

Songs of Ascents (Tracks 1, 2, 3) Psalms 120, 121, 122

Main Idea: These three Psalms are the first of fifteen “Songs of Ascents,” which were likely sung as pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem for worship during one of three major festivals.

I. A Pilgrim’s Mess (Psalm 120)

- A. Assurance (120:1)
- B. Plea (120:2)
- C. Submission (120:3-4)
- D. Desperation (120:5-7)

II. A Pilgrim’s Help (Psalm 121)

- A. A Timid Pilgrim’s Question: Where Is My Help? (121:1-2)
- B. A Seasoned Pilgrim’s Counsel: Trust in the Lord’s Watch Care (121:3-8)

III. A Pilgrim’s Worship (Psalm 122)

- A. Gladness (122:1-2)
- B. Unity (122:3-5)
- C. Longing (122:6-9)

If you look at the headings of Psalms 120-134 you will notice that they share the same title: “A Song of Ascents” (the title is included in the Hebrew Bible). Some of these Psalms (often referred to as “pilgrim songs”) are very familiar to many Christians, but others are less familiar. They appear to have been sung during the three annual festival processions as pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem (“ascents,” plural, indicating multiple journeys; ie., Passover in the Spring, Pentecost in early Summer, and Tabernacles in the Fall). They begin with a pilgrim in an alien setting (Ps 120), and end with praise given to God in the temple (Ps 134).

Today we sometimes see churches or musical groups make a collection of songs for Christmas or some other season/occasion. That’s kind of like what we have here. The Songs of Ascent were a mini-song book, a “pilgrim hymn book,” used for the journey to the Jerusalem.

Christians can relate to the pilgrim nature of the Christian life. The author of Hebrews says, “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14). In his book on the Songs of Ascent, entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson points out the importance of the pilgrim imagery saying, “There are two biblical designations for the people of faith that are extremely useful: *disciple* and *pilgrim*” (Peterson, 17). The former emphasizes our apprenticed relationship to Jesus (disciple), and the other emphasizes the “not home” nature of our faith (pilgrim), with Abraham serving as our “archetype” (Heb 11:8ff.), and Jesus showing us the way home (Jn 14:5-6).

Further, like the ascending pilgrims, we should be advancing in spiritual maturity, growing in this God-ward life. This growth happens as our hearts ascend in regular praise and prayer to our Creator and Redeemer. The Songs of Ascent assists us in this growth process.

Indeed, one of the reasons we need the whole book of Psalms is to strengthen our interior lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented on the spiritual value of the Psalms reflecting on Luther’s words: “But whoever has begun to pray the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say: ‘Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. It tastes too cold and too hard’ (Luther)” (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 25). Couldn’t you use some more “juice” to revitalize your worship life? Couldn’t you use some more strength to your prayer life?

Bonhoeffer continues his argument for the church to return to the “Prayer Book of the Bible” saying:

In the ancient church it was not unusual to memorize “the entire David.” In one of the eastern churches this was a prerequisite for the pastoral office. The church father St. Jerome says that one heard the Psalms being sung in the field and gardens in his time. The Psalter impregnated the life of early Christianity. Yet more important than all of this is the fact that Jesus died on the cross with the Psalter on his lips.

Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power. (Ibid., 26)

I’m not trying to argue for us to *only* sing straight from the Psalms in corporate worship, but I agree with Bonhoeffer that Christians would benefit greatly, and would grow in Christ-likeness, by growing deeply familiar with the Psalter. The Songs of Ascent are a great place to start! They are all short Psalms, easy to memorize and use in personal and corporate worship. My plan is to look at three Psalms in each exposition, so let’s now begin with the first three.

A Pilgrim’s Mess (Psalm 120)

The first song begins rather dark. The songwriter explains the day-to-day struggle of life in a broken world. We can identify with feelings of “distress” (120:1) and “misery” (5) and “war” (7). In this context, the Psalmist brings his trouble to the Lord, which is where we should take our trouble as well.

Assurance (120:1). The pilgrim says, “In my distress I called to the LORD, and He answered me:” (120:1). From this declaration, he then goes on to offer a plea to the Lord for deliverance (2), and then to explain his dreadful situation in more detail (3-7). The language resembles laments in Psalm 3:4, 18:6, 22:21, 66:14, and 118:21.

There are at least three ways to read this declaration in verse 1. First, the pilgrim could be giving a *past testimony* of answered prayer(s), which then fuels his present plea in verse 2 (Goldingay, *Psalms*, 448; as in Psalm 34:4,6; 118:5). Second, he could be testifying to how God *already* answered this particular prayer in verse 2. Or, he could be *anticipating* God answering his plea, and even be hinting at how God already assured him of the answer (VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 769). I lean to the first option. It seems most natural to see the Psalmist remembering time of distress in the past in which the Lord answered him, giving encouragement to now seek the Lord in the present crisis.

