

The Psalms of Ascents (Ps 120-134) were prayed by the people of God as they ascended up the rugged terrain of Palestine to Jerusalem. They came together to worship Yahweh and celebrate the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The journey was a physical challenge that ran parallel to Israel's spiritual challenge. We have identified a sequential pattern of five sets of three psalms, which may have served as morning, noon, and evening prayers. Each set of three psalms broadly covers: the distress and challenges of life; the people's dependence on God; and the Yahweh's saving deliverance. The final triad concludes the Psalms of Ascents and celebrates three key blessings from the Lord, covenant faithfulness, life together, and faithful servants.

Psalm 132 reminds the people of God that their pilgrimage was not only over land but through time. The arduous geographic journey is analogous to Israel's salvation history, the journey from Abrahamic covenant to Mosaic Law to Davidic throne. The two journeys parallel one another and converge in Zion. Place and time matter to the psalmist as they do today to the followers of Christ. The structure of Psalm 132 is built around two vows: David's costly vow to the Lord to secure a permanent dwelling place for the ark of the covenant and the Lord's solemn promise to David to establish his royal line through the coming of the Anointed One who will be adorned with a radiant crown. Psalm 132 compares the far lesser vow to the far greater promise to deepen the joy of our salvation.

David's Vow

*Lord, remember David
and all his self-denial.
He swore an oath to the Lord,
he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:
"I will not enter my house
or go to my bed,
I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
till I find a place for the Lord,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."
We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:
"Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
'Arise, Lord and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
May your priests be clothed with your righteousness;
may your faithful people sing for joy.'"
For the sake of your servant David,
do not reject your anointed one.*

Psalm 132:1-10

The psalmist asks the Lord to remember David, Israel's deeply flawed but earnestly faithful king, who desired above all else to find a permanent place for the ark of the covenant, a place that the Lord might call home. The hope behind the psalmist's plea is that the Lord will remember all David's "self-denial" and his passion for the presence of God and then act on that remembrance and fulfill his promises to David. Surprisingly, the David story is summed up in this singular act of worship and devotion, namely his tireless effort to find a permanent place for ark of the covenant. Undoubtedly, David made the vow. He "swore an oath to the Lord" that he would not rest until the ark found a permanent dwelling place. However there is no record of such an oath in the biblical narrative. Yet what slipped below the historical record rises here to great significance.

The psalmist makes much of what the ark symbolized, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob, but of the ark itself he says very little and what he does say is inauspicious.¹ The ark is referred to as an "it", an object rumored to be in one place, Ephrathah (the region of Bethlehem), but found in the fields of Jaar. The history of the ark is spotty at best. During the reign of Saul no one paid any attention to it (1 Chron 13:3). Years before, during the days of Eli, the Philistines captured the ark as a war trophy but they soon lived to regret it and they sent it back to Israel where it found its way to Kiriath Jearim where it stayed under Eleazar's guardianship for twenty years (1 Sam 4 - 7).

David recognized the ark as a holy symbol for the Lord God and as act of devotion to the Lord he sought to retrieve the ark and bring it to Jerusalem. But David's first encounter with the ark ended in tragedy. David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord when Uzzah put out his hand to steady the ark because the oxen stumbled. We read, "The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act and therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Sam 6:7). Understandably, David was angry "because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah" and he was "afraid" of the Lord (2 Sam 6:8-9). He put his plans on hold for three months before resuming the processional. Only this time with far greater care and reverence. The narrator tells us that as the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, King David, dressed in a linen ephod, leaped and danced before the Lord. And after the ark was set in the tent that David had pitched for it and the sacrifices were finished, David gave each person a loaf of bread and cakes of dates and raisins. Everyone in the city of Jerusalem rejoiced, everyone but one, Michal David's wife. She was mortified at David's undignified display of holy abandon and she despised David in her heart (2 Sam 6:12-20). One wonders if this was not the singular act of self-denial that the psalmist asks the Lord to remember!

