

Advent 2019

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you!””
(Psalm 122:6 ESV)*

*“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!”
(Psalm 72:2 ESV)*

*“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.”
(Psalm 146:3 ESV)*

*“Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!”
(Psalm 80:19 ESV)*

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

December 1st 2019

Psalm 122

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bible to Psalm 122.

I suspect that many of you are thinking: “Psalm 122? I thought this was the first week of Advent?”

We are a people of the Book. A people of the WHOLE Book. And that means, we need to do the hard work of learning how it is that every page of this glorious Book points to Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen?

To that end, we are going to turn our attention to this worship song of the Old Testament church and by God’s grace, we are going to be helped to see Christ, and to love his bride.

Before we read the text, I want to give you a very brief orientation. Whenever you read a Psalm, you should take note of the small heading that’s written at the beginning. That header serves as a song description and it often provides helpful information in understanding the Psalm. Ours says:
A Song of Ascents. Of David.

So, for starters, we learn in the header that David wrote this song. That’s helpful for us to know. But even MORE helpful is that first detail. This is a Song of Ascents.

The Songs of Ascents are found in Psalms 120-134. Three times a year, the Israelites would leave their communities and would travel on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship together and observe the sacred feasts. From what we know of Jewish history and worship, it appears that these Psalms made up the “travelling hymn book” for the Israelites. This is like the playlist that the Israelites would sing along to in the van on their way to church. Can you visualize that?

Therefore, as we read today's Psalm, I want to invite you to imagine an Israelite pilgrim who has traveled for miles and miles on foot. He's exhausted. But he's finally arrived. And the sight of Jerusalem causes him to overflow with praise and gratitude. This is the song that he sings. Hear now God's inspired, innerant, living and active word to us today:

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

122 I was glad when they said to me,
 "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
2 Our feet have been standing
 within your gates, O Jerusalem!
3 Jerusalem—built as a city
 that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up,
 the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
 to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
5 There thrones for judgment were set,
 the thrones of the house of David.
6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
 "May they be secure who love you!
7 Peace be within your walls
 and security within your towers!"
8 For my brothers and companions' sake
 I will say, "Peace be within you!"
9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
 I will seek your good. (Psalm 122:1-9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

This morning, we're going to sing along with the pilgrim's song, we're going to see why it ultimately fell flat, and then we are going to transpose this song to a New Testament key. So let's do that now. Let's begin our time in the text by singing along with the pilgrim's song.

Singing Along With The Pilgrim's Song

Why do we sing at all? Speaking is easier, and it allows us to communicate all of the information that we need to convey. So what's the point of singing?

I think we could all agree this morning that songs – good songs – do more than just communicate information. A good song will also make you *feel* information. Amen?

That's one of the challenges in preaching through the Psalms. This was a SONG! It was written in Hebrew and it followed the poetic rules of its day. It had melody and passion, and even though I just read that text with as much passion and emphasis as I could muster, we did not hear our text this morning in the way that the pilgrims heard it as they sang to one another.

And yet, in spite of our limitations, I want us to do our best this morning to not just hear the information in this song, but to try and *feel* what the pilgrim would have felt as he sang to the best of our ability. As we sing along with the pilgrim's song this morning we need to first appreciate:

1. The joy of unity in worship

In the opening verses he sings:

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
² Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem! (Psalm 122:1-2 ESV)

“Oh how sweet it was,” he says, “when they told me it was time for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem! Just the THOUGHT of being here filled me with joy! But NOW I’m here! I’m really here! And look at this place!! We’re in JERUSALEM!! How AMAZING is this?!”

