

The Deer Pants: Longing for Public Worship

Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. | March 2020

Last week I penned some thoughts on what I perceived God was doing in the present crisis and suggested some avenues of response. In this article, I am delving into one thing: challenges from the loss of corporate worship. As we respond to the roaring of the lion, we ought to imitate the panting deer.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 42:1-2, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” What realities in the Psalmist’s life lay behind this analogy? David was in exile, hiding from Saul in the wilderness and cut off from public worship.

In his exile, David experienced many grievous afflictions: targeted to be killed; betrayed by those whom he helped; slandered and accused of being forsaken by God. In Psalm 42, he expresses his worst trial: he was deprived of public worship.

He expressed his soul’s longing for worship by the analogy of a deer, chased by dogs, longing for water. In Psalm 63:1, he uses a similar analogy, “O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

David, in exile, was able to commune with God. He prayed, wrote poetry, sang. However, he was cut off from the public assembly, where God met with His people in a particular way. As a result of his separation from corporate worship, David’s soul thirsted. Much of what David possessed in public worship was only types and shadows. How much keener should be our sense of loss? As the New Covenant church, we worship in the full light of the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, in the past, as you read Psalm 42, you thought David’s words overstated the case. However, now that you are deprived of the privilege of public worship, you may better identify with David’s longing. Is your soul thirsty? Do you feel spiritually malnourished? Do you feel somewhat disconnected from God and his people? Although we stream services and

we read and pray with others in our homes, there remains a void in our lives.

Are you learning that corporate worship is the Christian's greatest privilege and blessing? James Bannerman described the transaction that occurs when we gather together in God's presence, "Public worship is no other than the manner and the way in which sinners, associated together in a church state, are permitted in their collective capacity to hold intercourse with God, to maintain in a right and befitting way their fellowship with him, and to approach him day by day in acceptable communion."¹

David Clarkson in his sermon, "Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private,"² presented twelve reasons to demonstrate that public worship is more important than private: 1. The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private. 2. There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private. 3. God manifests himself more clearly in public worship than in private. 4. There is more spiritual advantage in the use of public worship. 5. Public worship is more edifying than private. 6. Public worship is a better security against apostasy than private. 7. The Lord works his greatest works in public worship. 8. Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven. 9. The most renowned servants of God have preferred public worship before private. 10. Public worship is the best means for procuring the greatest mercies, and preventing and removing the greatest judgments. 11. The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship. 12. The promises of God are given more to public worship than to private.

Bannerman detailed these blessings:

All the elements of worship to which we have referred are part of a public ordinance, and not of a private one, they belong to the body of believers collectively, and not individually. They are to be enjoyed as means of grace, not by Christians separately, but by Christians in their Church state, and in communion with one another. . . . and even where

¹ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols, Reprinted from the 1868 edition (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:341.

² David Clarkson, *The Works of David Clarkson*, 3 vols, Reprinted from the 1696 edition (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 3:187ff.

the individual use of these ordinances is not impossible or unlawful, but the reverse, they are not used to the same gracious effect, nor have they the same gracious influence as in the case of the social and joint employment of them. . . . In short, the blessing upon ordinances is but half a blessing when enjoyed alone, even in those cases when the ordinance may be used by the Christian apart from others. . . . All the parts of Church worship belong in a peculiar and emphatic sense to the Church, and they are made effectual by the presence and Spirit of Christ, as His instruments for building up and strengthening the collective body of believers in a manner and to an extent unknown in the case of private and solitary worship.³

As David learned by experience the privilege and blessing of corporate worship, may we, as well. To help you evaluate your attitude and participation in public worship consider the following four challenges.

First, may the deprivation of public worship work in you a higher esteem for it. Cease taking it for granted. Exclaim with the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Ps. 122:1). Or “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold (be a doorkeeper) of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Ps. 84:10).

Second, do you need to repent of having a cavalier approach to worship? Have you allowed people or things to keep you from gathering with God’s people to worship Him? Have you been worshipping formalistically rather than by faith from a prepared heart?

Third, church office-bearers need to examine their reasons for no longer having an evening service.⁴ Why do you deprive God’s people of a double blessing? In public worship, Christ stands in our midst and speaks (Pss.

³ Ibid., 329, 330.

⁴ There are many arguments for the second service. For just two biblical examples, the morning and evening offerings were doubled on the Sabbath; in Psalm 92, a Psalm that directs our Sabbath worship, the writer exclaimed, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your lovingness in the morning and your faithfulness by night.” Moreover, it has been the practice of the Protestant churches from the Reformation until recent times.

22:25; 40:9-10; Rev. 2:1). What a privilege it is to gather in His presence and to gaze on His loveliness!

Fourth, those of you who willfully neglect⁵ the second service need to repent of your worldliness. How are you spending the Lord's Day? What does it say about your spiritual health if your spiritual thirst is satisfied with one draught? Do you not want more of Christ and His benefits? During the self-isolation of the past few weeks, many have binged-watched movies; others have consumed replays of sporting events. How many of these same people in the best of times begrudged the Lord an hour one day a week?

God has removed the privilege of corporate worship for a season so that we may evaluate our attitude toward public worship. I pray that one of the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a renewed commitment to God's glory and our good in His worship.

In the absence of public worship, may our souls pant for the worship of the living God, as the ravaged deer pants for the water brooks.

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⁵ I recognize that some because of age, health, or distance may not be at the second service.