This much is clear: the Psalm begins with the confident note of *assurance*. The Lord answers prayer! By “answering” it means the Lord both “hears” and “acts” (cf., Ps 86:1, 7; 102:2; 108:6). Throughout the Psalter we see that the Lord “answers” us! He may sometimes say, “yes,” sometimes, “no,” and sometimes “not now.” But the Lord answers. This assurance should give us confidence to continue calling out to Him now!

With cell phones today, we have access to people but some people never answer the phone! I remember in the 80’s-90’s that we would have to make sure we were home at a certain time because we were “expecting a call.” You would say, “I have to be home at 8:00pm, Jim is calling me.” And if you missed the guys at the meeting spot at 3:00pm, you were on your own! You couldn’t call and say, “Where are you guys?” But now, we’re reachable all day with cell phones. Yet, some people never pick up the phone! Have you ever found yourself saying, “Why do you

even have a phone if you never answer?” Maybe someone has said that to you! Be encouraged today, the Lord answers His people. You can and should call on Him.

Plea (120:2). The pilgrim is in an oppressive situation. He asks the Lord to “deliver [him] from lying lips and a deceitful tongue” (120:2). Foes are speaking falsely about him, and he cries for help because the lies wound.

While you may not have people specifically lying about *you*, many in the culture are lying *to* you. Many tell you to about the origins of life without reference to God; they tell you about love without reference God-centered covenant love; they speak of meaning and fulfillment, joy and peace, without God. We can identify with the frustrated pilgrim who constantly hears the voices of the godless.

So in light of this mess, the pilgrim opens up like a child who pours out suppressed feelings, pouring forth tears and pent up emotion. Take a cue from the psalmist here, and cry out for deliverance! Sometimes the Lord brings us to places where all we can do is cry out to Him. Sometimes we can act, but sometimes we can merely cry out; sometimes we can only groan (Rom 8:26).

So he first prays about the mess. Then in verse 3-4, he does something else.

Submission (120:3-4). The pilgrim asks, “What will He give you, and what will He do to you, you deceitful tongue?” (120:3). The answer: “A warrior’s sharp arrows, with burning charcoal” (120:4). What’s the psalmist doing? He’s submitting the problem to God. He says to his attackers that Yahweh will shoot burning arrows at them.

In the Scriptures, words are likened to sharp arrows (Ps 57:4; 64:3-4), and fire (Prov 16:27, 26:18; Jam 3:6). While the attackers shoot their arrows at the Psalmist, the believer says that God will have the last shot. The ESV (and other translations) mentions “glowing coals of the broom tree” whose charcoal was apparently the best. The judgment of God will not only kill but will also consume. Ultimately, God will have the last word for the wicked. We can leave our oppressors to God’s judgment. We must take this eternal perspective.

Desperation (120:5-7). The pilgrim speaks about his misery, as his alien status comes to light. He’s dwelling in “Meshech” (modern day Turkey) and in the tents of “Kedar” (the Arabian desert). These statements in verse 5 may be taken in different ways, but I take them metaphorically, expressing how the psalmist is living *among the godless*. He’s a pilgrim. He doesn’t feel at home.

In verse 6-7, the psalmist expresses his tiredness. He’s tired of living “with those who hate peace” (6). He adds, “I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war” (7). Israel was told to seek the peace/shalom of the city when in exile (Jer 29:7). Yet, the pilgrim is frustrated with the lack of peace that existed.

Paul’s words to the Roman Christians, living as sojourners on earth, come to mind here: “If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone. Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:18-19; cf., Matt 5:43-48). We’re called to seek peace, and to love our enemies. And like this Psalm teaches, we should trust in God’s final judgment of evildoers.

So what happens when you don’t experience peace in your sojourning? This Psalm encourages us to pray. These closing words are essentially an *implied prayer* that the Lord would establish peace. The entire Psalm is really a prayer for peace or shalom (VanGemenen, 771).

Bring your mess to the Lord. Perhaps you have lost your job. Perhaps you have lost your dignity over something. Perhaps people are saying evil things to you or about you. Whatever the reason for your darkness, bring it to the Lord. He answers our pleas. We can express our grief

and desperation to Him, and we can trust in His sovereignty to bring ultimate peace, even though we may only see a glimmer of it in this life.

