

The Psalms of Ascents come in five sets of three psalms each.<sup>1</sup> Within the first four sets, the three psalms follow a sequence: the first psalm begins with the distress of the human condition; the second psalm focuses on the theme of the Lord's protection in spite of the dangers along the way; and the third psalm brings the pilgrimage to a conclusion in Zion. The sojourners were equipped morning, noon, and night with psalms to sing and prayers to pray. In the morning, they confronted reality: lying lips (Ps 120:2), contempt (Ps 123:3), tears of sorrow (Ps 126:5), and oppression (Ps 129:2). At mid-day they focused on God's provision: protection from all harm (Ps 121:7), life-saving help (Ps 124:1), security and rest (Ps 127:1-2), and forgiveness (Ps 130:4). In the evening they looked forward to Zion. They celebrated the peace (Ps 122:6), justice (Ps 125:4), prosperity (Ps 128:2), contentment (Ps 131:2), and blessing (Ps 134:3) of Jerusalem. Each psalm uniquely prepares the sojourner for worship and when taken together they move the company of the committed into the presence of God.

*The House of the Lord*

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,  
 "Let us go to the house of the Lord."  
 Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.  
 Psalm 122:1-2*

The antiphonal encouragement heard by the psalmist sweeps aside the loneliness of the earnest sojourner and places him – places her – in the fellowship of believers. Our individualistic spiritual aspirations are challenged by the blessing of others who insist on including us. "Let us go to the house of the Lord," provides the incentive we need to enter into the joy of the Lord. Christ's followers hear this positive exhortation in concert with the refrain that runs through the Book of Hebrews: "Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. . ." (Heb 4:14); "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. . ." (4:16); "Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity. . ." (6:1); "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart . . ." (10:22); "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. . ." (10:23); "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. . ." (10:24); "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. . ." (Heb 12:1). For believers all of these exhortations are contained in the psalmist's exhortation, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." This is what it means to "go" to church – to belong, to enter into, to be devoted to "the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

"Let us" corresponds to a shared reality that the psalmist visualizes for us, "Our feet are standing in your gates." The crowded loneliness of western individualism is replaced by the gathered community rejoicing. The line, "Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem," evokes a certain sense of awe. We picture the sojourner looking around 360°. The long journey is over. The arrival is satisfying. The experience is inspiring. Grace has led his family home, to the house of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Motyer, Journey, 19-21.

*The House of David*

*Jerusalem is built like a city  
that is closely compacted together.  
That is where the tribes go up –  
the tribes of the Lord –  
to praise the name of the Lord  
according to the statute given to Israel.  
There stand the thrones for judgment,  
the thrones of the house of David.*

Psalm 122:3-5

The poet's description of Jerusalem's earthy, urban complexity describes a real place designed for the people of God. The fact that the buildings were "closely compacted together" meant that the city was packed with people. Jerusalem was the spiritual and political center of the people of God. This is where the tribes of the Lord came to worship. Three times a year as prescribed by the Old Testament Law people from all over Israel ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. They came to praise the Lord and to remember all that the Lord had done for them. They were thankful for God's blessings in harvest and in history. They remembered the Exodus and they praised God. The image of thrones stands for judgment and justice. Jerusalem is where you came to worship the Lord and to obtain his social justice. The pilgrim experiences a satisfying sense of congruence. This is where security, worship, and justice come together. This is the place where the many tribes become one people.

David made Jerusalem Israel's God-centered alternative to the pagan high places. "In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; and bulls will be offered on your altar" (Ps 51:16-19). David's son Solomon built the Temple and established worship in Jerusalem based on the Tabernacle and the rituals prescribed in Leviticus. Solomon was the architect for Israel's new society. He established Israel's boundaries and gave her a reputation among the nations for wisdom, wealth and power. He put Jerusalem on the map as Israel's capital. It was a time of growth and prosperity. "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy" (1 Kings 4:20). Under Solomon's rule Israel appeared to reach its highest potential. Solomon's Jerusalem was a harbinger of the shalom to come, his splendor, only a faint hint of the majesty of God. Yet Solomon was torn between the fear of the Lord and the power of his ego and conflicted soul. There is no hint of internal conflict in the "pilgrim's warmth of spiritual emotion."<sup>2</sup> He and his family experience a grateful sense of arrival. They are where they belong and they are thankful.

The invitation to go up to Jerusalem is not in our day an invitation to visit the "Holy Land" nor is it an invitation to celebrate a religious heritage nor any form of political or ethnic Zionism. The invitation is to come into the presence of God, but this "presence" is no longer defined

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<sup>2</sup> Allen, Psalms, 212. (Leslie C. Allen, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Psalms 101-150) revised (Nashville: Nelson, 2002).

geographically, but relationally. It is an invitation to come to Christ – and no one else. The Messiah has come. We cannot pray Psalm 122 and pretend that Christ has not come and fulfilled the whole sacrificial system through his atoning sacrifice. Those who belong to Christ have been indwelt by the Spirit of God. Their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and the structural language of Jerusalem has been reworked to describe God’s people who are “members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22).

### *The Household of Faith*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:*

*“May those who love you be secure.*

*May there be peace within your walls  
and security within your citadels.”*

*For the sake of my family and friends,*

*I will say, “Peace be within you.”*

*For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,*

*I will seek your prosperity.*

Psalm 122:6-9

When Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time he wept. He had walked all the way from Galilee (more than one hundred miles from Caesarea Philippi), but unlike the company of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, he chose to ride the last two miles in order to make a statement. The Prince of Peace approached Jerusalem in humility, riding on a donkey. With its mother by its side, the young male donkey remained calm as the processional slowly moved through the noisy crowd. In the spirit of Psalm 122 the festive atmosphere was charged with emotion and expectation. By choosing a donkey, Jesus stirred the people’s imagination. Matthew draws out the meaning of the symbol by locating the image in salvation history: “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey’” (Zech 9:9).

Jesus wept because the people did not recognize “the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:44). With deep sadness he said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes” (Lk 19:42). His reference to peace is reminiscent of Psalm 122 and causes one to wonder if Jesus felt the sharp paradox between his deep sorrow and the psalmist’s great joy. The psalmist urges the people to ask for peace, but the peace he has in mind is not simply the absence of war. The peace of Jerusalem is the fullness of God’s blessing in every regard. It is internal well-being as well as external security. This peace is political and relational, social and spiritual. It is peace with God and man. In the upper room Jesus offered his disciples peace. He said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

We cannot create *shalom*, any more than we can save ourselves. We are poor candidates for peace. Our bodies break down. People fail us. Terrorists attack. Friends betray us and war breaks out. The world's strategies for obtaining peace have proven superficial and unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup> Jesus distinguished the true gift of peace from worldly peace. He came into Jerusalem to do for us what only the Prince of Peace could do (Isa 9:6). "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:4-5). Shalom is the priceless gift that we could never earn or deserve: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Rom 5:1).

Shalom embraces the fullness of salvation, which means deliverance from "sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life." The meaning of Shalom is exceedingly positive, embracing "peace with God, access to God's favor and presence, hope of regaining the glory intended for humankind, endurance in suffering, steadfast character, an optimistic mind, inner motivations of divine love and power of the Spirit, ongoing experience of the risen Christ and sustaining joy in God."<sup>4</sup>

The peace we long for is the Peace of God, for only his peace, "which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7). This is the lasting peace that survives the pain and suffering of this life and outlasts death itself. "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal" (Isa 26:3-4).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> White, "Salvation," 968.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 66.