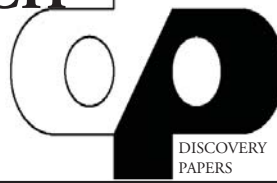


# CRAZY, BEAUTIFUL CHURCH

*SERIES: ASCEND*



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Psalm 122  
3rd Message  
Paul Taylor  
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It was a quiet, peaceful, secluded spot. I would often drive there immediately after church when I was in college. There was a creek and tall trees and rocky banks. I would drive towards the foothills, park by the road, and walk down to the water. I'd sit on a rock or walk along the water. It was a beautiful time of meeting with God. It was a powerful place for me.

Places are important to us. Is there a place that is special to you? Maybe you experienced God there. Maybe you have memories of family or of friends. Where is that place? Maybe it's outside somewhere. The mountains. The ocean. Maybe it's a chapel or a sanctuary. Take a second and think about a special place. Go there in your mind. Imagine yourself there.

This summer at PBC, we are doing a series called *Ascend*, studying Psalms 120 through 134. This is a collection of psalms referred to as the Psalms of Ascent. They were traditionally used by the ancient Israelites as songs to sing as they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For thousands of years, these psalms have led God's people into worship. That's our hope for us this summer.

This morning we are being guided into worship by Psalm 122. It's a psalm that is all about a special place—the holy city of Jerusalem. That makes sense. These songs were used as God's people went to that place. Jerusalem played an incredibly important role in the life of the ancient Israelites.

But it is a bit tricky for us to listen to a psalm all about Jerusalem, because we are not ancient Jews. Jerusalem doesn't mean the same thing to us as it did to them. In the Old Testament, God chose a place to dwell. After the first temple was built, we read about God's presence filling the temple. 1 Kings 8:10-11 says,

**<sup>10</sup>When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD.**

**<sup>11</sup>And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.**

For ancient Jews, Jerusalem was the center of their worship. It was the place where God chose to dwell in a unique and powerful way. But not for us. For us something has changed. What's our Jerusalem?

Because places are so important to us, we are tempted to take the reference to Jerusalem and substitute a different place. We just have a different place that serves as the center of our worship. People sometimes talk about the "house of the Lord" in that way and they mean the physical building that they go to as Christians in order to worship. Some of those physical buildings are beautiful testimonies to the glory of God. You walk into them and you immediately have a sense of the transcendent.

But when Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn in two. Some time after his resurrection, the glory of God once again descended and chose to make God's presence uniquely real. But this time it wasn't in a place. This time it happened to a people. Acts 2:1-3 reads,

**<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.**

So now we don't have a place where God's presence is uniquely manifest. Now we have a people. The church. That's why our sign out front says, "Peninsula Bible Church meets here." There's an old song that says, "The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people." What Jerusalem was to ancient Jews, the church is to us.

So that's what we're going to be talking about today. This crazy, beautiful church. This is what Jerusalem is to us.

Our culture has done something curious. We understand that the church isn't a place. But we're still a little confused about what the church is. For a lot of people, church is an event. Church isn't a place anymore, it's an event. And if a previous generation evaluated their "church experience" by how beautiful the stained glass was or how delicate the arched ceiling looked, many people in our generation evaluate their "church experience" by how powerful the event was.

Was the music the kind of music I like? Was it loud enough to fill my ears? Or, was it soft enough to not hurt my ears? Was the room darkened in just the right way to

encourage maximum spiritual awareness? Were the visuals stirring? A lot of people “go to church.” Church is an event they attend. And it might be a good event or a bad event—there’s all sorts of ways to evaluate it.

That’s the wrong way to think about it. Church isn’t an event. It’s a people. You don’t “go to church.” You are the church. The church is a collection of people. A community. The church is us, not what happens at 9:00 am on a Sunday morning.

So as we look at Psalm 122, we’re going to hear the psalmist talking about Jerusalem and we’re going to be thinking about the church. Not a place, not an event, but a people. And we’ll see that this psalm is an incredibly powerful description of who the church is and what the church ought to be. We’ll find out how we are supposed to respond to the church, what is supposed to characterize the church, and finally what really makes the church the church.

