

Taking the pilgrimage home

Littlebourne - 1st January 2023 - Psalm 134

■ *A Song of Ascents.*

We've reached the 15th and final Psalm of Ascent. We understand that these would have been the Psalms sung by those that went to the festivals in Jerusalem to worship.

We started with Psalms that were really quite distant from Jerusalem, Psalm 120 was set in a foreign land, among hostile people, then as we progressed through, we have come closer to Jerusalem. More and more the Psalms have expressed being closer to God, closer to others and more worshipful.

The last Psalm we looked at, Psalm 133, was about how good it is to be amongst fellow believers. They've reached their destination, they are enjoying the time in Jerusalem, and now it is time to head back home.

This the last of the Psalms of Ascent, a Psalm that many believe was for the end of the Pilgrimage - a Psalm for returning home. A common view is that the first two verses would be those said by the departing pilgrims - they speak words of encouragement to the priests and Levites that will remain in Jerusalem, ministering in the Temple. Maybe not what we expect - the people from far away encouraging the leaders. Then verse 3 would be said in return - a blessing on those that are going back to far away places, back to ordinary life.

The pilgrim is going away from the focus and worship of the temple, the encouragement of the time of the festival, back to the ordinary.

v1-2

■ *Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!
Lift up your hands to the holy place
and bless the Lord!*

So this is thought to have been what the Pilgrim would say to the Levites, to those that served in the temple.

The temptation for all of us is to let what is special become mundane - those that were in the temple all the time, constantly part of the worship of that place, would probably lose some of the wonder they had when they first worked there. So they need encouragement to see it as they first saw it, to see the temple through the eyes of the pilgrims who have come from far away, for whom it is exciting and unusual. It would have been easy for them to forget what a privileged position they held, being in the temple so often.

The Psalm mentions those '*who stand by night* in the house of the Lord'. In the temple, the bulk of the worship, the sacrifices, the services, would be during the day. However the temple would be manned at night - there were those that stood by, the night watchmen of the temple. Maybe the pilgrims are setting off late in the day, or very early, and they are directing their remarks to the night shift at the temple, after one last visit. Maybe, this is meant to tell us that the worship of God is to be done even when things are quiet and dark.

The praise of God is to take place in the dark and in the light, in the bustle and the emptiness, during the 'set times' of worship and when it's silent and calm.

Verse 2 tells those in the temple to 'lift up your hands'. Other Psalms mention this too - Psalm 28 (verse 2) says:

*Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy,
when I cry to you for help,
when I lift up my hands
toward your most holy sanctuary.*

Psalm 63 (verse 3-4) says:

*Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.*

There's examples there of lifting hands in a cry for help, and in lifting hands in praise. I think the point of this is not that there's something about this particular physical stance - after all worship is associated with many different stances, from face down completely on the ground, to kneeling to looking up. It's that this is symbolic for reaching out towards the right thing - it's the stance of our heart that is more important than our physical position. We need to be reaching up to God, seeking Him.

1 Timothy 2:8 associates this lifting of hands with prayer:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling;

The point is to be seeking and reaching out to God, in ways more than just physical.

On the other hand, lifting of hands is a physical act - our worship is to use more than just our minds. There's a temptation in some church traditions, reformed traditions included or even maybe especially, to treat the body's part in worship as merely the means to deliver the mind to church. We can over-intellectualise our worship, or make it solely about thinking and words. Whilst thought and word are vital, worship is more than just words said. What our bodies do is important too.

What the pilgrim has found in the temple, the enjoyment of worshipping God, he is now exhorting those in the temple to do.

v3

*May the Lord bless you from Zion,
he who made heaven and earth*

The response to the pilgrim in verse 3 is a prayer, or more a benediction. A benediction is not so much asking for God's blessing, but a pronouncement that God blesses us. We usually do this at the end of our services - we will say some verse or verses of scripture that typically constitute a promise by God to bless us. A benediction is not so much of a prayer, but a pronouncement.

It says 'may the Lord bless you *from Zion*'. Zion is the hill on which the temple was built. It's not a particularly high hill, nothing special geographically, but it's special because it's where the temple was - this is symbolically where God is meeting with us.

A theme from the OT is sometimes the river that runs from Zion, from the Temple. There isn't a mighty river in Jerusalem, but this is really a picture - rivers of living water flow from the temple, from Jesus' work on the cross. What is really symbolised here is the blessing that comes from the heart of God.

The blessing 'from Zion' might be a way of saying to the pilgrims that all that they've seen in the temple, all the blessings of their visit to Jerusalem, all the worship they've enjoyed and experienced here, they should take back home. Zion might be considered the source of the blessing, but the river from Zion flows into the wider world.

This is followed by 'he who made heaven and earth'. The same God that they've come close to in the temple, in Jerusalem, is the God that made everywhere else. God is not limited to this one spot, but He is sovereign everywhere. The message to the pilgrims is "Don't lose the sense of blessedness you had in Zion, but remember he made all things. There is nowhere, no situation that is beyond His control - He is Lord of all things. You have been blessed in Zion, and will be blessed likewise everywhere."

