

The Priority Of Public Worship

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[0:00] Psalm 87. He has set his foundation on the holy mountain. The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

! Glorious things are said of you, O city of God.! This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.

The Lord will write in the register of the peoples, This one was born in Zion. Selah. And as they make music, they will sing, All my fountains are in you.

Thank you, Pastor John. It's indeed an honor to be here this morning and to be able to open the Word of God with you today. I'd like to bring you greetings from your sister church, Grace Covenant Church in Gilbert, Arizona.

We're partners together for the gospel and also partners together in the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, where I've had the distinct privilege of serving many years side by side with your pastor, in the administrative council and on various committees.

[1:30] I'm very blessed to have a pastor like John Heaney, and I'm very blessed to have a friend like John Heaney. If you'll turn in your Bibles, or if you still have your Bibles open, I wanted to call your attention to this very important psalm.

And I'd like to ask, does it really matter whether we worship in church every Sunday or not? I'm sure you've often run into people who have said, I worship God faithfully every Sunday on the lake, in my boat, fishing.

Or some have said, I do my greatest praying on Sunday as I'm on the golf course trying to make that putt. Others have said, when I'm out in the woods, I'm in God's creation.

I feel close to God there. And He doesn't care whether I'm in church or out there, just so long as I'm worshiping Him.

Well, what would you think? On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being least important and 10 being most important, how would you rate the importance of being in worship and church every Sunday?

[2:56] I hope that you would rate it a 10, especially in light of what God's Word has to say on this subject. Did you know that the book of Psalms sheds a lot of light on the importance of corporate worship?

The book of Psalms has often been referred to as the church's handbook for worship, or the worship manual for God's people. And this morning I would like to call your attention to an important truth that is set forth for us here in Psalm 87 and verse 2.

Reading from the ESV Bible, it says, The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

When we read that the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob, we can't help but notice that a comparison is being made here between the gates of Zion on one hand and the dwellings or the dwelling places of Jacob on the other hand.

It's not a contrast where God loves one and he hates the other. It's a comparison. See, God loves them both. He just so happens to love one more than the other.

[4:17] So both the gates of Zion and the dwelling places of Jacob are used figuratively here to represent two different forms of worship.

One which is public and the other which is private. I would ask that you turn with me in your Bibles back a few pages to Psalm 84.

Psalm 84. Beginning at verse 1, the psalmist says, How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at

your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praises. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

[5 : 30] As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength.

Each one appears before God in Zion. Notice the references to Zion as the place where they appeared before God.

Zion represents the place of public corporate worship. This is where God's presence is. So we should understand in Psalm 87 too, the gates of Zion, as representing the public meeting place for corporate worship.

And the dwelling places of Jacob would be the private residences. The individual families and homes where family worship, where private devotion would take place.

Here in Psalm 87, verse 2 reveals that the Lord loves the place of corporate worship, more than all the private places of personal and family devotion.

[6 : 39] And so because the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than the dwellings of Jacob, we can assert that he places public worship over private.

That there is a priority, if you will, of public worship. God wants you to place public worship over private worship.

It does make a difference whether we have personal devotions or not. That's very important in our own personal relationship to God. That helps us to grow.

That helps us to deal with sin in our lives, to be intimate with the Lord God. And yet that is not near as important when it's compared to what you're doing right here, right now, this Sunday morning. What you're doing right now is far more important to God because God prefers public worship over private.

[7 : 40] Remember that God loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. And to help you see this, I want to give you nine reasons why God wants you to place public worship over private.

Try to go through them fairly quickly. So that you won't be overwhelmed here in your chairs too long. There are more, certainly, but nine good reasons to help convince you of the importance of public worship over private.

And the first reason is because God is more glorified in public worship. When we pray the Lord's Prayer and we say, Hallowed be thy name, we are making a request that God would cause more and more people to respect, honor, reverence, praise his name.

The name of God often refers to his reputation, his fame, his renown, his personal character. And where God's name is most respected and praised is in corporate worship.

If you'll look in your Bibles to Psalm 96 at verse 6 and 8, I think that this will come out a little better for us.

[9 : 07] Psalm 98, rather 96 and verse 6. Splendor and majesty are before him. Strength and beauty are where?

In his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples. Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.

Bring an offering and come into his courts. So God is most glorified when that glory is most proclaimed or declared, which occurs in public worship.

Note here in this psalm that strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. The place of public and corporate worship. Verse 8 in the psalm shows that ascribing to the Lord the glory of his name involves bringing an offering and coming into his courts.

That's the place of public worship. If you'll look with me again in the book of Psalms to Psalm 107 at verse 21. We'll begin actually at verse 23.

