

The LORD unites his people in joyful worship; pray for the peace of God's church

Psalm 122

Introduction and Context

General

- The Book of Psalms is a collection of Hebrew poetry written over a long period of time (approximately 1000 years) by many different authors (Asaph, Korah, Solomon, Jeduthun, Heman, Etan, Moses and David). These poems were written to be sung and used during the public worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem¹.
- God's covenant with his people serves as the central theological concept behind the psalms². God, the Sovereign King, has initiated a covenant (a binding agreement) with his people. Even though only 12 psalms explicitly mention the word covenant, all of the psalms were written in the context of a covenant relationship that exists between God and the people of Israel. The LORD will be their God, they will be his people (Genesis 17:7).
- The psalms show us that God's people were intimately aware of God's presence as they frequently reflect on God's past acts in history (his gracious deliverance from Egypt), extol God as the divine king, appeal to God's people to remain obedient to God's law (covenant), remind people of the basic principle of covenant life (blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience), and ask God for forgiveness.
- One purpose of the psalms is to help God's people confess a profound faith in and love towards God³. They do that by arousing our emotions and directing our wills so that we do not only think as we ought to think, but also feel what we ought to feel and long for that which we ought to long for⁴. With regard to our emotions, the psalms reflect the full spectrum of human emotions; reverence and awe for God (Psalm 8), shame/disappointment that God has not acted as expected (Psalm 44), fear (Psalm 56), sadness (Psalm 13), anger (Psalm 5), doubt regarding God's power or justice (Psalm 73), love (Psalm 18), etc. With regard to our wills, the psalms instruct us how we ought to behave as covenant people. Wisdom psalms (e.g. Psalm 1 and Psalm 119) in particular seek to do this by means of contrast between the righteous life and the life of the wicked⁵. The psalms also show us positive examples of what a life lived in obedience to God looks like, and also provide us with communal and enthusiastic exhortations to praise God together.
- The psalms give us an authorised and authentic response to God and his Word. We learn in them not only what God has said to us (the Word of God coming down); we also learn how we may and

¹ Longman & Enns, 2008.

² Longman, 1988.

³ Longman, 1988.

⁴ Ash, 2008: p12.

⁵ 'Psalm 1 is generally thought to have been consciously composed as a preface to the completed collection. The opening psalm speaks confidently of the two ways: the righteous flourish, while the wicked are blown away like chaff. This is due not to impersonal retributive forces but rather to the providential 'knowledge' of the LORD (Psalm 1:6)' (Longman & Enns, 2008: p811)

ought to respond (the word of God going back up). As a result, the psalms are of great practical importance in the Christian life and a vital protection against imbalance⁶.

Specific

- Psalm 122 is part of a group of psalms known as the ‘Songs of Ascent.’ All the psalms from Psalm 120-134 the words ‘a song of ascent’ in their Hebrew title. One likely reason for this title is that these songs frequently reference Jerusalem and Zion (the temple mount in Jerusalem). Biblical writers regularly describe individuals as going up to Jerusalem, no matter where the people are located in relationship to the city⁷.
- The Songs of Ascent were traditionally sung during the Jewish Feast of Booths or Tabernacles in autumn (see Leviticus 23:33–44). They also seem to have been sung during pilgrimages to Jerusalem in general. In Jewish tradition, the Feast of Tabernacles commemorates Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. The pilgrimage theme of the Songs of Ascents resonates with the wilderness theme of the festival⁸.
- Another possible theme of the Songs of Ascents is the mention of foreign peoples. Psalms 120–134 may be connected with the dispersion of the Jews following the time of the Babylonian exile (after 538 BC), which could also resonate with the idea of wandering without a permanent home⁹.
- Four of the Songs of Ascents are assigned to David (Psalm 122; 124; 131; 133), one is assigned to Solomon (Psalm 127), and the other 10 are not attributed or affiliated with any particular individual.
- Within the Songs of Ascent, Psalm 122 can be further classified as a song of Zion since it focuses in on Jerusalem as the primary location of the LORD’s presence in Israel (see also Psalm 46, 48, 76, 85 and 87).
- Psalm 122 refers to David in the title. David is associated with the authorship of the Psalms as a whole (see 1 Chronicles 25:1), however, the Hebrew phrase often translated as “of David” does not necessarily indicate authorship. The Hebrew preposition used in the phrase can mean “to,” “for,” “by,” or “about.” This makes it unclear whether the phrase “of David” in psalm titles means that the psalm was written “by David” or “for David” or was dedicated “to David.”¹⁰
- Within the psalms of ascent, a threefold repetition can be noticed. One psalm will contain a theme of distress regarding life in a fallen world (e.g. Psalm 120). The next psalm then offers hope by calling us to trust on God (e.g. Psalm 121). The final psalm then focuses on the city of God and the peace that will come from being in that city (e.g. Psalm 122).

