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The Climb of Your Life: The Base Camp Psalm 122

The highest peak in the world is Mt. Everest at 29,000 feet. It is the Holy Grail of mountain climbers. Approximately 3100 people have made it to the top since May 1953. Most of those climbers started at this base camp, the first of five camps that stretch up the flank of the mountain. Base camp sits at 17,600 feet, 2½ vertical miles from the top. It is the place you rest, acclimatize, receive encouragement and prepare yourself for the climb of your life.

This morning as we continue with our series on the Psalms of Ascent... we arrive at base camp. *[Read Psalm 122]*

I was excited about last week's Seahawks game and the opportunity to watch Jim Harbaugh throw another hissy fit. So were lots of other folks, apparently. Everywhere I went I saw Seahawks jerseys... such enthusiasm... such anticipation. If someone were to write a psalm to describe that excitement, maybe it would go like this:

I was glad when my friends said to me, let us go to the Seahawk game! We are standing with our feet inside of Century Link Field. Century Link, built like a small city to which the fans go up. The referees are all set, ready to pass judgment. Cheer for the victory of the Seahawks. All you within the grandstand and you within the luxury suites. "Victory to the Seahawks." For every Seattle fan I will say, "Victory to the Seahawks."

That's the kind of excitement we hear from the psalmist. He is glad to go to the house of the Lord. Glad that someone invited him to come along. And now he is standing inside the city gates, and he is pumped! As football season was approaching, one guy said, "I've got the shakes, I'm so excited!" The psalmist has the shakes, too! He can't wait to get in, can't wait to find his place in the courtyard, to stake out his spot and set up a little tailgate party right there on Temple Mount. He is glad!

Obviously, this speaks to the joy of a Jewish pilgrim 2500 years ago who has traveled to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. For centuries, though, commentators have seen this psalm as also pointing toward Christ and his church. The throne of judgment once occupied by King David is now occupied by King Jesus. And Jerusalem, the "House of the Lord," is now the Church of Jesus—

gatherings of people, large and small, who congregate on a Sunday morning and other times to celebrate the greatest victory ever... the victory of Jesus over death and Satan.

So here's the question for this morning, you Christ-worshippers: Are you excited to come to the House of the Lord? Do you get the holy shakes when Sunday morning approaches? "It's time to go to Church! Yippee." Are you glad when they say, "Let us go to the House of the Lord?" Some of you are. I can sense it. You can tell that you love to be here... love to serve, to greet, to give... love to love your fellow Chapel Hillbillies. "Yes," you would say, "I am very glad to go to the house of the Lord."

But others of you... maybe not so much. "No, not really that glad. It's something I do for my family. But I'd rather be watching a game."

How do you know if you are glad to be here? How would others know it? What are your signs of gladness? Is it the excitement in your heart and smile on your face? The eagerness with which you greet others? Are you kind of like a Chapel Hill Border Collie, yipping excitedly at others as they walk in from the parking lot? Or are you the Grumpy Gus I see from my window—head down, scowl on your face, unwilling to greet or smile—sending a clear signal that says, "Don't talk to me. I'm not interested in being nice. I'm on my way to be miserable in church, so just shut up!"

Or what does your giving say about your gladness? Some of you, whether you make a lot or a little, gladly tithe, happy to give your offering in the service of the Lord. But some of you pass that plate on like it's filled with rattlesnakes. Whoever is going to pay to keep this place running, it won't be you. Every Sunday, it's dine and dash for you.

Or what does your arrival time say about your gladness? Some of you are here early, your "feet inside the gates," seated and ready to go—eager to meet God, ready to drink in every part of the service from the first musical notes to the benediction. But others of you, who would never think of missing the opening kickoff, arrive 5, 10, 15, 20, 30 minutes late. Not just once in a while—we all get delayed sometimes, like when every stinking road in town is torn up—but every week?

What are you saying when you consistently show up late to church? "It's just not that important. I'll get there when I get everything else done. I don't need prayer for the forgiveness of my sins (we do that early on in the service); I don't need to praise God for his goodness to me (we do that early on, too.) I don't need to greet my friends. I don't like announcements because I really don't care what is going on in the life of the church—or worse—I am really not that excited to meet with God. He's lucky I'm here at all."

