

5. Finishing the race

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you all on this rather wet day. It's good to see you. And we'll be continuing, indeed concluding, our little series on songs for climbers.

Now normally we sing at the beginning. Today we are going to sing our hymn at the end. So I want us to begin with a word of prayer. So let's pray together. David writes, God our Father, how we praise you that there is nowhere in this universe, nowhere in heaven and earth or indeed beyond, where we can escape from your presence.

Sometimes this terrifies us. Sometimes this makes us feel dirty and small. Other times we're only too glad to nestle into your care and into your love.

We have been looking at these psalms, psalms which tell us of dangers and difficulties, but also the destination to which you have called us. Psalms that are realistic, that pull no punches, that make no false promises about the journey.

And yet are terribly reassuring in that they tell us of the glory of the destination and the way in which you protect us as we travel. Today we meet here for a few moments to hear your voice.

[1 : 58] We pray you'll speak to each one of us. We have come by habit. We have just dropped in almost by accident, as it were. We don't even know why we have come. But you know why we are all here.

And you have words to say to us, words that we need to hear. And we pray that we will listen to these. All of us are at different stages. Some have come with strong faith, and we pray that faith may be strengthened.

Some have come full of doubt. Indeed, perhaps even with fears and depressions darkly looming over them. And we pray that by the light of your word and your presence you will dispel these. Some of us have come, and our minds are elsewhere, full of thoughts, full of plans, full of hopes and fears.

And we pray that you will help us to listen to you. We know that there are so many other voices we hear in this world. There are voices we read about, voices we hear from the television, voices from the internet.

[3 : 05] But the whole panoply of modern advertising and modern communication threaten to deafen out the sound of your voice. We thank you that this is your world.

That the still small voice of your spirit can break through all these distractions. We pray that may happen today. We pray for the world in which we live. This is our message that comes individually to us, and which we must treat as individuals.

And yes, this is a public message. This is public truth. This is a gospel for the whole world. This is a gospel of your grace. Your grace that knows no national or racial or other boundaries, but comes to all and changes all who are willing to listen.

And so bless us now as we read your word, as we study it together, as we sing your praises. We pray indeed we will leave here with the blessing that you want to give us, and then share that with others.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now in the Bible, please, if you turn to page 519.

[4 : 17] This is the fifth and last of this series, which I've called Songs for Climbers, which are the songs that the pilgrims sang as they made their way to Zion at the great festivals.

And we've now reached the last three psalms, 132 to 134. A longish psalm, and then two very short ones.

So Psalm 132, a song of ascents. Remember, O Lord, in David's favour, all the hardships he endured. How he swore to the Lord, and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, I will not enter my house, or get into my bed.

I will not give sleep to my eyes, or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob. Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah.

We found it in the fields of Ja'ar. Let us go to his dwelling place. Let us worship at his footstool.

Arise, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.

[5 : 24] Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy for the sake of your servant David. Do not turn away the face of your anointed one.

The Lord swore to David a sure oath, from which he will not turn back. One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne.

For the Lord has chosen Zion. He has desired it for his dwelling place. This is my resting place forever. Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

I will abundantly bless her provisions. I will satisfy her poor with bread. Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy.

There I will make a horn to sprout for David. I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine.

[6 : 27] In 133, once again, a short psalm of David himself. Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore. And finally, 134. 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. May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us. Songs for Climbers And in the history of climbing, of mountaineering, two great names are the names of Mallory and Irvin, who in the 1920s joined an expedition designed to conquer Mount Everest.

[7 : 42] On the 4th of June, 1924, these two intrepid climbers set out from the base camp to attack the final slope and reach the summit of the mountain.

They were never seen again. And it's still not known exactly what happened to them. One of the Sherpas who saw them go said this later on. They were last seen going strongly for the top.

Last seen going strongly for the top. And it seems to me that's a good way into these last three Psalms, because we've now reached the finishing post, so to speak.

Remember this group of Psalms begins in what's what the Psalmist says in Psalm 120, Meshech and Kedar. Meshech is on the Caspian Sea, Kedar in the South Arabian Desert.

That's about the limits of your geographical horizons in those days. Psalmist is saying wherever on earth you begin, whatever your starting point, you can reach the destination.

[8 : 46] And that destination is Zion, city of our God. And each of these Psalms has had their special emphases. We look at the difficulties of climbing, the external difficulties and the internal difficulties.

We've also seen the reassurance and the help for climbers. And now in these final group of three Psalms, we are particularly concentrating on the finishing post.

Last seen going strongly for the top. That would be a wonderful epithet or epitaph on the tomb of a Christian, wouldn't it be? Last seen going strongly for the top.

Now, each of these Psalms speaks of a particular aspect of Zion, which are only fully realised when we reach Zion. But they cast their light backwards on the journey.