Let's also remember that the Lord Jesus embodied this Psalm. He surely knew it, and He definitely experienced it. He experienced great distress, most dramatically in Gethsemane (Mk 14:33) and at Golgotha (Mk 15:34). He was the object of evil words; his reputation was smeared; He was a stranger on earth. Through Him, because of His atoning work in Jerusalem, we can have peace with God by the enablement of the Spirit, and we will one day live in a new creation filled with total shalom. Look to Jesus today. He understands your grief, and grants grace to distressed pilgrims.

A Pilgrim's Help (Psalm 121)

In Psalm 121, the serious hazards of travel are noted, as an interesting dialogue takes place. The anonymous pilgrim (perhaps a young man²) raises a question in verse 1, and then answers his own question generally in verse 2. But then another voice speaks in verses 3-8. This other voice could simply be an inner dialogue, with the pilgrim speaking to himself, like we read about in Psalm 42-43. Or (more likely), the second voice represents a more seasoned pilgrim, perhaps a minister, who offers godly counsel. We may also envision multiple people speaking or singing these reassuring words to the worried pilgrim.

A Timid Pilgrim's Question: Where Is My Help? (121:1-2). As the pilgrim considers his journey, he asks: "I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from?" (Ps 121:1). The hills are enigmatic. Do they represent *refuge*, *danger*, and/or *anticipation of arrival in Jerusalem*? Regarding *refuge*, the mountains surrounding Jerusalem conveyed a peaceful image of the Lord's protection of Israel (125:2; cf., Goldingay, 456). The mountains may have also stirred up a sense of peace since the Lord made the mountains. Others see the pilgrim as looking with *anticipation* at arriving in Jerusalem, which set among the mountains. But I think its best to read the hills conveying the *danger* that exists along the journey. While he may have indeed had a mixture of emotions in his heart, I think his primary thought was that the hills were part of *the problem*.

The hills sheltered bandits. And significantly, they were home to pagan gods, who "lived" among the high places (cf., Jer 3:23). Later in the Psalm the pilgrim highlights Lord's character, seemingly alluding to the Lord's transcendence and supremacy over pagan gods. Unlike the pagan gods, the Lord doesn't sleep nor take a vacation (3ff; cf., 1 Kin 18:27). The Lord is always watching over His people. The reference to the moon and sun may also be allusions to the gods.

The hazards of travel today may look different. We might imagine walking through a rough part of a major city at night, or if you're from the hills, a particular back road that one shouldn't enter at night. We might imagine our missionary friends in hostile terrorists regions praying Psalm 121. Other hazards of life include madmen with guns, diseases, weather-related disasters, and automobile dangers. Like this pilgrim, we need protection from the threats of this life.

This much our pilgrim friend knows. He knows that his help will come from the "Maker of heaven and earth" (Ps 121:2; cf., 115:15; 134:3). One can hear this verse in the opening line to the Apostle's Creed, which Christians have recited for hundreds of years. God is Creator and therefore reigns over all things, including pagan deities. The pilgrim's help won't come from Baal, Asherah, or the moon priestess.

Yet, the pilgrim needs something more. He needs to know of the personal, intimate nature of the covenant keeping God of the Bible. He needs to know not just God as Creator, but as Companion and Guardian. He needs to know what precedes the affirmation of God as Creator

in the Apostles Creed: “We believe in God, *the Father* Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth” (my emphasis). That’s what everyone needs. They need a relationship with God, which of course comes through Jesus.

Many non-Christians believe in a Creator God but have no relationship with Him. You might even here them say, “God help me” in a moment of panic and desperation. I believe this instinctive cry is saying something about human nature; namely, we’re made to know this God. We sense that God exists (Rom 1), but many fail to truly know Him as Savior and Shepherd.

At the same time, many Christians will affirm that they know God both as Creator and Redeemer, through Jesus Christ, *but* functionally live worried lives. We are prone to fear, aren’t we? In moments of crisis, we need to experience our theology. We need to work our theology of God itself into our hearts. We know the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, and this should bring us peace (cf., Eph 2:18). That’s what the timid pilgrim needs. And so another voice reassures Him of the personal nature of the Lord.

A Seasoned Pilgrim’s Counsel: Trust in the Lord’s Watch Care (121:3-8). The reassuring speaker has a dominant theme: *trust the Lord’s watch care*. He encourages the anxious traveler to remember that God is always looking out for His followers. In verses 3–8, six times the verb ‘to protect’ appears, also translated as “watches over” (NIV) or “keep,” (ESV). This Lord doesn’t watch from a distance. He watches like a father looking over his children while they sleep.