[10 : 20] Psalm 107 at verse 23. We read, Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters. They saw the deeps of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep.

For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven. They went down to the depths. Their courage melted away in their evil plight.

They reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wit's end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

[11:26] So once again, we see this corporate aspect where praise and honor is to be given to God. Would you agree that one of the best ways to honor a person is to do it by public acknowledgement?

I mean, suppose for a moment that the elders here at Grace Fellowship Church wanted to honor you, to show their appreciation for your service, for your ministry to the Lord Jesus Christ here at the local church.

Well, one way they could do it is to simply fill out a certificate and put it in the mail to you with a thank you. And that would be certainly a legitimate way that they could show their gratitude.

But it would be far more honoring if that same piece of certificate was handed to you publicly as you were brought up in front of all the people and in front of the entire congregation.

You were thanked by the elders. See, there's more honor given when it is done in public rather than in private.

[12:45] And likewise, God is more honored. He is more glorified when it is done in public rather than private. So the first reason why God prefers public worship over private is because he is more glorified with public worship.

Let me give you a second reason why. The second reason why he prefers public reason is because God takes more delight in public worship over private.

If you'll turn in your Bibles to Psalm 149 and look with me at verse 4. Here we read, For the Lord takes pleasure in his people.

He adorns the humble with salvation. Now, if you're discerning, you're saying, Well, it doesn't have anything to do with public worship here in verse 4. But verse 1 shows the context of this psalm is that of public worship.

God takes more delight. He finds greater pleasure and joy in public worship, more so than he does in private. Now, most of you certainly know Pastor Bob Heaney.

[13:56] He is somewhat of a patriarch at this church. And I understand that he is the blessed father of eight wonderful children and at least 28 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

And I know he loves them all. And if all of them lived out of town, except for Stan, he would be very happy just to see Stan on a daily basis.

He would be content. But I know it would bring Bob greater joy and happiness if they could all come from wherever they live in town or out of town and they could all be there together for an annual event.

It would bring him greater joy. To have all of your children, all of your grandchildren together in your house at the same time. Doesn't that give greater delight?

And likewise, it pleases God when all of his people who may worship him privately or in family devotions throughout the week come together on the Lord's Day to worship him corporately.

[15:16] Secondly, God takes greater delight in public worship. So that's the second reason why we should put that before private worship. There's a third reason, and that is because there is actually more of God's presence in public worship.

Now, we all understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, that God is everywhere throughout the universe at the same time.

But I'm sure you realize that there is a sense in which God is pleased to make his presence. The light of his countenance, if you will, to shine more brightly in some places than in other places.

In Psalm 51 and verse 11, David pleads that the Lord would not cast him away from his presence.

In Matthew chapter 18, in verse 20, Jesus promises that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he will be in the midst of them.

And this promise is given in the context of the corporate assembly of the saints. So certainly God is present with each of us when we close the door of our rooms to pray to our father who is in secret, who sees in secret.

[16:48] And yet God promises his presence in an extra special way when we are gathered here corporately to honor him in public worship.

So we should prefer and place public worship over private. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 4, the Apostle Paul is addressing a particular problem in the Corinthian church.

An issue of a man who was in sin and the congregation was not dealing with him and addressing the sin.

But he has something very interesting that he says to the congregation regarding how to deal with this matter of sin. And he writes, It's important for us to meet publicly.

There's more of the presence of God in public worship. There's a fourth reason why God wants us to place public worship over private. And that is because the clearest manifestations of God are found in public worship.

[18 : 38] And that is because the church is not in public worship.

Verse four. David says, one thing that have I asked of the Lord that will I seek after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

The Lord's house is where his beauty is beheld. The Lord's house is where his glory is manifested. Now, we know that David, the sweet psalm singer of Israel, enjoyed some of the greatest manifestations of God's glory and grace.

What sweet ecstasies of fellowship David must have experienced in his personal walk with God, a man after God's own heart.

And yet in Psalm 122 in verse one, David says that he was glad when they said to him, let us go to the house of the Lord. This same desire of the psalmist for the glories of corporate worship are expressed throughout the book of Psalms in Psalm 116 and verses 12 through 19.

[20 : 26] 19. The psalmist says, what shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of his people. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

Oh, Lord, I am your servant. I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people in the courts of the house of the Lord in your midst.

Oh, Jerusalem, praise the Lord. So what was it that could lead these psalm writers to speak in terms of the courts of the Lord?

[21 : 33] It's because that is where the presence of God was truly manifested. God's glory was seen and enjoyed. God inhabits the praise of his people.

In Psalm 34, 8, David says, oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. And the best way to taste and see of the Lord's goodness is in the context of the public worship service.

