (51-52)

Thus in worship, we bring our diversity, but we pursue unity together.

"In worship, all the different tribes functioned as a single people in harmonious relationship. In worship, though we have come from different places and out of various conditions, we are demonstrably after the same things, saying the same things, doing the same things. With all our different levels of intelligence and wealth, background and language, rivalries and resentments, still in worship we are gathered into a single whole. Outer quarrels and misunderstandings and differences pale into insignificance as the inner unity of what God builds in the act of worship is demonstrated." (52)

This is one of the things Paul is saying in Galatians 3:27-28 when he writes: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Charles Spurgeon writes, "David, in a vision, saw the city built. He saw it no longer a waste, or a mere collection of tents, or a city on paper, started but not yet completed. God's mercy to the nation of Israel allowed peace and plenty, which was sufficient for the building and perfection of its capital. . . . Thanks be to God. Jerusalem is built. The Lord, by his glorious appearing, has built Zion. It is not built as a set of booths or as a conglomeration of hovels. It is a city: substantial, architectural, designed, arranged, and defended."⁶

And: "The church is a permanent and important institution, founded on the Rock, built with art, and arranged with wisdom. In a church, one of the most delightful conditions is the compactness of the unity: 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism.' (Eph. 4:5) A church should be one in creed, one in heart, one in testimony, one in service, one in aspiration, and one in sympathy. Those who would build dividing walls greatly injure our Jerusalem. She needs compacting, not dividing. There is no joy in giving to a church that is torn with internal dissension. The gladness of the saints is the adhesiveness of the love and unity. It would be to their sadness if the church was a house divided. Some bodies of Christians appear to be periodically blown to fragments, and no gracious believer is glad to be in the way when that explosion takes place. Strife and contention are not attractive."⁷

When I was at OSU with The Navigators, I had a part-time job in the Education Extension office helping with its publications and publicity. It became obvious that one of the problems was that every office on campus was doing its own thing, using its own logos and colors and making a general mess of things. So the university hired a woman to come in and bring conformity and uniformity to what was produced that had OSU on it. It was a good thing to come together and look alike, to agree that what went out from OSU represented it well.

Worship helps bring us together. We are certainly diverse, and even should be more so. But God's thoughts must be our thoughts. His truth our truth. We must come and ask him what he thinks, we must pursue integrity in our lives, a worldview that brings things together instead of breaks them apart.

Worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God

The psalmist writes, "*to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*"

It's in worship that we obey the command to praise God. We do that together. We do that with a certain structure. We do that with order and purpose. We do that regularly. We do that in every season. And we must, or we forget, we drift, we lose our very selves.

We have to admit a relationship with God is sort of strange thing. God is a spirit. He is a three-person-ed Trinity. He speaks through his word, which is a canon closed 2000 years ago. He speaks to us through prayer, which is not that easy to explain

⁴ Garber, 111

⁵ Garber, 111

⁶ Spurgeon, TOD, 1289

⁷ Spurgeon, TOD, 1289

to people. He allows evil to exist. He ordains all things, which we don't understand. He is pleased to work through his people, who are broken, needy, sinful and very often mess things up a great deal.

Your relationship with God is very important. And it is not fragile in any cosmic sense, but you do need others or you will fool yourself. Humans have an incredible capacity of self-deception, which is why we need others, why we need the Scriptures, why we need elders, why we need *this*.

If you decide that you don't need this, that you can worship God best by yourself, or off in the mountains, or with five people of the same age group, or without authority structures, or without accessing our forefathers, or in a "new way," then you are in danger. Worship serves to center you, to help you, to feed you, to pastor you.

What we're doing here is renewing our covenant to God. That isn't the way we often think of furthering our relationship, but it is what worship is. PCA pastor Jeff Myers writes, "The language of 'personal relationship' does not best describe the precise way in which the Lord and His people relate to one another. I'm not denying that God's interaction with us is a 'relationship' or that it is 'personal,' but when you combine those two words the resulting phrase has connotations that do not really help us understand how God and man relate to one another.

"The biblical word 'covenant' is much better. When we hear it we are reminded that God's relations with us have a particular *form*. Indeed, a covenant is a *formal* personal relationship, if you will. That is not an adequate definition, but it reminds us that covenants possess definitive content and structure. The covenant is the *form* or *shape* of God's personal relations with us."⁸

"According to the Scriptures, in corporate Christian worship, the people of God are engaged by the Spirit and drawn into the Father's presence as living sacrifices in Christ (Eph. 2:18). This is how God renews his covenant with his people. He draws near to draw us near. And in drawing us near to Him we are renewed through sacrifice. Christian worship is always sacrificial; when we say Christian worship is covenantal renewal worship we mean that it takes the form of sacrifice and offering... The Lord serves us when he draws us near to himself through 'knife and fire' (Gen. 3:24), that is by making us living sacrifices. This means that our reasonable liturgy, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, is to offer ourselves as 'living sacrifices,' to submit to the Lord's transforming knife and fire."⁹

The sacrificial covenant renewal service is an astounding thing that we take for granted. We're so used to God's goodness to us, that we don't blink an eye at why or how or *that* he loves us, bends to us, forgives us and hears us again and again.

