

Let Us Go to the House of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Well now if you're here in the building there's you've got a copy of Psalm 122 on page four. If you're at home you'll need to open your Bible to that although it's going to take us seven pages until we get to Psalm 122. This is the longest introduction I've ever done on any topic and I'm doing it because we begin a series today on 15 little psalms called the songs of ascent, the songs of going up. There's Psalm 120 to 134 and they were sung by Israel because three times a year they went up to Jerusalem. Remember God said three times a year you've got to come up to Jerusalem to have a feast with your friends and family in my presence at the temple and these psalms were sung on the pilgrimage as people walked up to Jerusalem giving shape to the journey but also shape to the whole life of the believer as their journey toward God's place with God's people in God's presence and what's interesting is that it's an uphill journey because the journey of believers always includes suffering and it always requires courage. In fact the first song of ascent, Psalm 120, the writer is a victim of a campaign of lies and slander and he says at the end of the psalm, too long have I dwelled amongst those who hate peace.

I am for peace but whenever I speak they are for war and some of you may have that sense. So the journey of the believer is not one of you know escape and fantasy but it's walking through the real world moving into the presence of God with a profound sense of homelessness as we go.

One of the strangest things about these psalms is just how extravagant and exaggerated they speak about Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem. It's almost as though they're talking about God himself when they talk about Jerusalem. This is the place that God chose to dwell.

They also use the same high language about Zion. Zion is a mountain on the top of which Jerusalem is built. So let me just remind you, Psalm 48 says, Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. In the city of our God, his holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Mount Zion, the city of the great king.

Or in our psalm today, 122 verse 6, Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May they be secure who love you. Do you love Jerusalem?

[2 : 55] Or Psalm 129, May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backward. It's almost as though our view of Jerusalem is the same as our attitude to God. And I've been to Jerusalem and if you've been to Jerusalem, when you get there you think, what's the big deal?

It's such a disappointment. I mean it's not a particularly clean city. Paris, now there's a city full of parks and gardens and art and built on a river.

It's very beautiful. Or Rome. Now there's a city. Colosseum, Forum, Pantheon, Piazzas, let alone Vatican and museums.

To say nothing of Vancouver. We've got much nicer mountains than Jerusalem. Mountains with snow on them. Water, skiing, parks, mountain hiking.

So what's the big deal about Jerusalem? Why is it so important? Why does it play a part in the prayers of God's people in the Old Testament? How is it relevant to us today? So what I want to do is to do a drone flight over the whole Bible.

[4 : 03] A high fly over the whole Bible. Is that okay with everyone? Good. Because the Bible opens with a garden paradise.

And it's interesting that paradise is one of the ways in which God helps us in this. So it begins with a garden paradise. Remember? It's a unique place, Eden, in all the earth, where God walks in fellowship with the man and the woman.

And it's just a place of sheer goodness, harmony with God, each other, no lies, no abuse, no selfishness, or evil, rest. These words pile up.

Blessing, meaning. And it's one of the reasons why in our lives today, when we see or experience something truly beautiful, it stirs in us a kind of a homesickness, a longing for this paradise, which is a homesickness for God himself.

So that's where the Bible starts. There'll be a test on this if you're under 15 afterwards. The Bible ends in a garden city paradise.

[5 : 11] The garden has expanded, and now it's a city making room for many, a place where God can live with his people, after we've been delivered from our pride and our selfishness and our evil and our guilt and our sin.

And there the tree of life spreads its branches for the eternal healing of the nations. And the story of the Bible is how God rescues and redeems us at great terrible personal cost, not to bring us back to that garden paradise, but to bring us with each other into the paradise of God, the garden city forever, delivering us from evil, the evil we commit and the evil committed against us.

And I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but it's an incredibly difficult work that God has because, precisely because we resist him. We keep wanting to play God.

We keep wanting to set up our own definition of heaven. And every attempt to build heaven here, apart from God, turns out to be hell for others. And the way that God redeems us, the way that he rescues us and brings us to himself, is he uses paradise to feed our longings.

