

4. RECENTRED

Starving for real relationship

Psalm 122

New joy in community

Many of us have prayed down through the years for Christians in other countries who do not have the freedom to meet in safety, never thinking that we would ever end up in the same situation ourselves. However, for circumstances of public health, that became a reality for us too when our services and gatherings fell victim of attempts to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Who would ever have thought?

The interruption to worship services, Bible study groups, organisations and the pastoral visit, ripped right through the relational centre of congregational community. Attempts to stitch something together digitally went somewhat in seeing us through. But the virtual was a poor substitute for the vitality of gathering together with others for worship. The dynamic of group conversation couldn't be replicated in the conference call. The gracious touch of pastoral presence died the death of social distancing. Quickly we found ourselves starved of real relationship.

– TO TALK ABOUT –

Q. What relational aspects of church life did you find yourself missing the most in the period when your congregation couldn't gather?

It's often said that you never know what you've got until it is gone. So it was with many things we had taken for granted in the regular rhythms of our church life. Might we now find ourselves coming together again for times of worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship and service with fresh appreciation? Perhaps recent years have seen a lessening of commitment to one another and to God in church life. Might this be a time when God renews and recentres our church life together? Might a take it or leave it attitude be replaced by a new desire to give and go?

Let's have a look at Psalm 122 and reflect on how it helps us express a rediscovered joy in community as God's people.

PARALLELS AND

PATTERNS

Read Psalm 122.

Do so slowly. Listen carefully. Pay attention to the details. Reflect on how things feel at different parts of the psalm. Let the psalm sink into your soul.

– TO TALK ABOUT –

PARALLELS

Line up the psalm alongside your recent experience of living through the coronavirus pandemic. Use the questions below to help identify and talk about some parallels.

This psalm was sung by pilgrims making an annual journey to Jerusalem for one of the Old Testament religious festivals. They were great occasions for worshipping God, but also for enjoying being a part of the wider community of his people. The singers loved getting together in this way (v1) and just being there (v2).

Q. How might this psalm help us express how we feel about being able to return to our congregation's expressions of community in the areas of worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship or service? What did you learn to appreciate in a fresh way from being apart from others in your church for the period of lockdown?

The festivals attended by the singers of this psalm were firmly centred on God, his presence (v1) and praise (v4) and prayer (v6).

Q. Why is worshipping together so important in keeping our lives centred on God in today's world? How have we sometimes lost sight of God as the centre of church life? What causes that to happen?

Talk about other parallels you can see between the story and our situation today.

PATTERNS

Line up the psalm alongside your recent experience of living through the coronavirus pandemic. Use the questions below to help identify and talk about some patterns for living as followers of Jesus.

Jerusalem was prized as a place of peace and security in community for God's people (vv6-7).

Q. How has being unable to gather for church life as normal helped you recognise what the community of God's people contributes to strengthening you to follow Jesus in all the circumstances of life as well as to your overall well-being?

The singers of this psalm were joyfully committed to the community of God's people as family and friendship group (v8) and something they wanted to see develop, thrive and prosper (v9).

Q. What did you learn from the period in which church couldn't gather that helps you recentre your life for that kind of joyful commitment to God, his church and the community of God's people?

Talk about other patterns of who God is and how he acts, or lessons that we can learn in living as his followers and his church, that emerge from this psalm.



POSSIBILITIES AND

PERSPECTIVES

– TO TALK ABOUT –

POSSIBILITIES

Take a moment to think about the initial impression this psalm made upon you as you read it and the discussion that you have just had. What sticks in your mind? What do you particularly sense God prompting you to think more deeply about?

Pause and take a moment on your own, or share with the person next to you, your sense of what God is saying to you or your congregation from your reflections on this psalm?

PERSPECTIVES

Prepare to share with others what impression God has made upon your heart. Do your best to put this into words. Maybe it will be the same as others, maybe it will be different. Pay attention to the conversation that is about to start so that God can deepen and widen the impact of his Word.

Share with the whole group the lessons you think God is teaching you and your congregation through his Word, by his Spirit.

PATHWAYS

TO PURSUE

– TO TALK AND PRAY ABOUT –

Thinking

What has reading this psalm against the background of your experience of the period of coronavirus pandemic caused you to think again about?

Living

In what specific ways will that make you change the way you live as a follower of Jesus? How might it reshape an aspect of your congregation's life?

Praying

Pray together for strength to follow through on what God has taught each person and the implications for your life together as a congregation.

PROMISE AND

PRAYER

PROMISE

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!
Psalm 133:1

PRAYER

God of relationship,
three in one fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
May the recent absence of church life,
grow in us fresh hunger for spending time with you,
make our heart for one another grow fonder,
recentre our lives on what matters most.
Help us to rediscover,
fresh joy in worship,
renewal of praise and prayer and purpose,
recommitment in sacrifice and service.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.