
June 29 : Scriptures Psalm 120-128

SUMMARY

We're now at The Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120-134. What are the Songs of Ascent? Let's see what GotQuestions.org has to say. "The Songs of Ascent are a special group of psalms comprising Psalms 120–134. They are also called Pilgrim Songs. Four of these songs are attributed to King David (122, 124, 131, 133) and one to Solomon (127), while the remaining ten are anonymous. The city of Jerusalem is situated on a high hill. Jews traveling to Jerusalem for one of the three main annual Jewish festivals traditionally sang these songs on the "ascent" or the uphill road to the city. According to some traditions, the Jewish priests also sang some of these Songs of Ascent as they walked up the steps to the temple in Jerusalem." (gotquestions.org/Songs-of-Ascent.html)

I like these psalms a lot because they're short, easy to memorize, encouraging, and great examples of ways to pray and worship the Lord.

Psalm 120. This psalm is a cry to God against liars who spread "gossip and baseless rumors" (HCSB commentary). What helps us understand this psalm is knowing where Meshech and Kedar are. According to my study, Meshech was originally in what is now central Turkey (Asia Minor). The people were later pushed westward toward the coast and stayed southwest of the Black Sea. Kedar is in the north/northwest area of today's Saudi Arabia, where many of the Ishmaelite tribes relocated. Why is this important? "Together, they represent places far and near where the Israelites lived as aliens" (HCSB commentary). Of course! These are pilgrim songs that travelers to Jerusalem would sing as they undertook their journey. One of the blessings of their pilgrimage is the Jews were able to "get out of Dodge," away from possibly hostile neighbors (those who spoke ill of the Jews). So while the psalm has a negative tone, it could be seen as a fitting start to a joyful ending. "I'm outta here!"

Psalm 121. This one is a bit of a surprise, but you must know the context to appreciate it. The first two verses state the theme, "I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Here are the two parts. 1) I lift my eyes to the hills looking for hope. Why? Because the ancients built idol worship places on the hilltops to get closer to their gods. 2) I don't need to do that because my God BUILT those hills and is infinitely more able to help me than puny "gods." Get it? Now, read the rest of the psalm. The Almighty God won't let you slip, He is always awake to help, He's right next to you, He watches over you day and night, He can protect you to the utmost, and near or far, He's always ready to help. How's that? Talk about an ever-present help!

Psalm 122. I love this psalm because so many good praise and worship songs have been written with the words as lyrics. And it doesn't hurt to have visited Jerusalem, Israel, either! As the place that's ground zero for God's work on earth, it's so exciting to go to Jerusalem, whether it's the first time or you've been within her old walls many times. Jerusalem is unique because God's Temple was in the city's heart, on the Temple Mount at the writing of this psalm. It's the central gathering point for all the tribes, so going up to Jerusalem during a pilgrim feast is like a family reunion three times a year. It's also the governmental center of the nation, with the king living right next to the Temple grounds in the city of David. As the pilgrims anticipate arriving in the city, they pray God's blessing over Jerusalem and all who live within her walls!

Psalm 123. This short psalm is a humble cry for God's favor. Imagine the pilgrims approaching Israel. As they get closer, the land rises into a swell of hills and low mountains. As they get near, they "lift their eyes" to the city and know that God "lives" far above the land in heaven. Because the Lord is high and exalted, the person approaches God humbly, like a servant girl would approach the mistress of the house – with great humility and respect. A proper attitude for those who would draw near to the Lord, right? As they draw near, they petition the Lord in song for favor because "back there, at home," they've had to deal with contempt and scorn, similar to the trash-talking noted in Psalm 120.

Psalm 124. This chapter is a thanksgiving psalm to the Lord for His ongoing protection. Perhaps this one was sung as a thanks song for helping the people during their journey, or it was sung as appreciation to Yehovah for preserving them until this time to make their pilgrimage. Or it could have been sung as a general thanks to the Lord by anyone who had gone through troubles since the last pilgrimage, like sickness or business/family difficulties. It would undoubtedly be a psalm that would lift the travelers' spirits as they praised God for His sustaining and delivering power – and they were on the way to seeing *HIM!* The psalm closes with the resounding declaration, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (124:8). Bam!

