
Bible Study for February 27, 2019
The Pilgrimage Psalms

Pilgrimage Psalms: Each of these songs are also known as “A Song of Ascents,” or the Pilgrim’s Psalter. Pilgrimage Psalms were festive psalms sung as the Jewish people recalled the Lord’s goodness to them as they journeyed up to Jerusalem during their annual feasts. Psalms 120-134 are regarded as the 15 Pilgrimage Psalms. The experience of Babylonian Exile of the Jewish people figures prominently in these Psalms. The Babylonian Captivity and the forced detention of the Jews occurred following the Babylonian conquest of the Kingdom of Judah in 598/7 and 587/6 BCE. The exile formally ended in 538 BCE, when the Persian conqueror of Babylonia, Cyrus the Great, gave the Jews permission to return to Palestine.

History of Religious Usage:

There are three theories as to why they were originally referred to as “A Song of Ascents.”

First, The Talmud, a well-known collection of Jewish laws and traditions, states that there were 15 steps between the courtyard of the women and the courtyard of the men in the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem. There was a step for each of the fifteen psalms (120-134). Some scholars believe the priests in Israel or the choir singers sang these songs as they “ascended” the fifteen steps in the place of worship. However, there is no evidence found that it was done this way.

Second, the word “ascent” was used in Ezra 7:9 to describe the trip some of the Jews made from Babylon (the place of exile) back to their homeland in Israel. These psalms could have been sung on that journey home. However, “ascents” is plural, implying the ascent was recurrent.

Third, the city of Jerusalem sat up in the Judean hills. It was common language to say: “Let’s go up to Jerusalem.” The Jewish people were admonished to visit Jerusalem at least 3 times each year for the main worship festivals: Passover in the spring, Pentecost in the summer, and Tabernacles in the fall. It’s possible that these songs were sung as the believing families of Israel “ascended” from their homes, scattered over the whole region, to the city of Jerusalem. This appears to be the most probable conclusion. Joseph and Mary would have sung these psalms as they made their way with Jesus to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41), and Jesus, most likely, would have sung them with His disciples as they made their way to the city for the religious festivals.

Below is a summary of each of the 15 Song of Ascents. David composed at least four of these psalms (Psalm 122, 124, 131, and 133). Solomon wrote one (Psalm 127) and the remaining are anonymous.

- Psalm 120: “The Prayer of a Homesick Soul.” - A burdened believer is far from his spiritual homeland and is living among ungodly people who are only for war.
- Psalm 121: “Help Comes from the Lord.” - What can a believer expect from the Lord who watches over us? Simply, that He will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life.
- Psalm 122: “Joy in Going to Church” (by David) - There is joy in Jerusalem as the pilgrim looks forward to his journey there because that is where the people of God worship and He is the cause of their worship.
- Psalm 123: “The Gracious Help of the Lord” - The pilgrim looks to God for total dependence as a slave looks to his master for grace and kindness.
- Psalm 124: “God is My Help” (by David) - The pilgrim looks to God as his only source for help.
- Psalm 125: “A Song of Trust” - God does good to those who are good. Thus, we can trust in Him for He cannot be moved.
- Psalm 126: “Thanking God We are Home” - The pilgrim looks back at the journey of the captivity and sees that was a prelude to blessing.
- Psalm 127: “The Gift of Children” (by Solomon) - The pilgrim realizes that children are a gift of the Lord.

- Psalm 128: “The Blessing of Fearing God” - The blessings of reverence towards God are celebrated.
 - Psalm 129: “Blessed are those who are Persecuted” - Past troubles cannot add up to the blessing of peace and prosperity we have in God.
 - Psalm 130: “The Song of Redemption” - The man who stands and is amazed at God’s willingness to forgive understands both his own sin and the extent of God’s unfailing love.
 - Psalm 131: “A Childlike Faith” (by David) - David pictured faith as a young child nestled close against his mother. This contrasts the attitude of the arrogance that challenges God’s word.
 - Psalm 132: “God’s Oath and Covenant” - The pilgrim recalls God’s covenant and promise to David that assures Israel and her destiny.
 - Psalm 133: “The Family of God” (by David) - Worship brings God’s people together as a family.
 - Psalm 134: “The Joy of the Journey” - The pilgrim concludes his journey by giving thanks to the Lord for the privilege and joy to be a servant of the Lord
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For the sake of brevity, we will only cover five Pilgrimage Psalms: Psalm 121, Psalm 124, Psalm 126, Psalm 130, and Psalm 131.

Psalm 121: Assurance of God’s Protection

- The Israelites lived in a pagan world. Every culture around them worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Some were good and some were evil. They all competed for mankind’s attention and appreciation. In contrast, Godly Israelites worshipped the true God who made heaven and earth.
- The psalmist had left his old neighborhood and was headed to the temple, to the place of God’s presence. We too must decide at some point to leave our old ways of life behind and to move on to a closer, deeper relationship with the Lord. Committing to a new level of obedience and faithfulness to God does not make life easier. The minute we get serious about following Christ, we are locked into Satan’s radar, and he will do what is necessary to discourage, distract, deceive and defeat us.
- Psalm 121 is a promise for the suffering believer. After personally celebrating Yahweh’s guardianship in verses 1–2, the psalmist turns to give assurance to others in verses 3–8. He declares the nature of God’s guarding role in verse 3–4: “He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”
- Psalm 121 is a reminder that the Lord is with us. We may ask: Where will I get the help I need? The answer is in verse 2, “My help comes from the Lord.”

