

Psalm 119's twenty-two stanzas guide devoted disciples in a prayerful engagement of the word of God. These expository prayers are followed by fifteen pilgrim psalms that prepare the people of God for expository worship. Word and worship are bound together in the praying imagination. The word of God studied, obeyed, sung, prayed, memorized, internalized and enjoyed, is conjoined with the worship of God that is rooted, real, reverent, rigorous, personal, communal and centered. Taken together these two sections guide the believer into the word and into worship.

Tradition holds that the “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120-134) were sung by the people of God as they went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual festivals. The psalmist may have used the plural form of “ascents” as a simple plural to refer to the quarterly pilgrimages to Jerusalem to keep the feasts of the Lord, or the plural of majesty, meaning “The Great Ascent” may have been used to magnify the liturgical significance of this sequence.<sup>1</sup> These short, terse, poetic psalms, with their quick transitions and artistic brevity, transformed travelers into worshipers-on-the-way. The Psalms of Ascents can be memorized more easily because of their brevity. They often accent a particular word that helps to focus the meaning. We picture the pilgrims singing these songs as they journeyed to Jerusalem.

“Pilgrim” is an excellent word to describe the person who sang these songs, but the word itself does not appear in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Some translations may use the word “pilgrim” or “pilgrimage” (Gen 47:9; Exod 6:4; Psalm 119:54), but the better word is “sojourner” or “sojourning.” The Hebrew conveys the idea of temporary guest or resident alien. The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “sojourn” in Psalm 120:5 is *paroikia* which is the root of our English word “parish.” This “congregation of pilgrims,” writes Patrick Reardon, “is the Church that is in exile, on pilgrimage, here in this world, encompassed by calumny and malice.”<sup>3</sup> The apostle Peter’s letter to the God’s elect exiles or chosen outsiders picks up on this theme and develops the discipleship profile of the world’s resident aliens. Reardon sees First Peter as a kind of commentary on Psalm 120.<sup>4</sup>

As we meditate on these sojourner psalms we will find a deep affinity with the apostle Peter’s spiritual direction. Peter wrote to the followers of Christ scattered over five rural Roman provinces. Their newfound faith in Christ literally changed their social standing. Because of Christ they were perceived as outsiders, foreigners and strangers in their home culture. The challenge we face today is similar to what the people of God have faced throughout salvation history.<sup>5</sup> In the eyes of the world we are outsiders, resident aliens. We are strangers in our home culture, but we have a spiritual house built by Christ. We may not be crossing political and ethnic borders, but we are foreigners nevertheless. Language, food, and many customs are the same, but the word of God, Eucharistic fellowship, and Jesus’ Kingdom ethic make all the difference. We

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Motyer, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 240.

<sup>4</sup> Reardon, 240.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 12.

become sojourners in our familiar culture for the sake of Christ.

*My Distress*

*I call on the Lord in my distress,  
and he answers me.  
Save me, Lord,  
from lying lips  
and from deceitful tongues.  
Psalm 120:1-2*

The catalyst for the believer's journey to God is the mess of the human condition. Evil is the reality confronted by the psalmist's soulful resistance to the ways things are and were never meant to be. Righteousness is the quest for the way of life as God intended it to be. It is inevitable that we should set out for Jerusalem in lament. The Bible knows no other pilgrimage than the journey we begin in distress, crying out to the Lord, "Save me." Those who find Psalm 120 an odd way to begin this worship series of ascent psalms have opted for a starting point outside salvation history. Repentance, conversion, and transformation are key to setting things in motion. The trip to Jerusalem and Mount Zion always begins this way – with the Lord's salvation. The whole myth of self-sufficiency is simply foreign to the pilgrimage. The idea of working to impress is out of place and has no traction along this path. No true sojourner sets out as a hero ready for a great adventure. If we were climbing Mount Everest, maybe, but certainly not Mount Zion. The believer is neither a tourist nor an adventurer. Christians today who pray this psalm have taken up a cross. They are following Jesus and like their Lord they have set their face to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). They are learning to pray this psalm the way Jesus prayed.

The entire sequence of psalms is framed by the Lord's response to the psalmist's cry for help. The psalm begins with a confident declaration. The Lord has answered, is answering, and will answer his call. It is here and now, in the continuous present. We pray this psalm with the psalmist. We are in need of salvation and only the Lord can save us. The world is a distressful place and what it makes it that way are "lying lips" and "deceitful tongues." The fall of humanity into sin and depravity was caused by a lie. Satan asked, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat fruit from any tree of the garden?'" And proceeded to refute Eve's clear understanding, saying, "'You will not certainly die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen 3:1-5). Ever since evil has been striving to gain the upper hand through deceit ("lying lips"), deception ("deceitful tongues"), and denial ("They are for war").