Form and Structure

- Psalm 122 is generally divided into three parts:
 - 122:1-2 – An introduction, arriving at the gates of Jerusalem
 - 122:3-5 – Looking up to survey the city

⁶ Ash, 2008: p13.

⁷ Barry et. al., 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- 122:6-9 – Praying for the peace of the city

Exposition

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

- **When does the psalmist's rejoicing take place?**

It is not entirely clear where the psalmist is when he 'rejoiced'. If the psalm was composed by David, perhaps he wrote it to commemorate the moving of the ark of the covenant into the tabernacle in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6)¹¹. Then, David would have been in a town called Kiriath Jearim (2 Samuel 6:2; 1 Chronicles 13:6).

If the psalm writer is someone else, then he could simply be a visitor coming to the city during one of the appointed festivals (Exodus 23:14-17). He could be speaking about the moment when he decided to leave his home and come to Jerusalem (before he started his journey) or he could be speaking about the moment when he arrived at the gates of the city of Jerusalem (at the end of his journey). The reference to feet 'standing in your gates' suggest that he has just arrived¹².

Some have argued that the psalm celebrates a pilgrim's imminent departure from Jerusalem¹³ though this seems very unlikely.

To conclude, the psalmist rejoices when he arrives at the gates of Jerusalem. He has travelled a long way to get here and now he is delighted when someone in the crowd encourages him to go to the house of the LORD.

- **What is the house of the LORD?**

The house of the LORD is just another way of speaking about the Tabernacle/Temple (see Exodus 23:19; 34:26). In the Old Testament, the temple was the place where the LORD dwelled amongst Israel. His presence was manifested in the holy of holies within the Temple. This was where old covenant believers would go to meet with the LORD, to enjoy fellowship with him and to offer their sacrifices (see Leviticus).

During the Old Testament period, Jerusalem was the place where God made his special presence known to his people. In this sense, it was the centre of the world¹⁴.

3-5: *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 the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.*

- **What does it mean that Jerusalem is built closely compacted together?**

¹¹ Longman, 2014: p416.

¹² Allen, 1983: p156-159.

¹³ Goldingay, 2008: p461-468.

¹⁴ Longman, 2015: p417.

On a surface level, this phrase refers to the city buildings which are very close together. Being a city surrounded by mountains, Jerusalem was much more densely populated than other cities and as a result it had a striking physical appearance¹⁵.

Given the context of this verse, it could also refer to the unity of God's people that is evident in Jerusalem. After describing the nature of the city (closely compacted together) the psalmist immediately talks about the twelve tribes who come to the city.

- **Who are the tribes of the LORD?**

The tribes of the LORD refers to the twelve tribes of Israel (see Genesis 35:10, 22–26). Each tribe was allotted its own land (see Joshua 14:1–5). Jerusalem served as a central place to unite the tribes geographically and in their worship

- **What is the statute that was given to Israel?**

God's people were expected to come to Jerusalem on the festival days (e.g. Exodus 23:14-17)¹⁶. These feasts emphasised God's goodness in the Exodus, the Conquest and his continual care throughout the history of Israel (Deuteronomy 16:15)¹⁷. The LORD commanded the people to come for worship at the annual feasts in Jerusalem at the central shrine (Deuteronomy 12:5-6), where his people would confess the LORD's name, to give thanks for God's provision¹⁸.

- **What are the thrones of judgement?**

The thrones of judgement were the places where everyday regular legal judgments are given. The LORD expected his king to govern over his people in a fair and just manner (see Jeremiah 22:1-4). These thrones of judgement are connected to the house of David since he was King and the LORD had promised David that someone from his house would reign as king over his people (2 Samuel 7:16). Jerusalem was the centre of Israel's justice system associated with the king's central power¹⁹.

