

# How the City Makes Glad

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[ 0 : 00 ] And this is God's holy word. Psalm 122, a song of ascents of David. I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. 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. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May they be secure who love you.

Peace be within your walls and security within your towers. For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, Peace be within you. And for the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

This is God's word. Let us pray. Lord, we ask now that you would help us to focus on your word that we would receive from you tonight, that you would take away the burdens, the distractions that are creating barriers now in our heart and our minds to looking at this passage you've written to us.

[ 1 : 09 ] We recognize that though this was written in an ancient time, in an ancient hand by David himself, that you have written this in your providence for us too. And so we come now and ask that you would help us to believe that and see it.

And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. There are 15 Psalms of Ascent. The Psalms of Ascent are a whole group of Psalms from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134.

So this is the second of them. Psalm 121 is the first. And Psalm, excuse me, I should say, this is the third of them. And the reason they're called the Psalms of Ascent is that three times a year for Israelites that believed in the Lord, they are called to come to Jerusalem if they're able for feasts.

And so when you would travel as an Israelite in the ancient world to Jerusalem three times a year, that was a pilgrimage. You were a pilgrim on a journey. And the Psalms of Ascent are songs you would sing along the way, songs you would sing at different points throughout the journey.

And so we don't do this as much anymore. I guess we wear headphones or AirPods throughout the city. And maybe every once in a while we might sing out loud while we're walking around. But in the ancient world, people would always sing while they're walking and traveling places.

[ 2 : 25 ] If you've been to the military tattoo across the street, you know that the tattoo is framed around that, that there would be a band that would go with the army as they travel and people would sing songs.

And so the Psalms of Ascent are the songs that Israel, the Israelites sang along the journey to Jerusalem three times a year for the pilgrimage. And those three feasts were Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths.

And so you would travel to Jerusalem for Passover to remember the Exodus story. You would travel to Jerusalem for Pentecost to remember the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments.

And you would travel for the Feast of Booths as a memorial for the time in the wilderness, living in tents, living without a home. And so in each of these, you would go, you would make a sacrifice to the Lord in Jerusalem at the temple, and you would bring your very best, the best of your grain, the best of your sheep, your lambs.

And really, it was all about remembering what God had done for Israel historically and what God had done for you in your life. And you come to these and you say, how can we, as New Testament Christians, sing the Psalms of Ascent?

[ 3 : 39 ] What does that mean for us? We don't go to pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year, nor should we. What does it mean as a person on this side of the gospel to sing a psalm like we just

sang, Psalm 122?

And the reason we can sing them is because they're God's Word. That's a good start. But also because in Hebrews chapter 3 and 4, the writer to the Hebrews says that if you are a Christian tonight, you too are a pilgrim.

It's the same language. You are an exile. You are a wanderer. You are wandering through the wilderness of this life towards a city, a Jerusalem. And so these psalms, the Psalms of Ascent, become new songs for us in a different way as New Testament pilgrims.

And the theme, I think, here is the very first, the third word, verse 1, David arrives in Jerusalem and he says, I was glad. So the question tonight is, what makes for true gladness?

What makes for true gladness? And where is that to be found secondly? And then finally, how do you seek that? And so that's how we can sing the Psalms. What makes us glad? So let's think about that together.

[ 4 : 50 ] First, what makes for true gladness? Verse 1 and 2 is the focus here. Two things that will help us here. A couple more things to know about the Psalms of Ascent. The first is that by tradition outside the biblical text, we know that the Israelites often, when they went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year, they would often refuse to sleep in any built structures.

So if you were coming towards Jerusalem and you found a house, you found a friend that lived a little bit closer to Jerusalem than you, you wouldn't go inside their house and sleep. You would actually sleep outside the house in a tent or just on the ground underneath the stars.

And that's because you were there to relive the Exodus story. You were there to relive the time in the wilderness. You were there to relive the struggle. So it was not meant to be easy.