The prophet Jeremiah identified with this psalm and agreed with the psalmist that the underlying cause of apostasy, adultery, and idolatry was lies and deception. People use their tongue "like a bow, to shoot lies." Jeremiah warned, "'Beware of your friends; do not trust anyone in your clan. For every one of them is a deceiver, and every friend of slander. Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning. You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me,' declares the Lord" (Jer 9:3-6). Lies can be told and lies can be lived. The psalmist is up against a world that

despises the truth, and he calls on the Lord, “Save me, Lord.” Psalm 120 marks the turning point “from a dreamy nostalgia for a better life to a rugged pilgrimage of discipleship in faith.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Judgment*

*What will he do more to you,  
and what more besides, you deceitful tongue?  
He will punish you with a warrior’s sharp arrows,  
with burning coals of the broom bush.*

Psalm 120:3-4

The sojourner’s song is poetically terse and swift in transition. Like the pilgrim on the path the psalm can turn on a dime. The psalmist speaks out loud to his deceitful enemies who are nowhere to be found within earshot. But he reinforces his soul with the truth. Don’t be fooled, he sings to his children and his elders along the way, God will judge liars. “God’s arrows of truth and coals of judgment” will answer the liar.<sup>7</sup> The psalmist says in effect, “Do you know what’s next, can you see what’s coming, all you barefaced liars? Pointed arrows and burning coals will be your reward” (Ps 120:3-4, The Message). This is the self-talk in prayer that strengthens the soul, because it embraces the divine perspective and relies on the truth for encouragement. We can insist to ourselves that we are nothing and we’re all alone. Our inner monolog can be like Elijah’s prayer under the broom bush, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). Or with the psalmist we can acknowledge the fate of those who insist on living a lie and double-down on the truth.

*“Woe is Me!”*

*Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek,  
that I live among the tents of Kedar!  
Too long have I lived  
among those who hate peace.  
I am for peace;  
but when I speak, they are for war.*

Psalm 120:5-7

The psalmist is not a literalist. He captures the truth by painting a picture rather than taking a picture. He envisions two far off places, Meshek and Kedar, Meshek is far to the north in southern Russia (Ezek 38:2; 39:1) and Kedar is far to the south in the wilderness of Arabia (Isa 21:16-17; Ezek 27:21). If you were an Israelite, these two places represented cultures that were hostile to everything an Israelite longed for. It would be like suggesting that living in America was no better than living in North Korea or Somalia. That’s how alien the psalmist felt in his home culture.

Shortly after I moved to the South I was ordering a cup of coffee when the waiter said, “You’re not from here, are you?” I explained that I grew up in New York and that I had most recently had come from California. She quipped, “Oh, you’re from all those pagan places.” Since I couldn’t

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<sup>6</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 430.

just leave it at that, I explained to her that I was a pastor and that I found it easier to preach in those “pagan places” than in the South, because Christian identity and commitment seemed more clearly defined and meaningful. She shrugged and sighed like I didn’t know what I was talking about, but I think the psalmist would have understood. The sojourner who wrote this pilgrim song felt like a foreigner in his home culture. He lived among liars who paid lip service to God, but they we’re really for war. They were at war with themselves and with others.

In spite of the psalmist’s weariness (“too long have I lived among those who hate peace”), he unites in his praying imagination what the world cannot fathom. He links salvation (“save me, Lord”) with shalom (“I am for peace”). The first phrase in the last verse is simply “I peace,” meaning, “I am all about peace,” or “I’m all for peace.” It is not easy being for peace when the culture around you is for war. The apostles picked up on this theme. God’s grace produces peace, peace with God and the peace of God. We are called to be a people of peace, to cultivate inner peace and to make peace even with those who may despise us, because “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Not only must believers refrain from doing evil, “they must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet 3:11; see Ps 34:14). Since God has taken the initiative to bring about our reconciliation, we who have been reconciled in Christ can take the initiative and humble ourselves. We are freed up to pursue peace because “from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Corinthians 5:16). We have not only been reconciled to God in Christ but we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Peter’s emphasis is in full accord with the apostle Paul’s exhortation: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,” and “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:18). Because of the grace of Christ it is possible to “Let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, since as members of one body [we] were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Webster, *Outposts of Hope*, 107.