

Let Us Go to the House of the Lord (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening everyone. Like you've heard, we're starting a brand new series tonight, and we're looking at a particular group of Psalms, Psalms 120 to 134, a selection of those.

These are called the Psalms of Ascent. So let me give you the background story to these. So three times a year, the Hebrew people in the ancient Near East would make the big trip to Jerusalem for these huge religious festivals. And at these festivals, they would hear these amazing truths. God made you. God saved you. God has provided for you. And what great things to hear.

Great things for them to hear. Great things for us to hear. You don't have to muddle your way through life, second guessing yourself, feeling terrible. You can live without guilt. You can live with purpose. It's just brilliant. You know, these are festivals. You want to go to these festivals.

You want to hear these things. So they had these massive gatherings, but you had to get there, of course. And it's a big trip. Most people had to travel quite far to get there. And it was a potentially dangerous journey. So people would travel in groups. They'd travel in caravans. And on the way, the travelers, these pilgrims, would sing to each other to encourage each other.

And this little group of psalms are the psalms they sung to one another. Write them. So why are they called the Psalms of Ascent? Well, just quite practically because the last part of the journey was uphill to Jerusalem. It was uphill to the temple. And probably metaphorically because the journey was hard. Being a pilgrim, it can be challenging. Now, each of these Psalms of Ascent, each of them, each of these songs, each of them talk about various aspects of being a pilgrim.

[1 : 5 6] Things like perseverance, hope, joy, repentance. This week, we're starting with the third Psalm of Ascent, Psalm 122. And what it does, its focus is it recasts or reframes the life of the pilgrim as a coming home story. The story of the believer is a story of coming home.

Okay. So that's a lot of background information. Just hold it. Before we get stuck into the passage, I just need to say one more thing. And that is, we need to deal with the fact that in this Psalm, there's a lot of talk about Jerusalem. And the question for us is, what's it got to do with us?

What has this historic journey to Jerusalem got to do with modern followers of Jesus? Okay. So in the gardening world, in the plant world, there are annuals and there are perennials.

Yes. And annuals are flowers that you plant that bloom really big the first year. And then that's it. It's all over. They're gone. Perennials, on the other hand, are flowers that you plant.

And they come back every year. More importantly, though, about them is the first few years, they're not that impressive. They often take quite a number of years to mature, to really show what they are about. So in the Old Testament, there are things, there are practices, which some of them resemble annuals and some of them resemble perennials. Now this is not a perfect metaphor, but we'll go with it, okay? So the food laws, for example, are more like annuals. In the Old Testament, you can't eat this, you can't eat this, you can't eat this. They were there to add to the distinctiveness of God's people, way, way back in the days. Jesus now says, all food is from God, get stuck into it. So the old food laws, more like annuals. Again, not a perfect metaphor, but more like annuals. The Old Testament sacrificial system, more like a perennial. It's like the seed planted, and it slowly matures over the year until we see what it's really, really about, and it matures into the once and for all sacrifice of

[4 : 10] Christ on the cross. Now, I'm going somewhere with this. The city of Jerusalem is more like a perennial. The theme of the city, what it's about, it matures, it comes into full focus in the New Testament when we Christians are described as citizens of God's city.

So, Jerusalem, for us, it's no longer a journey to a physical place. It's a spiritual city, and the people in it are those who follow Jesus. So all that to say this, all this talk of Jerusalem in this psalm, it's not irrelevant to us. It's a thread and a story that keeps maturing.

That means everything God wants for Jerusalem in this psalm, he wants for us. What God wants for Israel in the Bible, he wants for us. Everything these pilgrims long for and pray for, we long for and we pray for. Okay, so that's a big preamble. So just mush it, mush it all into your brain, and then we'll get to the passage. So here we go. Let's start with just verses one and two.

I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. So there you have it. That's the whole journey in two verses. Do you hear it? It's the whole journey in two verses. Verse one, a friend says to another one, we're going to Jerusalem. It's going to be awesome.

You should come along. Come with our crew. It's going to be brilliant. And everyone's really happy about that. I was glad when they said to me, let's go to the house of the Lord. Verse two, our feet are standing at the gates. They've arrived. And they're absolutely delighted. They are completely overwhelmed. So when I was a kid, there was only, this is going to be one of these old person stories. When I was a kid, there was only two TV channels, right? They were color.

