

A Journey Song

Psalm 122

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We are going through a series on Psalms of Ascent which were particularly for journeying to worship the Lord together. And this psalm particularly is a journey song, Psalm 122. I would like to read that this morning, and then I will lead us in a time for prayer that the Lord would feed us this morning. Hear now God's word, Psalm 122.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together, 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. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!" For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, "Peace be within you!" For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. [ESV]

As we prepare this morning to ask that the Lord would teach us from His word, I want to remind you that as we pray prior to the pastoral prayer, it is not merely perfunctory. It is calling on God's presence much as we do at the beginning of our service every week when we do our prayer of adoration. We're praying and reminding all of us to pray as we do so to the triune God, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. All are equal in power and glory and are at work to feed the church of Jesus Christ. And so as we go this morning, we're going to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Let's go to them now and ask that they would hear our prayers and that the Lord would feed His church. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that your face towards us is loving kindness. Your word tells us that you delight in loving kindness. And we know that your delight in loving kindness is most revealed in giving us your Son, the word made flesh, God with us, the Lord Jesus Christ who came to save His people from their sins. Lord Jesus, you are our glorious resurrected holy redeemer. We thank you that you sought to make us reconciled to the Lord, our Father, and that because of you and your sacrifice, your victory over sin and death, and the resurrection, we get to enjoy a renewed and restored relationship that we can now call our Father, our dear loving Father. Thank you for your loving kindness. Thank you for your mediation, Lord Jesus. But we thank you our Father and Lord Jesus that you both have given us the Holy Spirit that precedes from the Father and the Son. You, Holy Spirit, do not draw attention to yourself. Rather, Holy Spirit, you draw our attention and direct our worship and our identity and hope in who Christ is. Holy Spirit, we now pray that you would take this word written for us with ink on paper, that it would be enriched and enlivened, and that it would remake us to be the people of God you desire us to be, made in the image of God to reflect the glory of Christ empowered by the Spirit to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world. Help us. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Over the last few months, since I am not able to travel via airplane, I have found myself spending a lot more time in the car than I ever would have anticipated. I was travelling to see my family in North Carolina, took several trips to pick Caroline up and get her stuff, and then also to return her back to preparation for college. I've spent a few thousand miles in my car which means I get to do one of my most enjoyable pastimes which is curating playlists of music. Now, in old money, we used to call them mixtapes. I still have mixtapes and have recovered some in my basement, ones that Kate made for me when we were engaged. I still love mixtapes.

Now, the funny thing about this is it says something about who we are. At least, my curated playlist does. It says something about my past. It says something about how I'm feeling in the present. But, also, in some sense, it says something about where I'm going or the place where I'm going. Perhaps

it's some place I really haven't been in a long time. And so it might have everything from The Eagles to Notorious B.I.G. to Talking Heads. You never know what I have, but you could find them on Apple Music if you so choose.

But it is something I enjoy doing. And it's something about a journey and wedding that with song that I somehow find deep within my soul great joy which is why, when I came to this series on Psalms of Ascent, I knew I wanted to preach on Psalm 122. It is, if you will, a mixtape of God's people for journeying to the temple. It is the song that they would sing.

Now, this is establishing what is the song in the worship of God's people on the way to Jerusalem, to the place where the temple was. And what we will find there, of course, is the same idea. It says something about where they've been. It says something about what's happening with them in the present. But, also, what they desire to be for the future. It's both a narrative of what God has been doing in their lives but also a vision for what He would want for them. And I think that is also for us. What has God been doing in our lives? What is He doing? And what are our hearts set on for the future?

As we look at these verses this morning, I want you to note several things about this passage which you will see. And as you do so, we will mark it out with the particular verses. First, in this journey song, we will see it is about going to the house of the Lord, verses 1-5, and all that that meant both explicitly and implied in these verses. Secondly, the better Jerusalem, what they were to pray for when they arrived. What were they to pray for? It was to be a better Jerusalem. But ultimately, it was looking to this third thing, the ultimate Jerusalem. In this journey song, we will hear what it meant for the people of God to go to the house of the Lord, to pray for a better Jerusalem, and to work for the ultimate Jerusalem. Let's look together as we go through this wonderful song of the people of God. And my hope is we, wedded by the word and guided by the Spirit and the hope of the gospel, would be able to find a tune for which we can have a song of journey, hope, and anticipation.