Think about it. When he rescued Israel from Egypt in the desert, he brings them to himself, and then he gives them a little tiny piece of portable paradise.

[6 : 40] To go with them. So that he can come and dwell amongst his people on their pilgrimage to the promised land. Do you remember this? At the center of the camp of two million people, there is the holy tabernacle.

At the center of the holy tabernacle is the ark of the covenant. And God comes and dwells on it. In the last chapter of the book of Exodus, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

And that means the people can come into his presence through a massive spiritual sanitizing protocol, sacrifices and priests and offerings.

And God puts that in place. Otherwise, we'd ruin paradise. Because you can't enter paradise until you're transformed. And they come into the land. God chooses Jerusalem and to dwell in the temple.

It's called the house of the Lord. In fact, in Psalm 122, we're getting closer to it. At Jerusalem, there are two houses. There's the house of David. And then there is the house of the Lord.

[7 : 42] And in the house of the Lord is the dwelling place of God. It's a little piece of paradise again. That's why Jerusalem is the center of longing and prayer for God's people.

It's not because Jerusalem tops the list of most livable cities in the world. It's a place set aside by God for his dwelling place.

Different from the rest of the world. A piece of paradise where the Lord of all the earth chooses to dwell and gather his people. And you know, of course, the great tragedy of the Old Testament is that God's people reject him.

And so he withdraws his presence from the temple and from Jerusalem. So that it becomes just like every other city on earth and the temple just an empty building. And when Jesus comes to earth, he does away with the man-made house.

He is the presence of God. And he is rejected by Jerusalem, as we read in the Luke reading. They don't know what makes for peace. And Jesus comes to open the door for us to the real thing.

[8 : 50] The heavenly city, the paradise of God. And he's gone there. And he's told us, I'm preparing a place for you. And I'm going to come back and take you to be with me in that place.

And before that happens, before the heavenly Jerusalem comes down from heaven, and he takes us to be with himself, Jesus creates a new temple here, a new dwelling place of God, not made up of bricks, but made up of living stones, believers, those who love him.

It's a living temple built on Jesus. It's the dwelling place for God in this world. It is the household of God. And you are the household of God.

That's where God dwells. That's why Jesus says, whenever two or three are gathered in his name, there am I in their midst. I just want you to imagine, you're watching those people going up to Jerusalem in the Old Testament.

You look at them with human eyes, you may think, oh yeah, they're heading up for a week of partying and feasting. You look at them through the eyes of faith, and you see, no, no, they're part

of this great big story of God.

[10:00] From paradise to, from garden paradise to garden city paradise, they're being rescued. And you might look at people coming to church and see the same thing.

You know, you might think they're going because they need help to cope with the week ahead.

Gathering in church is part of being caught up in the big story of God.

It's about our journey home. That's why we come. This time of year, it's a holiday cottage time.

People go up, they have holiday cottages in the Okanagan or in the Vancouver Island.

They open up their cottages, and they go up for some weeks and spend a nice time relaxing with family now that we're allowed to travel. And someone this week said that most of us operate as though heaven and paradise is like the cottage away from the city.

We think of heaven like that second house on top of our real life here where it's much more important. And up there, it's cleaner and more relaxing and a great place to retire one day, perhaps.

[11:06] But Vancouver is much more important, certainly more exciting. And this is where the Psalms of Ascent are so important to us, because they flip it upside down.

They say, the center of our journey is not the city you're living physically now, but our true spiritual home. And the way Psalm 122 does this right off the bat is by picturing us on the day we arrive in heaven and the joy that that brings to us.

That's the point of the first two verses. Just look at them with me, will you? Psalm 122 verse 1. I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

And then verse 2, there arrived a feeder standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. This is a bit of a flat translation in English. It's difficult to convey the sense of elation and euphoria and delight in verse 1.

It's not, I was glad when they said that to me. He remembers back in verse 1, the first time he is invited to join others in the journey to God. I was overwhelmed with delight, would be closer to it.

