

Advent Psalms | Longing for the Humble King

“Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”

12.10.23

Psalm 122

A Song of Ascents, of David.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." 2 Our feet are standing Within your gates, O Jerusalem, 3 Jerusalem, that is built As a city that is compact together; 4 To which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the LORD-- An ordinance for Israel-- To give thanks to the name of the LORD. 5 For there thrones were set for judgment, The thrones of the house of David. 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. 7 "May peace be within your walls, And prosperity within your palaces." 8 For the sake of my brothers and my friends, I will now say, "May peace be within you." 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

On October 7th of this year — “a date which will live in infamy” (FDR after Pearl Harbor) — the nation of Israel was brutally attacked by a terrorist organization. Since that time, there have been protests in cities/universities around the world... Oftentimes these protests have been in support of the terrorists and in opposition to Israel. The first big takeaway from this massacre is that human beings are capable of great evil and hatred.

MY reason for raising this event and its aftermath is that today’s Psalm (122) tells us to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” and the question I have is – how are WE, as believers in Israel’s God and as those who put their confidence in Israel’s Messiah – and I realize we have a few among us who were born into Jewish homes – but how is that call to prayer to be carried out by Gentile believers in Jesus Christ? What does it mean for US to pray for the peace of Jerusalem?

This Psalm (122) is listed in the readings for Advent in what’s called the “Common Lectionary” i.e., readings used in churches all over the world in a wide array of traditions and denominations. In other words, these readings were chosen FOR me this year... I didn’t plan to tackle this subject. The readings were chosen many, many years ago (long before the barbaric attacks of October 7th) BUT... since it’s there, AND since a number of people have asked me about the Christian Church’s relationship to ethnic or geographic Israel – let’s look at it.

This is one of the 15 “Psalms of Ascent” – most people hold them to be pilgrim psalms, sung or chanted as pilgrims went up (ascended) to Jerusalem for the three feasts prescribed in the Law (Deut 16.16). It’s been noted that there were 15 steps up to the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem and that some pilgrims would memorize Psalms 120-134 and chant one of these short psalms on each step as they ascended. So, what can we learn from these Psalms of Ascent? Let’s look at:

- 1) A Pilgrim ELATED
- 2) A Pilgrim FRUSTRATED
- 3) A Pilgrim ANIMATED

Attributed to David, this Psalm finds him thrilled to be going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple (or in David’s case the Tabernacle – the portable Temple where believers worshiped before the Big

Temple was built by David's son). David recalls that when it was time to celebrate these three pilgrim-feasts he was elated – "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD'"

So, why was the pilgrim-king so happy to go to the Temple/Tabernacle? Well, at least FOUR reasons can be found in this short Psalm of Ascents. First, the City of Jerusalem was a beautiful location. We saw that during Solomon's reign, people came from all over the world on pilgrimage to this "City of God". And even before Solomon, the city was thriving and was beautiful. The 48th Psalm is also about Jerusalem (like the travel guides: "48 hours in Jerusalem"). It contains the words: "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth..." (2). The striking architecture was apparently visible from a distance.

When the pilgrims set foot in Jerusalem they saw order, peace, safety, goodness and beauty. And that's why this pilgrim is ecstatic to go there in company with the other worshipers. Psalm 84 begins with the exclamation, "How lovely are Your dwelling places, O LORD of hosts!"

Second, this would remind all the worshipers that they were TOGETHER and a unity. The buildings were "compact together" – it was warm and close. AND (v. 3) "As a city that is compact together; to which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the LORD." I THINK this is the only time that phrase is used in the Bible, "the tribes of the LORD" emphasizing (even as this was read in the "Age of the Divided Kingdom") it reminded the Hebrew Church that the tribes were One Nation, belonging to the LORD. This is NOT a bunch of totally unique individuals all on their separate, distinctive journeys. NO! They were a giant family... they all stemmed from Abraham.

