



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 122

Metropolitan Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm carries the title *A Song of Ascents. Of David*
- This is the first of four Psalms that is specifically attributed to David among the songs of ascents
- He wrote it for the people to sing at the time of their goings up to the holy feasts at Jerusalem
- David perhaps never made pilgrimage from a great distance to one of the major feasts, but he wrote Psalm 122 in the voice of one who did, and who had arrived at the Holy City
- And he wrote it both for what Jerusalem was in his day, and for what it would become under his son Solomon and their successors



Introduction

- It is suitable to be sung when the people had entered the gates, and their feet stood within the city
- It was most natural that they should sing of Jerusalem itself, and pray peace and prosperity upon the Holy City, for it was the center of their worship, and the place where the Lord revealed Himself
- Some are of opinion that this Psalm was composed with a view to the captives in Babylon; who are here represented, and are represented as rejoicing at their going up to Jerusalem
- It is the third Psalm of ascents centers on blessing and peace in Zion



Introduction

- This Psalm describes the joy of the pilgrim on arriving at Jerusalem to worship God
- It implicitly acknowledges the hardships and dangers involved in such a journey as it speaks of the importance of God's help for the journey
- While Psalm 120 begins with the psalmist in trouble in a far away land and in Psalm 121 the psalmist puts his trust in God; in Psalm 122 he meets with God's people for worship in Jerusalem
- Psalm 122 is a Psalm of arrival



Introduction

- It's the Psalm of someone who has been looking forward to that arrival for some time
- And it's also a Psalm about going to church, about gathering with God's people for worship each week
- The Psalm begins and ends with the phrase *the house of the Lord* (vv. 1,9)
- Jerusalem is a place of refuge for God's people in the midst of a hostile world
- The psalmist begs God to keep the walls of Jerusalem strong and its gates secure so that the people living there can know also an internal peace founded on the outer sense of living in a safe place



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2
- Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5
- Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- The psalmist was on a journey which started in Psalm 120 where he was surrounded by people who did not care about God
- Along the way in Psalm 121 he learned to trust in God's providence and care
- And now that he is finally arriving in Jerusalem he thinks back to the beginning of his journey and how glad he was to leave for Jerusalem; where the temple was; where God met with His people
- The Psalms of Ascent are all about going to meet with God, and the temple is the place where God promised to meet with His people

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- The Psalm begins with an invitation; the invitation was joyful; and the acceptance of it made the psalmist *glad*
- David had in mind both the community, *when they said*, and the individual *I was glad*
- He pictured the individual coming together with the group to *go into the house of the Lord*
- The people are exhorting one another to go and attend upon the worship of God at His tabernacle or temple at Jerusalem, and especially at the three great festivals
- During David's days there was never a temple, but he knew one would be built, having extensively planned and prepared for it (1 Chronicles 22:2-16)

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- It is possible that David wrote here of the pilgrimage to the tabernacle, which did exist in his day and was regarded as the *house of the Lord*
- It is more likely that David wrote this Psalm in anticipation of the pilgrims who would come to the *house of the Lord* built by Solomon
- The language is expressive of the happiness which is felt by those who love God and His sanctuary, when the stated season of worship returns
- It is the will of God that the believers gather for prayers and worship

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- We ought to worship God in our own houses, but that is not enough; we must *go into the house of the Lord*, to pray to Him there
- God's people ought to stir up one another, to go to worship God in public
- Some commentators explain that *they said to me* as the Prophets especially Jeremiah, Daniel, Haggai, and Zechariah, who declared to the exiled people the certainty of their return and the restoration of their temple and city
- But others declare that the higher sense is the heavenly Jerusalem, of which the Prophets tell us

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- Some church fathers explain that there are four Houses of God into which the faithful soul needs to go
- First is that lower House of God, the Church Militant here on earth, of which is written, *“My House shall be called the house of prayer”* (Isaiah 56:7)
- Next, the outer House of Scripture and then the inner house, the contemplation of the heart; and last is the upper house of the Church Triumphant, where there are many mansions
- One may note that in verses 1 and 2, two moments lived by the faithful are joined; the acceptance of the invitation to, *go to God’s house*, and his joyful arrival at the *gates of Jerusalem*

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- *Our feet have been standing*, When the pilgrims reached the city gates, they stopped for a while, breathless and amazed by the sight of its magnificence, and by the memories of its ancient glories
- Also, they felt safe because walls and gates defined the boundaries of the city, and provided protection from Israel's enemies
- Most commentators regard this as David's description of the joyful statement of the pilgrim who has finally arrived
- The most important aspect is the evident joy and gladness at coming to the destination