Psalm 125. This ascent song glorifies how the Lord provides strength and stability to His people. As usual, the writer pens the words in picture form inspired by Jerusalem's location. As the hills surround Jerusalem and provide protection, so the Lord surrounds His people to protect them. Even if the land of the righteous falls into enemy hands, it won't remain in their possession. Israel's God will deal with Israel's enemies and eliminate them.

Psalm 126. This powerful song was written after the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile, “when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion” (Psalm 127:1). The description of the returning exiles is delightful – “We felt like we were dreaming. We laughed and shouted joyfully because the Lord did remarkable things for us!” Of course, this would be a great song of ascent because later generations of Jews followed the same paths and roads their ancestors did when returning from places of trouble to the joy of their hearts – Jerusalem. The psalm concludes with a prayer for restoration by those coming to the Temple. “As you restored the fortunes of the exile generation, move again on our behalf as we come to You, Yehovah!” The Negev is an interesting reference. The Negev is the desert. When it rains, the gullies (called wadis) fill and nearly overflow with the rushing water that brings life to the land. And that’s how the psalmist sees God’s blessing. “Let your restorative blessing gush, Lord, like the gullies in the desert.” Even if someone comes from a place of trouble, the Lord will lift them up and help.

Psalm 127. This psalm is one that I’ve often quoted. Usually, I use it when dealing with projects or new ventures with the Lord. But the context is the family because of 127:3-5. If the builders of the house or watchmen of the city don’t depend on the Lord as they build, then all they’re doing is for naught. That’s very true for parents as they raise a family. It takes time, effort, and diligence to raise godly children, and even then, it can be challenging. Parents need to rely on the Lord to help them raise good, godly kids. And contrary to our modern culture, children aren’t inconveniences, nuisances, things to be stewarded until they can be “kicked out of the nest.” They are the future and a parent’s (a father’s) pride when they walk God’s way. The city gate example at the end means, “A father with God-fearing sons won’t have anything to fear at the place of city government. His sons will stand shoulder to shoulder with him when he speaks with his enemies. It’s a powerful picture!

Psalm 128. It is a blessing to be a person who loves the Lord and walks in His ways. The psalm paints a picture of God’s blessing on the man’s work, his wife, and his children. Why? Because the Lord repays the man who reveres Him with His goodness and favor. Even though I’ve gone through many struggles in my life, I thank Jesus for how good He’s been to me and my wife. We’ve tried to walk in His ways as much as we could (and sometimes failed, which He’s covered), and we’re in a position where life is productive and pleasant. We’re still working (that’s a blessing), and we have time to relax and enjoy life. And speaking of blessings, the final verse talks about the blessing of seeing our children’s children. As a grandfather, that joy is mine!

INSIGHT

Psalm 121 talks about looking toward the things of earth to help us. High places were

where the ancients expected to find their gods who would help them; indeed, there are many “mountaintop” experiences between God and His people. There are Moses and God in Exodus 3-4, Israel meeting God at Sinai (Exodus 19-20), Elijah and Yehovah’s battle with Jezebel’s prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), and Elijah and God at Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19). Jesus revealed His divine nature to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration (likely Mt. Hermon in northern Israel, Matthew 17; Mark 9:2), and Jesus’ ascended from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-12). Jesus will return the same way He left, with clouds as He descends to the top of the Mount of Olives.

Don’t we look to the high places for our help? Tall buildings are like high places. Aren’t the financial centers of the world located in high places (buildings)? Do we look to the world’s financial system to help and provide for us, or do we look to the Lord for that? Aren’t government buildings tall structures that hold the reigns of political power? Do we look to politicians to protect and provide for us? Aren’t many prominent church buildings and cathedrals tall structures? Do we look to the organized church and church hierarchy to protect us spiritually and provide for us rather than go straight to the Lord? We need to lift our eyes from these man-made institutions and focus on the one who made those institutions and holds them in His sovereign hands, just like the psalmist tells us to.

