

Advent 2019

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you!””
(Psalm 122:6 ESV)*

*“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!”
(Psalm 72:2 ESV)*

*“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.”
(Psalm 146:3 ESV)*

*“Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!”
(Psalm 80:19 ESV)*

Pray For The Peace Of Jerusalem

December 1st 2019

Psalm 122

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. Please open your Bibles to Psalm 122; that’s on page 517 in your pew Bibles. This is the first Sunday in Advent 2019. Let me just say a quick word about Advent in general. The word “advent” simply means “coming”. Traditionally we have used the 4 Sundays leading up to Christmas to think about the COMINGS of Jesus Christ – notice the plural. Christmas is the first of Christ’s TWO comings. The two comings by which he effects the redemption and restoration of all things.

Advent is not just “pre-Christmas” – it is bigger than that and it helps to place Christmas within its wider redemptive context.

So we are going to read some texts over the next couple of weeks that you are not going to recognize as explicitly Christmas-y. That’s ok. These are texts about a wider theme within which the coming of Christ at Christmas must be understood.

Hopefully you have your Bible open now to Psalm 122. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF DAVID.

¹ I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

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

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

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.

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

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you!

⁷ Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!”

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. (Psalm 122:1–9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well if you have your Bible open you can see for yourself that immediately after Psalm 119 there are 15 Psalms of Ascents and Psalm 122 is the third of those. The Psalms of Ascents were written and arranged to be sung by the pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem for worship.

Psalm 122 was to be sung upon arrival. So these Psalms, in a sense, give us a narrative of a typical pilgrim’s progress to the Holy City – but there is more here for us than just that. W.S. Plumer in his fabulous commentary on the Psalms puts it this way – speaking specifically about Psalm 122. He says:

“It will weaken the force of this Psalm, if we forget that Jerusalem was a type of the true church of Christ and also of the heavenly state.”¹

So we are called, in this Psalm, to enter into an actual journey – but we are also called to think about our own journey. Our journey to Christ and our journey to the ultimate celestial city.

So let’s do that. Let’s enter into this pilgrim’s progress to Jerusalem – and as we do that the first thing we notice is his joy in arriving at the city.

¹ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 1099.

The Pilgrim's Progress To Jerusalem:

1. His joy at arriving in the city

He was glad when this trip was first proposed.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" (Psalm 122:1 ESV)

In Exodus 23:14-17 the people of God are commanded to go to Jerusalem three times a year for a festival of worship. They were to go up for the Feast of Unleavened Bread which culminated in the Passover; they were to go up for The Feast of First Fruits and also the Feast of Booths.

So that was it.

Three times a year.

Now that isn't to say that they only worshipped three times a year – the rest of the year they worshipped in smaller groups. Travel was difficult and dangerous in those days. It was expensive. And so on most Sabbaths the people would gather in small local clusters. It was fine – it was wonderful – but it wasn't Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was something special.

There was the tangible PRESENCE OF GOD in Jerusalem.

The temple was there.

The sacrifices were there.

It was the place where the Levites sang and the prophets preached and the Spirit of God filled the temple.

There was nothing quite like it – and you can hear that in the pilgrim’s exclamation in verse 2. J. Alec Motyer translates it this way:

“Our feet have been actually standing in your gates, Jerusalem!”²

He goes on to explain that this is:

“An expression of wondering joy – something almost too good to be true!”³

Now remember, to feel the full force of this Psalm we are supposed to LEAP FORWARD from the 10th century BC to the present day. So imagine perhaps a modern day believer who lives 4-5 hours north of here – too far away to be with us every Sunday. He and his family watch from home on line – with maybe a few neighbours joining in. It’s a wonderful experience – it is meaningful experience – but it is not quite the same as being here.

So 2-3 times a year he wakes up very early and he bundles his kids into the car and they make the 5 hour drive in order to be here in person.

As they walk in through the doors – and someone hands him a cup of coffee from Brother Bean and someone else gives him a bulletin and as they begin to hear the opening bars of worship this modern day pilgrim says to himself:

“I was glad when they said to me – let us go to the house of the Lord!”

I can’t believe I am actually here!

My kids are being loved and taught the Gospel downstairs.

My ears are soaking in the music.

My lungs are breathing in the air.

² J. Alec Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishers, 2016), 367.

³ J. Alec Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishers, 2016), 368.

My Bible is open beside me and my backside is sinking into the plush chairs in the sanctuary – it is GOOD TO BE IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD!

Can you feel that PILGRIM?

That's what is going on here.

This is a brother who is GLAD TO BE IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD!

This is a brother who is glad to be standing in the city of God.

There is no place like it!

Even though he lives 300 km away – this is home!

Can you feel that brothers and sisters?

That's what we're seeing in verses 1-2.

He has made it! His feet are standing inside the gates – and now he is going to take a tour of Holy City. We see that in verses 3-5.

2. His experience of community and justice

“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.”
(Psalm 122:3–5 ESV)

As he walks through the city the thing that he feels is the press of the whole people of God. Jerusalem is a COMPACT CITY – he says. It's not like the village at home. It's tight. The alleys

are narrow. The buildings are tall and when you look up its almost like the rooftops are leaning in towards each other.