Third, the main reason for going to Jerusalem and the Temple was to give thanks. Yes, they could be thankful all the time, but this was to be intentional, together and focused on thanking God. They were (Deut 16.16) not to come empty-handed but to make a thank-offering and be reminded that "the earth is the LORD'S" (Ps 24 & 50) and He shares it with us. He loves us. He provides for us. We depend on Him for everything. Gratitude makes you happy and happiness makes you grateful – maybe, gratitude IS happiness – no wonder he's elated!

Fourth, not only peace and beauty in Jerusalem but JUSTICE is found there. V. 5 "For there thrones were set for judgment, the thrones of the house of David." People would settle disputes in Jerusalem. There would've been some sort of system of delegated jurisprudence that eventually became a kind of "standing judicial counsel", a Sanhedrin, as we see in the days of Jesus Christ. It was meant to safeguard the welfare of the weak and allow God's people to resolve conflicts.

In time, the family into which Jesus of Nazareth was born would ALSO make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We first see Him there when Mary and Joseph present Him at the Temple and are greeted by Hannah and Simeon (Luke 2.25-38). Then we find them celebrating Passover: "Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover" (Luke 2.41).

Later in His life, Jesus Christ, made pilgrimage to Jerusalem as the "Undercover Boss". On one such pilgrimage, He's seen NOT elated but terribly sad and frustrated. He says in Luke CH 13: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your

children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! Behold, your house is left to you desolate..."

The Temple, the Lighthouse of Grace for the whole world, the "House of Prayer for all nations" (Mark 11.17) had become a place of religious commerce; NOT GRACE but greed. (John 2.13-14) "The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables."

The City of Joy had degenerated into a place of spiritual danger and deception. The leaders who sat on the "thrones of the house of David" could no longer render righteous judgment. They could not settle disputes because they'd become corrupt. "They heal the brokenness ... of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there IS no peace." (Jer. 8.11).

And once again comes the frustrated Pilgrim, Jesus Christ, to HIS City (the "Undercover Boss") and "When the Man Comes Around," "He approached Jerusalem, and saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, especially YOU, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.'" (Lk. 19.41-42) He's saying, "Jerusalem – the City of Salem (shalom) you were given eyes to see but you refused to see and now your vision has been taken away and you don't know what leads to peace..."

Then He tells a parable (Luke 20.9) of a vineyard Owner who leaves His Vine (remember last week – "take care of this Vine!") He leaves His vineyard with tenant-farmers (those who sit on the thrones of David to render justice). The Owner sent slaves to check on His Vineyard but the renters killed the messengers. Finally, the Owner sent His own beloved Son, the Heir, "(saying) perhaps they will respect Him" but the farmers killed Him too (they wanted the vineyard for themselves!)

The parable ends like this: "Jesus looked at them and said, 'What then is this that's written: 'the Stone which the builders rejected, turned out to be the chief corner stone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.'" The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour ...for they understood that He spoke this parable against them." Those sitting on the "Thrones of the House of David" had lost the ability to discern spiritual truth and they'd become corrupt, greedy, blind and UNBELIEVING.

So, THEY took the Beloved Son, the Frustrated Pilgrim and had Him condemned, beaten, tortured and executed... in order to keep the peace of Jerusalem. BUT THEY DID NOT KNOW WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE! They were the keepers of the City of Peace, but they knew NOTHING about peace.

And in the Grand Mystery, the death of Jesus Christ MADE peace: "God and Sinner reconciled." The True King, the Son of David, would now take the Throne and that Throne was in the shape of a Cross. He Himself knew what makes for peace. He therefore gave Himself, an atonement for sin, 'Throned Upon the Awful Tree."

