

Psalms of Ascent

Part 3 – The Holy City

Psalm 122

The Psalms of Ascent (120-134) were sung by the people of God as they journeyed toward Jerusalem to worship and receive atonement for their sins. It is important to remember that for many generations of redemptive history God had chosen to dwell among his people in the tabernacle (and later the temple). If God's people were to worship him rightly, if they were to offer sacrifices and receive pardon for their sins then they had to go to the holy city. No wonder their arrival was met with such great joy.



The Temple Mount today

How are Christians in the 21st century to understand Psalm 122? Our dispensational friends would have us believe that Jerusalem is still the holy city and the place of God's special presence. They believe that whoever allies with Israel will have the special blessing of God. But this is not how Psalm 122 is to be understood. There is no question that for generations Jerusalem was the special place of God's presence among his people. However Jerusalem, like so many people and places in the Old Testament, was a *type* pointing to a greater and eternal reality.

The earthly Jerusalem was an Old Covenant picture of that eternal "city" of John's vision recorded in Revelation 21. It was symbolic of the eternal joy and rest that will be experienced by all those who, through Jesus Christ, have received God's great salvation. But Jerusalem was also a type pointing toward a present reality for God's people: the church of Jesus Christ. No longer does God limit his presence among his people to a temple or a city. Through the church God is making himself known throughout the world among all the nations.

Main Theme: The joy, unity, and peace anticipated in Jerusalem are experienced in the church through Jesus Christ.

Vs. 1 – The Psalmist rejoices in the prospect of his arrival in Jerusalem to worship in the temple. The Torah commanded God's people to gather together in the city for three major festivals each year. For Israelites living significant distances from Jerusalem this could present major challenges and hardships. The joy these journeys would illicit was not founded merely upon a chance to see the big city. Rather, it was due to the prospect of worship and offering sacrifices. The people understood that their identity and spiritual well-being depended upon what happened in the temple.

Vv. 2-5 – The Psalmist is impressed by the physical dimensions and tight design of the city (vs. 3). God's people gather there to confess his great salvation (vs. 4). Jerusalem is also the place where justice is administered (vs. 5). The plurality of thrones suggests confidence that God will preserve the royal line.

Vv. 6-9 – In this section the Psalmist expresses his concern for Jerusalem. The word Jerusalem is derived partly from the Hebrew word *saalem* (be at ease) or *shalom* (well-being). In this section the Psalmist calls God's people to pray for the peace of the city. In verse 7 he takes note of the city's fortified walls. Those defenses were necessary precisely because the city was under threat from foreign invaders. Given its spiritual, political, and cultural significance the call to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is understandable. This peace is sought both for the sake of God's people (vs. 8) and the temple (vs. 9).

1. The joy of worship for a pilgrim people.

Vs. 1 – “I was glad when he said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’”

- The pilgrims finally have Jerusalem in their sights. The trials of living in the presence of enemies (120) and the dangers of the journey (121) are now eclipsed by the joy of seeing the holy city. The gladness of the pilgrims entering Jerusalem is to be reflected in the gladness of Christians as we meet each Lord’s Day to worship the Lord together. We too are pilgrims longing for entry to the holy city of God.
- The sight of Jerusalem and the temple is only a shadow of the ultimate Christian pilgrimage toward that eternal city “with foundations whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). The great Christian pilgrimage is reflected in the doxology of Jude 24 – “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing.” We see this same theme in Ephesians 5 where Paul writes that Jesus is preparing his church, “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (vs. 27).
- Notice that the gladness of the pilgrim is not that he can finally have a deep and private devotional experience. Rather his joy is wrapped up in the prospect of worshiping together with the full company of God’s people. In the temple there would be praise and prayer, the reading and teaching of God’s Word, and sacrifices and offerings for thanks and forgiveness. The joy of Christians ought to exceed that of our old covenant fathers because in Christ we possess the substance of what they only knew in types and shadows.

2. The bond of unity for a scattered people.

Vv. 2-5

- God’s people had been scattered. At that point in redemptive history the scattering was at least in part the result of God’s discipline upon his people. They had not been the bright beacon drawing the nations to the temple. So God began scattering them. Nevertheless God continues to be faithful to his covenant promise. He calls his people, assigned to various tribes, to gather periodically at the temple. The city of Jerusalem and its temple was the symbol of their unity. No matter how far away they lived the temple is what bound them together with a common identity.
- The expression “bound firmly together” (vs. 3) is the same used in the instructions for making the tabernacle: “*couple the tent together* that it may be one whole” (Exodus 26:11). Those building instructions will one day be fulfilled in the eternal city of God (Revelation 21:10ff).

3. The source of peace for a troubled people.

Vv. 6-9

- The final syllables of the word “Jerusalem” are taken from one of two Hebrew words for peace. Peace is the proper fruit of justice rightly administered (vs. 5). The pilgrim notices the walls and towers of the city. These were meant to defend against foes from without. However the prayer for shalom is meant to convey a harmony and sense of well-being that can only be experienced by relief from the enemies within. Jerusalem was where God chose to make his dwelling place. The response “I will seek your good” (vs. 9) was the least that this reality demanded.
- All that Jerusalem was for the old covenant saints the church is in our moment of redemptive history. The earthly city of Jerusalem was never intended to be an eternal city. The temple and its practices were types pointing to Jesus. The city of Jerusalem pointed beyond itself to the age to come. There are no territorial or ethnic boundaries to the church.