

Psalm 132
Moving Towards God's Promises

Michelle Drewitz
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Riverdale Baptist Church
Whitehorse, Yukon

Since the fall, we have been working our way through the songs of ascent. There are 15 Psalms that make up the songs of ascent. When God's people journeyed from their homes and villages, their farms and towns, to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual feasts and festivals, these were the songs that accompanied them. These were the songs that were sung as they traveled through mountains and valleys, across deserts and woodlands, in the heat of the day and the coolness of the night. These were the songs which reminded God's people about what it means to be God's people and brought them ever closer to the Living Eternal God. These were the songs which gave meaning to their everyday activities like working and sleeping, playing and socializing, enduring trouble and celebrating joys. These were the songs which helped them to strengthen their faith and hope in the Lord.

For several months, we have been working our way through these Psalms. There are a couple of noticeable differences between the first twelve songs of ascent and Psalm 132. First, the setting for the first twelve songs is not always clear. But Psalm 132, and indeed the last three songs of ascent, all have their geographic focus on Mount Zion. This is particularly appropriate because these were the songs that were sung by God's people as they made their way to Jerusalem for the annual feasts and festivals. Secondly, Psalms 120-131 are each only a handful of verses long. Psalm 132, in contrast, is 18 verses long, by far the longest song of ascent! Thirdly, in the first twelve Psalms we can find echoes of our own personal stories because of the general themes and images and language used. We hear an important word to the whole of God's people: "O Israel put your hope in the Lord". But Psalm 132 focuses on an historical event in Israel's history. It is about some specific event, seemingly not related to our lives. It is about the ark of the covenant.

Unlike the other Psalms which are more challenging to date, this Psalm was most likely composed for the dedication of the temple during King Solomon's reign. There are phrases from Solomon's prayer of dedication found in 2 Chronicles and from the book of Proverbs that are also found in this Psalm.

Lastly, the songs of ascent are generally structured as a prayer or song, whose movement is continuous. Psalm 132 is structured like a mirror. If you picked up a bulletin this morning, you'll notice that the Psalm is printed as an insert for you. It is done this way to help you see the structure of the Psalm. No other song of ascent is structured in this way. Verses 2 through 10 mirror verses 11 through 17, as you notice by the two columns. There are words or ideas on the left column which are then picked up in the right column. For example, verse 2 speaks of the vow David made to the Lord God. Verse 11 introduces the oath the Lord swore to David. Though I will not constantly be referring to the insert, it is available to you to help you understand how this Psalm is organized.

The main themes of the Psalm are about the presence of God, God's rule among His people, and Christian obedience. The first half of the Psalm, as we will see, is about David's obedience and promise to God about the ark of the covenant. The second half of the Psalm is about God's promise to His people. God's promise stretches as far back as the covenant with Abraham, to the construction of the ark of the covenant, to the ark's journeys with God's people, to the capture of the ark by the Philistines, to King David bringing the ark back to Jerusalem, to the building of

the temple by King Solomon, to the promised coming of Christ the Messiah, to the eternal reign of Christ in the new Heavens and new Earth.

This Psalm calls attention to the faith history between God and His people while also calling attention to the future unwritten faith story between God and His people. This Psalm is a proclamation of the promise between David and the Lord, a declaration of hope about the promise between God and His people, and a statement of Christian obedience. This Psalm teaches us that Christian obedience is grounded in the historical past with hope for the future.

The Psalm begins with a request to God that he would remember all the trouble and hardships that David endured. Indeed, most of us are familiar with many of the challenges David experienced to become King of Israel and while he was King. Some of these troubles were a result of his failure and some of the troubles were a result of other people and circumstances. Before David took the throne, his predecessor, King Saul, attempted to kill him. Then when David was king, he fled Jerusalem when his own son attempted to take the throne. David sinned and faced significant problems when he slept with a married woman and had her husband murdered. However many problems David faced, the opening statement in this Psalm about the hardships of David is most likely in reference to the challenges in getting the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and gathering all the materials for the temple.