What these pilgrims go home to isn't going to be as obviously worshipful as what they have been seeing. But the worship can come home with them. The forgiveness of sins that they have seen in the sacrifices - that can follow them home. The fellowship and common cause they've found - that comes home with them too, even if they aren't physically close. Being close to God - they can be close to God wherever they go.

Then and now

Jerusalem was of such importance because it was where the ark rested, where the temple was built around it. It's where Israel would go to worship God, where God dwelt among them, where they offered sacrifices and sought God's help and forgiveness. They had priests to mediate between themselves and God. Their way to God was found in Jerusalem. Much of the formal worship for them was centred entirely in this place.

Jerusalem doesn't really feature any more for us though, does it. Hopefully none of us thinks we need to go there to find God. Our way to God rests elsewhere.

The temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood all were in fact pointing to something, or rather someone better. We don't need to go to a particular place, to offer sacrifices or to reach God through some intermediary.

Remember in Mark 14, Jesus is accused of saying that he "will destroy the temple and in three days will build another that is not made by hands". Hebrews 9:11-12:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

We do not approach God through sacrifices for our sin, but through the one sacrifice that paid for all our sin, once and for all. We don't go to a physical location to seek God's presence, but God, the Holy Spirit dwells in us all. We don't need a priest to stand between us and God, but rather Christ is the ultimate high priest, who intercedes for us and bridges the gap between humanity and deity perfectly forever.

Hebrews chapters 8-10 tell us about how Jesus Christ fulfils the aims of the temple and priesthood and sacrifices and how he accomplishes those aims perfectly and eternally. The Old Testament system foreshadows the new.

One last important point about this - an alarmingly common misconception to deal with - it's not the case that the way of salvation has changed between then and now. The way of salvation has always and only been through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. The customs of ancient Israel were but shadows of what was to come - they showed the people their sinfulness and illustrated for them the great cost of their sin in all the unending sacrifices demanded. Of course, the Old Testament also showed them that salvation was not found in such sacrifices, but was really a gift of God.

I think we see in the attitudes expressed in the Psalms we've looked at that ancient Israel did understand this to some extent. David says in Psalm 122 (verse 1):

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."*

If we look at the Old Testament law alone, if we just take the rules and regulations, we would expect David to be terrified to go to the house of the Lord. He would find there a terrifyingly holy God, who demands sacrifice and is totally unapproachable. Would David rejoice at the prospect of this?

But David rejoices as he is invited to visit the house of the Lord, because presumably he understands that he worships one who is more than just a demanding God of sacrifice - in some way, he has faith that God saves apart from the sacrifices and the following of the law. His salvation is found in Christ, though he might not have been able to articulate it in those terms. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New.

Paul makes this point in Romans 4 - before the institution of the temple, before the law of Moses, Abraham was justified before God, not by works, but by faith. As Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6:

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

It was always and eternally only through Christ that anyone is saved. Abraham may have been much more in the dark than we are regarding the *mechanics* of salvation, but nonetheless, he was saved by faith in Christ. Salvation is by faith in Christ - no amount of pilgrimage or sacrifice or worship or works will ever do - only Christ's life, death and resurrection are enough.

What do we learn from those pilgrims of old?

We don't need to go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to meet with God anymore, but like the pilgrims in this Psalm we do need to be aware that whilst we might meet with God in a special way, worship at certain times and places, that should not prevent us from worshipping wherever we are.

Today, like then, formal worship occurs in specific places - here in this chapel, and many other churches throughout the world, specifically on Sundays. I don't think it's at all wrong to feel more or to find it easier to worship in the particular times and places that we do it formally. But like the pilgrims heading home from their pilgrimage, we should be aware that worship doesn't end once the benediction is said and we say the grace to one another. Worship is a part of our whole lives and follows us back home. Wherever and whenever we find ourselves, we worship.

But we also face the same temptation as the Levites - most of us go to church every single week, if not multiple times. We can get complacent, we can lose sight of the privilege we have in coming together to worship. This is especially true for those that serve at church regularly - are we turning up because we want to worship or because we're on the rota for something? As the pilgrims say in verses 1 and 2, we should be encouraged to worship, and our heart attitude should be one of reaching out to God.

Conclusion of the Psalms of Ascent

So to sort of sum up the Psalms of Ascent, we've joined the pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem. From being far apart and in distant lands, surrounded by those that opposed them, as in Psalm 120, we've ascended to the place of true worship and joined together in doing it.

Near the end of Revelation, we see the new Jerusalem - the city where God and his people dwell. This new Jerusalem is described as being like 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' - it's the bride of Christ, the church dwelling with Christ, with no separation. At its centre is no longer a temple built with human hands, but Christ on his throne, from which the river of living water flows.

We are like those who would have sung these Songs of Ascent, thousands of years ago, on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem - but we are heading for a Jerusalem far greater, and no return trip for us.