I don’t think I’m exaggerating. This brother was THRILLED to be together with the people of God, in the city of God to observe the worship of God. Seeing Jerusalem was like catching a little glimpse of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. One commentator notes:

God’s kingdom is greater than Jerusalem but receives its visible expression in the temple and palace of Jerusalem.¹

So he’s looking around at what feels like a foretaste of heaven and he goes on to sing:

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,
⁴ to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord. (Psalm 122:3-4 ESV)

Have you ever attended an event with thousands of worshipers? I have the privilege of attending the Together for the Gospel conference again this year, and one of the things that I am most looking forward to is the sight and sound of tens of thousands of believers filling a stadium to worship God. There is something that happens deep in our souls when we are caught up in a multitude of worshipers.

It feels like home, doesn’t it?

God made us to worship Him and He made us to live in unity with one another so when we are together and worshiping we are in the SWEET SPOT in terms of our God-given purpose! One commentator puts it this way:

If a converted man, who did not love the worship of God could be found, he would be such a monster as the world has never seen.²

¹ Willem A. VanGemeren. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Psalms-Song of Songs)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 5, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 355.

² William S. Plumer. *Psalms*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 1101.

If you don't find satisfaction and joy in seeing and hearing the corporate worship of God, then you ought to ask yourself if you truly love the Lord at all! We were MADE for this! Amen?

The brother in today's text was feeling that too.

He looked around at the hundreds of thousands – perhaps even the millions – of worshippers flooding the streets of Jerusalem to worship God and his heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

He saw the 12 tribes of Israel – tribes that were geographically separated – united together with a single purpose; to praise the Living God! He saw these brothers and sisters, young and old, men and women, pouring into the tabernacle to worship. He heard the bleating of goats – he saw the sacrifices being made – he smelt the smoke of the offering – and he marveled at the fact that the holy God of the universe had made a way for the sins of His people to be forgiven!

It was glorious!

It was like a glimpse of heaven itself!

And he had the privilege of seeing it with his own eyes!

If we want to sing along with the pilgrim this morning then we need to feel that with him. But he doesn't stop there. As we sing along with the pilgrim's song, we need to delight in:

2. The safety of a just and righteous king

The Israelites had always longed for a king. Some of these pilgrims were travelling from lands where they didn't live under a just ruler. In fact, the first Psalm of Ascents finds the pilgrim leaving a situation where he saw injustice all around him. Why don't you go ahead and look back with me to Psalm 120 and look at verses 6-7. This is where the journey began for many of these pilgrims:

**⁶ Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.**

⁷ I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war! (Psalm 120:1-7 ESV)

Many of the pilgrims coming into Jerusalem were longing for peace. They lived in contexts where the rich took advantage of the poor. They lived in circumstance where the powerful could subvert the laws of justice. They hated it!

But then the pilgrim entered into Jerusalem and saw the thrones for judgement. He saw the place where the abused and the oppressed could present their case to a just and righteous king. That's what he's singing about in verse 5:

⁵ There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.

As I read this my mind wandered back to 2017 when images were flooding the news of Syrian refugees who had risked their lives and the lives of their children as they fled from their homes

and travelled on rafts through treacherous waters. They decided that they would rather die at sea than live another day under tyranny. It is a horrific thing to live under the oppression of injustice.

How sweet it was then for the pilgrim to look up and see David's palace! How sweet it was to know that he was stepping foot into a safe place – a place where the leaders governed with righteousness. Did you know that the kings of Israel, before assuming their title, first had to write out the Law by hand? And then they had to have it inspected by the priests! We find this command in the book of Deuteronomy:

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. (Deuteronomy 17:18 ESV)

In God's design, the King of Israel was to begin his reign by first recognizing that there is a law that governs over and above him. There is an authority that even the King must answer to.

The pilgrim saw all of this in Jerusalem, and he LOVED what he saw! And this led him to pray:

3. A prayer for the peace of Jerusalem

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

“May they be secure who love you!

⁷ Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”

⁸ For my brothers and companions' sake
I will say, “Peace be within you!”

⁹ For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good. (Psalm 122:6-9 ESV)

O God, please watch over this place! Let this forever and always be the safehaven that we need!

Let your worship continually reverberate from this temple!

