

Psalm 122 “A Song of Ascents: Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”
Psalm 132 (121, 122, 126, 129)
Hebrews 12

May 15, 2011

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

There are few things that humans long for more than peace.

Everyone wants peace.

Even Hitler wanted peace!

A little piece of Poland, a little piece of France!

(in the immortal words of Mel Brooks)

Even the most bloodthirsty tyrant wants peace –
on his terms!

with the whole world in submission to his rule!

We tend to be the same way.

When do you most long for peace?

Is it not when chaos and disorder reign in your life?

When *nothing* goes your way?

I once counseled a man who longed for peace.

His life was filled with chaos:

his workplace was chaotic, his family was rambunctious,

and he prized above all things those 15 minutes in between work and home,

the one time in his life when everything was peaceful.

So *woe* to the driver who interfered with his “peaceful” ride home!

Have you ever noticed that the more you want something, the less you seem to have of it?!

The quest for peace had only made this man’s life *more* chaotic.

Your rule – your wisdom – your way – will *never* produce peace!

Why is that?

Because your peace is only as good as your kingdom.

The Pax Romana was only as good as the Roman Empire.

As long as you submit to Rome, you’ll have peace on Rome’s terms.

How does this work in your home?

As long as you submit to me, you’ll have peace!

Is there a power struggle between you and your wife?

You and your children?

As long as things go my way, we’ll have peace!

Peace is all about power.

Notice that for the Psalmist, *peace* is defined in terms of Jerusalem.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Not just that Jerusalem would be free from attacks from enemies –
but that peace might *rule* from Jerusalem –
that those who *love* Jerusalem might be secure.

Jerusalem *means* “city of peace.”

The Peace of Jerusalem is that rule that brings peace/shalom
to those who love the city of God.

We’ll sing two Psalms in response:

Psalm 129 speaks of how Israel has been afflicted by the nations.

In this respect, Psalm 129 reminds us that the nations *hate* the Peace of Jerusalem

But Psalm 132 reminds us of how Jerusalem *became* the city of God –
how David sought for a place where Yahweh could dwell with his people,
and how the LORD chose Zion as the place where he would dwell forever.

Israel’s hope – *our* hope – is not for *our* peace –
but for the peace of Jerusalem,
which brings security to those who love her!

Sing Psalms 129 & 132

Read Hebrews 12

The songs of Ascents have long been described as pilgrim songs.

Certainly Psalm 122 begins with the theme of pilgrimage:

1. The Journey: We Have Joy *because* of the Destination (v1-2)

¹*I was glad when they said to me,*

"Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Are we there yet?!

How often have you heard that?

One of Hollywood’s more profound reflections on this theme
was Adam Sandler’s “Click” –

where a man could just “fast-forward” his life to the next “destination” –
forever avoiding the journey.

The journey is boring, tedious, annoying.

Let’s just “get there” already!

Beware of that attitude!

If you long for heaven because you are frustrated and annoyed with the present,
then you are just like the child in the back seat saying,
“are we there yet?”!

We live in a culture that is conflicted over which is better: the journey or the destination.
On the one hand, we have amazing transportation
that can bring us to our destination safely and quickly,
beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors.
And so we zoom down the interstate at ridiculous speeds,
or fly across oceans that once took weeks or months to traverse –
all in the name of reaching our destination as quickly as possible.

Before the remote control, there was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Celestial Railroad* –
a parody of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*,
in which Hawthorne described a railroad trip to the Celestial City,
the "easy way" to get to heaven,
bypassing all the difficulties and dangers of pilgrimage,
only to plunge all its well-heeled passengers into the pit of hell!

How can we get there faster, quicker, easier...?

But where are you going?

Because we are also bombarded with messages
that tell us that life has no real destination.

What matters is the journey!
After all, you have a "round trip ticket" to your "destination"!
You'll spend a week or two there – and then come "home."

Most modern conveyances are designed to be as comfortable and luxurious as possible –
for what you can afford!

'Travel in style and comfort' – and all sorts of conveniences and entertainments
are found in abundance wherever "travelers" are found.

To the question "are we there yet" – the modern answer is "of course!"
You are always "there" – because the journey *is* the destination.
There is no final destination – only a journey.

Psalm 122 answers our modern dilemma by telling us that we find joy in the journey
precisely *because* of the destination.

Of course, verse 1 speaks of a "round-trip" pilgrimage.
Three times every year the people of Israel were to assemble in Jerusalem
for the feasts of the LORD – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.
The people of God would go up to the house of the LORD together –

and so the Psalmist says, “I rejoiced” – I was glad –
when they said, let us go up to the house of the LORD!

In the Old Testament, the language of pilgrimage centers on the round-trip idea.
But in Christian thought, pilgrimage is envisioned more as a life-long journey.

Why?

Because of the location of the city.

When Jerusalem is an earthly city –
a city where you are *commanded* to go three times each year –
then you will engage in roundtrip pilgrimage!

But when Jerusalem is a heavenly city,
then your conception of pilgrimage will change!