6-9: *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 brothers 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.*

- **Why does the psalmist encourage prayer for the peace of Jerusalem?**

Jerusalem was not only the meeting place between the LORD and his people, but also the place where the twelve tribes of Israel united in worship. Because Jerusalem is such a crucial site of worship and unity, it needs to remain stable and prosperous. Therefore the psalmist encourages the people to pray for the peace and security of Jerusalem.

In praying for the peace of Jerusalem, the psalmist also makes a play on words. Jerusalem in Hebrew means 'city of peace'. The psalmist is thus asking people to pray that the city will be true to its name. that it will be a place where justice and righteousness are seen. That it will prosper. That it may remain focused on the worship of the LORD.

¹⁵ Goldingay, 2008: p461-468.

¹⁶ Goldingay, 2008: p461-468.

¹⁷ Van Gemeren, 1991:p775.

¹⁸ Van Gemeren, 1991: p776.

¹⁹ Longman, 2014: p417.

Key themes

- God creates a desire for worship in the hearts of Christian believers
- God expects his church to be united in worship
- God expects his church to be a place of justice and peace
- Christians should pray for God's church to be what God wants it to be
- Christians rejoice in the certainty of the new Jerusalem

Indicative & Application

God creates a desire for worship in the hearts of Christian believers

- One of the purposes of the psalms is to show us the desires which God wants to create in our hearts. We read and sing the psalms not only to learn truth about God, but to see how God wants us to respond to his truth.
- Psalm 122:1 shows us that the old covenant believer desired to worship the LORD together with other believers. He was glad when someone told him that they must go to the house of the LORD. Even if it meant a long and dangerous journey, he was eager to be in the presence of the LORD together with fellow believers.
- Old covenant believers had to go to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to meet with God. Even then, they could not approach the holy of holies or even offer their sacrifices themselves. They had to remain at a distance. Nonetheless, they still enjoyed real fellowship with God.
- New covenant believers rejoice that we do not have to go to a temple to meet with God, we can go to the person of Jesus Christ. He is our great high priest who has opened a way to God through his blood (Hebrews 10:19-25).
- Just as God the Holy Spirit created a desire for worship and fellowship in the hearts of old covenant believers, God the Holy Spirit does the same for Christians today (Galatians 5:25). That is why we are encouraged in Hebrews 10:24-25, "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."

The LORD expects his church to be united in worship

- The psalmist marvels at the city of Jerusalem when he looks up to see it. It is built together securely and strong (122:3). It is also the place where the twelve tribes of Israel gather (122:4).
- Jerusalem is a place where there is meant to be peace among men since this is where the twelve tribes of Israel come to worship. This is where a diverse people come to give thanks to the LORD. This is the city where God's people seek to follow his decrees.
- In the book of Hebrews, the writer tells us that as Christians, when we gather together for worship, we come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22). Now the heavenly Jerusalem is the perfect city under the rule of a perfect King, the kingdom which we are eagerly waiting to receive from God (Hebrews 12:28). That is not where we go when we meet together for worship. But the writer suggests that something of the reality of that heavenly city must

be seen when we gather together as God's church. Something of that city must be evident in our meetings so that when unbelievers join us, they will cry out, 'Surely God is really among you.' (1 Corinthians 14:25)

- In the book of Acts, we read that God the Holy Spirit us uniting a people from numerous different cultures together in one church (Acts 2:1-12). Galatians 3:28 also emphasises that in God's church, traditional distinctions that divide people should do so no longer and Revelation tells us that in the new Jerusalem, there will be people from every tribe and tongue and nation (Revelation 7:9). From this we can conclude, God's church is meant to be a place where diverse people unite in worship.
- When we confess as Christians in the Nicene Creed that we believe in 'one holy catholic and apostolic church.' The term 'catholic' does not refer to the Roman Catholic church, but to the universal nature of God's church. God's church includes people from lots of different backgrounds and cultures. It is not limited to one people or one group.
- Because the church is meant to be a place where there us a unity through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:3-6), we must make sure that we do not exclude anyone from our church gatherings on the basis of culture or age or background. Church must be a place where all Christian believers are welcomed.