When they were going to the house of the Lord, we'll notice that one of the things these first few verses say is things which were longed for. And you'll see this, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" First and foremost, what it meant for the people of God to go to the house of the Lord was it was a place of God's presence. To go to the house of the Lord was synonymous with saying, we are with God's presence. And this was the great hope of the people of God, to know the in-dwelling presence of the Lord.

So how did God make Himself present in the temple? And that is what we know as the ark of the covenant. Now, what was the ark of the covenant? It was at the heart of the temple, the place where the sacrifices for sin were offered on the day of atonement, Leviticus 16. But what was meant for God's presence to be there in the ark of the covenant? Well, we learn this later on specifically in Hebrews 9. The writer of Hebrews is describing this earthly temple, and specifically describing the Ark of the Covenant where it says this in describing the innermost sanctuary of the temple, "Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna," again, recalling what God did for them in the desert, "Aaron's staff that budded," giving an example of how God leads His people, but also "the tablets of the covenant." This is God's word as it was written as God's covenant promise to them as His people, not His people covenant to God but God marks His presence by having in writing His word of promise, and presence, and faithfulness. "Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things, we cannot now speak in detail."

But if you go back and read the fashioning and what they were to use in Solomon's temple and all the work that was to go into the design, you begin to see that even all the architecture, all of the gold, none of it was superfluous. It's a picture of how God even uses the artisans and art itself as a picture and reflection of His glory and beauty. So does art matter? Yes. Does creativity matter? Yes. And God shows how even the creative architecture and all that surrounds the very things, the most precious part of God's

presence was surrounded by glory and beauty. His very presence, His glory and beauty, His promise was all there.

And if you read back through the Psalms, you see that even when David found himself persecuted and forcibly separated from the place where he most wanted to worship, you hear over and over again the longing in his heart. What did he most want? Freedom from persecution? Of course. Did he want to see his family? Yes. But what he most wanted was to be in the house of the Lord again. And what was interesting is that even when he was tempted to doubt and wonder whether God would be faithful, and to see the prosperity of the wicked, he said even he almost slipped. And yet, when he came back into the presence of God, he was returned to his right mind, his right heart. He found the place, God's presence. It's the gravity of who He is. And this is what the people of God long for. Going to the house of the Lord was all about being in God's presence.

But it wasn't just a place of presence. It was also meant to be a place of unity. In verses 3 and 4, notice what the psalmist says. "Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together, 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." Now, this is remarkable. This is David saying, this is the place not only where we experience God's presence vertically, but we experience God's presence by the people of God, the tribes together as a place of dwelling in unity because we're worshipping the God who is holy and faithful.

Now, implied in all of that is actually a surprise of what God has done. To even have David say that is remarkable. Think about it. If you go back and read the book of Judges, which has been my call because I've been in Judges for a while, one of the things you begin to see is it's remarkable that we would even consider the tribes being together bound for worship in the temple as a place of unity. Why? Because you go and you see how they often warred against even each other and even how they grieve the fact that brothers and companions would rise up against one another. They would often want what the other had. They would complain and grumble. This is not uncommon because one group liked hardwood floors and the other liked area rugs. One liked hip-hop, and the other one liked classical.

You get my point. I'm trying to say that for this to be a place of unity is remarkable. But it's also the hope of what God does with His people from different backgrounds, different families under one purpose in God's presence, worshipping the Lord together. To go to the house of the Lord meant to be in a place of unity.

But it was also a place of authority. To go to the house of the Lord was a place of His presence, a place for unity for the household of God no matter its diversity, but also a place of God's authority. Verse 5, "There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David." He's referring to where God is present, to where the people of God gathered together in unity. To hear from the authority, the word of God, is to understand that to go to the house of the Lord was to put ourselves underneath God's authority.

