Is Psalm 122:6 About Modern Israel?

Understanding Psalm 122 in Its Biblical Context

Introduction

Psalm 122:6 is one of the most frequently quoted Old Testament verses in modern Christian discussions about Israel and the Middle East.

> *“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.”*

Whenever conflict erupts in the region, pastors, evangelicals, and Christian ministries often repeat this phrase, encouraging believers to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. The reasoning usually follows a simple pattern: since Jerusalem is constantly in conflict and the Bible says to pray for its peace, Christians must obey this command and therefore support the modern state of Israel.

However, this interpretation often isolates the first part of Psalm 122:6 while ignoring the context of the entire passage. When the psalm is read in full, particularly verses 6–9, it becomes clear that the prayer for Jerusalem’s peace was connected to the **Old Covenant system centered on the temple and the worship life of Israel**.

Understanding the historical and covenantal context of Psalm 122 is essential if Christians are to interpret the passage faithfully.

The Context of Psalm 122

Psalm 122 is one of the **Songs of Ascents** (Psalm 120–134), which were sung by Israelites as they traveled to Jerusalem for the major pilgrimage festivals required by the Law of Moses.

The psalm begins with the joy of approaching Jerusalem:

> *"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.*
> *Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem." (Psalm 122:1–2)*

Jerusalem was the spiritual and political center of Israel because three key institutions were located there:

- The **Temple**, where sacrifices were offered
- The **Covenant Nation**, whose tribes gathered for worship
- The **Davidic Throne**, the seat of judgment and governance

Psalm 122:4 explains why the tribes went to Jerusalem:

> *"Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the LORD."*

Thus, Jerusalem's significance in the psalm is directly connected to the worship structure established under the Mosaic covenant.

The Meaning of Psalm 122:6–9

The well-known verse reads:

> *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love*

> *thee.” (Psalm 122:6)*

But the psalm continues:

> *“Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good.” (Psalm 122:7–9)*

The psalm itself explains **why Jerusalem’s peace was important**:

> *“Because of the house of the LORD our God.”*

The Hebrew word **shalom** (peace) appears repeatedly in this section, referring to stability and well-being within the covenant community.

Jerusalem’s peace mattered because it ensured:

- the proper functioning of **temple worship**
- safety for the **pilgrims traveling to the feasts**
- stability for the **Davidic throne and civil order**

Without the temple and the covenant system centered there, the original context of Psalm 122 disappears.

The Temple as the Center of the Old Covenant

Under the Mosaic covenant, the entire religious life of Israel revolved around the temple.

Sacrifices for sin were offered there, and the presence of God was symbolically manifested in the **Holy of Holies** above the mercy seat.

God declared through Moses:

> *“And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat.” (Exodus 25:22)*

Thus Jerusalem’s peace ensured the continued operation of the worship system God had established.

Jesus Announces the End of the Temple System

During His earthly ministry, Jesus foretold the end of the temple and the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem.

Shortly before His crucifixion He declared:

> *“Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.” (Matthew 23:38)*

Immediately afterward He prophesied:

> *“There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:2)*

This prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

The destruction of the temple marked the historical end of the Old Covenant sacrificial system.

Christ as the Final Sacrifice

The New Testament explains why this system came to an end.

Hebrews teaches that the temple sacrifices were only temporary shadows pointing forward to Christ.

> *“By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:10)*

> *“But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 10:12)*

Christ’s sacrifice accomplished what the temple sacrifices could never fully achieve.

The tearing of the temple veil symbolized this transition.

> *“And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.” (Matthew 27:51)*

Access to God was no longer mediated through a temple priesthood but through Christ Himself.

God’s Dwelling Place Is Now His People

The New Testament repeatedly teaches that God no longer dwells in temples made with human hands.

Stephen declared:

> *“Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” (Acts 7:48)*

Instead, believers themselves are now described as the temple of God.

> *“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16)*

Ephesians likewise explains that believers are being built together into a spiritual dwelling place for God.

> *“In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22)*

Thus the focus of God's redemptive plan shifted from a physical temple in Jerusalem to the **spiritual temple composed of believers**.