This protection doesn’t mean, however, that the traveler may never stub his toe, get injured, suffer, or even die. It means that God’s purposes can’t be thwarted. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:18-39). He will watch over us throughout this whole life, and take us and ultimately take us to glory.

We learn then three truths about the Lord’s personal, intimate, fatherly, shepherd-like watch care.

First, the Lord’s watch care is constant (3-4). The counselor declares, “He will not allow your foot to slip; your Protector will not slumber. Indeed, the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep” (3-4). Our Lord’s protection involves him holding us up. He will keep us from falling. Asaph wrote in Psalm 73, “My foot had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped” (73:2), but the Lord was there to uphold him and bring him peace by granting the wobbly worshiper an eternal, God-centered perspective” (73:23-28). We too may feel like our faith is weakening and our hope decreasing, but the Lord has His grip on His people. We need to cast our burden on Him and trust Him (cf., Ps 55:22).

Our pilgrim friend also reminds us that the Lord’s protection never ceases. Unlike the pagan gods, the Lord never sleeps. That’s the first qualification of a good watchman (121:1). You have to stay awake! It’s hard to guard anything when you’re asleep! In our humanness, we get tired. We get weary. We need sleep. But our God never gets tired. He’s never weary. He never needs a timeout. Oh, we may think He’s asleep sometimes, but He’s always watching over us as our gracious Shepherd.

As we look to the New Testament, we find Jude saying these amazing words, about the Lord’s preserving grace: “Now to Him who is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless and with great joy...” (Jude 24). What hope! The Lord will keep us from stumbling, and get us to our final destination.

Second, the Lord’s watch care is comforting (5-6). He shades us and protects us. The counselor says, “The LORD protects you; the LORD is a shelter right by your side. The sun will not strike you by day or the moon by night” (5-6). The Lord stands between every threat and us, whether the scorching heat of the Middle East, or the dangers and cold temperatures of the moonlit night, as

he is at our “right hand” (5; cf., Ps 16:8. Some writers link the reference to the moon to *lunacy*). Indeed, the Lord’s presence is like “the shade” (5, ESV) or “the shelter,” bringing us refreshment as well as safety (cf., Ps 91:1). And His presence overcomes our nighttime problems.

We need this sort of comfort. Have you ever been worried because of your surroundings? Have you ever been asleep at night and woken up, only to then toss and turn with fears entering your mind and heart? Psalm 121 would be a good one to memorize and recite during these moments (along with Psalm 127). May you trust in the Lord’s watch care over you as he deal with the dragons of the night. And may His presence refresh you as you deal with the intense pressures of the day.

Finally, the Lord’s watch care is comprehensive (7-8). Finally, he offers these encouraging words by pointing to the future, “The LORD will protect you from all harm; He will protect your life. The LORD will protect your coming and going both now and forever” (7-8). All harm; your whole life; your coming and your going; now and forever. This is comprehensive protection!

So even though “we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” we can fear no evil, because our Shepherd is with us (Ps 23), and He will see to it that we arrive to our heavenly destination. The Lord will hold our hand in this life, and afterward He will receive us into glory (Ps 73:24).

A Pilgrim’s Worship (Psalm 122)

If you have ever traveled to a lovely city, then you can identify with the pilgrim as he reflects on arrival into Jerusalem. Only his joy is greater because he wasn’t visiting Jerusalem as a tourist, but as a *worshiper*. His joy is expressed in three snapshots, like postcards or Instagram pictures, with little captions (or #hashtags!) to go along with them. The worshipers first caption may be say “gladness” (1-2), the second, “unity” (3-5), and the third, “longing” (6-9).

Gladness (122:1-2). After the frustration of living among the godless (Ps 120), and enduring the dangers of travel (Ps 121), the pilgrim’s trouble has been replaced with joy (Ps 122, originally penned by David). You can feel his joy as he says, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’ Our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem” (122:1-2). What a contrast between verses 1-2 and Psalm 120:5! The pilgrim is no longer in a far country, but is now in the holy city (122:2). He’s no longer in the company of liars, but of brothers, who encourage him to worship (122:8; 120:2, 7). His companions said, “Let’s go...” and he happily joined the worshiping party.

As we ponder the pilgrim’s happy arrival into the city, Derek Kidner helps Christians apply this Psalm, who are living on this side of the cross. He says, “There is a miniature of this gladness in any meeting for true worship” (433; cf., Ps 92; Heb 12:22-24). While we aren’t making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, we do share the joy of worshiping corporately with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Do you share the pilgrim’s excitement about gathering with the Redeemed in your local assembly? We should desire this tremendous blessing. In corporate worship, we bring our tired, broken, desperate selves before God, thanking Him for redemption and provision, and asking Him for His help. Corporate worship is an unspeakable blessing to traveling pilgrims.