The Joy of Going Up to Jerusalem 122:1-2



- It is also to be understood spiritually of the gates of the New Jerusalem
- According to St. Augustine, those who stand there are those who delights themselves in God, but he whose delight is in himself, cannot stand, but must fall through his pride, as Lucifer did
- St. John Chrysostom believes that he whose heart is on fire, longing to the Word of God, will find his deep satisfaction even in standing within the gates of the house of God, knocking on them with his hands, feeling his deep debt to the city, and the house of the lord, to enjoy his heavenly home



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- There might be a reference here to when David had conquered the city of Jerusalem, taking it from the Jebusites who held it as a Canaanite stronghold
- He *built* the city in his own day, and David rejoiced in declaring, *Jerusalem is built*
- There may be a reference to the geography of Jerusalem, *compact* surrounded by mountains and valleys, forming a great series of natural fortresses and strongholds
- As Josephus descript it, 'one and entire' surrounded on the north by a wall, and on the three other sides by walls and by deep, rocky valleys
- And some understand the words of the repairs executed just after the return from exile



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- The walls have been rebuilt, the ruined houses repaired, the gaps spaces filled up; the city once more presents an aspect of unity, continuity, solidity, widely different from the ruined condition in which Nehemiah found it (Nehemiah 2:17,7:4)
- But it may be understood metaphorically, and the sight of the restored city to the psalmists' eye is a symbol of the mutual harmony of its inhabitants or of the unity of the nation
- In speaking of the earthly Jerusalem, the psalmist does not say that it is a city; but only that it is built *as a city*; because it is at best but the faded and shadowy type of the only true Jerusalem, the City made without hands, eternal in heavens



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- St. Augustine says, “Brethren, when David was uttering these words, that city had been finished, it was not being built. It is some city he speaks of, therefore, which is now being built, unto which living stones run in faith, of whom Peter says, ‘you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house’ (1 Peter 2:5) that is, the holy temple of God.”
- *The tribes*, The twelve tribes of the children of Israel, whom God has chosen to be His people
- This points to a time before the scattering of *the tribes*
- *Go up*, To three great feasts and festivals of the nation



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- *To the Testimony of Israel*, This describes the ark of the covenant, which was often called by this title (Exodus 25:22,27:21; Numbers 1:53)
- Representing the throne of God and His presence in Israel, *the Testimony of Israel* was the center of the tabernacle and later the temple
- *To give thanks to the name of the Lord*, The primary purpose of the feasts of Israel was for the people of God to come together and give Him *thanks*
- Their appreciation for what He had done gave them faith for what He would do in the future



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- The Israelite tribes came together for the purpose of praising *the name of the Lord*
- The word *throne* is commonly known as the seat of a king, but it may denote a seat or bench occupied by a judge
- Jerusalem was the supreme seat of justice; so, the people had reason to love it, because justice was administered there by a man after God's own heart
- The seat of royalty founded on the family of David, met with rest and stability; for God said to David, “*And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.*” (2 Samuel 7:16)



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- All this is much more applicable to Christ and the heavenly Jerusalem
- Because, lest the Jews may imagine that the words of the Psalm apply to that earthly Jerusalem, and not to the Heavenly, of which it was a figure, God permitted the seat of government to be removed from Jerusalem, and, furthermore, Jerusalem itself to be destroyed
- The promise, then, applies to the Jerusalem above, and to Christ, according to the prophecy of Isaiah 9; of Daniel 9; and of the Angel to the Virgin, Luke 1:32-33, *“the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”*



Describing Jerusalem 122:3-5

- Christ's throne and the thrones of those who reign with Him have been established most firmly in heaven
- Those seats really sit in judgment, according to the promise of our Lord, "*when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*" (Matthew 19:28)
- And those seats are upon *The thrones of the house of David*, because all the power of the saints derived from Christ, who is called the Son of David in the Gospel, and who got the seat of David His father, and who will reign forever in the house of Jacob, and of whose kingdom there shall be no end

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- David exhorted pilgrims and those who invited him to go to *the house of the Lord*, to the truly godly among the tribes that went there to worship to *pray for the peace* of the city
- He is asking them not to pray only for themselves, but for others and for Jerusalem
- This is the language which those who were going up to the city, to the house of the Lord, addressed to each other, expressing the joyful feelings of their hearts at their own near approach to the city
- Jerusalem is mentioned over 800 times in the Holy Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- The name “Jerusalem” means “city of peace”
- To us now, it teaches the duty of praying for the church: its peace; its unity; its prosperity; and its increase
- The litany of peace is prayed in the Coptic Orthodox Church liturgies where the priest prays, *“Remember, O Lord, the peace of Your one, only, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”*
- Ephesians 4 tells us: *“endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”* (Ephesians 4:3-6)

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- We have a beautiful picture of the early church at peace within and without in Acts 2:42-47, *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers ... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common ... they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.”*
- As the thrones of judgment are set in Jerusalem; there will be no more conflict, but an exalted peace, comfort, and love
- The prayer included a blessing for those who *love* the city, and a direct request for *peace* and *prosperity* for the city
- How could they ask for the peace in Jerusalem? According to St. Augustine: by practicing love themselves!