God wants us to place public worship before private. And the fifth reason why is because you can receive more spiritual benefits in public worship.

There are more spiritual benefits to be enjoyed. Psalm 84, 11 says, for the Lord God is a sun and shield.

The Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

Now, you may wonder, what does this have to do with public worship?

[22 : 43] Well, when you look at verses 1, verse 2, verse 10, the whole psalm is about public worship. So we can say that no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly in public worship.

Another great psalm is the psalm of Asaph in Psalm 73. Many of you are familiar with that. It's the psalm of, you know, why do the wicked prosper?

And Asaph is sharing his own personal struggle with trying to keep his heart pure and right before God. And he's going through all of these problems and struggles.

And he looks at the unbeliever, the heathen, and they are flourishing in their lives. And Asaph, with complete transparency, shares that when he tried to understand it, it literally gave him a headache. He was as a brute beast before God. But in verse 16 and 17, he says, But then I entered your sanctuary.

[23 : 58] And then I understood the final end. It was in the sanctuary, you see, that the place of public worship where Asaph, who had been going through this intense personal struggle, found wisdom and understanding and grace.

Brethren, you rob yourselves of many personal blessings when you forsake the public worship of God. The sacraments are a means of grace that are practiced in the public assembly. Baptism is a public declaration of one's profession of faith. It's a vital part of public worship. The Lord's Supper is not to be a private affair.

It's a public ordinance. And it should be obvious that there are far more spiritual benefits to be received by the saints in public worship rather than in private.

And that's because God designed it that way. He has ordained for his people to enjoy more spiritual benefits in public worship than in private.

[25 : 17] There's a sixth reason why we should place public worship above private. And that is because public worship is more edifying to the believer than private.

Private worship involves our vertical relationship with God. It's personal. It is intimate.

Seldom does it really involve others on the horizontal plane. Certainly family worship can be edifying. But public worship not only involves that vertical relationship, but the horizontal one between other fellow believers.

Just listening to the singing this morning certainly must have warmed your heart. And coming together, sitting next to brothers and sisters in Christ, worshiping the same God, sitting together in prayer under the reading and proclamation of God's word.

Those are wonderful, edifying benefits to the saints of God. I would ask that you turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and look with me at verse 12.

[26 : 43] The Apostle Paul is writing here to the saints. And in verse 12, he says, So, with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Since you're eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in those gifts that edify or build up the church. In verse 26, he says, What then, brothers, when you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation.

Let all things be done for building up, for the building up of the body. For, you know, God has given every believer some spiritual gift that is to be used in the building up of the saints.

In order to receive the benefit of those gifts, it's important that we are in public worship, where the exercise of those gifts are often utilized and demonstrated.

So, public worship is more edifying to the believer than private. Let me go on to a seventh reason why God wants us to place public worship over private.

[28 : 09] And that is because public worship provides better security against backsliding than private. Believe it or not, public worship is one of the most effective means of preserving us from falling away from the Lord.

One of the first steps of backsliding is neglect of private prayer. We usually backslide in our hearts inwardly before it is noticed outwardly.

But the neglect of public worship is close behind. Don't you think it's a sign of a backsliding heart when a person regularly misses worship with little or no concern?

Isn't it a sign of a backsliding heart when almost any reason becomes good enough for missing church? You were out late Saturday night.

You woke up Sunday morning. You realized that you needed more sleep. So you skipped worship. You worked hard all week. And you're worn out. It's been hot here in town.

[29 : 24] And you want to get out of the area and drive your family to a cooler place for the weekend. And so you missed worship. You get some tickets to a basketball game or a Notre Dame football game.

And so you go to see the game. And you missed worship. Do you think any of these excuses are acceptable in the sight of the Holy God?

Is he pleased with any of this? What kind of message does that kind of attitude really send to the Lord? Doesn't it say to God and all the rest of God's people that he's really not all that important?

Doesn't it say that your sleep or your relaxation or your ball game or whatever it may be take priority over worship and therefore over God? That's what you're saying.

That's what you're saying. If you allow these excuses to keep you from the courts of the Lord.

Those who intentionally miss public worship are those who need to be here the most.

[30 : 31] Believers must either carelessly neglect or willfully forsake the worship of the Lord when they are backsliding.

And maybe there's someone here today who is in that kind of condition. You're here today, but. You may not have been here last Sunday and you're not sure you'll be here next Sunday. And you just don't see it as that important. Well, God prefers it over private worship. And it's a sign of backsliding.

It's a sign of an unhealthy state of heart when public worship is not important. And it's a sign that you need to remember your first love and to repent and to do the things you once did.

To be restored to the Lord. To go to your elders or your close Christian friend and to seek accountability and help, support and encouragement.