What is true of Zion fully is also to be experienced partially on the climb. So let's look at these three Psalms. First of all, in Psalm 132, Zion is the place of God's presence.

[9 : 57] Zion is the place where, verse 14, my resting place forever, here I will dwell, for I have desired it. A place that God himself has chosen.

Now, of course, God is everywhere. That Psalm I read from at the beginning says that. Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

Upwards, downwards, sideways, whatever way you go, he is there. The problem, of course, of saying that God is everywhere is often an excuse to avoid him anywhere. We're quite happy with a God who is everywhere, as long as he's not in the particular place I am at any given moment.

As I said, the presence of God can be terrifying, as well as reassuring. And this is why this Psalm is particularly saying the presence of God, which is the feature of Zion, is also to be experienced on the journey.

Now, the background of this Psalm, probably like Psalm 24, talks of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. That place in the old tabernacle and then temple, essentially a chest, a wooden chest, which symbolized the presence of the God himself.

[11:15] That is taken up to Zion. Now, the Ark of the Covenant certainly does not exist today. Stephen Spielberg thinks he knows what happened to the Ark of the Covenant, but he is almost certainly wrong, because the Ark of the Covenant was probably destroyed when the Babylonian armies captured Jerusalem and sacked the temple and burnt it.

You read in Ezra how various temple vessels were brought back. There's no mention of the Ark of the Covenant. And, of course, there is no mention of the Ark of the Covenant, because we now have the true Ark of the Covenant, Jesus Christ himself.

There is no need for a shrine, a building, or an object in that building, because the Ark of God, Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh, in whose glory God dwells fully, is our companion on the journey.

Remember, that's an important thing. Jesus says the letter of the Hebrews is already in Zion. The Ark of the Covenant, who has run the race before us and is now seated at God's right hand in Zion, if you like.

But he's also our companion on the journey. Now, just two things about how the presence of God can be experienced now. Obviously, this psalm could be gone into in much detail, but just two things.

[12:33] First of all, the presence of God on the journey will be experienced as we trust his promises. Because after all, verse 11, the Lord swore to David a sure oath which he will not turn back.

David was determined that the presence of God would be at the heart of his life and other people's. Verse 3, I will not enter my house, get into my bed, will not give sleep to my eyes until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the mighty one of Jacob.

Now, another way of putting all this is to say that as we climb, we need to listen to God and to obey his word. Trust and obey.

Well, there really is no other way than trusting the promises and obeying the commands. And as David brings this ark into Jerusalem, what he's saying is the presence of God, the word of God, because the ark contained the tablets of the law, which Moses was given, that ark is going to be the center of our lives.

But the second thing about Zion being the place of God's presence is that finally, it does not depend on us. We will not reach the top simply by grit and determination and putting our best foot forward.

[13:57] That's verses 13, and following the Lord has chosen Zion. And verse 15, I will abundantly bless her provisions, I will satisfy her poor with bread, her priests I will clothe with salvation, her saints will shout for joy.

The Lord has promised to defend Zion and to bring all her children there. Notice how the psalm ends, his enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine.

The crown is the crown of the coming king. Just as when David, David captured Jerusalem, brought the ark of the covenant there, and the tribes came up to crown David as king of the whole land, pointing forward to the time when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

There's also the crown of the journey in that sense. So Zion is the place of God's presence, and what will keep us climbing is experiencing something of that presence on the journey.

We've noticed in previous sounds that sometimes that is difficult and hard. Sometimes he seems to be absent. Sometimes the difficulties, the problems, come like a kind of mist between us and him.

[15:11] Nevertheless, he is there, and he will bring us safely to the destination. Secondly, in Psalm 133, Zion is the place of fellowship.

Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Once again, David is the author. Once again, he's talked about the sense of joy as the pilgrims gather.

And of course, in later days, pilgrims would gather from all over the earth. Remember the day of Pentecost when people from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem for the great festival.

And the reality of that festival, of course, was demonstrated when the Spirit came in power. And it is a glimpse of the future. Now, in that moment, why don't you notice this?

This kind of fellowship doesn't happen naturally. How good and pleasant it is. We've often said before, good means, the good in the Scripture means something or someone or a group of people fulfilling the purpose for which it was created.

[16:17] That's why God gathers his people together. And pleasant, of course, means that this is something which is attractive. Attractive to experience, attractive to look at.

But it does not happen naturally. Let me read the verse as it would be translated literally. Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together and in unity.

Now that's what the text says. It's perfectly easy to live together and not in unity. Perfectly easy to live together in a fractious, quarrelsome and critical environment.

It's no mere proximity. You're not in fellowship with people simply because you are close to them. It doesn't happen naturally. To live above with those we love, why?