Then we read about David's promise to God. David vowed he would not rest until he found a resting place for God. David promised to find a permanent place for the ark of the covenant.

Why does this Psalm – a Psalm that focuses quite a bit on the ark of the covenant – belong in the songs of ascent? Why do God’s people sing about the ark of the covenant as they make their way to Jerusalem for the feasts? Well, we need to understand a bit about the history of the ark of the covenant. In Exodus 25, the ark of the covenant is described as being 45 inches long, 27 inches wide and 27 inches high. It was a wooden box covered with gold both inside and outside. It had four feet on which there were gold rings. Poles were inserted through the rings so that the ark could be lifted and carried since no one was allowed to touch the ark.

There was a mercy seat, also called an atonement cover, made of pure gold which was on top of the ark. On either end of the mercy seat were gold cherubim facing each other. Inside the ark were the Ten Commandments. It was from this mercy seat that God’s Word was heard. Thus, the ark of the covenant was a symbol of God’s presence.

It was made under Moses’ leadership about a year after Israel’s exodus from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Whenever the ark moved, it was covered by a veil and was carried by the Levites. When God’s people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, the ark moved with them.

As God’s people neared the Promised Land and reached the Jordan River, the Ark was carried ahead of the people. When the feet of the priests carrying the Ark touched the Jordan River, the river grew dry and stayed dry until the priests left the River after everyone had crossed.

Then the ark was moved to Bethel where Israel consulted it while they planned an attack against the Benjaminites. Then the ark of the covenant was at Shiloh. It was from here that the elders of Israel decided to bring the ark of the covenant out to the battlefield where Israel was fighting against the Philistines. Israel had been significantly defeated by the Philistines and were scared. They believed moving the ark would help them. But once the ark of the covenant had been brought out, it was captured by the Philistines.

Wherever the Philistines took the ark throughout their country, it resulted in problems and trouble for them. After seven months, the Philistines returned the ark to the Israelite village of Kiriath-Jearim.

So then when David was King, he promised to retrieve the ark and bring it back to Zion, to the capital city of Jerusalem. This is what the Psalm refers to. But even that process was full of struggles for David. The first attempt to bring the ark to Zion was disastrous. The story is told for us in 2 Samuel 6. The ark was placed on a new cart and began its procession to Jerusalem. Along the way, David and the whole house of Israel were singing and dancing and celebrating. But then the oxen stumbled so Uzzah reached out to steady the ark with his hand and actually touched the ark. This was an act of irreverance so God struck him down and he died there. Then after three months, King David once again tried to bring the ark back to Jerusalem. This was successful and the ark of the covenant was placed inside the tent that David had prepared for it.

In the next chapter of 2 Samuel, we read that God had finally granted David rest from his enemies. But David was distressed and dissatisfied that he was living in a palace of cedar while the ark of God – or God’s dwelling place – was inside a tent. So David proposed that he would build a temple for the ark but God said no, David’s son would do that instead. Though God granted him rest, David was determined to not rest until he had found a resting place for God. So David devoted his final years to making the preparations for the temple.

In verse 6 of this Psalm, we read of two place names: Ephrathah and Jaar. Ephrathah is another name for Bethlehem, the place where Jesus Christ was born. Ephrathah is also in reference to the city of Bethel; which is where the ark of the covenant had remained for some time. The fields of Jaar refers to Kiriath Jearim where the ark had been for twenty years and from where David retrieved the ark. So in that one verse the people of God are reminded of the journeys of the ark of the covenant. We are also reminded of the blessing and joy of God’s presence, the celebration at having brought the ark to its home.

The Psalmist describes a scene of celebration and worship when writing about righteousness and joy. In Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the Temple, recorded in 2 Chronicles 6, he ends his prayer with the same verses from Psalm 132:8-10.

