

PSALM 120

A PSALM OF ASCENT

An Art of Taleh Mini-Study





THE OUTLINE

Psalm 120

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Introduction

Christians frequently use the metaphor of a journey to describe their spiritual experience. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the most famous works along this line. Yet the idea of a journey is not just a clever, resonating technique to describe our experience. The people of God have always been a people on a journey. Ever since sin and idolatry caused Adam and Eve's removal from the Garden, we are on a long journey back to a reconciled relationship in the presence of the creator God.

The Hebrews knew this in their bones and often wrote psalms expressing their journey with God. The Psalms of Ascent (120-134) are perhaps the best example.

The theology of these psalms (or songs) is deeply rich. But unlike a systematic textbook, their theology stems from raw human experience.

The authors hold nothing back as they walk toward God and his promises amidst violence, joy, pain, prosperity, anguish, waiting, fellowship, and more. As we're swept up into their journey, we find nothing less than a big arrow pointing to Jesus as the Messiah that brings this journey to a climax.

As a literary whole, the Psalms of Ascent are a book within a book that takes us on a journey towards God's presence.

Introduction

While the connection from one psalm to another is not always smooth, there is a clear progression toward the promises of God's salvation. Words and themes like God's steadfast love and his watching over us are repeated, showing continuity. The climax comes in Psalm 132 with a rehearsal of God's covenant promise to rescue his people (and ultimately the world) through the Davidic line.

From a historical point of view, there is some ambiguity to their origin. There are multiple authors not necessarily of the same time period. It is mostly likely these Psalms were compiled for worshipping pilgrims to sing as they journeyed up to Jerusalem during the festivals (see 122 and 133). Others connect these psalms to the Jews returning from Babylonian exile (126).

No matter the historical origins, these Psalms are a poetic expression of our journey towards God's saving presence. However, we find that success in our journey does not depend on us but on God's faithfulness anchored in this covenant promises.

For this reason, the Psalms of Ascent are a fantastic tool for worship and study both on the corporate and personal level. The authentic portrayal of a hurting humanity juxtaposed against God and his covenant steadfast love is decisively brought to a point in Jesus. He is that for which the writers long. We celebrate the fulfillment of these promises in Jesus and look forward to when God's saving presence will be fully here – the journey complete.

The Passage

Read this passage at least twice – one time straight through and then one time much slower, soaking in each word and detail as you go. Don't rush through it. Rather, taste it, savor it and, in doing so, begin to see how delightful it truly is.

1 In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.

2 Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.

3 What shall be given to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?

4 A warrior's sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!
5 Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

6 Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.

7 I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war!

The Outline

In the Art of Taleh, our first approach to a passage of Scripture is to study a passage sentence by sentence.

To do this, we want you to work through Psalm 120, sentence by sentence, and as you go, summarize each verse in no more than 5 words.

We will start you off with the first verse...

- 1: distressed pilgrim cries to God
- 2: _____
- 3: _____
- 4: _____
- 5: _____
- 6: _____
- 7: _____

A Few Questions

Now, to better understand the passage, we have a few questions for you. Please base your answers off of Psalm 120 alone. For each answer, you should even write in parentheses the verse that you are referencing. The key here is to stay grounded to the word at hand.

1. How does the Psalmist describe his problem?

Where does he find his answer? And how does he describe the resolution?

2. How does the Psalmist contrast himself against those with whom he dwells? What emotions are shown?

3. What do verses 5-6 imply by using the words "sojourn" and "too long have I dwelt"?

A Brief Devotion

If the Psalms of Ascent represent a worshipful journey towards the presence of God and all his good promises, then it is no surprise that the beginning of the journey starts with trouble. After all, the further one goes from God's life-giving grace, the more we may experience the effects of idolatry and sin.

We start our journey in Psalm 120, which breaks itself into three sections. The first section, verses 1-2, the psalmist establishes a problem. The author is in distress - plagued by lies and falsehood. Yet his first reaction is not vengeance, but crying out to Yahweh (LORD) – the specific name God revealed to his covenant people on Mount Sinai. This is the main point of the Psalm: deliverance comes from the LORD.

The second section, verses 3-4, is comprised of a question and answer that pronounce victory over the verbal assailant and judgment to follow. By now you should feel the heat in this situation.

A Brief Devotion

The psalmist is sick of the lies and trusts the LORD to handle it. The 9th commandment wasn't arbitrary. This isn't the first time a lying tongue is contrasted against the truth (Psalm 52:1-4). Because lying is antithetical to the character of the LORD, he will eventually deal with it. The question and answer form might be thought of as someone in a heated exchange saying, "You want to know what's coming you?! I'll tell you what's coming to you!"

Yet our modern eyes might be a let down a little when we read about arrows and coals. But don't miss the point. Arrows were often used to connote judgment over one's enemies (Ps 45:5). The broom tree was a hardwood tree whose coals burned hot for a long time. These items represent intense, precise, and even fatal judgment.

A Brief Devotion

The final section, verses 5-7, is a lament by the psalmist further contrasting his godly desires against those around him. In the first section, he is for truth while those around him lie. Here, the author is for peace while those around him are for war. Meshech was a region in Turkey up near the Black Sea; Kedar was in northern Arabia. Since these places are not geographically near each other, the Psalmist uses them metaphorically to represent the violence that results in being far away from the LORD's presence, i.e., the temple in Jerusalem.

You might even go so far as to say that we start our ascent towards the LORD's peaceful presence as far away as Meshech or Kedar might be from Jerusalem. For this reason, Psalm 120 is entirely appropriate for those who find themselves amidst warmongering people seemingly far from God. Yet even there, God is able to answer our cry for deliverance.

Reflection

We have three questions to conclude this mini-study on Psalm 120 and our aim in these questions is to make the truths of this passage meaningful to our own lives and indeed for these truths to transform our lives.

- 1. Do falsehood and deceit procure in you a similar response as the psalmist?** What are examples from your own life that resonate?
- 2. Are you quick to cry to God for deliverance, or do you seek to remedy the situation without him?** Why might we hesitate to trust in God for deliverance?
- 3. When dealing with violence in its various forms, do you make the connection between peace and the presence of God?** How should the Holy Spirit affect the way we live amidst those who hate peace?

About the Author

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This mini-study was written by Colson Hauser, a guest writer for the Art of Taleh.

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