



## Pentecost Sunday

# Are You Glad to be in Church Today?

Hebrews 10:22-25; Psalm 122:1-9

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Are you glad to be in church today? The psalmist said, I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord.”

We hear a lot of reasons people give up for not going to church: “My dad made me go when I was little.” “There are too many hypocrites there.” “It’s the only day I have to sleep in.” “The pastor talks too loud.” “The pastor talks too soft.” “I’m not a fan of organized religion.” And to all of these and more, here’s what I say: Don’t try to respond in such a way as to expose the person’s flimsy excuse. Because it doesn’t make a difference. When you remove one excuse another will most likely pop up in its place. Instead, keep relating, keep loving and pray that the person will one day find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God.

What may surprise us is how many people do go to worship. It is one of the important acts in a life of discipleship. And what is more interesting than all of the excuses people give for not worshipping, is discovering the reasons why they do.

Psalm 122 is the song of a person who decided to worship God. The first line catches us by surprise. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” But it shouldn’t. Worship is the most popular thing that Christians do voluntarily. I say voluntarily because a lot of the Christian life style is written into our laws and social expectations. Not stealing, not lying, not having an affair with someone else’s spouse are reinforced by our legal system.

But worship is not forced. There are, to be sure, a few temporary coercions—children and spouses who attend church because someone has decided they must. But, honestly, these coercions are short-lived, a few years at most. Most Christian worship is voluntary and it is the single most popular act in our country. More popular than all the golf links, and fishing boats, and soccer games put together.

So, when we hear “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord,’” we are not listening to the fake enthusiasm of someone drumming up worship business. We are witnessing what is typical of most Christians, in most places, at most times. This is not an exception to which we aspire; it is foundational to our life with God.

I want you to test this with me. Go ahead and think of someone whose walk with God inspires your own. Do you have a person in mind? Now, think about how they nurture their relationship with God. Got it? I’m betting that they worship regularly. Worship gives us structure for our lives, it nurtures our need to be in relationship with God, and worship centers our attention on the decisions of God.

Psalm 122 describes Jerusalem as a compact city, well built. (Verses 3-4) And in worship, though we 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 differing levels of intelligence and income, 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.

Another reason Christians keep returning to worship is that it nurtures our need to be in relationship with God. Worship is the place where we obey God's command to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

When we sin, and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn't go off and leave us—God enters into our trouble and saves us. The truth is that God made us, redeems us, provides for us. The natural, honest, healthy, logical response to this is praise to God.

But we don't always feel like it. I don't believe we worship because we feel like it. You see, feelings can be great liars. If Christians only worshiped when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship going on. Feelings are important in many areas, but completely unreliable in matters of faith. The Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel.

We live in a time when 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, namely that we can *act* ourselves into a new way of *feeling* much quicker than we can *feel* our way into a new way of *acting*. When we praise God in worship, our deep need to be in relationship with God is nurtured.

In worship, we find structure for living, encouragement for our relationship with God, and help for centering our lives on things that are important to God. Every time we worship our minds are informed, our memories refreshed with what God says, with what God has decided, with the ways God is working out our salvation.

There is simply no other place where these can be done as well as in worship. If we stay home by ourselves and read the Bible, we are going to miss a lot, for our reading will be shaped unconsciously by our culture, limited by our ignorance, distorted by unnoticed prejudices. In worship, we are part of the larger congregation where all the writers of Scripture address us, where song writers use music to express truths which 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 God says to us. Worship is the place where our attention can be centered on these personal words.

Worship, even for the most faithful at it, takes up only a small percentage of a person's life, an hour or so a week for most. Does it make any difference to the rest of the week? The final verses of Psalm 122 say that it does, "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." (verses 6-9) Here we have prayers that overflow from worship and create a new relationship in society. Worship motivates our living the rest of the week.

Worship will not satisfy our hunger for God, no, it whets our appetite. Our need for God is not taken care of by participating in worship—it deepens. It overflows from Sunday morning into the rest of the week. Worship initiates an extended, daily participation in the things important to God.

Friends, we live in a pragmatic culture and are reluctant to do much of anything if its practical usefulness cannot be demonstrated. So, it's inevitable that we ask, "Is worship worth it?"

Can we justify the time and energy and expense involved in gathering Christians together? Worship is part of being a disciple. And if the church, if this church, stops making nature disciples of Jesus, then it stops being the church. Worship is central to the making of disciples.

Let me illustrate all of this with a contemporary example. It was late winter in Kishnau, Moldova, a city near the Romanian border in what was formerly a part of the Soviet Union. And a man by the name of Charlie VanderMeer was visiting the city to encourage Christian workers.

It was deep winter in Kishnau but another cold Sunday didn't deter the Christians in Kishnau. They turned out in force —1,500 strong — to worship in a church without central heating. According to VanderMeer, of all those who attended, only 20 or 25 arrived in cars. The rest either walked in the snow (some as far as 3 or 4 miles) or took public transportation. Some had to change buses up to five times. Then they did it all over again for the evening service. Amazed at the dedication of these people, Charlie wondered as he wrote for *Our Daily Bread*, "Would we go to church if we had to do that?"

The Christians of Kishnau, like the people in Psalm 122, were willing to go to great lengths to worship God. Neither the faithful in Jerusalem nor the worshipers in Kishnau had it easy. They faced many hardships and obstacles, yet they were glad when they could go to the house of the Lord together.