The Reorientation of Jerusalem in the New Testament

The New Testament also redirects attention from the earthly city to a greater reality.

Paul writes:

> *"But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." (Galatians 4:26)*

The writer of Hebrews similarly says believers have come to:

> *"Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." (Hebrews 12:22)*

The final fulfillment is described in Revelation:

> *"And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven." (Revelation 21:2)*

Thus the ultimate Jerusalem in the biblical narrative is the **heavenly city of God's redeemed people**.

Historical Background: Idumeans in First-Century Judea

Another historical factor often overlooked involves the presence of **Idumeans (Edomites)** in Judea.

During the Hasmonean period, the Jewish ruler **John Hyrcanus (134–104 BC)** conquered Idumea and required its inhabitants to adopt Jewish customs and circumcision.

The historian Josephus records:

> *"He permitted them to stay in that country, if they would circumcise themselves and make use of the laws of the Jews… and they were hereafter no other than Jews." (Josephus, Antiquities 13.257)*

This incorporation meant that the population of Judea in the first century included people of mixed ancestry. Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth, was himself of **Idumean descent**.

The Development of Rabbinic Judaism After AD 70

After the temple was destroyed, Judaism underwent a major transformation.

Since sacrifices could no longer be offered, Jewish religious life shifted toward rabbinic teaching and synagogue worship. Over time this system developed around the **Talmud**, a collection of rabbinic interpretations and discussions of the law.

The original Mosaic system required:

- a functioning temple
- a Levitical priesthood
- sacrificial offerings
- pilgrimage worship in Jerusalem

Without the temple, the system described in the Torah cannot operate as originally established.

The Rise of Dispensationalism and the Political Interpretation of Psalm 122

The modern interpretation of Psalm 122:6 as a command to support the modern state of Israel largely developed through the influence of **Dispensationalism**.

This theological system was popularized by **John Nelson Darby** in the nineteenth century and spread widely through the **Scofield Reference Bible (1909)**.

Dispensationalism teaches that God has separate programs for Israel and the Church and that Old Testament promises concerning Israel remain tied to a future national restoration.

Because the Scofield Bible became widely used among American evangelicals, many Christians came to read Scripture through this interpretive framework.

Within this context, Psalm 122:6 became a commonly quoted verse in discussions about modern Israel.

Organizations that frequently cite the passage include:

- Jerusalem Prayer Team
- Jewish Voice Ministries
- Chosen People Ministries
- Global Day of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem

These groups often encourage Christians to pray for modern Israel based on Psalm 122:6.

Why the New Testament Never Commands Christians to Pray for Jerusalem

An important observation strengthens the need to read Psalm 122 carefully: **the New Testament never commands Christians to pray specifically for Jerusalem**.

Instead, the apostles broaden the scope of prayer.

> *"I exhort therefore… that prayers… be made for all men. For kings, and for all that are in authority." (1 Timothy 2:1-2)*

The gospel mission moves outward from Jerusalem to the whole world.

> *"Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem… and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8)*

Jerusalem was the **starting point of the gospel**, not its permanent focus.

The Importance of Context

The central issue surrounding Psalm 122 is the importance of reading Scripture in context.

When the verse is quoted alone, it can appear to be a universal command. But the psalm itself explains the reason for praying for Jerusalem's peace:

> *"Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good." (Psalm 122:9)*

Once the temple system was fulfilled in Christ and later destroyed, the historical conditions that gave Jerusalem this role no longer existed.

Conclusion

Psalm 122 celebrated the peace of Jerusalem because it was the center of Israel's covenant worship and the location of the temple.

The New Testament reveals that the temple system was fulfilled through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and brought to completion with the end of the Old Covenant structure.

Today God's dwelling place is not a building in Jerusalem but the spiritual temple composed of believers.

For this reason Psalm 122 must be understood within its historical and covenantal context. While Christians may certainly pray for peace among all peoples—including those living in Israel and throughout the Middle East—the command of Psalm 122:6 cannot be applied uncritically to modern political circumstances apart from the larger biblical narrative.

The ultimate peace of Jerusalem is found not in geopolitics but in the redemptive work of Christ and the promise of the **heavenly Jerusalem where God will dwell with His people forever**.