Kidner then adds a second application: “The Christian’s equivalent to this progress and arrival is finely expressed in the doxology of Jude” (Ibid). We referenced Jude in Psalm 121, and we may also consider with Psalm 122 in view. The Lord will “keep us from stumbling” until we arrive “in the presence of his glory blameless, and with great joy” (Jude 24). In other words, our

ultimate arrival – our ultimate worship experience – is yet to come. We are seeking a better city (Heb. 11:10; 13:14). We’re anticipating a great garden city of the redeemed.

Unity (122:3-5). The pilgrim now takes “the city tour of Jerusalem” and he marvels at the unity of the city. He may have inserted a #iheartJerusalem after posting his picture! He notes the essence of this city is its unity (3–5). The shape of the city speaks of its *togetherness* (3). Kidner says, “Such was the blueprint; such will be the ultimate reality (Rev 21:10ff.)” (433). Peter draws out the unity that exists between God’s people, as living stones, who together worship God through Jesus (1 Pet 2:4-5).

The happy pilgrim then states that his brothers from different tribes gather united as “Yahweh’s tribes” (4a). They are one people.

Being with other pilgrims increases our joy in worship. Calvin said “Our joy, in like manner, *should be doubled* when God by His Holy Spirit not only frames each of us to the obedience of his word, but also produces the same effect upon others, so that we may be united together in the same faith” (*Psalms*, 70, my emphasis). Personal worship brings joy; corporate worship brings double joy!

Further, the people united to give “thanks to the name of Yahweh” (4c; cf., Ex 23:14-17; Deut 16:16-17). The festivals expressed gratitude in two ways. They celebrated what Yahweh did in making the crops grow, and they also remembered the stages of redemptive history, in which the Lord freed His people from slavery, and brought them into the land (Goldingay, 465).

Finally, they come to a place where, ideally, under God’s appointed king, justice is executed (5). Kidner notes that a ruler’s first duty and best gift is the establishment of justice (434). As we consider the concept of justice broadly, we’re reminded of it being a characteristic of the Messianic era (Isa 9:7; 11:35). Ultimately, the Just King (Ps 72) will full this duty and give us this “best gift,” a place of total peace and justice.

Longing (122:6-9). The final picture of the city may have a caption that reads something like, “Pray for the peace.” He concludes by saying:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you prosper;
may there be peace within your walls,
prosperity within your fortresses.”
Because of my brothers and friends,
I will say, “Peace be with you.”
Because of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good. (122:6-8)

The pilgrim longs for shalom, peace in the city. Jerusalem, “the city of peace” didn’t always experience peace. So the song moves from joy to longing. And it moves from joy to commitment to seek the good of the city. We too should long for peace within the community of faith, “our brothers and friends” and seek to do good to everyone, especially those of the household of faith (cf., Gal 6:10; Heb 13:1-3).

When Jesus, the Great Pilgrim, entered the city, he “wept over it” (Lk 19:42-44). He lamented Jerusalem’s rejection on Him, and the upcoming destruction of the city. Then in Jerusalem, Jesus, the perfectly obedient pilgrim, died for sinners, rose on their behalf. He ascended into heaven, and poured out His Spirit among His people in Jerusalem. These pilgrims went out from Jerusalem to tell the whole world where they could find real peace, in Jesus Christ, “who is Himself our peace” (Eph 2:14, ESV). We don’t need to go to a temple to find peace. We need to go to a person, Jesus Christ. That’s how you find peace. That’s how you find peace with

one another (Eph 2:14-22). And ultimately, we will know the fulfillment of this peace when the Prince of Peace comes in glory. While it's good to pray for peace in the Middle East (1 Tim 2:1-3), the Christian's ultimate prayer is "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!"

Reflect and Discuss

1. Do you believe God answers prayer? Why or why not?
2. What "mess" are you experiencing right now? Stop and take your burden to the Lord.
3. Do you feel like a pilgrim in this life? Explain.
4. What kinds of lies are distressing you? Explain.
5. What kinds of threats are worrying you? Explain.
6. How does Psalm 121 encourage you? Explain.
7. Does the Lord's *protection* of His people (Ps 121) mean that believers will never suffer? What does it mean that the Lord is watching over us?
8. Do you look forward to corporate worship? Why should we?
9. Stop and give thanks to the Lord for His redemption, protection, and daily provision, both personally and with others.
10. How do Psalm 122 point us to Jesus? Reflect on and rest in His person and work, and His kingdom.