It was supposed to be hard. You don't sleep in a comfortable bed. You sleep out under the stars. And then the second thing to know then, to really make sense of Psalm 122, is Psalm 122 comes after Psalm 121, right?

I think that's a fact. And that's important because the Psalms of Ascent, they build on each other. They grow. And you remember, probably if you've been in the church at all for any time, that Psalm 121 has that very famous line where the psalmist says, I lift my eyes to the hills, and I ask, where does my help come from?

[ 6 : 17 ] And then it's antiphonal, meaning a choir or somebody else sings back to him and says, my help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He keeps me. Now, why in Psalm 121 did they say that?

And it's because you're on the pilgrimage, and this is not, oh, I lift my eyes to the hills, and I notice God. I look at Arthur's seat. I look at the best of the highlands, and I say, look at God.

He's amazing. Look at how great the creation is. That is not what it's talking about, though that's true. When Psalm 121 says, I lift my eyes to the hills and ask, where does my help come from?

It is because they're afraid. They're sleeping outside. The hills in the ancient world are a place of danger, not safety. It's the place where you would get robbed, where bandits tried to hide out for you.

It was the place, often in the Old Testament, of the false gods, where Asherah poles and Baal worship sites were set up all throughout the mountains. And so they say, I lift my eyes to the hills outside of Jerusalem, and I realize, if I'm going to make it from my home to Jerusalem, where's my help going to come from?

[ 7 : 21 ] So that's Psalm 121. It's about the journey, and will my keeper keep me all the way to Jerusalem? But then you come to Psalm 122, and the point is, I was glad when they said, let's go to the house of the Lord.

And then verse 2, here it is. Our feet are now standing in the gates of Jerusalem. So you see that they've done the travel, Psalm 121, Psalm 122. My feet are now, have arrived inside the gates of Jerusalem.

That's what David's saying. I'm so thankful to have finally made it. And there's a sense here that the psalmist is saying the pilgrimage, the pilgrimage includes a sense of homelessness, a sense of wandering, a sense of, I'm on the journey, and I'm not yet home.

But then in verse 2 of Psalm 122, but now when I come to Jerusalem, here I am. I'm standing here. I finally made it to where God has sent me, where I want to be. And that tells us that in verse 1, boy, this makes sense, verse 1.

Because in verse 1, what does David say? I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the, and we should expect there it should be temple of the Lord.

[ 8 : 32 ] But that's not what he says. I was glad when they said, let us go into the house, or the Hebrew word is home, of the Lord. And what David is saying is, when I go into Jerusalem, and I get through the wilderness journey, the pilgrimage, which is full of dangers and toils and snares, and I finally am standing in the gates, and I see the temple, he says, I just want to be home.

And in this psalm, he says that home is being in the home of the Lord, where God dwells in the midst of the city of God in Jerusalem.

And that means that the point of this passage is simple, and it's to just say this, real home for the pilgrim believer is wherever God makes his home.

And that's what David's saying. He's saying, I knew finally that no matter where I come from, no matter where you come from, that you will never be fully home until you arrive at the place that God has made home, where God calls home.

I, every single person in this room knows what it feels like to come off the back of a long work day and come home. And everybody in here knows what it's like to come off the back of a long trip and come home.

[ 9 : 52 ] And it doesn't matter how good a holiday is. There are times on the best holiday you've ever had where you think, I just want to be at home, and I just want to get back to normal, and I just want to get back to my routine.

And the relief that that is. I can say, I did it a month ago, that when you take five kids 32,000 feet in the air across the Atlantic, no matter where you land, whether it's New York, Atlanta, Philadelphia, it doesn't matter, Edinburgh, London, wherever you land, you think, this is now my home.

I just want to be off the plane. I just, you think, this is such relief. We all have that sense, you know, the existential reality of being relieved to not be traveling anymore. And that's what's being talked about here, but it's being, in other words, that feeling we get when we finally drop our bags or we come home from work after the worst day.