That will be glory. To live below with those we know, well that's a different story. Now that's not Shakespeare, but it is actually a very telling truth.

[17:24] There are no national barriers, no racial barriers. And ultimately it looks back to the beginning of the story. God calls Abraham so that all the nations will be blessed.

And then forward to the look of Revelation where all the nations, every tribe, tongue, people, language, every part of the world gather before the throne of God and before the Lamb or as indeed Revelation is also to say in chapter 14 gather around the Lamb in Zion.

I saw the Lamb standing on Zion and around him those and around him the redeemed. So it does not happen naturally. But we worked at a rather ridiculous chorus which apart from being doggerel says my love just keeps on growing.

Mine doesn't. I've got to work jolly hard at it. Maybe you're more loving than I am, but you have to work at it. Secondly, of course, the other thing to point out is it is not achieved by effort.

It is a gift of God. It is like the precious oil on the head running down the beard on the beard of Aaron. It is like the Jew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion.

[18:38] In other words, that true unity, while we have to work at it, of course, because we're human and fallen and sinful, nevertheless, it is a gift of God. Oil there, the anointing oil which is a symbol of the Spirit himself, and the Jew of Hermon, the life-giving Jew from heaven.

For there the Lord has commanded the blessing. And the blessing, what is the blessing? Life evermore. So Zion is not only, Zion is not only the place where God dwells, it is the place of fellowship.

And finally, in Psalm 134, Zion is the place of ceaseless worship. 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. The holy place there is the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Temple. That is where God reveals himself particularly. And we have many examples in the Old Testament of people who go into the house of the Lord who lift up their hands and who call on the name of the Lord.

So the songs for climbers has been a lot of struggling. There's been a lot of battling. There's been a lot of wrestling. There's been a lot of sheer hassle.

[20:06] But the songs for climbers end with unceasing praise. It's rather like the end of the letter to Jude, to him who is able to keep you from falling. Apply that to the climb up the mountain of Zion and to present you faultless before his presence with songs of joy.

The word there is of a party, of celebration. And that's what's happening here. A couple of things about this. This praise is a universal and timeless praise.

The Levites, the Levitical singers in the Old Temple, would have a 24-hour rota. So as one group finished, another group would take over and the praise of the Lord would continue, as we would say nowadays, 24-7.

It's rather like that the hymn, The Day You Gave Us, Lord, is ended, which speaks about the sun that bids us rest, is waking our brothers neath the western sky, and talks about the praise of God rising perpetually over the whole earth in different time zones, in different languages, and in different circumstances.

And that's the idea here. This happens even in this world. Praise and worship and adoration of the Lord. But it is pointing to the new creation.

[21 : 29] Look at the book of Revelation chapters 4 and 5, where the whole of the created order praise God. And they praise God because he is the creator, and they praise him, and they praise the lamb, because he's the redeemer.

Praise all over the earth. Praise, praise day and night, never ceasing. But I think the second thing, the last thing I want to say, is that praise is not a futile or empty activity.

You might feel, well, singing, and of course, don't fall into the trap of thinking that's the only picture of heaven. Otherwise, you will find your desire to go to heaven becomes very weak.

I didn't want to go to heaven when I was a boy, because I was told it was like being in church. If you tell that to an eight-year-old boy, it's not going to excite great desire for Zion.

It still doesn't excite great desire for Zion. But that's another story. It is one of the pictures. It is one of the metaphors. Perpetual praise. But what I want to say it's not futile.

[22 : 37] Notice the last phrase, May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth. We notice this phrase all through this group of Psalms.

The maker of heaven and earth. Why were we made? Why did he make us? He made us to enjoy him, to glorify him, and to enjoy him forever.

And the glorifying and the enjoying belong together, do they not? Ultimately, that is God's purpose. Perpetual praise. I don't mean perpetual singing, I mean perpetual rejoicing in the wonder of being created and of being recreated in the new creation.

The wonder of it is that God's purposes are going to be fulfilled. There, may the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth. Zion, where he lives.

Zion, which is the place of fellowship. Zion, which is the goal to which we travel. So where are we on this climb? It's perils and prospects.

[23 : 47] I think what I want to say as I finish, and I say this to myself as much as to anyone else, keep on climbing. If you've fallen, get up again. No fall can really harm you, provided you get up again.

If you're weary, press on. And if you've not begun the journey, then begin it now. That journey will take you from your Meshech or Kedar, and will end up in Zion, a place where the Lord will bless you, he who made heaven and earth.

Let's pray. Lord God of Zion and of the journey to Zion, give us courage and faith and hope and strength to continue climbing, looking forward to the wonderful blessings of your presence and of fellowship and of ceaseless worship which await us there.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.