I will tell you as your pastor, it is disheartening to look out at the start of a service and see so many empty seats. It sends a message loud and clear: "I am not very glad to be here."

But that wasn't a problem for this guy. He was full of anticipation. And maybe if we discovered some of what it was about going to church that made this guy so "glad,"... maybe it would amp up the Sunday morning excitement for some of you.

So are five things I find in this psalm that contribute to gladness. You might want to jot them down... they all very cleverly rhyme, but you might to write them down anyhow.

What filled this man with Anticipation? First, "Invitation." "I was glad when they said to me, let **us** go to the house of the Lord." I don't know if he was planning on going to church on his own, but something stirred in his heart when friends came along and said, "Let's go to church together!" Think back. How did you first make your way to Chapel Hill? The Yellow Pages? Internet? The big building? I know one kid saw the sanctuary as it was being built and said to his dad, "Look, it's the new Mariner's Stadium!" Or how about this: how many of you came for the first time because someone asked you?

The most effective means of Christian outreach is a personal invitation. And notice, the invitation wasn't, "Hey, you really should go to the House of the Lord! They've got a great contemporary service with electric shofars and everything." No, it was "Let us go together! Will you come with me to church? I'd love to pick you up."

Chapel Hill grew from a church of 185 people to a church of 1700 worshipers because excited people invited their friends... friends who need Jesus and a place learn about him; a place to be loved. But we are not as good at inviting as we once were, and it shows. When was the last time you invited a friend to church? If you want to be more excited about church, try it. You will be more interested and engaged in every part of the service because you are so eager for your guest to have a great experience. And of course, the real benefit is this: someone you know who doesn't know Jesus just might get to know him! Last Wednesday a man who was invited to Men's Life gave his life to Christ out in the foyer afterwards! That will make you glad, I guarantee it!

So one way to up the anticipation factor is through invitation. A second is Veneration. (That's the "tion" word for "Worship.") Verse four says that the tribes of the Lord have all gone up to Jerusalem so they "can give thanks to the name of the Lord." This is the most important thing to grasp, and the hardest thing in a culture that is built on self-gratification. Everything in our culture revolves around "what I get out of it." Church is too. People describe going to church because they "get fed" there. People hop from one church to another because they "like the worship better."

Obviously, we work hard to provide nourishing, biblical messages. And we would be crazy not to offer music that captures the hearts of our worshippers. But this is not a seminary class. And it is not a concert. It is a service of worship to Almighty God. We have not gathered here primarily for what we get out of it; we are here to give ourselves to God. To tell him we love him and to offer up our lives in confession and surrender; offer up our instincts to the instruction of his word; to proclaim his worthiness—that's what worship (worth-ship) means! Augustine once wrote, "A Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot."

Obviously, we get something out of worship, too, but not what you might think. We get God. We receive more of God and his love and grace and instruction in our life. But that is a result of our primary purpose. We are here together, first, to tell God that we love him, that we are so grateful to him, that we have been blessed by his grace, that he is God and we are not; that we cannot live without him; that nothing we do will amount to anything apart from him. That is why we worship: for God, first... not for us.

One theologian described Sunday worship as theatre. He said, "Most people think of it this way: God is the prompter, the pastors are the actors and the congregation is the audience. That is exactly wrong. In real worship, the pastors are the prompters, the congregation is the actors and God is the audience."

If we got hold of this one thing—that we are here together to offer veneration to the God who created us, blessed us, is crazy about us and provided His son as a sacrifice to save us—it would change our whole approach to Sunday worship. We'd want to be here early to grab a few extra minutes with the Lord. We wouldn't want to miss a single piece of a service built to honor Him. We would sing lustily and listen carefully and laugh heartily and pray passionately and give generously because we understand, "This is about God, not about me!" Veneration.
[Anticipation, Invitation, Veneration]

Another thing that will up the gladness factor on a Sunday morning is "Obligation." I know, "obligation" sounds like the opposite of "gladness," but hang in there with me. By "obligation" I mean a sense of responsibility, of ownership, stewardship—that we are not just consumers, we are hosts; this is our house, too! We are concerned about the wellbeing of those around us; concerned for the visitor who is confused, concerned for the child who is lost, concerned for the non-believer who is frightened and convicted.