But you can see the Christian conception of pilgrimage underlying Psalm 122.

While the OT pilgrim would physically go to Jerusalem only three times a year,
Jerusalem plays a much larger role in the believer’s life!

The holy place in Jerusalem, after all,
was only the place where God *met* with his people –
the place where God’s *name* dwelt.

“Jerusalem,” in Psalm 122, certainly refers to the physical city –
but also refers to the mystical city – the city in whose peace we find peace.

So let me ask you:

what place does earthly pilgrimage play in the Christian life?
Is there a place for the “round-trip” idea of pilgrimage?

Many have thought that the Reformation decried *all* “holy places” –
and eliminated all “holy times” except for the Lord’s Day.

But that is not true!

Certainly they objected to the fleecing of pilgrims
that characterized much of the late middle ages!
And they opposed the cult of the saints that motivated most of the pilgrims.

But when you look at Reformed doctrine and practice,
you begin to see that alternate patterns of pilgrimage did develop.

Indeed, it is quite amusing to note that today

Protestant pilgrims can visit all the “holy” sites of the Reformation,
with tours of Edinburgh, Geneva, Wittenberg, etc.
and for that matter, evangelical “holy land” tours take you along the same routes
traveled by medieval catholic pilgrims.

And indeed, you find that people have the same *responses* today as they did then.

For some, it is merely of intellectual interest.
They learn a lot – and that’s about it.
For others, it’s really just one big party!
They have great fun, blow the whole wad,
and come back no better than they were before!
But for others, pilgrimage is a profound spiritual experience.
What is it about being in that *place* affects them?

Some say that there is some residual holiness attached to the *place*.
But think of the biblical city of Bethel (which means “house of God”).
Jacob had his vision of the ladder to heaven –
and built an altar there to the LORD.
But when Jeroboam built a shrine there to the LORD,
he led Israel astray.
A place does not have “inherent holiness” because of some great act of God in the past.

I think Augustine understood how place functions in Christian pilgrimage.
Listen to how he says it in his commentary on Psalm 122:

“Brethren, when by chance some festival of martyrs and some shrine is named,
let your *love* call to mind
how on a certain day crowds come together to celebrate the solemnity;
how those crowds excite one another,
how they encourage one another and say, ‘Let’s go! Let’s go!’
And they ask, ‘Where shall we go?’
And the answer is, ‘To such and such a place, to the holy place!’
One by one they speak to one another, and, as if inflamed,
the individuals produce a common conflagration;
and this one flame as a result of the conversation of people exciting one another
carries them off to the holy place,
and the holy thought sanctifies them”
(Augustine, on Ps. 122:1, Migne 36/37, 1619 – emphasis added).

Notice that for Augustine it is not the *place* that sanctifies them,
but “the holy thought” – prompted by the “common conflagration”
of the “conversation of people.”

In other words, it is the *Word* expressed in *fellowship*.
Yes, it is true that quiet reflection and contemplation can profoundly affect us.
But that quiet reflection and contemplation can *only* affect us
if we are first informed and instructed by the Word.

To stand in a parking lot in Edinburgh and stare at a little yellow square
is hardly a moving experience!
But when you *know* that this square is the only marker of John Knox’s grave,

and that beneath you lie the bones of the man who led the Reformation of Scotland,
that can have a profound effect!

Roundtrip pilgrimage in the Christian life
should have the effect of strengthening us in the journey
as we reflect on how God's works in history –
at particular times and in particular places –
point us forward to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Or to put it another way,
our pilgrimage is not a solitary one
(my chief objection to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*
is how *alone* he is most of the time!).

If we *are* being built together into this heavenly temple,
then we participate in this pilgrimage together as the people of God!

(And not just the people of God here in South Bend,
but also with the people of God in China and Madagascar –
and the people of God in the 14th century and the 3rd century –
that is the point of Hebrews 11, as it sets up the reading we had from Hebrews 12!
We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses –
not that they are “cheering us on” –
the image is not that they see us,
but that *we* see *them*!)

Verse 2 then speaks of our arrival at Jerusalem:

²*Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!*

Most commentators agree that verse 2 indicates that this Psalm
would be sung (at least imaginatively) in the gates of Jerusalem.
There is some difference of opinion as to whether the pilgrims would sing it
as they were standing in the gate itself –
or whether it would be sung “as if” standing in the gate,
either in remembrance or in anticipation.

Think of the famous hymn,
“Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, see him dying on the tree!”
No one assumes that you can only sing this if you can literally “see” him dying.
In the same way “our feet have been standing”
(which could also be translated, “our feet are standing”)
does not necessarily mean that you can only sing this if you are literally
standing in the gates of Jerusalem!

Rather, the point of verse 2 is to direct your attention to the destination of your pilgrimage, as the city of Jerusalem becomes the focus of our thoughts:

2. The Destination: the Place of Thanksgiving and Justice (v3-5)

³*Jerusalem— built as a city
that is bound firmly together,*

After all, where are we going?!
Are we there yet?!

We are in Jerusalem.
But what is Jerusalem?
A city “bound firmly together.”