And think, I'm finally home. That sense of existential relief is the tiniest, tiniest little shadow of what's being talked about here. And we can all say, there is a home that I've yet to experience that I really long for, and this passage is telling us that that home is wherever God makes home.

And that will never really be home until we get there. Now, that's why I think, in verse one, David uses the word glad. And glad, the word glad here is not really the sense of the modern word happy, which is sort of a cheap word, and we use that in a really thin way.

[ 11 : 22 ] But the word glad here has a real thickness to it and a depth to it in the Hebrew text. And I know this is a very old word, but it corresponds a little bit more to something like mirth or to be merry.

You know, we stop saying Merry Christmas, but that's the word merry, mirth. It's this real deep sense of gladness, what the New Testament calls joy. Joy is what's being talked about here. One of the favorite moments, one of my favorite moments in The Lord of the Rings is when, in the third book, The Return of the King, Gandalf and Pippin are facing a great battle.

And Pippin, the hobbit, looks up at Gandalf's face in the midst of sorrow and trouble, and it says, in the wizard's face, Pippin saw at first only lines of care and sorrow, though as he looked more intently, he perceived that under all there was a great joy, a fountain of mirth, enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth.

And, you know, this life we live is sad, it's hard. Life in this earthly existence we have so far gives you a lot of wrinkles and a lot of bags under the eyes, like Gandalf had when he was battling in Minas Tirith.

But Pippin looked up at Gandalf and said, underneath it all, I could see that there was a joy, a fountain of mirth, that would burst forth and make us all laugh if it was just to let it go.

[ 12 : 48 ] And here, we're being told, David is saying something like, when I step into the place that God has made home in this earth for now, it creates for me a fountain of mirth like nowhere else.

What makes glad? Being home with God makes glad. It's the only thing that can bring absolute gladness to your life. Secondly, where is this home exactly?

Where is this true gladness to be found spatially? Now, the psalm turns from verse 1 and verse 2 that the home where the Lord, the temple, that's what makes me glad. But then, he does something a little bit unexpected and he turns not just to talk about, you expect him, I think, David, to talk about

the temple and the home of God and say, now I get to go into the temple and be in God's presence. But instead, in verse 3 and following, he turns and he starts talking about the city as a whole. He talks about the city of God in the Old Testament, Jerusalem. And just look at some of the things he said.

He says in verse 3, Oh, Jerusalem, built as a city, bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up. And one of the things he's doing here is he's actually standing in the gates.

[14:02] The temple is out in front of his vision above him. But David is literally looking around and saying, wow, look at the architecture of this great city, how firmly it's been put together. And you can go through and see how he talks about this beauty of the place that he loves to be, the city he loves to be.

And he goes on from there and says in verse 4, this is the meeting place of all the tribes of Israel. So he's thinking there of the fact that when you get to Jerusalem, the city that makes glad and the home of God that makes glad, you know, it's like those moments where you have a reunion with family that you've not seen in a long, long time.

We got to experience this summer. We had, I had a nephew that I'd never met before, a niece I'd never met before. And this summer, I went and we met them and all the cousins are together. And you think, boy, I love being here.

How being here makes me glad because all the peoples are gathered. So you can imagine that when you come to pilgrimage every year, as an ancient Israelite, you are going to see family members that lived on the other side of Israel that you had not seen before.

You're going to see people that you said, oh, I remember you from the last Passover and that you had met and you come and you greet. And you see, in other words, David is turning and saying, true home is being wherever God is home.

[15:21] And true home is also being in a physical, gorgeous, spatial, embodied place where the people I love are here. And so David looks around and he notices that.

And this is really an ode to true home, an ode to that city here. And in verse 5, the last thing he says about it is he says, there in that city the thrones of judgment are set, the throne of the house of David.

So he looks up and he says, this is a place where at the center is the throne of the house of David, the throne that represents righteousness and justice and safety and peace and that can never be thwarted, that is forever by covenant of God.