Psalm 124: Thanksgiving for Israel’s Deliverance

- As believing pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem, they remembered all the times the Lord had protected His people, and they thanked Him publicly in song.
- We believe David penned this psalm after some great deliverance from threatening danger, which was likely to have involved ruin, possibly by foreign invasion, but it is not certain. Whatever it was, David recognized the goodness of God in making a way of escape. To him he is careful to give God all the glory and takes no glory for himself as conquerors usually do. Here he:
 - I. Magnifies the greatness of the danger they were in, and of the ruin they were at the brink of (v. 1-5)
 - II. Gives God the glory for their escape (v. 6, 7)
 - III. Takes encouragement to trust in God (v. 8)
- God wanted us to recognize that if the Lord was not protecting us, we would perish instantly. Day after day God guides us and keeps us from pitfalls and detours. And in every day, we should find gratitude for His goodness.

Psalm 126: A Harvest of Joy

- Psalm 126 was written after the return of a band of Israelites from decades of captivity in Babylon and then was sung by later pilgrims to remind themselves of God's people who still lived in Jerusalem.
- It opens with joy, as the writer praises God for allowing His people to return from captivity and exile in Babylon. God's people had been conquered and carried away as God had chastened them for their sin and rebellion. But God had not forgotten them. In His time, he allowed them to return to Jerusalem and to the land of their fathers. Their city was a heap of broken, neglected rubble, and the temple was nothing but burned-out timbers. What really mattered, however, was that God's people were back in the land that God had given them so many centuries earlier.
- Then reality set in. The Israelites remembered all those who had died in the destruction of Jerusalem and in the years of the exile. They thought about the thousands of Jews who were comfortable in Babylon and who had refused to return. Laughter turned to tears and to prayer, as they remembered the bitterness of decades in a foreign land and how they had longed for God to restore their fortunes (v. 4).
- It's important to note that some blessings God sends suddenly (vv. 1-3), some come in the course of time (v. 4), and some come as we patiently sow and weep (James 5:7). But God's promise is secure, for us to reap: "at harvest time, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Psalm 130: Waiting for Divine Redemption

- Reformer Martin Luther called Psalm 130 one of the Pauline Psalms because it reflected the New Testament teaching of the apostle Paul that we receive God's grace not by works but through faith alone. The psalmist expected that God, being supreme and omniscient, would not only hear his cry for help, but that God, being faithful, would also intervene on his behalf.
- The psalmist was confident of God's grace and forgiveness but waited to hear from God. He waited for God to speak words of grace into his heart and mind, and act in his life to bring some level of assurance, encouragement, and healing. It's one thing to know God's promises in our minds; it's something else to experience the guilt being lifted from our hearts.

Psalm 131: Song of Quiet Trust

- After the traveling believer arrived in Jerusalem, offered his sacrifices to the Lord, and received God's gracious forgiveness, he or she might have been tempted to think that they had somehow "arrived" at a place of higher spiritual influence or prestige. If anyone in Israel had a reason to be proud, it was David. What a spectacular rise from shepherd boy to the powerful king of a powerful nation.
- Psalm 131 only has 3 verses, but it brings any feelings of sinful pride we might be struggling with back under God's control. The Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon said that this is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.
- Some scholars believe that the psalm reflects David's response to his wife, Michal, when she criticized him for dancing before the Lord as the ark of the covenant was carried into the city of Jerusalem. Michal was embarrassed to see her royal husband jumping around in uninhibited praise to God. She called him a vulgar man (2 Samuel 6:20). In response, David said, I will be even more undignified than this, and will be humble in my own sight (2 Samuel 6:22). Lord my heart is not haughty (Psalm 131: 1).
- We must recognize the depths of God's grace and mercy before we allow pride to rule us.

Recap

It's important to remember the following about these psalms.

- 1) The journey towards holiness begins with a decision to leave our old life behind and move closer to God.
- 2) God promises His presence and protection along the way. He never sleeps.
- 3) Suffering and even persecution are not unusual intruders on our spiritual journey.
- 4) God provides His grace and mercy when we stumble and get discouraged.
- 5) Life's journey for believers ends with a wonderful reunion in Heaven.

Study

HOW CAN WE RELATE to the psalms? We can view these as songs for our spiritual journey from spiritual bondage, to belief in Jesus, then to our final destination in heaven. They are discipleship psalms, a series of pictures of the hard work, growing pains, and ultimate victory of spiritual growth.

Questions to think about

1. What are some things you are struggling with in your spiritual journey?
2. In what areas has God shown you grace and mercy?
3. How are you actively cultivating your relationship with God?