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- *Peace be within your walls*, The prayer, which he would have others offer, the psalmist now offers himself
- The prayer embraces, first, the whole community, *within your walls*; then, especially those who have the direction and government of it, *within your palaces*
- The welfare and security of every earthly city is in the strength of its walls and towers
- Within these walls are the people of God
- All the inhabitants of *Jerusalem* are included in this petition, and peace is wished for them all

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- Church fathers wonder, what are the 'walls' of Jerusalem, but the prophets, the apostles, the disciples, and the saints, on whom peace abounds
- Whereas its palaces are the true believers who became a holy temple for the Lord
- *walls* and *palaces* in the Vulgate Latin translation reads *strength* and *towers*
- So according to St. Augustine these terms are variously explained of divers virtues and graces, especially of charity and faith
- A deeper explanation takes the strength of Jerusalem to be the Passion of Christ and her towers the heights of spiritual grace and glory attained by those who love Him

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- David prayed for blessings for those who loved and prayed for Jerusalem, but the blessing was not only for the individual but for the community, for the sake of those dwelling there *For the sake of my brethren and companions*
- Some see two literal ways of interpreting this verse each of which lends itself to a deep spiritual sense
- The psalmist recognizes them as his own brothers and friends, and thus have a personal interest in their welfare
- Or, he is praying that all his brothers and friends, now in exile and poverty, may be brought home to their own city and be enriched with the abundance of her palaces

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- The first gives the meaning of the rejoicing sense of fellowship in the unity of believers, the Church
- And the other the eager yearning of all devout souls for those who have gone astray and are in captivity to sin, suffering a famine of the Word of God
- *Peace be within you*, Some commentators take these words as those of Christ Himself, promising present blessings and future glory to the Church on earth, *“For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.”* (Hebrews 2:11)

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- David understood that his gladness and goodness toward God's city was not because of his own palace, nor because of his own house and family; nor because of his own personal interest, but was primarily because *the house of the Lord* was established there
- The psalmist prays for the peace of Jerusalem, prays for his *brethren and companions*, and then finally seek the well-being of all
- To seek something requires intention and effort
- In the context of this Psalm, it means especially to seek these things in prayer

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- The Apostle Paul is a good example for us here
- He always sought the good of the church first
- He wrote in Philippians 1: *“For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith.”*
(Philippians 1:23-25)
- St. Paul was not only willing to die for Christ – he was willing to live in order to seek the well-being of Christ’s church

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- This city, St. Gregory the Great says in his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, “has here a great construction in the customs of the saints. In a building, one stone supports the other, because each stone is set upon another, and the one that supports another is in turn supported by another. This is exactly how in our Holy Church each one is sustaining and sustained. The closest support one another, and so it is by using them that the building of charity is erected.”
- This explains St. Paul’s exhortation, “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” (Galatians 6:2)

Prayers for its Peace and Prosperity 122:6-9



- St. Gregory continues, “Indeed, if I do not make an effort to accept you as you are and you do not strive to accept me as I am, the building of love between us can no longer be erected, bound though we may be by reciprocal and patient love”
- He tells us what the Psalm means for our lives in practice
- He tells us that we must be a true Jerusalem in the Church today, that is, a place of peace, “supporting one another” as we are; “supporting one another together” in the joyful certainty that the Lord “supports us all”
- In this way the Church will grow like a true Jerusalem, a place of peace and let us pray for the city of Jerusalem, that it may truly be a place of peace



Discussion

- What is the house of the Lord?
- What are the characteristics that mark out Jerusalem in this Psalm?
- What are the reasons the psalmist gives as to why he is glad to go to the house of God?
- Read Ephesians 2:19-22. How does this passage redefine the ways in which the psalmist speaks about Jerusalem? Where does God dwell now?



Discussion

- What does it mean to pray for the peace of Jerusalem?
- How is his prayer in verses 6-9 for the sake of the house of the Lord our God?
- How would you describe the attitude of the worshiper in this Psalm? Why have you reached that conclusion?