Why does this Psalm emphasize the importance of the ark? Why does this song of ascent, unlike any other songs, speak of an historical event for God’s people? Why do God’s people sing of the ark of the covenant on their journey to Jerusalem?

Well, the story of the ark of the covenant has theological significance for God's people. First, the ark was a symbol of God's presence among His people. The ark of the covenant was a regular reminder that God is with His people, above His people, and over His people. Second, the ark was a reminder that God cannot be manipulated or treated like magic. The story of why and how the ark was captured by the Philistines was a reminder that the people of God cannot use or manipulate God to serve their own interests and desires.

Thirdly, the story of the ark of the covenant was well known among the Israelites, like the story of the birth of Jesus for Christians today. The Psalmist points to something familiar, to the ark of the covenant, a symbol of God's presence, to teach us about Christian discipleship. Why does the Psalmist do this? And what does the Psalmist teach us? The Psalmist chooses to draw our attention to history, to moments and experiences and events in the life of Israel that held deep theological significance. After all, when it comes to matters of everyday and ordinary faith, we cannot always rely on our own experiences or thoughts or emotions to help us. We also need to remember history, we also need to remember God's story. We need history to help us on our faith journey because our own personal experiences, valid and true as they are, do not give us the full image of faith.

Living in Canada in 2019 we are so quick to draw conclusions about life and faith based on our finite and limited experience. I have an experience, good or bad, and draw a conclusion about the state of the world or religion based on what happened to me. We are all familiar with this approach to life and faith. Perhaps at some point in our life we have decided that since God

didn't heal me or my brother or my friend, then God must not in fact be real. Or we have been hurt by pastors or church leaders, or we have not been noticed or thanked for our service in the church, or our opinions haven't seemed to matter in church decisions – so we conclude that we don't actually need to be part of a worshipping community of believers or there is hypocrisy in the church so God's character is not who He says He is. Or maybe we have dismissed the existence of God because God didn't answer my prayer the way I wanted when I wanted and how I wanted.

So after considering our own experience of God, our own experience of the church – God's people, our own experience of prayer or forgiveness, we decide that God is not in fact real. Or that the Christian faith is not in fact about grace and hope and joy and love. Or that prayer doesn't work. We are quick to draw these conclusions from one person's experience.

Now suppose you are wanting to purchase a new vehicle or choose which movie to watch on Netflix or plan your next summer hiking trip in the Yukon. Will you ask one car owner about their experience of their car or will you consult more people and do more research? When choosing a movie, will you ask your neighbour or check multiple reviews online? When planning your next hiking trip, will you talk with several people who have lived and hiked in the Yukon or will you talk with someone who lives in Halifax? You see, when it comes to decisions like buying a new vehicle, choosing a movie to watch, or planning a hiking trip, we would all agree that it would be most beneficial to talk with many people. A survey is far less helpful if

one person has been surveyed. A survey is more helpful in giving us information and data if more people have been consulted.

But when it comes to matters of faith, we tend to consult only our own personal experience and not listen to the voices of others; not listen to the stories of the Bible, not listen to the stories of saints before us, not listen to the stories of those in our church family, whether young or old.

When it comes to matters of car buying, movie selecting, and planning hikes, we consult various people and many sources. So when it comes to matters of prayer, Christ's love and forgiveness, grace, salvation, God's judgment, or the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, why then are we so quick to only consider our own personal experience? Why are we so quick to dismiss matters of faith based on a consultation of one person, myself? Why do we not also turn to our community, both past and present, to help us in matters of faith?

You see, we need each other to help us know how to live. We need each other to help us obey. We need each other to journey on this path of discipleship that leads us ever closer to God. We need to meet together to help each other listen to other people's experiences, not just our own. Here at RBC, there are plenty of small groups you could be part of which help us do just that, whether that's as part of the parents of littles small group on Thursday morning, or as a small group during the week, or at the monthly Ladies fellowship or parenting group, or with the youth group.