## Enjoy the Church

Our psalm begins with the psalmist standing within the city of Jerusalem enjoying the experience.

Psalm 122:1-2:

**A song of ascents. Of David.**

**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.**

You know that feeling when you finally get somewhere after a long road trip? Or airline flight? That’s where the psalmist starts. These psalms were sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. This one begins with the incredible feeling of standing within the gates of the city that you’ve traveled a long way to see.

Several years ago, my extended family went to Germany on a vacation and visited a bunch of sites. At one point, we visited the castle that had served as the model for the Disneyland castle. It’s called Neuschwanstein Castle. I remember standing at the base of that castle looking up at it and just reveling in that moment. It didn’t seem real. I expected Tinkerbell to fly down right in front of my face. It was like seeing something you’d only known as a fantasy come to life.

This is what it might have felt like for the first time when

the pilgrims came to Jerusalem. Can you imagine the long journey and then standing there looking at the incredible beauty and glory of Solomon’s temple?

These pilgrims rejoiced to enter Jerusalem. If the church is our Jerusalem, do you feel this way when you get together with other Christians? When we assemble as the church? Put simply, do you enjoy church? And remember, I don’t mean the event of church that starts at 9:00 am and ends at 10:20 am. I mean the people. Do you enjoy the community?

If we are going to use the experience of the psalmist as a guide to what our experience ought to be, then the first part of it is that we enjoy each other. Enjoy the church.

This is very often my experience. I have profound experiences when I’m surrounded by gatherings of other Christians. I usually walk away from a Sunday morning worship service aware of God in a way that I wasn’t before worshipping together with this group. I love going on retreats and spending a weekend together. I often feel refreshed after meeting in a small group to study the Bible or pray.

But I also experience something when the church gathers in less formal or intense settings. That’s part of the beauty of Camp PBC which is coming up the first week of August. It’s not a spiritually intense week. There’s nothing magical about it. But something happens there. It’s the church doing life together. It’s not magical, but it’s special. Really special. The normal events of eating and cooking and cleaning and going to bed and waking up have some different character to them. When my feet are standing inside the gates of Camp PBC, I am glad.

We’re actually making an effort to bring some of that magic back to Palo Alto this summer. Look for announcements about Sunday Night Live—a chance to come together as families and anyone else who wants to be included for a kind of Camp PBC campfire experience. It’s starting up the last Sunday of June and will run through the middle of August. I’d encourage you to check it out—it’s a great opportunity to just spend some casual time together as a church.

So I can resonate with the experience of the psalmist. Times of gathering with other believers are often uniquely powerful. I do enjoy the church. Except when I don’t.

And sometimes I don’t. Sometimes my experience in Christian community is far less than I want it to be. Sometimes it can feel forced. Sometimes I just don’t click with people. Sometimes getting together can seem like a dry obligation. Sometimes it seems like people in the

church just don't have enough in common. Sometimes it seems like people are trying so hard to look like good Christians that they can't relate to each other. Sometimes Christians can be mean to each other. Judgmental. Competitive. Gossipy. Even vengeful.

On the one hand, it's easy to say that we are supposed to enjoy the church. When that works out, great. But what about when it doesn't? What about when our experience isn't great? What about when it is worse? What about when it is damaging or hurtful?

First of all, I want to say that if that has been your experience, I'm sorry. Sometimes we try so hard to talk about how great Christian community can be that we make it sound like something must be wrong with you if you haven't felt that way. That's not at all the case. If you've had a bad experience with the church, or are having one right now, that's perfectly fine. Plenty of people have been burned by the church. A lot of it is justified. You were legitimately hurt. The church is full of broken people. We are going to hurt each other. You don't have to pretend like Christians have never hurt you or claim that all your experiences in church have been positive. We must value truth, even when the truth is hard to hear.

And yet, you're still here. You're worshipping at a church on a Sunday morning. Good for you. I'm glad that you haven't given up on us. Not just for our sake, but for your sake. I'm convinced that there is something beyond the hurt that you might have felt as part of the Christian community. Just like a good marriage often goes through struggles and then comes out stronger, your experience in the Christian community will get better as you work through some things. And as we work through some things.