[12:20] For the first time, he realized, the writer of this psalm, life is more about plowing fields and raising a family and getting to 80 years of age. He realizes that he's been invited into the presence of God, that the God who made him and loved him is rescuing him.

He's part of the great story of God in this world. And it's like the first time the penny drops on the good news of Jesus for us. And we go, really? You mean he died for me?

He's willing to accept he wants me, he loves me, he's willing to forgive my sins. You might remember that. And that's why verse 1 is spoken by an individual, because we have to receive and respond to this individually.

You hear God calling you by name. And come to him and he will give you rest. And it means joining a group of others as well to respond to this individually.

Let us go to the house of the Lord. And part of this joy is knowing that my story is caught up with this big story of God, that I am made for more than this. That I am on a journey, no matter what the difficulties, and God is there waiting for us to welcome us into his true home.

[13:27] That's why as believers on the way, we do verse 1 over and over. We invite others to join us on the journey. We try and seek and save the lost. Now, if verse 1 has feelings of joy, verse 2 is complete astonishment.

This has been the verse that I have found most wondrous this week. It's the moment he realises that he has arrived in the presence of God.

He says, Our feet are standing in the holy city. So for us, what that means is not the first time you go on a tour of the physical city in Israel, but it's the moment you realise that we are in heaven, the paradise city of God, with those who love him, where we can see his face.

There is a day, brothers and sisters, when we're going to say to each other, we are here. Look at your feet.

We've touched down on the streets of gold with our brothers and sisters in this place and presence of God. Ever thought about that? What a moment that's going to be.

[14:48] You know, after all my doubts and fears and wanderings and failures, through all our dangers, toils and snares, God has successfully brought us to himself through it all.

And it's part of why we meet together in person. We liturgically rehearse that day when our feet touched down in paradise. And each week we look around and we say, Wow, look at how God has kept us.

I had doubts about some of you. I had doubts about myself. But he's kept us for himself. So you see, the Christian life isn't just muddling through this life.

It's living as knowing refugees with our citizenship in heaven. Not because life's so difficult here in Vancouver, but because we live in Vancouver knowing that we're on our way to the presence of God.

Now, why is this such a happy psalm? Why is this such a happy thing? The psalm then gives us two reasons, two points. Verses three to five. Firstly, because justice flows from the house of the king. [15:58] If you look down at verse three, cities are important. We form our cities, then our cities form us. You know, if you live in Vancouver, the way we put things together shapes us.

But our ultimate destiny is a city, not built by us, but built by God. And the first thing the singer notes is its unity. So verse three, built firmly together. It's not an architectural statement, or the rocks fit nicely.

It's about verse four, the connection between the people who are going up. The tribes, the 12 tribes, they're united together. And they're united together because they're gathering to him.

And the reason, what they're supposed to do as they gather, in verse four, is to worship, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. You see, what gives us unity is that we gather to worship the one true and living God.

We don't gather as a church to give each other a little bit of inspiration to help us to get by the next seven days. We don't come to church to be busy with doing all sorts of good things for other people. [17:05] It's to worship God. We don't come to church for what we can get out of it. You can't assess church by how you feel. It's about God.

You know, in pagan religions, worship is manipulating the gods by doing lots of good things for them out of a sense of duty. In Christianity, we realize all the blessing has come this way and God calls us to worship him and that's how we nurture our relationship with him.

And there's a reason for our worship, even further, verse five. The reason for the unity and the joy in the worship, verse five, is because there, the thrones of judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.

What that means is this, that Christian unity is not a fake unity, but it's based on the perfect justice that comes from the throne of David or David's son, our Messiah, who gave his life to defeat all evil and is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

And how we long for this. We long, long, long for this, don't we? Now, last week, when we spent time lamenting the residential school discovery, we just long for justice.

[18:22] It seems humanly impossible. In so many areas of our life, this is true. And it's hard to imagine that day when our feet stand in the city and we'll see the throne of David and the one on the throne, the Lamb of God who died for us, who has risen with healing in his wings, ruling with complete and perfect justice and equity, and of that kingdom there will be no end.