Let the smoke of these offerings continually rise from these altars!

Let the verdicts of justice continually resound from these thrones!

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

That is the heartcry of the pilgrim and it is the climax of this Old Testament song.

It's a beautiful song, isn't it? But, if that's the case, then why bother transposing this song to a New Testament key at all?

We find the answer to that question in Luke 19. If you can, please turn there with me now. In Luke 19, Jesus undertakes the same pilgrimage to Jerusalem that we have been discussing. As a Jewish man, Jesus would have been singing the Psalms of Ascents as he made his way up to Jerusalem for the feasts. He would have sang the Psalm that we have been studying this morning as his feet stepped into Jerusalem. Just like the earlier pilgrim, Jesus stood at the entrance of the

city looking out at the temple and the palace, but after singing Psalm 122 Jesus looked out and said of Jerusalem:

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:42–44 ESV)

And that is exactly what happened.

In AD 66 the Jews revolted against their Roman overlords. At first they were successful and they were able to expel the Romans from Jerusalem. But the Emperor Nero dispatched an army under the command of General Vespasian. The Jewish rebels were quickly overwhelmed all across Judea and forced inside the walled city of Jerusalem. Many frightened refugees took shelter inside as well. Some historians estimate that, at the height of the Roman siege, there were as many as 1.1 million Jews inside the city – a city that normally had a population of 30-50 thousand people.

There was brutal famine and widespread disease.

When it was all over – when the Romans had broken through and completely destroyed the city – burning the temple and slaughtering the weak and fragile people left inside – historians would describe it as the most brutal event in Roman history.

So, what happened? Why did this Old Testament song ultimately fall flat?

Why Did This OT Song Ultimately Fall Flat?

Jesus answered this question for us in verse 42, didn't he? Look there again with me:

Would that you, even you, **had known on this day the things that make for peace!** But now they are hidden from your eyes. (Luke 9:42 ESV)

This Old Testament song fell flat:

1. Because Jerusalem didn't recognize peace when He came to her

I'm speaking, of course, of Jesus – the Prince of Peace. As it is lamented in the opening words of John's gospel:

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:11 ESV)

Everything that the pilgrim loved about Jerusalem – the worship at the temple; the throne of David – was specifically designed to point forward to the coming of JESUS. They were like signs that pointed to the coming Saviour.

And YET, when Jesus entered into Jerusalem and called his people to take their eyes off of the signs and to fix their eyes on him, they responded by hanging him on a cross.

Jerusalem didn't recognize peace when He came to her.

Imagine a husband at war who sent love letters to his wife every day assuring her of his imminent return. One day, he finally gets home and knocks on the door, but his wife refuses to get up from her chair to unlock the door. She's too busy reading her letters. He knocks again; he rings the doorbell; he throws pebbles at the window; and finally his wife gets so fed up that she calls the police and has him arrested for trespassing.

That's the tragedy of Jerusalem. That's why this song ultimately fell flat.

They fell in love with the SIGNS and rejected the Saviour. They thought that they knew what made for peace.

They thought that the temple worship made for peace, but the author to the Hebrews tells us that the sacrificial system was never sufficient in and of itself:

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4 ESV)

The whole system – gracious as it was – was really just a big demonstration of how serious our problem truly is! Again, the author to the Hebrews explains:

⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (Hebrews 9:6-8 ESV)

Do you see that? The Holy Spirit used the sacrificial system to teach us that THE WAY TO GOD WAS NOT YET OPENED. That's why, in the temple, there was a thick veil separating the people of God from the Holy of Holies. The way had not yet been made for man to dwell in the presence of God. The worship that the pilgrim witnessed in Jerusalem was specifically designed by God to point FORWARD to the only way in which we could ever have peace. The Apostle Paul tells us of Jesus:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood of his cross.** (Colossians 1:19–20 ESV)

The blood of Jesus – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – that is the only way to peace.