This has puzzled many commentators,
because “bound firmly together” is not really a construction term,
it is more “tent” language!

It is the verb used in Exodus 26 to refer to how the tabernacle was to be “bound together.”

In other words,
even as the tabernacle was the place where earth and heaven met,
so Jerusalem is now the place where God dwells with his people.

Jerusalem is now the tabernacle – the city (in a sense) *is* the temple;

as verse four says, it is the place:

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.*

When we think about OT history,
we usually think about the days of Moses, or the reign of David,
or the conquest under Joshua.

We remember the mighty deeds that God did in the sight of all Israel.

But Psalm 122 calls us to remember the ordinary days of OT Israel.

Because most OT generations never saw “mighty deeds” in their day.

The tribes of the LORD were commanded year after year,
generation after generation,

to go up to the house of the LORD, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

The thrice-annual pilgrimages were designed to remind them of God’s mighty deeds –
so that they might give thanks.

“Are we there yet?”

Israel certainly wasn't!

Whenever this Psalm was written,

it was sung throughout an era when Israel had not arrived!

And yet, it reminds us that God called us to come to Jerusalem

to give thanks to the name of the LORD!

Gratitude is essential to the Christian life!

As we remember God's mighty deeds to our fathers –

as we remember, above all, his wondrous works in Jesus Christ, our Lord –

we must give thanks to him for his kindness to us,

even though the journey isn't over yet!

Verse 5 expresses this in terms of the thrones of the house of David:

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

For the Israelites, the thrones of the house of David are intimately connected
with the theme of religious pilgrimage.

After all, David's son was the one who built the temple in Jerusalem!

As Americans we divide the religious from the civil.

We do not think that because Washington DC is the political capital,

that therefore our church headquarters should be in Washington DC as well.

(though I daresay that Washington DC was plainly designed

to encourage political pilgrimage –

as the layout of the National Mall suggests!)

But this impulse is not new to the United States!

It goes back to the fact that the founder of our religion

was rejected by the political rulers of his day.

Christianity has always had an ambivalent relationship with political power

because our King taught us that *his way* is the way of the cross.

The throne of the house of David,

as Peter says in Acts 2,

is at the right hand of the Father.

Our confession that Jesus is LORD emphasizes our allegiance to *his* kingdom –

and therefore our submission to *his* rule –

and therefore our dependence upon *his* peace!

And so we come back to the importance of peace:

3. The Importance of Peace: “If Mama Ain’t Happy...” (v6-9)

⁶ *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!*

The songs of Ascents speak often of peace:

I am for peace (120)

Peace be upon Israel (125)

Peace be upon Israel (128)

And here, Pray for the peace of Jerusalem (122)

The content of the prayer is found in verses 6-7:

"May they be secure who love you!

⁷ *Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"*

The peace of Jerusalem has immediate impact on the residents:

those who dwell within her walls.

I pray for the peace of Jerusalem,

because her peace is essential for the people of God.

If Jerusalem is cast down and destroyed,

then we have no destination –

and there is no point in our journey!

One does not go on pilgrimage to a ruined city with no sanctuary!

At least, not to *give thanks* to the name of the LORD!

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem today remains as a reminder of this!

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem has *nothing* to do with the modern nation of Israel.

The throne of the house of David is *not* in the modern city of Jerusalem

The throne of the house of David is at the right hand of the Father.

Evangelical support of Zionism has done incalculable harm
to the cause of the gospel in the Arab world!

Some have argued that Israel has a God-given “right” to the land.

But at best, that *right* depended upon their faithfulness to God’s law!

An Israel that does not confess that Jesus is the Son of David

could not possibly be the rightful possessor of the land!

It is worth remembering that according to the prophets

Egypt and Assyria (modern-day Iraq)

would be brought together with Israel

to worship the LORD.

The Peace of Jerusalem includes the nations –
so that there would be a highway from Egypt to Assyria
(that would lead through Jerusalem),
so that the nations might come in pilgrimage to the house of the LORD.

And that is what happened on the day of Pentecost –
when the Spirit was poured out upon the church,
and the gospel went forth to all the nations.

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.

Verses 8-9 show us the communal importance of the Peace of Jerusalem.
It's not all about *me* and *my* participation in pilgrimage.

Indeed, in these last two verses we begin to see more clearly
how the "I" of Psalm 122 relates to the "we."

Jesus is the prime singer of Psalm 122.
As Hebrews puts Isaiah's words into his mouth:
"here am I and the children God has given me."
Jesus is the one who has sought the good of Jerusalem –
he is the one who has said "shalom be within you."

Peace has come to Jerusalem because of the benediction of Jesus.

John Brown of Haddington (*PODIM*, p. 313) comments:
"While I sing, let me remember the gospel-church,
bewail her disorders, supplicate for her welfare,
and set my heart on the Jerusalem which is above,
and into which nothing can enter that defileth or disturbs.
O when shall my feet stand there!
When shall I see my Jesus, on his great white throne, and sit with him in his glory."

Are we there yet?