It's because justice flows from the throne of David, the house of David. That's the first reason for joy. And the second is, in verse 6 to 9, peace flows from the house of the Lord.

Did you notice, three times in this section, the psalmist mentions peace, 6, 7 and 8, peace, peace, peace. It's the Hebrew word shalom and it's in the very name Jerusalem.

It's the place of peace, the city of peace. This is a very big Bible word, peace. And I say this every time we come to it.

I love saying this, that shalom, peace, is not just the absence of war, of violence, and fighting. It's not God just taking away our difficulties so we'll be free to determine our lives.

[19:42] It's not even just harmony between God and us and each other and creation. It is the positive enjoyment and delight in those relationships.

This is important. Shalom, and I quote here, is to enjoy living before God, enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, enjoy living with one's fellows, to enjoy life with oneself.

It cannot exist where there is injustice, but shalom, peace, is a deeper and more wonderful blessing than justice. Because you can have justice without delight, but you can't have shalom without it.

You know, you can have an, it's not an empty court where all the cases are solved, it's a full house where we're eating and enjoying each other. It's not the punishment of wrong, it's the enjoyment of the right.

And this is not just a blessing for the future. We're given the first taste of this by Jesus himself. You know, in the same chapter in John's Gospel where Jesus says he goes to prepare a place for us, he also says this, peace I leave with you, my shalom peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give it to you.

[21 : 01] So let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. This is the peace of God which passes all understanding. And in these verses, alongside the threefold reference to peace, three times the psalmist mentions within, within, within, within your walls, verse 7, within your towers, within you.

And of course, we should be carriers of shalom peace into the world outside the church. But the prayer and energy of this psalm is peace within the household of God because true shalom only comes from the lamb who sits on the throne.

What does that mean? Well, the way that translates into action now is that we pray for and work for the togetherness and unity of the body of Christ because our unity together as Christians is a particular kind of unity.

It's not a political unity. And if you want proof of that, I can send you some emails I received this week. It's not a unity of taste.

It's not a unity of educational background. It's a unity that comes from belonging to the one God heading in the one direction toward the heavenly city. One God, one faith, one hope, one baptism.

[22 : 16] It's the unity of the Holy Spirit. And the New Testament tells us that we ought to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, to preserve that unity with actual concrete relationships of love, which requires humility and gentleness with each other.

It requires patience and bearing one another in love. I don't know if you've seen the new Lyft ads. Lyft is a rideshare company in Vancouver.

And they've got a new series of commercials aimed straight at us coming out of COVID. And their motto is how to be human again. And they show a driver getting to the backseat of a car with a mask on ready to be driven.

And the driver, also with a mask on, turns around and says a friendly hello. And the passenger looks very confused like he doesn't know how to say hello. He's forgotten the greeting of hello.

So he puts his hand up and he just does this a little bit awkwardly. And up comes the logo how to be human again. We have to learn how to be human again. Well, I think we need to learn how to be a church again.

[23 : 26] You know, how to invite others on the pilgrimage with us. How to set our hearts together on the heavenly city together. We've got to learn how to worship God in person again.

How to bear each other's burdens in patience and kindness. How to have enough real contact with each other to forgive. Have something to forgive and grow. How to grow the shalom and the delight in harmony.

Psalm finishes with these two things. There are two reasons we do this. Verse 8. For the sake of my brothers and companions. To begin to regather. As Carol said in her interview, we have to recommit to reconnect with each other.

We've got to learn how to be brothers and sisters again. To do what we can to build others up. Not using church for myself but finding other ways. Finding ways that I can build up others in their faith. Directing my heart and their hearts toward our heavenly home. to that day when we're going to stand and say, look, look, look. Our feet are standing in the city. And the second reason, verse 9, is for the sake of the house of the Lord our God.

[24 : 35] Because true community and shalom can only come if we're centered on God. Not centered on what I want, what works for me, my ideas and my vision.

but set it on the Lamb who sits upon the throne to who belongs all majesty, glory, dominion, power and authority forever and ever and ever and ever.

Amen. So let's