[31 : 48] Because to withdraw yourself from the public worship of God is to withdraw yourself from God himself. So public worship will help preserve us from backsliding.

An eighth reason why God wants us to put it before private worship is because revival occurs most often in public worship.

The book of Acts in chapter 2 verse 1 opens with the account of the greatest revival in history. By saying when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

And when you stop to think about the various revivals that have occurred throughout history, you'll notice that they most often began in public worship.

Revival broke out when Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. And where was that preached?

[32 : 53] In a public assembly. Revival by its very definition is a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered multitude.

And oh, how desperately we need revival today. Our hearts should ache for that outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us.

And when it comes, it will likely occur in the public service of worship. Brethren, that brings us to the ninth and final reason why we should put public worship over private.

And that's because public worship is the closest you'll get to heaven on earth. Pastor John read some scripture from Revelation 4 and 5 this morning that gave us a very clear picture of the worship of heaven.

But did you ever stop to think that here, public worship on earth, it resembles heaven more than anything else on earth.

[34 : 02] If you study all of the passages of scripture that speak of heaven or give you a glimpse into that world of glory and joy.

See if you can find anywhere in those scriptures just one place where you see someone worshipping privately or in secret.

Show me one place where they're doing anything privately in heaven. You see, public worship is corporate and that's the worship of heaven.

It's corporate. Everything we read about heaven seems to be public. Have you ever noticed that? Turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 22.

The writer says, This is public.

[35 : 23] And when you read of the description of heaven in Revelation 5, you read of 10,000 times 10,000 angels circling the throne.

The four living creatures, the 24 elders, they are all there together in the public worship and praise of God. Listen to me.

When you enter into glory. I hope all of you will one day enter into glory. You will enter into an eternal public worship service.

Just think it will be eternal church. And if you don't like coming to church now on earth, you're probably not going to like it later in heaven.

So that really does help give a good reflection of where your heart is. If you could say with David, I rejoice with those who said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord.

[36 : 30] Well, then certainly heaven is something that you can look forward to and that you'll be at home in. Earth should contain no sight so refreshing to us as the gathering together of the saints on the Lord's day to worship the Lord.

And there are two characteristics of heaven that can be found in every Sunday worship service.

God's presence and his people gathered together in corporate praise.

And I feel so sorry for those who would rather not be here. Because there's nothing about corporate worship that attracts them.

Hebrews 11.6 tells us that God rewards those who diligently seek him. And that if you seek after the Lord, you will find him if you seek him with all of your heart.

And if you believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. And maybe there's some young man, some young woman, someone here today, who is outside of the kingdom of God, who is still in opposition to the Lord, who is still unsaved.

[37 : 44] What better time than right here, right now, in the corporate assembly of the saints, in this earthly reflection of heavenly worship, what better time for you, in your heart of hearts, to acknowledge your sin to God, right where you sit, and to seek the Lord's forgiveness, and to put your faith in Christ, in his shed blood.

The public worship is the place of salvation, of conversion. May it be the place of the conversion and salvation of those of you who are here today outside of Christ.

Well, can you see why God wants you to place public worship before private? I hope I've convinced you. You probably were already convinced anyways. Psalm 87 verse 2 tells us that the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

And if the Lord loves the public worship of his people, shouldn't we love it too? If the Lord takes delight in the public assembly of worship, should we not take delight in it also?

So let us guard ourselves against missing worship for any little reason. God has not made the way to the public worship hard or toilsome.

[39 : 17] In Psalm 84, we read of the great distance the Jews would travel in the heat or in the rain to worship the Lord publicly at the temple. And they counted it a joy to be able to go on that pilgrimage for the Lord.

But today, there are some who aren't even willing to get out of bed in order to be in worship. And won't those Jews rise up at the judgment day and condemn that generation, our generation, for our slothfulness in public worship?

So may the Lord help us to make a renewed commitment to the courts of the Lord and to the public assembly of worship. God loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

And may he give us grace to love these gates too. May we never forsake or abandon them. Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you for the way that you have ordained for your people to be built up and nourished in the public assembly of the saints on the Lord's day.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, for this glorious institution of the church, of corporate worship, of the means of grace, where the cross of Christ can be lifted high and all men and women be drawn unto him.

[40 : 42] We pray that would be the case this day that sinners will find mercy and forgiveness by looking away from themselves and looking to Jesus Christ.

Oh, Holy Spirit, we pray that you would be pleased to do your work in turning hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. Give grace and make us all willing that we will turn from sin and that we will follow you all the days of our lives.

May Christ grow increasingly precious to us and may the public worship be exceedingly precious as well. For we ask all these things in the matchless name of Christ Jesus.

Amen.