¹In the wilderness Tabernacle the Ark of Testimony was the most important symbol of God's presence. Although it was lined and covered with pure gold, and it was not to be touched by human hands but moved by specially made poles, it was but a box. And not a very big box at that. It measured three feet, six and a half inches long and two feet, two and a quarter inches wide and high. Its lid was called the atonement cover and its contents included a copy of the commandments. From its name, shape, and contents, the Ark of Testimony symbolized Yahweh's presence and pointed to the divine work of redemption and revelation necessary for the salvation of God's people. It was never thought of as a substitute for the invisible reality of God nor as an object of worship and devotion. At the center of Israel's worship life, in the Most Holy Place, the Ark was not a sacred relic, but a symbol of the Presence of God. The Ark of Testimony pointed away from idolatry to the invisible reality of the God who is.

The Samuel narrative may describe the joyful celebration accompanying the psalmist's petition, "Arise, Lord, and come to your resting place, you are the ark of your might." The experience of the past becomes the shadow of the future when the coming of the Anointed One will clothe the priesthood of all believers in righteousness and all the faithful will sing for joy. David, the servant of the Lord, is a type pointing forward to the ultimate Son of David whose kingdom will endure forever and whose throne will be established forever (2 Sam 7:16).

The Lord's Vow

*The Lord swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:
"One of your own descendants I will place on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever."*

*The Lord has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling, saying,
"This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.
I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.
I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.
"Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
I will clothe his enemies in shame,
but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown."*

Psalm 132:11-18

To compare David's vow of self-denial to the Lord's vow of sacrifice is like comparing the ark (merely an "it") to the real presence of Yahweh. There is no comparison, but the Lord in his great mercy enters into a relationship with David for the sake of all humanity. Once again it is important to say that the measure of David's life was not in what he achieved but in what he received from the hand of God. Like David, the Lord takes us from nowhere and makes our names great, "like the names of the greatest people on earth" (2 Sam 7:9). He gives us a new home, a place of rest, free from oppression, and promises that "my love will never be taken away" (2 Sam 7:15).

The Lord vowed to establish the house of David forever and he fulfilled that vow in person, in the coming of Jesus Christ the Anointed One, the Son of David. This is where the Psalms, Jesus' prayer book, begin. The Lord declares, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." And how shall this come about? By none other than God's very own Son: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Ps 2:6). As David prophesies, "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" (Ps 110:1). The fulfillment

of these promises is what makes the first Advent such a source of joy and celebration. The angel of the Lord said to Mary, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31-32). The Lord honors his vow to David even though the sons of David are faithless. He has chosen Zion for his dwelling and he, as only he can do, will establish his real presence among his people. This is the reality that the apostle described when he declared, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (tabernacled) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The Lord takes the small scale self-denial of his frail and faithful servant David and matches it with his suffering Servant who “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5). The Lord God invaded the mess of the human condition in the most personal and costly way imaginable. Into our crisis of sin and death, God sent his one and only Son “in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (Rom 8:3). This is the Son of David who achieved the resting place that David earnestly sought for “the Mighty One of Jacob.” It is the “rest” that encompasses time and place and is secured for eternity. The Lord declares, “This is my resting place forever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it” (Ps 132:14). This is why Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

Psalms 132 concludes with a vision of the abundant life (John 10:10) and a description of the Anointed One who makes all of this possible. The people of God are blessed with “abundant provisions,” the poor are well fed, the priests are clothed with salvation, and the faithful “ever sing for joy” (Ps 132:15-16). The future of this new Davidic covenant is guaranteed by the Lord in four ways. It will come about through his strength and power as symbolized by the horn. This strength is not static but dynamic. It grows and sprouts. The choice of verb is related to the word for “branch” that suggests a Messianic symbol used by the prophets Zechariah (3:8; 6:12) and Jeremiah (23:5).² Secondly, it will come about because the Lord will be a true guide to his people. The image of the lamp stands for guidance and revelation. The Anointed One is “the true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). Thirdly, it will come about because the Lord will be victorious over all his enemies. He will clothe them with shame, an image of utter defeat and of a conquered people. Fourthly, it will come about because the Lord rules and reigns in righteousness for eternity. The symbol of the radiant crown adorning the head of the Son of David assures Mount Zion everlasting salvation.

² Ross, Psalms, 742.