And he's resting there in the fact that this place is a place of justice and peace of rest, of safety after coming out of the hills. Now look, we all know tonight, if you are a Christian tonight, if you've read much of the Bible tonight, you know that David is here talking about Jerusalem yet this Jerusalem is not ultimately the city David is talking about.

David here, he knows something more and boy, do we know more and that's that there is nothing but a shadow of the true city of God that's being reflected on in the psalm.

[16:41] And that's even in the psalm itself, you know, verse 6 to 8, he turns to other people that are traveling with him and he says, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, may it be secure, those who love you, peace within your walls.

The reason that David has to say that is because there has not been peace in Jerusalem and we know as you read the rest of the Bible there's not going to be peace in Jerusalem and this city, these walls, this temple is going to be destroyed and it is not a lasting city, it's an earthly city where God has chosen to make a temple a temporary home and you could, we won't do it, but you could go through the rest of the Old Testament and look at the prophecies about the city, the true city that this Jerusalem points to.

I'll just mention a couple of them for you. Ezekiel 36, Ezekiel 36 says, on that day, the day of the city of God, the land laid waste, Jerusalem laid waste, will become the Garden of Eden.

And so Ezekiel says, the true city that you should look for is a city that looks like the very Garden of Eden and in the Garden of Eden it's a place of peace, of safety, of rest, but one of the most distinctive features is that when you traveled to Jerusalem in Psalm 122, and you got to the home of God, the temple, there's a veil, there's a curtain, and there is only one person in the whole city that can pass through that curtain and be in the presence of the living God on earth, only one.

But that's not what the Garden of Eden's like. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the promise is that you can walk hand in hand with God as a friend. You can know him so intimately, so securely.

[ 18 : 23 ] And so we see that this is not the city, that this is the city, but it's not the city, and that's why I think one of the ways to express this is that every, there's a hint of this in the human experience of nostalgia.

Nostalgia sometimes really gets us. I've had some nostalgia lately. I got invited to my 20th class reunion for the high school that I graduated from recently.

I'm not going to be able to go, but you know, you get something like that, an invitation like that, and it brings memories of people that you don't think about anymore, you know, memories of that time with that person, and you see the invitation list and who's coming and think, man, I forgot that that guy existed, but we used to be friends.

And there's a nostalgia that comes with that, and nostalgia is a really tricky thing, a funny thing, because what nostalgia does is there's something beautiful about it, but it always contains a lie, right?

Nostalgia always contains a lie. I haven't been back. I don't know about you. Most of you will probably have a little more frequency in maybe visiting the home you grew up in or maybe passing by it if it's still around.

[ 19 : 35 ] I haven't seen the home I grew up in in many years, but I remember after about a 15-year hiatus of seeing the home I grew up in, finally being back in my hometown and seeing it, and it was exciting.

You know, somebody else lives there. I don't know who they are, but you kind of stand outside and you want to walk on the property, but then you think, I shouldn't do that. I'll get arrested in America, maybe, and, you know, I have to stay away.

But one of the experiences I had was to say, wow, and yet, the house was so much smaller than I remembered, and I could see where my window had been, and I thought, it doesn't look great, it needs a facelift, it needs a little renovation, but that is what we painted it, you know, and the grass is not as green as you remember, and the trees are not, and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, right?

And you experience nostalgia, and there's something of a lie in it, and that's because no matter how much we find a place in this earthly life, in these earthly cities that we call home, there is always a reality that there is a lack in it, and you go back to your home from childhood, and you say, this was good, but it's not actually filling the ultimate need that I'm looking for.

There's a word in German that some of the German philosophers use, famously Freud talked about this, or someone like Heidegger who's less well known, and *Unheimlichkeit*, and it's hard to translate, but it's got this sense of un-home likeness, and it's a reference to that feeling that we sometimes get where we are at the place we're supposed to be, but there's a strange sense where we're also not supposed to be here at the very same time, that we're not yet home, that it's not fulfilling all of our desires, that it, that's life in this world, that's what they said, and one of my favorite books is C.S. Lewis' novel, *Till We Have Faces*, and this is the words he puts in one of the characters' mouth, *Psyche*, about coming home, and I think he's got the *Psalms of Ascent* maybe in mind here.