The LORD expects his church to be a place of justice and peace

- The psalmist marvels at the city because it is the place where there are thrones of judgement (122:5). The city of Jerusalem was meant to enjoy peace, prosperity and security because that is where God's king ruled in the Old Testament. That is the one place where you would expect God's laws to be upheld.
- God's church likewise must be a place where God's King rules. If the church is a gathering of Christian believers, it is a gathering of those who confess that Jesus Christ is LORD. Therefore, one would expect God's church to be a place where people seek to follow the truths of God's Word and listen to the words of Jesus Christ.

God's people must pray for the unity, peace and prosperity of God's church

- Psalm 122 finishes with a plea for prayer. Specifically, a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem (122:6).
- The history of Israel is a sad testimony to the fact that God's church has only ever been but a poor reflection of the heavenly city. The tribes of Israel only came together to worship in Jerusalem for a few generations before there was a division into a northern and a southern kingdom. (see 1 Kings 12). Similarly, the Old Testament king David who reigned in Jerusalem was happy to forsake the justice of God when it did not accord with his own desires. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah murdered (2 Samuel 11).
- When Jesus walked on earth, he wept when he saw Jerusalem. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Luke 13:34). The city where God's temple was found, the city where God's tribes were meant to be united, the city where God's king was meant to rule with justice, so often it was instead a city of blood, bribes and adultery. A city which refused to listen to the prophets of God. A city which refused the justice of God's king.

- When we look at God's church today, we see the same challenges. Where the church is meant to be a place of peace and security, a foretaste of heaven, so often it is not. There is fighting. There is disunity. There is sin. We need God's help if we are going to be the church that he wants us to be. We need God the Holy Spirit to create the right desires in our hearts. We need God to help us love our brothers and sisters who are different from us. We need God to help us submit to Christ as King, to unite us in his truth and keep us from being led astray by wolves (Acts 20:29). That's why we must pray. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Pray for the help of the Holy Spirit. Pray for the peace and unity of God's church.

God's people should rejoice in the certainty of the new Jerusalem

- Psalm 122 in many ways describes what Jerusalem was meant to be rather than the reality of what Jerusalem was. In this sense, it was a reminder to those who sing it, that the Jerusalem here on earth is not the perfect Jerusalem which God people are looking forward to.
- In Isaiah 2:2-4, we read these words of promise: *"In the last days the mountain of the LORD 's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD , to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."* The New Testament similarly encourages Christians with a vision of a new heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21).
- These promises of an ideal Jerusalem are a reminder to us that the perfect church is not found on earth. Whilst we wait for the coming of Jesus Christ, we still live in a sinful world where we have sinful desires. We will continue to sin. We will make mistakes as individuals. We will hurt one another just as much as we are hurt by others. Now that's not an excuse to sin, but it is to say that we should expect sin. Sanctification is a lifelong process by which the Holy Spirit conforms us into the image of Christ. It doesn't happen overnight. So let's be patient with one another, quick to forgive and eager to help even as we pray, 'Come quickly Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22:20).

Christocentric focus

- Psalm 122 relates to Jesus' work as our high priest and king²⁰ (see also Belgic Confession Article 21 and Article 27).
 - He is our only High Priest (Psalm 110:4 (quoted in Heb. 7:17) who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us sin (Hebrews 9:12; 10:11-14). He also continually intercedes for us before the Father (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 9:24 and 1 John 2:1). As a result of Jesus' work of atonement, we can have access to God without having to go to an earthly Jerusalem temple (see Hebrews 10:19-25).
 - He is our eternal King who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.

²⁰ See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 12.

Sermon suggestions

Theme

- The LORD unites his people in joyful worship, pray for the peace of God's church

Goal

- Whenever preaching from a psalm, your goal should be to explain the truths of the psalm in a manner that enables God's church to sing the psalm. You should show how the psalm relates to the work of Christ and how we can sing the psalm as new covenant believers.