In the same way, the pilgrim looked to the throne of David for peace, but it was not to be found. Even David – the king after God's own heart – could not bring true peace. Just ask Uriah! Just ask Bathsheba! The same king who conquered the Giant and who delivered his people from the Philistines was left powerless by the true enemy of Israel. We are introduced to him in the opening pages of the Bible. After the devil deceived Adam and Eve and led them to question the goodness of God, the Lord looked at the Devil and decreed:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;

he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

In Genesis 3, the stage is set for the great war of mankind. We see it on every page of our Bibles and we see it on every page of our newspapers. We see it in our loved ones and we see it in the mirror. There is a battle being waged for the hearts of mankind, and the kings of Israel were powerless against such a foe. David could fight lions and giants, but he couldn't keep himself from lusting after another man's wife. Solomon could build the temple of God, but he couldn't keep his heart from worshiping the gods of his wives.

Could these kings truly usher in the peace of Jerusalem?

No.

But they pointed forward to the King that could. You've often heard it said that David was like an arrow pointed at the sun. He pointed in the right direction, but he ultimately fell short. Jerusalem needed more than another king like David. They needed the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, but when he came to her – when he invited her to enjoy the peace of his kingship – Jerusalem rejected him.

Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. (Luke 9:42 ESV)

So what do we do with this song now?

Very quickly now, as we conclude this morning, I want to transpose this song to a New Testament key.

Transposing This Song To A New Testament Key

William Plumer in his brilliant commentary on the Psalms wrote:

It will weaken the force of this song, if we forget that Jerusalem was a type of the true church of Christ and also of the heavenly state.³

When the Old Testament pilgrim prayed for Jerusalem, he was praying for a geographical place. That is true. But is that how we are meant to utilize this prayer today? Is our hope bound up in an earthly city? Not according to the author to the Hebrews. He tells us:

¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13:14 ESV)

What is this city that is to come? What is this New Jerusalem? The Apostle John writes:

And I saw the holy city, **new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, **prepared as a bride adorned for her husband**. (Revelation 21:2 ESV)

³ William S. Plumer. *Psalms*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 1099.

Do you see that? What is the new Jerusalem? It's the bride of Christ! It's the church!

The pilgrim walked into Jerusalem, but we walk into the church. The pilgrim saw the temple and the palace but we see JESUS! If the pilgrim could REJOICE and CELEBRATE at the sight of the SHADOW of what was to come then HOW MUCH MORE brothers and sisters can we sing this song!

Step into the church and behold Christ once again! Here, in the person of Christ, we find forgiveness for our sins. Here, in the birth of Christ, we see the promised seed who will once for all crush the serpent's head. Here, in the life of Christ, we find the perfectly obedient Son of David who finally lived the perfect life of justice and mercy. Here in the coming of Christ, we see the One who will once for all unite his people.

Here in the church we find a glimpse of the new Jerusalem – the bride that is being prepared for her groom. His people are not limited to the twelve tribes of Israel, but now they span across every nation, tribe and tongue, and THROUGH CHRIST as we lift up our hearts in praise and adoration, our songs and prayers are united with the worship of our brothers and sisters across the globe!

Therefore, PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM, but understand that you are not praying for a city in the Middle-East. As Martin Luther said:

Our Jerusalem is the church, and our temple is Christ.⁴

Pray for the peace of the people of God! Pray for the peace of the church of Christ! Pray that our song would resound across the continents as we exalt the name of the Son of God who came to us on Christmas day!

The title for our advent series this year is "Behold Him." I believe that is the response that our text would require of us today. The Old Testament pilgrim stood in awe as he saw Jerusalem. If bricks and stones – if shadows and symbols – could stir up such faith and joy in him then WHAT OUGHT WE TO SEE as we come once again to behold the Son of God in a manger.

Behold him.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

⁴ As cited in William S. Plumer. *Psalms*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 1101.