Please note, however, we never give God authority. We cannot give to Him something that He has Himself. He has the authority. We receive His authority. We don't give it to Him. So if you're ever tempted to hear somebody say, oh, God is not present in the public square, or God is not present in the world, that is not so because no one gives God authority because God is authority. God is present. Nothing has been taken from Him.

If you recall, just a couple of weeks ago, I reminded you of this great quote from John Frame when he writes this.

"Note that God is not worshiped by men's hands as though he needed anything. God is worshiped by men's hands, but hands that are raised in praise and thanksgiving not to supply the needs of God. Rather, he is the one who has given us everything: life, breath, times, and places. It is in Him that we live and move and have our being. We depend utterly on him. He does not depend at all on us."

And so to go to the house of the Lord was a recognition that everything is because of Him. All authority belongs to Him in heaven and on earth.

Just as was read earlier in the passage, this temple, no matter how glorious, can't contain all that he is. The very universe is God's house, and He is even bigger than that because He has called it into being. To go to the house of the Lord, my friends, was to go with that anticipation. He is present. He has reconciled us to Himself. We come together from every tribe to recognize His power and authority. And in that we find our gravitational center, our rootedness. This was their hope. This is why they're singing. We get to go to the house of the Lord.

Did it become duty? Probably. Were some of the tribe kind of bored, like some of the things we say often about church? Oh, we have to go again. Oh, I'd like to sleep in. You get the point. The idea is all these things still happen, and yet there's an opportunity for us to be reminded about how much the people of God longed to go to the house of the Lord.

But in going to the house of the Lord, this psalm also transitions. Once they get there, what happens? The psalm tells us that their job was to do something to make Jerusalem better, the better Jerusalem. Two things stand out for this better Jerusalem. In verses 6 and 7, it says, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! 'May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!'" And so the people of God, as they gathered together from all of these tribes, came together to work for a better Jerusalem, and the two things that they would have worked for are peace and security.

Now, when we hear peace, we think rest. We think of the lack of hostility. But that's the English word. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. This idea is more than just the absence of hostility. This is full embodied, spiritual, everything that we are put into one word, the idea of what does it look like for the people of God to flourish? What does it look like for Jerusalem to flourish in the presence of God? Yes, to enjoy this shalom. That is that we enjoy our relationship with God vertically, but then that is also expressed horizontally.

This idea of peace that they were to pray for, it says, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!" And that is when the people of God are in His presence, made right with Him through the work that He has provided through sacrifice, then we also enjoy what it means to be horizontal. Worship is never merely vertical nor is it merely horizontal. It is both. We can't have the one without the other. How do we know this? Because it says, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! 'May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls.'" So within the walls here, horizontally, but also as we understand the reconciling power of God as they would go to worship the Lord. They rejoiced in the reconciling power of God but also of how it brought reconciliation even among the tribes of Israel.

And they were to pray for security. He says, "May they be secure who love you," meaning may nothing ever draw them away from you. This is the desire that although calamity and all kinds of hostility may happen around us, we might always dwell secure in the relationship that we have with the Lord that can never be changed, never be overthrown, that the gates of hell, as the scriptures say, shall not prevail over the church. What God has begun, and what God has established, God will bring to completion. So when he says to pray for security, it is also the establishment and the repeating of a promise. All of those who are in the Lord are secure in Him. It doesn't mean we don't face calamity and pandemics and hostility, but rather, although we do, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

But the question is how do we appropriate this? We're thousands of years removed. You might be thinking, this is interesting, but what do we do with this? How do we apply this? Does it have no more application for the church of Jesus Christ here? And I would argue that it does because, in some ways, I mean for the middle point of a better Jerusalem to have a double meaning. Yes, they were to pray for a better Jerusalem, for peace and security. But, my friends, the church of Jesus Christ is the answer to those prayers because of what we understand to be the fulfillment of these prayers.