You hear that in verse 6: "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."

Do you hear the sense of responsibility, of ownership, of obligation... to God, to his fellow worshippers, to Jerusalem? Not in a grim, "do your duty" sort of way, but in

the sense of, "This is my church. These are my guests. It is my responsibility to pray for and care for and care about the state of affairs around here." I guarantee you, the elders and deacons and hundreds of volunteers who make the ministries of this church possible—who see stewardship of this house as a sacred duty born out of their love and gratitude—I guarantee you they show up on a Sunday morning with a sense of gladness. Why... because they have skin in the game. They are pulling for us. They aren't in the grandstand, spectating. They are in the game, playing. All in!

If you view Sunday mornings as a spectator sport and have never actually gotten into the game—never said, "How can I serve; How can I do my part? How can I help my brothers and sisters experience Jesus..."—then you will never be as excited as those who are all in. You will cross your arms and say, "Go ahead, entertain me, Bible Boy. Impress me, meet my needs, give me a concert." and when something upsets you, you will harrumph with displeasure—all the while keeping your jersey clean because you are up in the bleachers, safely away from the real action. Get in the game if you want gladness!

Can you bear one more? Habituation. It means habit... regularity. Sabbath was sacred in Jewish culture; it still is. It was the weekly priority and nothing was more important. The three annual pilgrimages—which were costly in time and money—were a priority. Worship wasn't once and done. These folks were in synagogue every week wherever they lived—and traveling hundreds of miles by foot, festival after festival, year after year—because every trip back to God's Holy City, every journey to the House of the Lord, strengthened and encouraged them for the rest of life.

Let's return to Mt. Everest. In order to reach the 29,000 foot summit of Mt. Everest, you have to make your way up from one camp to another. Base camp, Camp 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5... until finally, you make the final ascent. But actually that's not how it works. Did you know that it usually takes 5 weeks to climb Everest? Why... because, you keep returning to Base Camp. You start at Base, climb up to Camp 1, and then return to Base to rest and acclimatize. Then you climb to Camp 2 and back again to Base Camp, and then to Camp three and back again... until, finally, you make the final push to the top.

Did you notice *[from the video]* that the most dangerous part of the climb is the ice field between Base Camp and Camp 1? More people have died in those crevasses than any other part of the climb. Just imagine... five times back and forth across that section. But experienced mountaineers know that unless they acclimatize—unless they return to base camp again and again and again and again—they will not have strength to summit.

Many people think of Sunday worship as the mountaintop. They come here, have their spiritual high, and then return to the valley for the rest of the week. But no; this is base camp! This is the time for you to be resupplied, strengthened, to drink

in a little more oxygen, to prepare you and send you out and up—to your ministry at school, your ministry at work, your ministry at home—to the place where you are uniquely equipped and positioned to bring Christ into that part of His world. **That** is your mountaintop. You are here to be prepared and sent up! And if you don't come back to your base camp faithfully—again and again, week by week—you will run out of oxygen, run out of supplies, run out of strength, run out of encouragement and run out of hope. And when you stumble into the crevasses, and you will, you will not have the strength to pull yourself out.

If you pick and choose whether or not you go to Sunday worship based upon what other options are available—if you do not develop a habit of faithful attendance, week after week—you will not develop the spiritual strength and relationships that will carry you through the times when you are not glad. Because, trust me, we won't always be glad to go to the House of the Lord or to do anything else, for that matter. There will be times when we are distressed, disheartened, broken with grief or failure or sin. But in those moments when you desperately need God and God's people and don't feel like it... your habituation, your spiritual muscle memory will keep you going. It will sustain you and will provide the encouragement you desperately need and don't even know how to ask for. [Anticipation, Invitation, Veneration, Obligation, Habituation]

"I was **glad** when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord!" Are you?

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. The Psalmist was excited about going to "the house of the Lord." What makes you excited about coming to church?
 2. What if you **don't** feel like going to church some morning? What does it mean to "lead your feelings?"
 3. What is our purpose for being here for Sunday worship? What do you do to prepare yourself for that purpose?