

The Psalms of Ascent
Psalm 122 & 126
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As an introduction to today's message about the Psalms of Ascent, let me ask you a question: are there particular events during the church year that you look forward to celebrating or that make you feel glad? (After a pause) I reflected upon this myself and came up with celebrations around Christmas and Easter. I think because it is a gathering of people who have reason to be grateful for God's presence and for the special music and prayers that seem to make for a celebratory mood. And, at least for me, music is central to my experience of the pleasure of worship and the sense of presence. In many ways, the Psalms of Ascent have some similar characteristics and purposes for having been written.

The Book of Psalms are a collection of religious poetry. The Psalms can be read, spoken out loud and are often set to music. In fact, the psalms were written to be sung and accompanied by instruments. The Psalms remain as valid today as when they were written. They cover the whole range of human emotions and life situations. This is described in a book, "Bringing the Psalms to Life" by Daniel Polish, an educator and rabbi. He states that the Psalms "validated the whole range of human emotions. ...we suffer; we experience fear and exaltation; we meet with success and failure; we know contentment and anxiety; we experience betrayal, have enemies, even know rage and the desire for revenge; and we find vindication, comfort, new confidence. ...Above all, the psalms encourage us to give voice to our emotions and pour our hearts out to God."

This morning we will take a closer look at two psalms: Psalms 122 and Psalm 126. These two Psalms are part of a collection known as the Psalms of Ascent. These psalms were often sung as the pilgrims, ie Israelites, made the pilgrimage to the temple. Song of ascent may refer to the people climbing the stairs to enter the temple. Psalm 122 was a song of celebration when the Israelites would come to celebrate the feast days, celebrations during the seasons of the year related to the harvests. The opening phrase of psalm 122 captures the celebratory mood expressed in this psalm. "I was glad when they said to me "Let us go to the house of the Lord." In our hymnals we have a similar song "He Has Made Me Glad." In it we sing "I will enter his courts with thanksgiving in my heart; I will enter his courts with praise. I will say, this is the day that the Lord has made!" There are many other examples where our hymns and liturgies reflect the Psalms; that reflects their universality. They are not confined to the Old Testament or to the past. They carry contemporary messages that apply across time and human circumstances.

The second psalm, psalm 126 may have been written as praise to God for restoration of the temple after the exile in Babylon. It was a celebration of the release from captivity and the restoration of the community in Jerusalem. Other historians say that this psalm may point to David's return to Jerusalem after his son Absalom had usurped his rule. In either case it was likely written in response to a return to Jerusalem after a period of exile. Exile of any length is a painful experience; people are separated from their homes. They suffer from loss of traditions and specifically the loss of their place of worship. The exile to Babylon was a devastating

experience. The people suffered all the stages of grief: anger, sadness and a sense of abandonment by God. The persons who finally returned to Jerusalem found it devastated and rebuilding took several generations. No doubt this history was known by the descendants of the exiles. To rise up from the ashes and rebuild was a statement of their tenacity. It adds to our understanding of the songs of ascent to imagine the joy and the freedom to approach the newly rebuilt temple and to worship once again in the “house of the Lord.” It would be a restoration of their sense of belonging. It is also a statement of freedom after a forced captivity.

To be realistic, not all days leading up to worship were easy then nor are they now. We may have emergencies of one sort or another. We may not feel particularly well. Or we may have some fractured relationships that need repair. I bring this up because we can argue that we do not always feel celebratory when we come to worship. Yet, in these psalms there is the recognition that tears can be mingled with song. “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy, those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” It is not a condition for coming to worship that we are always ready with joyful hearts and songs. However, that is precisely why we can come to worship, “just as we are.” Worship is a collection of friends or acquaintances that share a common purpose: to worship in God’s house and become spiritually filled, better prepared to face whatever comes next. Jesus certainly knew his share of sorrow and tears. And he was well aware that each of us needs His presence. In fact when he was addressing the disciples as he faced the last week of his life, he promised that he would not ever abandon them. He made reference to the Holy Spirit, the advocate and comforter that would come to take His place among us. To put it in the language of the psalms, he came to set the captives free. So when we come “into his house” we can take heart that we are not alone and can expect support. That is certainly a reason to give thanks and praise. In the words of our next song, “Christ is our Guide and Friend on whom we can depend; his love shall never end.”