We know this because of what we hear in the letter that Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus when he says this in chapter 2,

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. [ESV]

You see, this is a greater explanation of what Jesus meant as He was speaking to the woman at the well. Jerusalem is no longer the place. A physical temple is no longer the place. 10001 Route 108 is no longer the only place. It is the living stones of Jesus Christ being brought of Gentile birth and Jewish birth and all tongues and tribes and nations all together breaking down the hostility that once existed between us and God because of sin through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, who is the peace of God. Notice that's what Paul says. Jesus is now this peace. Jesus is now the word made flesh. This is how God has expressed Himself and given us His word. God is now present because Jesus said that it is no longer in that place or in that temple, but rather He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh making many people one into the people of God.

So how do we appropriate it? We pray. We pray for peace. We pray for peace among ourselves. We pray for the security of Christ's church, not just CPC but the church of Jesus Christ around the world, the catholic church, universal. Wherever the gospel is preached and wherever they are gathering together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, this is the church at work. And we pray for its peace. And I must tell you and call you and encourage you that when we pray, we can widen our aperture because now we're part of a global body, not just a local one. And we pray for CPC and for her flourishing and for the gospel to go forth, and not just here but in every tongue and tribe around the world.

What does that look like for us when we pray? What will CPC look like perhaps in 10 years or 30 years? How can we be praying that God would bring about a better Jerusalem, a better body of Christ growing and expanding? It means we begin to pray now for something that doesn't look very much like we do in this room.

What do I mean? One of my colleagues David Cassidy, a pastor in Nashville, writes this. As we think about praying for what God is doing in the world and building up the body of Christ, he says,

"The average Christian in the world is not male but female, not white but brown or black, third world not first world, far more Pentecostal than Presbyterian. The average Christian in the world today is a 22-year-old female with brown skin. She has not been to our conferences. She likely does not read C.S. Lewis or *Christianity Today*. She has not read your blog or mine and does not go to Starbucks or care one bit about the alternate endings of the *Game of Thrones*, or if the latest lyric from Hillsong happens to agree with our confessional standards. She is also likely the vessel God will use to prophesy to the next generation. She's not afraid of suffering either, for according to *Open Doors USA*, over 215 million believers are persecuted with intimidation, prison, and even death for their faith in Jesus Christ across the

world. 42 percent of the world's population is under 25, half in Sub Sahara and Africa and South Asia, and the median age of the global population is 28."

When we begin to pray for the peace and security of the body of Christ and the expansion of His kingdom, we must widen the aperture and recognize that God is on the move. He's not waiting for the pandemic to finish. He's not waiting for us to figure out all the ways of our livestreams. He's at work. Thanks be to God. And He is demonstrating His power, and we're called to pray. Yes, we want the end of the pandemic. We want things to be able to get back to the place where we can gather together and hear ourselves in one voice praise God. But until that moment, we can be praying now that God would use precisely this moment where we feel at our weakest, and that He would demonstrate His greatest strength, that God in His kingdom is on the move.

May God give us this heart and widen our aperture of prayer, of how we can better reflect what God is doing even in our own community even in this day, how we can reflect more and more what God is doing around the world. And I must say that while I have found myself at times during the past five months grumbling and grieving, I am reminded that far more Christians today suffer a greater persecution than I could ever imagine. While I wish we could gather in many ways, I now know that there are Christians that are gathering. I'm reminded there are Christians gathering in countries that were they discovered, they would be put to the sword immediately.

It's caused me to reflect differently on the whole nature of what we're having to do here. I grieve that I cannot hear and see more of you. As Kate and I have traveled over the years as we've served here as a pastor and his family, we remark when we come home year that the fact that you sing and praise God is so deeply encouraging to us. And it grieves my soul. And it's hard to not be able to gather together to see your faces and to hear your voices in robust singing. It grieves me, and it is hard for me to have to learn how to wonder what you're thinking because I can't see your mouths. I wonder how many people are going to watch the live stream, and how many are not? But I begin to remember that I'm here today and gone tomorrow, but that God might use any word that I have and is probably reaching corners and neighborhoods and dens and living rooms that I will never know anything about. While this pandemic seems to discourage us, God is on the move. May we pray for a better Jerusalem for the sake of Christ and His body.

I close with this, the ultimate Jerusalem. In verses 8 and 9, he says, "For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, 'Peace be within you!' For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good." In some sense, he's now shifting not just what we're to be praying for a better Jerusalem now, but also what we're to be longing for in the future which is the ultimate Jerusalem.

