

THE LORD SWORE AN OATH TO DAVID

SERIES: ASCEND



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Psalm 132
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One of my favorite books for children was written by Rudyard Kipling, the *Just So Stories*. These are imaginative stories (mostly about animals) describing how things came to be: how the rhinoceros got its wrinkly skin, how the camel got its hump, or the elephant its trunk. Going back to a time before conditions were as they are at present can be instructive and inspiring.

Psalm 132 is a Psalm of Ascent. Although it is found near the end of this collection of traveler's songs, it describes an older time when Jerusalem wasn't yet a city, let alone a destination for pilgrims. It tells of the arrival of the ark of the covenant on Mt. Zion, an event that would lay the foundation for Jerusalem to become the holy city with the temple as its center. In Ps. 132 pilgrim singers tell a 'just so story' recalling the time when the ark itself made its ascent to the place God prepared for it. As we will see, this text is a message about oaths and obedience, the inspiring example of a young king, and an encouraging reminder of God's faithfulness.

There are two references to oaths in this text. Verse 2: "David swore an oath to the Lord and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob." Verse 11: "The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath he will not revoke." The first case, we have David's oath. In the second, we have God's oath sworn in answer to David. Both are important.

Before we move further in consideration of this psalm, its references to the ark and to oaths, I want to recall an account of an oath from American church history—about 200 years ago. It is a story of a remarkable gathering that came to be known as the 'Haystack Prayer Meeting.' Early in the nineteenth century vital faith was at a low ebb in this country. It was similar in many ways to our experience today and to the era of Israel's history described in Ps. 132 before the ark of the covenant was brought to Mt. Zion.

The haystack meeting began a revival. Five Williams College students gathered in a field for a twice weekly prayer meeting and on the third Sunday of August, 1806. A dark cloud arose in the west, and when thunder and lightning began, the students sought shelter under a haystack where they rode out the storm talking and praying about foreign missions. These young men, moved by the Spirit as they prayed in the rain, spoke an oath to God

and to each other; a promise to travel overseas for the sake of the gospel, and to convince others to join with them. What followed was amazing. A number of protestant denominations re-discovered God's call to reach the world. Many independent missions organizations, Bible societies and student ministries including InterVarsity are the spiritual heirs of this rainy day prayer gathering. Two hundred years later their story is still inspiring.

Turning back to our text, verses 1 through 10 describe David with a handful of others, like the students in Massachusetts, making an oath to spend themselves in order to honor the Lord.

Psalm 132:1-10:

- ¹LORD, remember David
and all his self-denial.**
**²He swore an oath to the LORD,
he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:**
**³"I will not enter my house
or go to my bed,
⁴I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
⁵till I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."
⁶We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:
⁷"Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
⁸Arise, LORD, and come to your resting
place,
you and the ark of your might.
⁹May your priests be clothed with your
righteousness;
may your faithful people sing for joy."
¹⁰For the sake of your servant David,
do not reject your anointed one.**

The recovery of Israel's ark is also described in II Samuel 6. It had been abandoned during the reign of Saul, left in a forested area called Kiriath Jearim ("Jaar" in Ps.132:6) where it languished for 20 years. Early in his reign David determined to turn from the ways of Saul and put God at the center of his life and his kingdom. He and some of his loyal followers resolved to honor the Lord by finding the

'lost ark' and putting it in its rightful place. They sealed their determination with an oath (v. 2).

Oath-making needs to be undertaken carefully. Jesus warns against speaking oaths in which words are used as a substitute for obedience (Matt. 5:33-36). However a promise can be made to God in a way that casts a vision and shapes righteous behavior. The language of Ps. 132 is intended to inspire us along these lines. For Saul the presence of God was an afterthought; for David it was foundational. Further, the content of verses 3-5 make plain that we are not dealing with empty language. David's promise exacts a price (no rest) and cancels other priorities. He announces that he has no business acting as king until he gives proper honor to Israel's Lord.

During a recent interview with David Shaw, the football coach at Stanford, he was talking about former players. He was asked if any of them had become coaches. He got a grim look on his face and said, "Yeah, a couple, though I tried to talk them out of it." He went on to speak of long hours, time away from home and, for the majority of coaches, meager financial reward. He also said that having once started down that road it is very hard to change course. Coaching becomes a consuming passion that captures the heart. David Shaw's remarks about a captured heart remind me of King David's determination to honor God in Ps. 132. Nothing will stop him from putting God at the center. Such single mindedness may or may not be good for football coaches. It is the essence of wisdom for believers. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and receive all else as well.

David's oath leads him to prayer. Verse 8: "Arise Oh Lord come to your resting place, you and the ark of your covenant." David and his men could find and carry the wooden chest containing tablets of stone up to Mt. Zion, but it would make no difference if their actions were not accompanied by the power and presence of the Lord. They prayed for God to ascend to his 'resting place', a place where he would be worshipped; Verse 9: "May your priests be clothed with your righteousness may your faithful people sing for joy."

A 'just so story' worth remembering, the first half of Ps. 132 ends with a request by the later pilgrims who sing of these events that God should remember David (v. 10). Their request identifies their need. A godly oath uttered by Israel's king (or by young men sheltering in a haystack) is inspiring to look back on, but something more is needed in the present.

Beyond just remembering the oath of David, verse 11

moves on to speak of the oath of God.

Psalm 132:11-18:

**¹¹The LORD swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:**

**"One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne.**

**¹²If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever."**

**¹³For the LORD has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling, saying,**

**¹⁴"This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have
desired it.**

**¹⁵I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.**

**¹⁶I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.**

**¹⁷"Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.**

**¹⁸I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but his head will be adorned with a
radiant crown."**

We noted that Jesus warned his followers against making oaths that promise too much, substituting speech for action. But God's oaths require no such warning. They are always rooted in divine purpose and expand rather than contract.

Lets observe how God's oath to David grows larger, shedding light on greater truths. A sure word is spoken first to David (v. 11) and then to his descendants as well. These descendants include all who are united with Christ, the son of David whose reign is everlasting.

Mt. Zion, a particular Judean hill, is first the resting place of a wooden ark, and then the symbol of God's everlasting presence. References to rest call to mind the seventh day of creation and the glory of a new world in which there are no more wars to fight. Verses 15-16 are spoken to the people of God with overtones of a groom offering abundant provision and lasting joy to his bride. The poor are provided for and God's servants are made beautiful.

When God makes an oath, the vistas grow greater and the promises more wonderful. It is a great privilege to sing of these things.

**¹⁷“Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
¹⁸I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but his head will be adorned with a
radiant crown.”**

The second section of our psalm ends with three beautiful metaphors: a stout horn for sure defense and security, a lamp that dispels darkness and uncovers what was hidden, and a crown that makes its wearer wonderful to behold.

What have we learned from the oath of David and the oath of God? I hope we are inspired by a young king and his loyal servants seeking the abandoned ark; inspired to give the cause Christ first place in our lives. But memories and inspiration are not enough to transform us. We need to hear the oath of God as well. He is determined to bless his people—promising to dwell among us and use us for great good. Like the ancient pilgrims we sing this song of ascent. May its message transform us.