[6 : 06] They were color. But there was only two TV channels. And on Sunday nights was my favorite show. And so it was at 6.45 on a Sunday night. The show was called The Wonderful World of Disney.

And the opening scene was this castle. And the fireworks over the castle was my favorite show. I grew up in this working class family. And I remember thinking to myself, that looks amazing. I will never get to go to Disneyland. Because I also lived on this island in the bottom of the earth. There were lots of barriers, right? There was lots of barriers. When I was 28, I traveled through America with a group of friends after university. And I went to Disneyland.

20 years of anticipation. I remember going through the gates. And you go through the gates. And then you turn. And you turn again. And you're looking down Main Street. And there's the castle.

I had been dreaming of this castle for 20 years. Thinking it will probably never happen. And then seeing it in real life. Seriously, I was 28 years old and I started crying. Like I welled up in tears. Tears of joy. Folks, these few verses at the start, they're trying to convey the sense of joy. The joy of being with God's people going to the temple. I don't know how many of you guys were here on the first week back after 64 weeks apart. But after that service, I did this little debrief. And I said, so after the online service finished, and it was just you guys and me.

And I said, hey, wasn't it great to be together? And everyone started clapping. And I was like, and wasn't the production team great? Everyone just started clapping. Everything I said, everything I said, do you like my shoes? Everyone was like, those are fantastic. Man. You know, it was just great. Just, I just want to, for those folks, for those folks at home, if you are comfortable being around people, you need to get in on that joy. There's joy being together. There is joy in being together. So verses one and two, joy, joy, joy. Now that sense of happiness is explained in verses three to nine, okay, so verses three to nine, it's why they're so happy.

[8 : 26] That's the structure of the passage. Let's look at three to nine. We'll just begin with three and four. Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord. This, this bound firmly piece, this bound firmly, it's talking about the architecture of Jerusalem. Kind of, but kind of not. It is talking about the architecture, but the city was an architectural metaphor for unity. So all of the tribes coming together, these unique tribes, all unified, all relationally glued together like cities in a building. And the, and these unity is not something we should, we should gloss over. It's awesome because you had these diverse tribes coming from all over the nation, coming together in this one place, saying the same things together, like, like we do on Sundays, believing together, supporting one another, supporting one another, just by turning up, just by being here. Again, like we do on Sundays, just, you guys, just being here encourages me. Just seeing your faces just encourages me. When you choose not to go, that's a discouragement to people. You should know that. That's a discouragement to us because we are glued and connected in ways than more than meets the eye. Now, just as an aside on this business of unity and diversity, unity does not mean uniformity. It was unity in diversity, which is part of the reason for the joy.

Like many of us, you've probably been doing some thinking about the residential school system. One of the goals in the school system was to eradicate indigenous culture. And like, I don't know, I guess perhaps they were thinking that, that Christianity can only look kind of Western and Caucasian or something. Perhaps, I'm not sure. But it was so wrongheaded. Somebody asked me the other day, they said, is culture ordained by God, all these different cultures? Is God, is God into different cultures? In heaven, will we all blend in together into one sort of coffee-colored sort of uniform kind of culture? I want to read something from Revelation 7, 9 to 10 to you. And listen carefully to the description here. After I looked, so this is the vision of heaven, okay? After I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number from every tribe, from every nation and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God, before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, crying out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. So what did they have in common? It was all about Jesus. But listen to the diversity. Four different descriptions of diversity. Nations, tribes, peoples, languages. It's unity in diversity. And it's one of the things the pilgrims look forward to when they came to the temple. It's one of the things we should look forward to as we look at our eternal home. There will be unity, but there will be beautiful diversity.

It's something we hope for at our gatherings as well. Now, what else were the pilgrims joyful about? Verse 4, the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. So one of the things they did in the temple was just, they were just thankful. They went there and they just thanked God. Remember in pagan worship back in the days when pagans would go to their temple and pray to their gods, their prayers were all about securing what they needed, all about manipulating the gods, all about just trying to work out a way of getting something out of their gods, like harvest or children or something like that. The believers who came to the temple, they were there to be thankful. And they had so much to be thankful for. You know, when you look at the grand story, the grand story is people keep messing up and God steps into the mess and saves us and redeems us and calls us to a better life. Our response to that?