[ 21 : 43 ] The sweetest thing in all my life, she says, has been the longing to reach the mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from, my country, the place where I ought to have been born.

Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longings, the longing for home, for indeed, it now feels not like going, but like going back to where I belong. All my life, the God of the mountain has been wooing me.

Oh, look up once, at least before the end, and wish me joy in these final days. I am going to my love. And he's reflecting there on the fact of what David's reflecting on, and that's that there is no earthly city, no earthly home, no earthly experience, no success, no relationship, no person, as good as it all is, that can be absolute home for us, that can fill the desires of the heart, that can really, really fill the gap deep down at the bottom of our soul.

And that's why 700 years later, 700 years after this moment, there was another pilgrim, and that pilgrim was coming to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, just like in Psalm 122.

And that pilgrim stood above in the hills outside the city of Jerusalem, and he looked down at the city of Jerusalem. And what did he say? It says that, we're told in the Gospels, Jesus wept for Jerusalem.

[ 23 : 11 ] And it says, would that even you, Jerusalem, had known on this day the things that make for peace. Would you be willing to receive peace, but now they're hidden from your eyes.

And the reason Jesus was weeping is because he knew that just like every other place, Jerusalem is a city of man. It's an earthly place. And he knew that when he entered in, he would not be glad when he entered the gates.

He would be rejected. He would suffer. He would die. He would be, in other words, you know, we can say the same thing. It's anachronistic, but Edinburgh rejected him.

Glasgow rejected him. Jerusalem rejected him. Natchez, Mississippi, where I'm from, rejected him. Humanity rejected him when he came because no earthly city could be true home unless the Son of God become the builder and he established a city whose foundations come from the Lord.

And that's why tonight in a minute we're going to sing the Charles Wesley hymn and Can It Be where it says, he left his father's home above so free, so infinite his grace, he emptied himself of all but love and he bled for Adam's helpless race in order to be able to give us true home again.

[ 24 : 26 ] And so tonight we can say that because Jesus Christ bled, the veil was torn. And because the veil was torn, we really can, in this earthly pilgrimage we're experiencing right now, know that if you're struggling and saying, I'm just not satisfied with where I am, well, let me say, that makes sense.

You're not home. You will not be satisfied with where you're at, not fully, not until God brings you all the way to the mountain. And he can do so because Jesus Christ bled for Adam's helpless race.

So let me conclude with this finally, briefly. How can you, in this life right now, you know, you say, well, look, that's all future. What am I to do with this today? What can you do with this today?

Let me say two things as we close. First, today, in order to bring this home to us right now in this moment, in 2025, in our city, first, we have to realize and recognize the city of God, true home, is not yet.

And what I mean by that is we've got to grapple in our hearts and in our minds with the objective reality that the city of God, first, is a real destination.

[ 25 : 36 ] So where do we see this moment, Psalm 122, fully fulfilled? And that's in Revelation 21, where Jesus Christ brings down the new Jerusalem to this earth.

and he builds a physical, embodied space where all the tribes gather with him. That's true home.

And one of the things I just want to invite you to do tonight is I want to ask you, is the new Jerusalem, the city of God, a real destination in your heart and mind?

It is real objectively, but are you grasping hold of that subjectively? And we sang tonight at the beginning about hope, and the Bible talks about hope, hope in the city that is to come.

And boy, that makes all the difference, the fact of the new Jerusalem, the reality of it. C.S. Lewis one more time. He says, creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.

A baby feels hungry, well, there's such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim, well, there's such a thing as water. And if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world has yet to satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world, another city, another home.

[ 26 : 49 ] If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy, it doesn't prove that this is all a fraud. Instead, it points me to something beyond this earthly city, beyond this earthly life. So the first thing is to say, the city of God is coming, it's real.