It's compact!

And it is absolutely overflowing with the tribes of the Lord!

Historians tell us that normally – Jerusalem had a population fluctuating between 30,000 – 50,000 people. But during festivals that number could reach as high as 500,000 – some people even say closer to a million.

So the city was absolutely JAM PACKED.

Walking through those alleys was like SWIMMING. You had to WADE through a chest high mass of humanity to get anymore.

But it was marvelous!

It made you feel like you were a part of something big.

It made you feel like there was more than just you and your little family and those three other guys from your village caught up in the great and awesome purposes of the Lord.

Everyone was here!

And they were all on the same page.

And that never happened at any other time of the year.

Israel was always a TRIBAL people. There were always rivalries. There were always feuds. There were border disputes. Sometimes even open warfare between the tribes. And the only thing they had in common – was the Lord. As this pilgrim waded through the streets of Jerusalem he

experienced UNITY IN DIVERSITY. Not uniformity – but UNITY AROUND THE WORSHIP AND THE SERVICE OF THE LORD.

That is the magic of church!

And if it's not there then it's not the church! If the Gospel has been properly understood – if God has been properly understood – then the gathering of his people will be characterized by UNITY IN DIVERSITY. The Apostle Paul says:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:14–16 ESV)

Do you see?

If the Gospel has been properly understood then the gathering of God's people will be an experience of unity in diversity. The rich and the poor will sit side by side in Christ. Jews and Gentiles will sit side by side in Christ. Old and young. Educated and uneducated – men and women. Millennials and Boomers. All – will sit side by side – in Jesus Christ.

The Apostles understood that the unity of the feast days ultimately pointed forward to the unity that we would enjoy in the church. James, the brother of the Lord addressed his Epistle to:

“To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1 ESV)

Peter used almost identical language. He addressed his letter to:

“To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1 ESV)

Why did they do this? Israel no longer existed as 12 tribes – but the church did. The church now manifested this marvelous UNITY IN DIVERSITY. They were Jews, Greeks, Romans, Parthians and Medes – in Christ. And there is nothing quite so marvelous as that.

The pilgrim was loving that – he was rejoicing in that - and he was rejoicing in the display of God’s justice.

Look again at verse 5:

There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. (Psalm 122:5 ESV)

Judgement here has the sense of JUSTICE – the first and greatest gift of any ruler. In the Bible JUSTICE is always a precursor to prosperity. So for example we see in Proverbs:

“The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.” (Proverbs 13:23 ESV)

According to the Bible – all things being equal – the good earth and the hard work of human beings OUGHT to produce wealth and prosperity – but it often DOESN’T because of injustice. When the powerful can buy a judgment the poor are kept in poverty.

And that’s why a good King was good news for simple people.

The King’s job was to ensure that the rich and the powerful did not abuse the poor. The King’s job was to ensure that simple people were not taken advantage of in the marketplace. The King’s job was to make sure that land stayed in the possession of families and was not swallowed up through excessive taxation, exorbitant interest or fraud.

So when the pilgrim saw thrones being set up for judgment – he was glad.

Decisions are going to be made today – in favour of the poor and I was glad that I was there to see it.

The third thing we see here flows very naturally out of the first two. We see the pilgrim's concern for the peace and security of Jerusalem.

3. His concern for the peace and security of Jerusalem

Everything was so good here that he wanted it to last forever.

O God! Watch over this city!

Do not let this BEACON DIM!

Do not let this STANDARD FALL!

There is nothing like this on planet earth, Lord, therefore PRAY for the peace of Jerusalem!

But of course this is where we need to transpose this Psalm into a New Testament key – isn't it? Because Jerusalem did not receive the peace that the pilgrim prayed for.

Jesus told us why.

In Luke 19 Jesus has just come into the city for Passover – meaning he had just recently sung this Psalm. He had just prayed for the peace of Jerusalem – but then – Luke tells us that Jesus looked out over the city and wept. He said:

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day **the things that make for peace!** But now they are hidden from your eyes.⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41–44 ESV)

And of course if you know your history then you know that this is precisely what happened.

In AD 66 the Jews revolted against the Romans. The Emperor Nero dispatched an army under the command of General Vespasian. He routed the Jews throughout all Judea and drove them within the walls of Jerusalem. Some historians estimate that at the height of the Roman siege there were as many as 1.1 million Jews inside the city – a city that you will recall normally had a population of 30-50 thousand people.

There was brutal famine and widespread disease before it was all over.

When it was all over – when the Romans had broken through and completely destroyed the city – burning the temple and slaughtering the weak and fragile people left inside – historians would describe it as the most brutal event in Roman history.

This was not the peace that the pilgrim had prayed for.

This was the exact opposite of what the pilgrim had prayed for.

And so this is where we must leave the pilgrim's journey and begin our own by asking the obvious question:

What Are The Things That Make For Peace?