Isn't it true when we think about it? He says, "For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, 'Peace be within you!'" He likely knows what we know from history. He was longing for something that would not yet be ultimately realized. Jerusalem would be destroyed. The temple would be destroyed. And yet, we also know that even in our day, the reality of sin still means that we await the ultimate Jerusalem. We long for a time when there will be peace that will know no end, that there will be an experience of goodness and glory that will have at its center the presence of God in the new heavens and the new earth.

Let me ask you this. What are we to do then? Are we to merely wait for Christ to return and we just wait for all that to happen? I believe when he charges us here for the sake of one another to seek the peace for the sake of Christ's church and to build up her for the sake of God's glory and for the good of the house of the Lord, I think it means we are to learn cultivation. What does it look like for you and I as we await for Christ's return, which could be this day? O Lord, please return this day with the new heavens and the new earth. But until you do, may you enable us to begin to cultivate life here as what the ultimate Jerusalem will look like.

What do I mean? Just briefly, I want to read from Hebrews again. Hebrews 12. This is the writer of Hebrews saying how you and I need to envision what every Sunday is. He says, "But you have come to

Mount Zion." So when we gather together, the writer of Hebrews is saying, we're coming to Mount Zion, "to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." The blood of Abel meant death. The blood of Christ means life. And when we gather together, the writer of Hebrews is saying we are gathering with all the angels in heaven and all the great cloud of witnesses, and we are singing, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.

So how do we begin to cultivate? Ask that the Lord would ask us to cultivate a greater love for His church. How do we do that? We do that by asking this question. What are we expecting God to do when we gather together? Are we expecting God to do more we want to have more people? Or are we expecting God to do more because of who He is in His presence, in His authority, and in the peace that He brings?

We can cultivate a greater love for Christ's church to pray for her, pray for her growth and flourishing and the expansion of Christ's kingdom. We can cultivate a greater love for Christ's church by being willing to join us as members that we might learn to serve one another together and not look to be served as if we are all joining the church as if it were a cruise ship. We come ready to serve with our talents and gifts to give them away, not waiting to be entertained. We cultivate a greater love for Christ's church as we fight against the consumerism that oftentimes comes with us when we come to church. We come to love selflessly, to serve boldly with our gifts, the building up of Christ's church with a longing and a hope and a love for Christ and His church that He would be glorified, and that the word of grace would go forth wonderfully and powerfully. We are to pray for the lost, to pray for those in your neighborhood who do not know Christ, yet you are the hands and feet of Christ in those neighborhoods. We are to seek reconciliation in relationships where you know you need to go and reconcile. We are to boldly trust in Christ as far as it depends on you to live in peace with others.

This is all part of the cultivation work for the ultimate Jerusalem. Why? Because of what we hear in these words.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no more night there. They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. [ESV]

How we appropriate this journey song as the church of Jesus Christ is that we don't merely sit on our hands waiting for this day to be revealed although we long for it. We do by Christ's grace and the power of His Spirit to bring all that we have, our glory, our gifts, our talents, our persons, and we bring it and offer it to Him and say, Lord, glorify your name through us that the nations might hear and see what the gospel of the reconciling grace of Christ looks like, to bring many nations into one people under one God, one gospel, one faith, one baptism. This is the glory. And we get to be workmen to see that glory revealed. May we get a vision for this journey song and have our own journey songs as you get into your car or you join online, a journey song for what it looks like for us to go to the house of the Lord and to worship Him together, that the Lord would give our hearts a greater love and a cultivation of love for Him for His sake. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for this journey song, a reminder that you give us a great vision for what it looks like for your name to be glorified and for the kingdom of God to be expanded. We thank you, O Lord, that we do not have to travel to a particular city or site to worship you but that where two or more are gathered, there you are also. And we, by your grace, can cultivate a greater love for you and for your

church. Father, I pray that you would expand your church in and around the world of all tongues and tribes, of all people of all races and covers, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, Lord, we pray you would bring this about with healing in your wings. Help us, Lord, to have this vision and this journey song for the sake of your glory and the building up of your church. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.