## **Appreciate the Church**

That's where our psalm leads us next. If we are going to worship together and enjoy each other, we need to know how to be God's people. We can grow toward being the kind of people who are easier to enjoy. What made Jerusalem so great? What makes the church so great? And if the church isn't all that great, what can we do to be great?

Psalm 122:3-5.

**<sup>3</sup>Jerusalem is built like a city  
that is closely compacted together.**

**<sup>4</sup>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.**

**<sup>5</sup>There the thrones for judgment stand,  
the thrones of the house of David.**

What is the psalmist saying about Jerusalem? What does it mean for the church? There are three things that the author praises about Jerusalem. The way it's constructed, the way the tribes go up to it every year, and the fact that the thrones of the house of David are there. So what do these things mean?

First, he talks about the way the city is built. The Hebrew here is a bit hard to understand. Different versions translate it very differently. It seems to be something about how the city is compactly and efficiently held together. We're not entirely sure what that means, but the best guess is that it has to do with the safety of the city. The arrangement of the city gives us an added advantage in defending the city. So Jerusalem is safe.

The second point the psalmist makes is that this city is where the tribes come regularly. The fact that this is mentioned may be why this psalm is included as one of the psalms of ascent. What that says about the city is that it gives people a sense of identity. All of Israel is supposed to travel there regularly—all the tribes converge there. Imagine the sense of identity created when the whole city converges on a stadium for a football game. It draws people together, gives them a unified identity, and creates bonds among people who would otherwise have nothing in common. Jerusalem did that for God's people. Jerusalem created identity.

And finally, the thrones of the house of David are there. He says he's talking about the thrones of judgment. So when you come to Jerusalem, you find justice. In ancient Israel, one of the primary roles of government was to be the judge over disputes. Remember the story of Solomon deciding between two women who each claimed a baby to be theirs? The thrones of the house of David were known for being extremely just. In Jerusalem everyone was treated fairly. In Jerusalem, there was equality. In Jerusalem, there was justice.

So our psalm praises the city for its safety, the identity it creates, and the justice it promotes. What does that mean for us?

Let's see how we can apply these things to the church. The psalmist started by enjoying Jerusalem and then moved on to appreciating it. We started off with enjoying the church, now we can see what kinds of things we ought to appreciate about the church. We can appreciate the church.

Remember when we are talking about the church, we are not necessarily talking about Peninsula Bible Church. We are talking about the church at large—the combined assembly of God’s people. We are part of that larger thing, so all of this should be true of us. But we’re talking about something bigger than us.

Our psalm suggests that we can appreciate the church as a people of safety, a people of identity, and a people of justice.

The obvious question to ask is whether these things are true of us. Are people safe among us? Do we find our identity here? And do we promote justice and equality?

I’d say the answer probably depends on who you ask. I can think of powerful ways in which this is true for us. I’ve seen examples of all of these things. I can think of other ways where this isn’t so true for us. Areas that we need to grow in. So these characteristics become things that we can give thanks for when we see them and things that we can strive to grow in. Let’s spend a few more minutes thinking about how these things apply to us being the church.

First, safety. There’s a lot of ways that we could talk about safety. Certainly there is physical safety and the church should be a community of people where you don’t fear being attacked.

But real safety goes deeper than physical safety. Perhaps the most important aspect of being safe in a church is being able to be yourself. This has to be a safe place where we can talk about what is really going on. We have to be able to talk about our doubts here. Is this God thing really for real? We have to be able to talk about our failures here. I really wish I didn’t yell at my children so much. We have to be able to talk about our struggles here. I’m running out of money and I don’t know what to do next.

There are so few places in our world where it is safe to let down your guard. Most of the time statements like that are met with judgment or exclusion or annoyance or rejection. That can’t be true here. We have to be a place where you can have doubts and failures and struggles. We have to be a safe place.