"When we sin and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn't go off and leave us – he enters into our trouble and saves us. That is good, an instance of what the Bible calls gospel. We discover reasons and motivations for living in faith and find that God is already helping us to do it – and that is good. Praise God! 'A Christian,' wrote Augustine, 'should be an alleluia from head to foot.' That is the reality. That is the truth of our lives. God made us, redeems us, provides for us. The natural, honest, healthy, logical response to that is praise to God. When we praise we are functioning at the center, we are in touch with the basic, core reality of our being." (53-54)

One of the things that gets in our way is that so often we don't feel like worshipping. This may be because we stayed up too late on Saturday night. It may be because we feel too lousy with ourselves and don't want to come into contact with a holy God. Not this Sunday. It may be because we're tired of the rigamarole. It feels like a dog and pony show, one put on just for a song and dance. It feels phony and unnecessary. We're tired of it.

When we don't feel like it, we hesitate, we think it would be dishonest for us to go up to the house of the Lord. But "the psalm says, I don't care whether you feel like it or not: as was *decreed* "give thanks to the name of God."

"I [Eugene Peterson] have put great emphasis on the fact that Christians worship because they want to, not because they are forced to. But I have never said that we worship because we *feel* like it. Feelings are great liars. If Christians only worshiped when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship. Feelings are important in many areas but are completely unreliable in matters of faith. Paul Scherer was laconic: 'The Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel.'"

What would happen if you were recruited as an OU wrestler, and you called Coach Spates and said, "Coach, I don't really feel like practicing today. Maybe tomorrow." What would he say? Uh, too bad. Get your patootie in there NOW.¹⁰

"We live in what one writer has called the 'age of sensation.' We think that if we don't *feel* something there can be no authenticity in *doing* it. But the wisdom of God says something different: that we can *act* ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can *feel* ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an *act* that develops feelings toward God, not a *feeling* for God that is expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured." (54)¹¹

Worship centers our attention on the decisions of God

So we come. We want to come with joy and thanksgiving. With praise and awe. But we may trudge in. We may begin as if we have an appointment with the dentist: "I know this is for my good, and I'm here, but you can't make me like it." We shouldn't act like that or think like that, but we may and it's better to be here and be honest about it. This is where we should be. In fact, this is where *everyone* should be today. In God's house. In worship.

And it is here that we hear what God thinks about things. Where we gain our bearings and learn the truth.

⁸ Jeff Myers, *The Lord's Service*, (Canon Press: Moscow, Idaho, 2003), 38.

⁹ Myers, 56

¹⁰ Not sure that Coach Spates would say patootie.

¹¹ "Note that the object of these pilgrim feasts was *to give thanks*, not primarily to seek unity or prosperity. These were gifts over and above the occasion, not its *raison d'etre*; whereas pagan worship was all too blatantly a means to securing what one wanted: cf Hosea 2:5." Kidner, 434

“Thrones of judgment are places that word is announced. Judgment is not a word *about* things, describing them; it is a word that *does* things, putting love in motion, applying mercy, nullifying wrong, ordering goodness.”¹² *There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.*

Eugene Peterson waxes eloquently on this theme:

“This word of God is everywhere in worship. In the call to worship we hear God’s first word to us; in the benediction we hear God’s last word to us; in the Scripture lesson we hear God speaking to our faith-parents; in the sermon we hear that word reexpressed to us; in the hymns, which are all to a greater or lesser extent paraphrases of Scripture, the Word of God makes our prayers articulate. Every time we worship our minds are informed, our memories refreshed with the judgments of God, we are familiarized with what God says, what he has decided, the ways he is working out our salvation.

“There is simply no place these can be done as well as in worship. If we stay at home by ourselves and read the Bible, we are going to miss a lot, for our reading will be unconsciously conditioned by our culture, limited by our ignorance, distorted by our unnoticed prejudices. In worship we are part of “the large congregation” where all the writers of Scripture address us, where hymn writers use music to express truths that touch us not only in our heads but in our hearts, where the preacher who has just lived through six days of doubt, hurt, faith and blessing with the worshipers speaks the truth of Scripture in the language of the congregation’s present experience. We want to hear what God says and what he says to us: worship is the place where our attention is centered on these personal and decisive words of God.” (55)

Do you come to worship to have your opinions changed or confirmed? Do you sit there having figured God out already or are you still asking questions? Do you wonder? Do you seek him? Are you willing to follow what he says? Do you believe he has something to say? Do you believe these thrones of judgment still function for you, for us, today?