Thankfulness. Did you also notice though, it's called a decree. It was decreed that we should be thankful, which means you do it whether you feel like it or not. Now, that might not sit well with some of you.

Let me quote Eugene Peterson on this. He's got a book about pilgrimage called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It's a reflection on these Psalms of Ascent. Let me read a very short paragraph.

He goes, we live in what one writer has called the age of sensation. We think that if we don't feel something there, it can't be authentic. But the wisdom of God says something different, that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting.

[14:02] I'll say that again. We can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting, which is in the wisdom of God why the thankfulness was decreed.

So in my prayer life, I've been using something more recently in the last six months called the ACTS method of prayer. It's very simple. ACTS, A-C-T-S, adoration, confession, thankfulness, supplication. So that every time I pray, I include thankfulness. And folks, the more you do it, the more you see there is stuff to be thankful about. And I want to commend this approach to you.

Always be thankful in your prayers. I find life quite hard right now. But unless I have a rhythm of always being thankful, my horizon will be limited to just, you know, treating God like I want to see the manager. You know, I want to see the manager.

Here's my list of complaints. And let's keep going. So these programs joyfully looked towards being together because of the unity they would experience and because of thankfulness. Also verse five, their thrones for judgment was set, the thrones of the house of David. All right, judgment. We don't like the word. When you hear the word judgment, think justice. Okay. Think justice when you read judgment in the Bible. These pilgrim travelers were really looking forward to being in Jerusalem together because it was the administrative seat of justice. And justice is one of the best things a ruler can give their people. I think we are sheltered Westerners and I think we take justice for granted. We shouldn't. We should long for the world to be more just. We should long for a time when perfect justice is meted out everywhere. And the Bible teaches us that that day will come, that Christ will reign over his kingdom that is perfectly just. It's a terrifying promise, but it's a wonderful promise. And we should pray for it now in our world. We should advocate it for it in our community. Unity, thankfulness, justice, let's keep going. Psalm writer of 122 here pivots in verses six to nine, and he urges his pilgrims to pray. He says, pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Peace be within your walls and security within your towers. For my brothers and sisters 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. Okay, so there's a lot in there, but we'll just want to pull out two things. He prays for two things. He prays for peace. He prays for security.

Peace we know. The Hebrew word shalom, it's a very rich word. The other word there, shalvah, I don't know if I'm pronouncing it right, shalvah, it's a Hebrew word, and it means, it's the security word here, but this is what one scholar described it as. It's the relaxed stance of someone who knows everything will be okay because God is over us. Don't you just want that?

[17:18] Don't you just want that? Pray for that. Pray for it for yourself. Pray for it for your friends.

Pray for it for your community. So these were the pilgrim hopes. This is what they turned up to. They wanted to turn up to a place that was unified, diverse but unified. Unified because it was all about God. A place filled with thankfulness, perfect justice, security, and peace. And here's the thing though. Jerusalem did not live up to this. It did not live up to this. Foreign nations came in, took out the city, destroyed the temple, and the New Testament's rebuilt. It's not very good.

So what do we do with that? It's like a big build up. Didn't live up to it. When Jesus walked up that same hill in Luke 19 on the way to the cross, he looked out of the city and you know what he did, right? He wept. He wept at the city. Let me read 41 and 42 from Luke chapter 19.

And when he drew near the city, he saw it. He wept over it saying, would that you, even you had known on this day the things that make for peace, what they had hoped for for that city, peace, unity, security. Jesus is only going to come through me. This is what Christians believe. It is only going to come through Jesus. And it will come. Jesus will remake the world and we will get to enjoy all of those things perfectly forever with him. But that's not the whole story because we get glimpses of our future home now. We get to experience some of it now in our church, in our community. Our church, it is like an outpost to that new city promised. What those ancient pilgrims longed for, let's long for and pray for in our community. That we will be a place of unity and joy and thankfulness and diversity and peace and shalva. That great sense of security that we know God is in control.

And all the time with our hope though on the better city to come, our future home. Amen. Amen.