Have you let that really get down into your heart and shape your experiences in this life, your hope, your expectations, and settle your expectations for the kind of satisfaction you can actually experience in the earthly city.

One pastor I came across, I got this illustration from him, I thought it was very helpful. He says that, imagine two men captured in a raid of their city, their city burned, their city destroyed, and these two men are captured, they're imprisoned, they're thrown into a pit, and they both saw the city burn, but the first man believes that his family's still alive, and that there are people out there looking for him, and the second man is told, there is nothing left, everyone's dead, and they're both given a 10-year prison sentence.

How did each of them deal with the sentence? One man is trying every day to wake up and press on, right? But the other man finds himself in a place of hopelessness.

In other words, the expectation of what's on the other side means everything for how you live your life today. The expectation of the city of God to come means everything for how you live your life today, and so the expectation of true home that is to come helps us so much to simply do this, it helps us to not make all the little creaturely things in this world into the gods that we think can be to us the city of God.

[ 28 : 39 ] Expecting that our home is not yet helps us so much prevents us from letting all the crummy little and sometimes beautiful things in this life, it prevents us from turning them into the city of God in our hearts.

Lastly, and we'll finish with this, not only do we have to know that the city of God is not yet, but today we've got to know that the city of God is also now. And what I mean by that is very, at the end of this passage, David says, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, pray for peace in its walls.

How can a Christian say that? What do we mean by that today? Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and of course we can pray for physical peace amongst human beings today in the midst of conflicts, but something more than that's going on there, and that's this, that how, in other words, we could say, how is the city of God present today?

And this is a complicated theology, but I'll simply say this. The city of God is present today in the fact that God's people are citizens of the city of God today.

And so what the church is, is when we gather, when this group gathers together, we are a one-hour momentary glimpse of the city of God that is to come. That's what this means when we gather together for worship week in and week out.

[ 29 : 57 ] And so, if you are a member here, if you're a member of a church in the free church, you will have taken a vow that says, do you promise to seek the peace and prosperity of the church?

And in Psalm 122, verse 7 and 8, when it says, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, you can say, that means to me today, pray for the peace of the church, for its prosperity, for its unity, for its protection. And this is the last word. Boy, David, he comes into the city of Jerusalem where God has made his home and he said, it made me so glad to be there.

And he looked around and he saw his cousins and he saw the people that he hadn't seen in a long time and it gave him the biggest amount of joy. If there is the smallest in our hearts tonight, the smallest, a little bit of joy when you come into church, a little bit of joy and you look around and you say, the people of God, my spiritual cousins, brothers and sisters, being with God's people in God's presence, in God's place makes me glad.

If there is a little bit of that for you, how, can you imagine what it is going to be like when you step foot into the true home, the city of God, when Revelation 21 happens and you first enter the city?

[ 31 : 20 ] And Ligon Duncan, he puts it this way, if God in that moment were not holding the hearts of all his people steady, we would explode with joy. Rest tonight and be glad in the midst of a tough life, hard life, sad life, lots of trouble, with the words of the psalm.

Let me finish with Psalm 87.3, a parallel psalm and it says this, glorious things are said of you, O city of God to come. Glorious things are said of the city of God.

Let's pray. Father, we ask for hope in that reality. We want to experience just a taste tonight of the joy of the city of God that is to come.

And so, sometimes it can be hard to come into church on a Sunday night and feel joy, Lord, but that's what we're here for. Give us that, we ask, in the midst of trouble and sad and bags under our eyes because of hardship.

As we read about earlier, we come, Lord, and ask for this gift of hope and joy. Set our eyes tonight on the new Jerusalem and on the time that is ahead of us in the city that makes glad.

[ 32 : 33 ] Lord, we want to even imagine what it must be like to be in a place where there is no more sadness or anxiety, no more trouble. And that's what you promise us, Lord, so give us a taste of that as we sing this classic hymn tonight before you and Can It Be.

We want to bring these words to you, Lord, touch our hearts to bring these words to you, Lord, and we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.