Worship flows out into the rest of our lives

So I’m preaching to the choir. You’re here. You made it to worship today. Despite all the things you had to do this week, despite however much sleep you got last night, despite whatever conditions made it difficult for you to arrive to church today, you are here. Good for you.

Now, let me ask you this: Does worship make any difference in your life?

It does for the psalmist: *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!” For my brothers and companions’ sake I will say, “Peace be within you!” For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.*

“Here we have prayers that overflow the bounds of worship and create new relationships in the city, in society.” (56)

This prayer here seems like an informal asking for “a second helping of bread if still hungry, or for directions if lost.” (56) Out of worship comes a spontaneous prayer for peace and prosperity. *Shalom* and *Shalvah*. They go together. They flow out of worship. Are we praying for peace and prosperity of the church? Not only our church, but other churches? Are we partnering together with others who preach and teach the gospel? Are we concerned with reaching the lost, and equipping the saints to serve? Are we secretly praying for the downfall of other congregations, or are happy if we hear of failure?

I hope not, but I fear so.

We should pray for the peace and prosperity of the church. The Church. We should pray for the peace and prosperity of our city, state and nation. Of other nations. Of Uganda and Finland and Thailand and Australia. We should pray for God’s hand to move across the world in a way that brings peace and prosperity. “Worship extends an extended, daily participation in peace and prosperity so that we share in our daily rounds what God initiates and continues in Jesus Christ.” (57)

Peterson puts it this way: “Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God – it whets our appetite. Our need for God is not taken care of by engaging in worship – it deepens. It overflows the hour and permeates the week. The need is expressed in a desire for peace and security. Our everyday needs are changed by the act of worship. We are no longer living from hand to mouth, greedily scrambling through the human rat race to make the best we can out of a mean existence. Our basic needs suddenly become worthy of the dignity of creatures made in the image of God: peace and security. The words *shalom* and *shalvah* play on the sounds of Jerusalem, *yerushalayim*, the place of worship.” (56)

Worship is a taste of what is yet to come

We need only to brush on this, since it is not in our text. But we must remember that Jerusalem did not always exist. David built it up, and Solomon constructed the temple that our psalm speaks of. Many times it was attacked and destroyed. Jerusalem is one of the most fought over cities in all of history, in an area of the world filled with turmoil and trouble. And now we also know that Jerusalem was a picture, a type, a foreshadow of the church. It was the church of the day, but now we have a church, a temple without stones and mortar. An indestructible temple.

Hebrews 12:22-24 *22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Hebrews 12:28-29 *8 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.*

¹² Peterson

And in the future we will worship at the New Jerusalem, a new city:

Revelation 21:11-14 *11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed- 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*

Revelation 21:22 - 22:1 *22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day- and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Recently, I asked one of the students, "What can we do to reach out to this set of students?" I was talking about students he would naturally come into contact with, in his major, in his group. He thought for a little bit, and then said, "Well, we could set up a Christian conference where they could talk about how being a Christian affects their profession." "Okay, what else?" I asked. "We could do a show where they could display how being a Christian affects the things they create."

Those are good ideas. "What can we do *now*?" I asked. Then it hit him. We can invite them to go to church with us. To RUF. To join our Bible study. To come to fall conference. To meet some friends of ours for a movie. To worship with us.

Doing big huge things is one thing we can do, yes. We should think through those sorts of strategies. But we must be willing to say, "Let us go the house of the Lord." We can be assured that some hearts will leap for joy at such a suggestion.

I have two tickets to the Sooners National Championship game. Would you like to go? I have two tickets to the Masters – are you interested? I have two tickets to the Cards game – do you want to join me? I have two tickets to see U2, Toby Keith, Dave Matthews, Barry Manilow – are you interested? I'm going to the lake and have an extra spot on the boat – when can I pick you up?

I have a friend, JR Foster who loves baseball. He knows I do too, so he told me that recently, he was telling his committee that he had to go up to Boston for a meeting. One of the men asked him if he was going to a Red Sox game. I wish, JR said. The man pulled out a \$100 bill, and said, "I want you to go." It was one of JR's greatest thrills.

I'm going to worship God next week on Sunday morning. We meet at 9 am for Christian education, have fellowship from 10-10:30 and then worship together at 10:30. We'll sing the songs of the faith, confess our sin, hear of God's forgiveness, hear God's word for us and be blessed greatly. Next week we'll have a meal afterwards and hear from those who have gone on mission trips from our church. I hope you'll be here with me. I'll pick you up if you need a ride.

Pray that God would make us worshipers of him. Pray that he would draw more worshipers of him to himself. Pray that we will be a community, a place, a people, a church where that appetite for God might be whetted.