As we read the Bible we come to the sure and certain conclusion that there are two things that are absolutely necessary if we are ever going to know true and lasting peace.

The first thing we are going to need is a:

1. A clean slate

Sin RUINS everything.

Sin disrupts our relationship with God and it disrupts our relationship with one another.

You don't have to read too far into the Bible to see that. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, the Bible says:

“the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:8 ESV)

Do you see that? Sin separates us from God. If the Bible is clear about anything it is that God is holy – and after Adam – people are sinful and that is a serious problem. The nature of God and the abomination of sin simply CANNOT SHARE SPACE in the universe. The Bible says that. Habakkuk 1:13 says that God is of PURER EYES than to look upon evil – so if we are covered in sin then we are APART from the presence of God and that's not a good place to be.

Peace in the Bible COMES from the Presence of the Lord. So you either have both or you have neither. If you have the presence of God – you have the peace of God. And the opposite is true as well - if you don't have the presence then you don't have the peace.

So if you want to have PEACE then you have to figure out a way to deal with sin.

And that's why the coming of Jesus THE FIRST TIME was such good news. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming into the world the first time – he pointed at him and said:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

Now think of all the other things he could have said. He could have said: “Behold! The wisest man to ever live!” He could have said: “Behold! The holiest man to ever live!” He could have said: “Behold! The most POWERFUL man to ever live!”

He could have said any of those things – but he didn't. Because he knew what was most important. The most important thing is that FINALLY someone has come from heaven TO TAKE AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD – because THAT is the root of the human problem.

There will be no peace – until there is no sin – will you say amen to that?

So we're thankful for the first coming of Jesus.

The Epistle to the Hebrews says:

“he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Hebrews 9:26 ESV)

HE HAS APPEARED – this is why he came – TO PUT AWAY SIN by the sacrifice of himself.

Friends, if you haven't taken advantage of this grace then you need to do that today.

You do not want to die with a debt of unforgiven sins on your ledger. You want to NAIL your debts to the cross.

That's what it means to be SAVED! The Apostle Paul wrote to some Christian friends of his and rejoiced with them over this reality. He said:

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13–14 ESV)

Can you hear yourself in that passage? I can! I was DEAD in my trespasses and sins! I was toast! I had no chance on Judgment Day – but God saved my life by agreeing to cancel the record of my debts by nailing it to the cross of Jesus Christ! Hallelujah!

Say amen if you can find yourself in that passage!

That is something to celebrate!

And that is something that anyone can have now – because of the FIRST COMING of Jesus Christ. We can have peace with God through the precious blood of the cross.

The second thing we need in order to enjoy true and lasting peace is:

2. A good king

We saw that of course in our Psalm. The pilgrim was in Jerusalem to worship and also to observe justice. He said:

“There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.” (Psalm 122:5 ESV)

The pilgrim knew very well that there can be no peace without justice. And there can be no prosperity without justice. I trust you know that the Hebrew conception of peace – what they mean by SHALOM – has to do with far more than merely the absence of conflict. True shalom means peace, prosperity, happiness and well-being.

And all of those things depend upon justice.

Just like Proverbs says:

“The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.” (Proverbs 13:23 ESV)

There is no prosperity and no security without justice – and that’s why WE NEED A STRONG and RIGHTEOUS KING.

Both of those words are important.

The king has strong – because justice is opposed.

And the king has to be righteous because if he is strong but not righteous then his authority will only be used to enrich himself at the expense of the poor.

So – if we want to enjoy lasting peace – and enduring SHALOM – then we need a good king.

And we get a picture of this good king's coming in Revelation 19. The Apostle John says:

“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Revelation 19:11–16 ESV)

Do you see that?

That's the Second Coming.

In his FIRST COMING Jesus came as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But in his SECOND COMING he comes as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and he RULES THE NATIONS with a rod of iron.

He is going to smash and destroy every force of injustice on this earth. He is going to set up thrones and he is going to judge.

Now, whether that sounds like GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS depends entirely upon who you are and how you have been behaving in this world.

If you are an oppressor and an abuser – then that is bad news. But if you are a penitent – if you are covered in the blood of Lamb and eager to know real and lasting peace – then that's good news. REALLY GOOD NEWS.

“For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:3–4 ESV)

Do you see that?

When the King REIGNS in Jerusalem – all his people will know everlasting peace.

And that's what we've been waiting for!

The pilgrim in Psalm 122 – was given a glimpse and a foretaste – but it was not to last. Because Jerusalem did know the things that make for peace.

When the Lamb of God came to them – they did not recognize him.

When the King of Kings rode into their city on a donkey – they did not recognize him.

And so they missed out on their opportunity to know true and lasting peace.

Do not follow their example.

Psalm 122 is an Advent Psalm because it reminds us that there is no LASTING PEACE - there is no enduring experience of God's presence – there is no enduring experience of human fellowship – there is no enduring experience of justice and prosperity – apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He is our peace!

It is through the comings of Jesus Christ that we are given the things that make for peace.

So - joy to the world the Lord is come!

Thanks be to God!

Let's pray together.