Honestly, that’s part of why I came back to PBC when I graduated seminary. My wife Rachel and I were going through a hard time in our marriage and were in the midst of marriage counseling. I had talked to some other churches, but was afraid to talk too much about that. But I distinctly remember sitting down with a group of the elders from PBC and sharing that my marriage was in a hard place and we were in counseling. The response wasn’t, “hmm, maybe you should go be a pastor somewhere

else.” The response was, “that’s great—it sounds like God is preparing you to be a pastor in more than just academic ways.” I loved that response. It was affirming and welcoming and nonjudgmental and most of all it was true. That’s exactly what God was doing.

The church has to be safe.

The church is also the community where we find our identity. There are so many things competing for our allegiance in terms of identity. We are Americans, we are Californians, we are mothers and fathers and lawyers and engineers. We are White and Asian and Latino. We identify with the schools we graduated from and the companies we work for. We identify with the neighborhoods we live in. We even identify with the brand of phone in our pocket. I’m an Android guy—how could you carry an iPhone?

There are lots of things that compete for our sense of identity. But one should come first. First and foremost, we are followers of Jesus Christ. That makes us members of the church. This is our most important identity. It’s more important than the country we pay taxes to. It’s more important than the company that writes our paycheck. It’s more important than the candidate we vote for. We are followers of Jesus.

You experience this in a powerful way when you travel around the world and meet other believers and realize that you are connected to them in an incredible way. That has happened so many times to me in India.

The church creates identity.

But sometimes, I forget that being a part of the church is my primary identity. Sometimes I look to other things to be my identity.

And that brings us to the last thing: equality. This flows directly from identity. If our first identity is as followers of Christ, then when we come together, it doesn’t matter whether we are rich or poor, in recovery or refinancing, young or old, white or dark. Everyone gets treated equally here because we have a common identity.

Once again, there are few places in our culture where that’s true. You are always judged by something and treated differently because of it. We strive to be a place where that’s not true. When we get it right, it’s beautiful and powerful. But we can certainly do a better job. We have to be a place of equality and justice.

But we are not only a community where people are treated fairly, we are also a people who long for justice to be extended to the world. We can’t just be concerned about

what happens inside our walls because our God calls us and models for us the desire to look outside. We must be concerned with injustice in our world. We need to care about economic injustice, about modern day slavery, about racial inequality, about gender discrimination. That doesn't mean everyone needs to be completely up-to-date on every issue. But we need to be a community that collectively works for justice in the world.

The church cares about justice inside and justice outside.

The psalmist praises Jerusalem for its safety, the identity it creates, and the justice it promotes. These are the things that he appreciates about the holy city. These are the things we can appreciate about the church. When we see them lived out, we give thanks to God for making us that kind of people. When we don't, we pray for strength to grow and we strive toward those things. The church needs to be a safe place. The church should give us our identity. The church needs to love justice and equality.

## God Lives Here

We've seen the psalmist respond to being in Jerusalem. First, he arrives in the city and talks about the joy he has for visiting it. Then he praises the city. Finally, the psalmist concludes by offering prayers for the city. Here's what the psalmist prays for in verses 6-9.

Psalm 122:6-9:

**<sup>6</sup>Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:**

**“May those who love you be secure.**

**<sup>7</sup>May there be peace within your walls  
and security within your citadels.”**

**<sup>8</sup>For the sake of my brothers and friends,  
I will say, “Peace be within you.”**

**<sup>9</sup>For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your prosperity.**

You may have noticed some repetition in these verses. There is one overall theme of what the psalmist prays for: peace. That's the Hebrew word *shalom* and it's one of the richest and most meaningful words in all of Hebrew.

Peace is repeated three times in these four verses. But in the last verse, there is a different word. These verses progress in a kind of concentric circle, moving toward the center of the city. It's as if the psalmist starts outside the city and moves inward.

First he prays for the peace of the city and upon those who love the city. This is a kind of prayer that you'd ask looking from the outside of the city. Then he prays for peace within the walls and the security of the city. Now we're at the city, perhaps standing inside it and asking that the walls do their job to keep the people safe. Then he prays “for the sake of my brothers” that there is peace within the city. The implication is that these brothers are the ones who live within the city. So he's started out by talking about peace from outside, peace for the walls and peace for the inhabitants.