One God in three persons²¹:

- What does Psalm 122 reveal about who God is (Father)?
 - God seeks to dwell in the midst of his people. The house of the LORD is in the city of Jerusalem. God is not aloof and far away, he wants to enjoy fellowship with his people. That is why the temple existed. It provided an opportunity for sinful people to meet with a holy God.
 - God seeks to unite a diverse people in worship. Jerusalem is the city where the tribes of Israel go up. These tribes were diverse, they did not always get along with one another but God wants to unite them in worship.
 - God is gracious, providing laws for his people so that they can share in his ways (122:4b). God is thus not silent and hidden away from the world. He has made himself known, he has revealed himself and his desires in his Word.
- What does Psalm 122 reveal about what God does in my place and on my behalf (Son)?
 - God the Son enables me to approach God without fear of condemnation. The only way sinful people can rejoice at the prospect of meeting God is if we are assured that when we do so we will experience God's mercy and goodness instead of the wrath and judgement that we deserve. God the Son has offered himself as a sacrifice for my sins (Hebrews 7:27) so that I can approach God without fear (Hebrews 10:19-25).
- What does Psalm 122 reveal about what God does in me and through me (Holy Spirit)?
 - God the Holy Spirit works in me so that the desires of my heart will change to be like the desires of Christ's heart. He changes me so that I will long to worship the LORD. He changes me so that I will delight in fellowship with other Christian believers. He changes me so that I will work for peace, unity and justice in his church. He changes me so that I will pray.

Suggested sermon outline

I Introduction

Give some examples of the effects of sin on our world: Poverty, Racial hatred, Marriage problems, Rioting, Violence, Lies etc.

²¹ See Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 25; also Belgic Confession Article 8 & 9.

Talk about how these realities mean that we long for peace and security. None of us want to live in fear and hatred.

Draw attention to Psalm 120 and 121. Explain how in Psalm 120, the psalmist laments the fact that he lives among a people who hate peace and long only for war (Psalm 120:6-7). He then sets out on a journey to the city of peace, trusting God to care for him as he travels a long way (Psalm 121).

Finally, he arrives at the city of Jerusalem in Psalm 122.

Explain how God the Holy Spirit wants to use this psalm to teach and show us what he wants from us as church.

II God the Holy Spirit wants to create new desires within us

- A Explain the desire of the Psalmist
- B Explain why he has this desire, what is it that motivates him to worship God
- C Explain why we can have the same desire on account of what Jesus Christ has done for us
- D Explain how he does not worship by himself, but is part of a crowd, a gathering
- E Explain that Jesus has made us part of his family, he wants us to be part of his church and not lone rangers
- F Apply: God the Holy Spirit wants to create a desire for worship in our hearts
- G Apply: God the Holy Spirit wants us to be eager to love and have fellowship with other Christians

III Jesus Christ wants his church to be a place of unity, peace and justice

- A Explain what was meant by the tribes coming up to Jerusalem
- B Explain what was meant by the thrones of justice
- C Explain what the New Testament says about church services and what they are meant to be
- D Apply: Jesus Christ wants us to pursue unity, to love those different from us and not to exclude them
- E Apply: Jesus Christ wants us to pursue justice in his church, we must make sure that his Word rules and not the opinions of men
- F Encourage: If our church services are places of supernatural unity where people are eager to submit to Jesus Christ, they will be a foretaste of heaven, a place of peace

IV God the Holy Spirit helps us to pray for the church of Jesus Christ

- A Explain why the psalmist wanted prayer for Jerusalem
- B Talk about how Jerusalem was not a city of peace as it was meant to be
- C Talk about how church is often also not a place of peace
- D Encourage Christians to pray for the peace, unity and justice in God's church
- E Encourage Christians to look forward to the new Jerusalem, the perfect city

V God the Holy Spirit helps us to pray for the church of Jesus Christ

- A Explain that we sing this psalm, expressing our longing for the heavenly Jerusalem

B Explain that we sing this psalm, praying for peace in our own church fellowships

VI Conclusion

Singing the psalms

- The psalms were given to us by God for singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). They are not just meant for reading and studying, but they are meant to be sung and prayed by Christians, even today. Psalms are one of the means that God the Holy Spirit uses to reshape and change the desires of our heart so that we will desire the things that God wants us to desire.
- Numerous English metrical versions of Psalm 122 are available for singing:
 - [Seedbed Psalter](#)
 - [Free Church of Scotland](#) (scroll down for the lyrics)
 - [Psalter Hymnal](#) (audio)

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