In the past few months, we recently began inviting you to share stories – stories and reflections of your favourite Scripture, stories and reflections of your faith journey, stories and reflections of your experiences that help us to hear about faith among God’s people. When we listen to each other and to the stories of the Bible we are better equipped to think about matters of faith because we have our own stories, we have stories from other believers, and we have stories from the Bible.

So the story of the ark of covenant reminds us about God’s presence. It reminds us that we cannot manipulate God, like what Israel tried to do. It reminds us that we need history to help us make decisions and choose to obey. But history alone won’t help the Christian disciple in obedience. The past helps us know how to get to where we’re going since we can learn from the past of what works and what doesn’t work. But we also need hope and a promise to know where we’re going.

The first half of this Psalm is about David’s promise to God concerning the ark of the covenant; the second half is God’s promise to David and to all God’s people. The second half of this Psalm is about cultivating a hope towards God’s promises. The verb tenses in this section are all in the future tense. We see how this happens by God taking David’s promise and turning it into something even greater, even better, which you notice by the way the Psalm is mirrored.

In this Psalm, David promised to build God a house but God told David no, but I will build you a house, and a house which will last forever. We know this promise was fulfilled by sending Jesus Christ the Messiah, the anointed one.

And then in verses 14-15 we read a great promise to us, God's people. This is God's promise to dwell with his people forever. The Psalm tells us that God has chosen Zion for his ultimate dwelling place. Now Zion does refer to the city of Jerusalem on Mount Zion but in the Bible, Zion also refers to the New Jerusalem, the new Heavens and new Earth.

In the Old Testament, God dwelt with his people symbolically through the ark of the covenant. God dwelt among us physically through the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. God dwells among us today through the Holy Spirit. And the hope we have is that we will dwell forevermore with God in the new heavens and new earth.

But not only is there a promise that God will dwell with us, there is also a promise of blessing – a blessing of provision, salvation and joy. Not only are the priests that we read about in verse 9 clothed with righteousness, God now clothes His people with salvation. The faithful in verse 9 shout for joy. In verse 16, the Hebrew repeats the shout for joy, implying that the faithful will ever shout for joy.

And then the Psalm concludes with the glorious promise of Christ's eternal reign. *"I will cause a horn to sprout up for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one"*. In the Old Testament, the horn is a symbol of strength and the lamp is a symbol for light, life, and goodness.

There is a contrast in verse 17 and 18 between the people of God and those who have rejected God. God's people will be clothed with salvation but those who have rejected God will be clothed with shame. On judgment day, there will be those who are saved and there will be those who are shamed, disgraced.

What does this teach us about Christian discipleship? It again teaches us about obedience. After all, Christian obedience happens in our everyday and ordinary moments, not just during the extreme experiences where we're swallowed up in fear or caught up in an emotional 'high'. We need our memory of the past – our memory of the ark of the covenant, of God's presence – to obey. But we don't obey out of duty or religious ritual but from a place of hope in God's promises.

We remember our past with eyes toward the future. We sing this song to teach us about Christian discipleship. We sing this song to keep our eyes in faithful obedience to God's promise, our hope.

And so one aspect of Christian discipleship is obedience. We mature in Christian discipleship as we mature in our obedience to God. We may begin our faith pilgrimage obeying God because of something he did for us – perhaps he answered a prayer, or protected us, or provided for us, or healed someone who was sick. So we choose to believe in God and obey Him. As we grow in Christian maturity and in Christian discipleship, we will most certainly face struggles and challenges. Prayers may not be answered, we may experience heartache and disappointments, grief and pain. So we choose to obey and trust God because of the story of the ark of the covenant – because of those stories in the history of God’s people of God’s presence, provision, and protection. As we continue to grow in Christian maturity and discipleship, we obey God because of His promises to us. We obey God not because of our personal experiences, not because he answered my prayer but because of a sure hope in his promises. We obey God not out of duty or religious ritual, or what’s convenient for us but we obey God because of our hope in his promise – his promise to dwell with us forevermore. Amen.