Then he gets to the center of the city. He prays “for the sake of the house of the LORD our God.” The temple of God. One of the most beautiful buildings on earth. But he doesn't pray for the peace of the temple. Now he prays for “prosperity.” The Hebrew word there just means “good”, but since that is such a weak word in our language, the NIV uses “prosperity.” It isn't “good” like “not quite great.” It's “good” like “the opposite of evil.” Goodness. Prosperity. Life. Health.

So the psalmist prays for the city and for its people, and he builds in intensity as he moves toward the center. At the center is God's presence. It's the goodness of that presence that creates the peace of the city. The heart of the city is the presence of God.

And as we've been reflecting on the church, this is our final observation about the church as well. It may sound like an obvious thing to say. It may not even need saying. Except that it does. The heart of the church is the presence of God. This is where God dwells and this is what makes the church different. Look around. God is here. Not in this place, but in this people. God lives here.

The heart of the church is not the pastors. The heart of the church is not the people. The heart of the church is not activities or beliefs or political opinions or social groups or activism or even the Bible. The heart of the church is the presence of God. That's what makes us different. That is what creates this crazy, beautiful thing that we call church. The church—this community—is about God, not each other.

I came to college wanting to meet other Christians. When I arrived as a freshman, there was someone in my dorm who was a really strong Christian. But something happened that I didn't understand. I didn't really like being around this person. In fact, I didn't like this person very much at all.

That confused me. I thought Christians were supposed to have this deep connection. I thought we were supposed to be family. I thought we were supposed to be best friends.

That's the part I had gotten wrong. The church isn't about each other. It isn't about how well we connect with each other.

The church is about God. That means I'm going to be asked to form relationships with people that I wouldn't normally otherwise. It means that some of those people I might not click with. It means that some of them I may not even like very much.

This is what makes the church the church. There are plenty of places where you can find people you like and become friends with them. But in the church, we are called to love and appreciate and serve people because God has brought us together, not because we like them. We have to love each other, but we don't have to like each other.

At first, that may sound like a bummer. You may think—I don't want to be part of a community like that. I don't want to have to love people that I don't like. But when your perspective shifts, you may think differently. Because being a part of a community like this means that people will love you even if they don't like you. And I am learning that I'm not as likable as I sometimes think I am. You may be plenty likable, but for those of us that have rough edges, being a part of a community like this is really good news.

I want to be a part of a people that is connected because of something bigger than themselves. Who is bigger than God? At the heart of Jerusalem is the presence of God. At the heart of the church is the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Jerusalem wasn't just a city. God lived there. We aren't just a group of people. God lives here.

## Conclusion

Remember that place that I had you think about at the beginning of this message. It was a special place, but it was a lonely place. There were times of intimacy with God, but I also felt isolated and disconnected.

Places are important to us. But for most of us people are more important. There are certainly people who like to be alone more than I do. But even if you recharge by yourself, people are important to you. In fact, a lot of our special places are special precisely because of the people involved there.

We've looked at a psalm this morning that uses rich language to praise the glory of Jerusalem. We've suggested

that what Jerusalem was for God's people in the Old Testament, the community of the church is for us. We've talked about enjoying the church, appreciating the church, and the reality that God lives here.

That last point actually becomes the key to all the others. Sometimes I enjoy the church and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I'm able to appreciate the church and sometimes I find that really difficult. But when I remember that God lives here, it changes everything.

Because God is here—in this group of people—I can appreciate what is going on. I can look at the good things and give thanks to God. I can look at the areas we need to grow in and have faith that God is at work in them. If God weren't real, it would be hard to appreciate even the best church community.

None of this would make any sense apart from God. He is the key. He keeps us safe. He creates our new identity in Jesus Christ. He ensures justice will be done. The presence of God is the key.

So because I can appreciate God being in the midst of this crazy, beautiful, messy people, I can enjoy us too. I can stand in our midst and give thanks. Not because I have so much in common with everyone or even because I like everyone. But because God lives in us. He is at work. His presence is here—and that is special. Nowhere else can I find the perfect presence of God in a community of imperfect people. That's the church.

So here we are. We are standing in the gates of the church. We are standing with each other. Enjoy it. Appreciate it. Because God lives here.