



PSALM 120

A Song for Pilgrims Ascending to Jerusalem

This is Holly Culhane with Presence Point and welcome to our *Psalms for Shepherds* series. This week we are leaving the beautiful *Psalm 119* acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet and are moving into the Psalms of Ascent. Some believe these songs were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the Three Pilgrimage Festivals spoken of in *Deuteronomy 16*—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. Others believe these songs were sung by the Levite singers as they ascended the 15 steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Some believe the Levites first sang these songs at the dedication of Solomon's temple and yet others believe the songs were composed for a celebration after Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in 445 BC or were individual poems later collected and given the title linking them to the pilgrimage after the Babylonian captivity.

No matter their original use, these 15 songs are worthy of our consideration, singing them whenever possible (and, yes, some you will recognize, and the popular tune will quickly come to mind) and, as all of the 150 psalms, they are worth our consideration.

We begin our journey through these Psalms of Ascent with *Psalm 120*.

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

¹ I took my troubles to the Lord;
I cried out to him, and he answered my prayer.
² Rescue me, O Lord, from liars
and from all deceitful people.
³ O deceptive tongue, what will God do to you?
How will he increase your punishment?
⁴ You will be pierced with sharp arrows
and burned with glowing coals.
⁵ How I suffer in far-off Meshech.
It pains me to live in distant Kedar.
⁶ I am tired of living among people who hate peace.
⁷ I search for peace;
but when I speak of peace, they want war!

Maybe this psalm rings true for you today: "I am tired of living among people who hate peace! I search for peace, but when I speak of peace, they want war!"

Or, how about this portion of the psalm: "How I suffer in far-off [you fill in the blank]. It pains me to live in distant [again, you fill in the blank]. The place may be a city or a work environment. It could be the location where you are stationed in the military. It could be anywhere your loved ones are not or it could be the distance you feel from someone from whom you are estranged.

The author found himself in a hostile environment, for sure. He cried out for deliverance from the deceitful tongue of his enemies. He longed for peace, for "well-being", or "wholeness" as the word "peace" literally translates, but his enemies wanted war. Maybe you find yourself in that exact spot. You simply want truth and peace but those around you cannot seem to stop the deceitfulness they utter, the disruption which they cause, or the conflict in which they seem to thrive.

The answer? To do exactly as the psalmist has done!

Cry out to the Lord! Take your troubles to Him! In His timing, He will answer your prayer.

And I emphasize His timing, because He knows exactly the timing best for the purposes He wishes to accomplish in us for our good, and for His glory! But, oh, how hard is to remember that in the most difficult of circumstances!

Regarding this psalm, Max Lucado reminds readers in his *Encouraging Word Bible* that

"Although [the psalmist's] enemies were fierce, his confidence in God's protection was strong. He found great joy in going to the house of the Lord to worship. We, too," Lucado adds, "find hope and strength when we lift our eyes to the Lord rather than focusing on our troubles."

Lucado then goes on to remind us of how even those thought of as the bravest have had their *Psalms 120* moments.

"In late January 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received a threatening phone call at his house. It was not the first foreboding message he had received. But on this night, as his children and wife lay sleeping, the weight of the civil rights movement was too heavy. He decided that the risk was too great. He began to map out an exit strategy. At midnight he bowed over the kitchen table and began to pray this prayer, 'I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they, too, will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I cannot face it alone.'"

King described what happened next: "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' When facing a daunting challenge," Lucado reminds us, "King shifted his focus and turned to God."

“So did Paul and Silas”, Lucado goes on to remind his readers. “This missionary duo was thrown into a Roman jail in Philippi. The jailer locked them in the innermost prison. He fastened their feet in stocks. But rather than look at their shackles and chains, they looked to God. *Acts 16* tells us that ‘about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them’.”

Lucado shares, “It was midnight. They were in the deepest hole of the jail. The doors were locked. The guards were on duty. Yet Paul and Silas were singing and praying. Like Joshua, they looked to God for help. And, like Joshua, they received it dramatically. *Acts 16* tells us that ‘Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.’”

What was Lucado’s point? Help came to these men after they lifted their eyes to Yahweh, after they cried out to the Father, just as the author of *Psalms 120* has done in this Psalm of Ascent.

And that is the question for us today, fellow under-shepherd, that we must ask ourselves right now: Where is our gaze? When life gets hard, where do we turn? To what do we look? Do we ‘phone a friend’ or do we cry out to the Lord? Do we make life miserable for those around us or do you look up with anticipation expecting God to act? Do we have a good spiritual sulk or do we cry out to the One from Whom all spiritual strength comes?

How we respond to the toughest, darkest struggles in our lives, the deepest disappointments, and the scariest and most desperate of situations matter. Those we lead are watching. Those we influence, watch us. Those who look to us as mentors, and spiritual leaders, and the anchors for the environments in which we work and minister and lead need to see an example they should emulate. One who looks to the Good, Great, and Chief Shepherd first for His Provision, His Protection, and His Presence.

How we shepherd will undoubtedly affect how they shepherd.

So, please take 10 minutes right now, grab your journal or a notepad. Ask the Father how you are doing in turning to him as you ascend each day. Ask Him to reveal where you need to fine-tune your responses to those around you who seem to be more about war than peace, more about confrontation or competition than harmony.

And as Max Lucado shares,

“Gaze upon your Savior and remember that He is strong and capable. Allow Him to infuse you with hope and strength.”

And I will add, the hope and strength of a godly shepherd.

Thank you for joining me for this week’s *Psalm for Shepherds* podcast. May you shepherd well all those entrusted to your care.