June 30 : Scriptures Psalm 129-135

SUMMARY

Psalm 129. This psalm praises the Lord for His protection under oppression. It's very graphic. Over the years, the psalmist has experienced enemies (whoever they were) who attacked him to the point where it felt like they were digging furrows in his back as a plow digs furrows in a field. Ouch and yikes! And yet, Yehovah stepped in to cut the ropes of the yoke and freed him! The second half of the psalm is imprecatory, calling down curses on those who hate Jerusalem, the city where the pilgrims are heading for the Feasts. The singers call for those people to be driven back, wilt like grass, have failed harvests, and never be blessed by the Lord. Wowsers!

Psalm 130. This is a "waiting" song. The writer is very aware of his sin and feels he's in a pit, distant from Yehovah. He cries out for God's mercy and forgiveness... and waits. The writer sees himself waiting for the Lord as the city watchmen look for the dawn. That's an interesting picture because the watchman has faith that the sun will surely come up, he sees the sky beginning to brighten, and finally, the sun breaks forth! What a beautiful picture of God restoring His people after a time of discipline. They know He is the God who forgives, they see the Lord moving on their behalf, and finally, God's favor dawns on them. First, this is a vivid picture of the sun rising on Jerusalem in the morning. Second, it's reminiscent of Jesus' return and how, after a very dark and tumultuous time, His glory will fill the sky from east to west, and humanity will see the earth's restoration under the full light of God's presence on earth!

Psalm 131. This simple psalm is about resting patiently with the Lord, and it's a perfect companion song to the previous one about waiting on the Lord. And as we rest in the Lord, we do so because of our hope in Him and His ways.

Psalm 132. This song's theme is about David and Zion (Jerusalem). The first section recounts how David was set on finding a place for God's Tent, the place where the Ark of the covenant could rest, over which God's presence manifested (132:1-5). After the site was found, the priests and David "found the Ark" in "the fields of Jaar" (Kiriath-Jearim, where the Ark was stored after the Philistines returned it (1 Samuel 6:21-7:1). They brought the Ark to Jerusalem (again, the focus of the Psalms of Ascent) in a grand procession (132:7-10). The psalmist includes the plea that the Lord would not turn from His anointed one (king), David. This is answered by the songwriter recounting the Lord's promise to David (132:11-12). So, the Lord chose David as His king. Also, God chose Jerusalem as His city (132:13-14). Therefore, He will provide for those who live and work there and exalt His king over David's enemies (132:15-18).

Psalm 133. Psalm 133 is an ode to unity. Simply put, harmony between people under the Lord brings His blessings.

Psalm 134. This chapter is the last Psalm of Ascent. I see this psalm as a quiet little piece, almost like a lullaby, sung in the evening as people settle into sleep in Jerusalem. But were Levites on duty in the evening? Weren't their duties done at 3 pm when the sacrificial service wrapped up for the day? Check this out. When David made plans for the Temple, the Levite choir sang day and night, "*The singers, the heads of the Levite families, stayed in the temple chambers and were exempt from other tasks because they were on duty day and night*" (1 Chronicles 9:33). There you have it. Even after the Babylonian exile, when the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles were written, the Levites apparently continued their around-the-clock choir duties.

Psalm 135. Before I launch into my *Cruisin' Through the Bible* thoughts, I have to include this bit of trivia about Psalm 135 from my Study Bible "Nearly every verse of this psalm quotes or is quoted by other Scripture, such as Psalm 115." It's a psalm declaring Yehovah's greatness. The first four verses encourage the singers to let Yehovah's praise fly because He's good, His name is delightful (Heb. also "lovely, pleasant"), and He's chosen the people of Israel for Himself! The psalm then recounts why the Lord is so great – He's greater than all insignificant "gods" and does spectacular things like control the weather. I believe that's a slam against the Canaanite "god," Baal, who the Canaanites thought controlled the weather. *Touche'*! Furthermore, the Lord crushed Egypt and smote the Canaan and the Amorite nations, giving the land to Israel. Because of these great things, Yehovah's name and reputation continue to be talked about even generations later, and compared to the Lord, the idols are nothing but deaf, dumb, blind, and useless objects. God lives, they don't (which is a direct quote from Psalm 115:4-8), so it's fitting to praise the Living God!

INSIGHT

Speaking of unity (Psalm 133), that's the theme of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (as it's called) in John 17:20-23, "I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. *May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.* May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me." When Christians live united with one another, the world sees more clearly that the Father sent Jesus, demonstrating Father's love for us.