The angel told Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." (Luke 1.32-33) What makes for WAR is sin; what makes for peace, the only

thing that could restore the "SALEM" to Jeru-SALEM was a Love that takes the blame, that absorbs judgment, that pays the price, that satisfies true justice and delivers mercy to the guilty, that ATONES FOR SIN: "there, thrones were set for judgment" and "throned upon the awful Tree" the Son of David, the Son of God established peace (Col. 1.20) outside of Jerusalem and "the nails they drove into His hands, should've been through mine, the blood that flowed, should have been mine!" (Kemper Crabb) God accepted that Human Sacrifice. God raised Him from the dead to show Jerusalem the THING that makes for peace, the "deeper magic" that begins the New Creation. Here at Christmas, we remember Good Friday and Easter that declared to Jerusalem and to the whole world – "Jesus Christ will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

Lastly (Point 3): A Pilgrim ANIMATED. I am that pilgrim. We who believe in Jesus Christ find that He fulfilled the calling of Israel and Jerusalem. Jesus Christ IS the True Vine, the True Temple, the True Israel. We who are Gentiles MUST be forever thankful to the Jewish People. We HAVE something that belongs to THEM! We can NEVER be antisemitic and can only feel, if our thinking aligns with the Gospel (main teaching of Christianity) we can only feel a longing for their salvation – for their being regrafted into the Vine by believing in Jesus Christ.

When we pray for Jerusalem TODAY, however, we are praying for the New Jerusalem that is being gathered NOT from Twelve Tribes – TODAY, the "tribes of the LORD" are not twelve but perhaps millions. The mission of Israel is fulfilled by thē True Israelite, Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son! Thus Israel is NOW expanded NOT replaced. "For You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood persons from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Rev. 5.9)

When I pray for Jerusalem, I'm praying not simply for that great city in modern day Israel but for the New Israel – Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2.11ff) who trust in Jesus from every nation. When I see the beauty of the Church, when I experience the universal make-up and the international diversity of this New Jerusalem – see people who were naturally enemies NOW in true union and LOVE with each other – it stirs me up, it animates me. What a beautiful city, this Church!

When I see the way of grace – that on the Throne of Atonement, the Throne of the House of David was reclaimed... THEN, I can better understand what's happening in the world. It equips US and animates us with a new way of seeing life. We know what makes for peace – it's NOT the accumulation of power and profit ("Whoever dies with the most toys wins!") OR sweeping things under the carpet and healing people superficially. It's facing the deep, deep need that YOU have offended God (no matter WHO you are!) and God's eternal standard of justice requires NOT just forgiveness, but JUDGMENT. And God offers us One who was judged IN PLACE OF THE GUILTY.

When you GET that...you come to see: everyone's trying to do it on their own... everyone but this little group of people who are NOT achievers but receivers. This group is called, the Church, the New Jerusalem. You'll find that, for ALL HER IMPERFECTIONS and failings, only she, the Church of Jesus Christ knows the greater beauty of grace, the unity of the tribes (a new international family of believers in Jesus – whether they're called Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Baptist... there may even be a few Presbyterians in there) but we see a real reason to UNITE.

It's in the New Jerusalem, the Church where we truly live in gratitude – ever giving our time, talents and treasure in thanksgiving, in radical open-handed generosity because we know what it is to CLAIMED by God.

And it's in the Church that we see what makes for peace – it's atonement for the weak and wasted, the sick and sore, the vulnerable and the sinful. And that's WHY the church longs to show love, justice and mercy to the world. This is why, I pray for her peace, I seek her prosperity and her good, this is why I instinctively say, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'"

Q U O T E S

One of the reasons I love meeting with other believers is because I feel like I have a front-row seat at what God is doing in the lives of people around me. Over time, I see how God's Word slowly transforms us into His image. I see how God brings people from different backgrounds and interests, different ethnicities and generations, and unifies them by the gospel without obliterating their differences, thus shining a spotlight on the goodness and grace of God from gloriously different angles.

We are not lonely pilgrims on individual journeys to glory; we are a community of faith, marching forward as exiles in this world, beloved by God and beloved by each other. It is a privilege to be part of each other's lives, to cheer one another on in the faith, to chasten and chide with holy reverence when needed, and to love one another as Christ has loved us.

– Trevin Wax, "3 Reasons You Should See Going to Church as a Privilege, Not a Chore", (The Gospel Coalition blog-post, April 27, 2016)