

Psalm 120

Behind Enemy Lines

Psalm 120-134 are called the *Songs of Ascent*, or the *Song of Degrees* or the *Pilgrim's Songs*. They were sung three times per year as travelers returned to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, The Feast of Weeks/Pentecost, and The Feast of Tabernacles. Jerusalem is uphill, regardless of the direction of your approach. Here is a listing of all of these 15 Songs of Ascent:

- [Psalm 120](#): God's presence during distress
- [Psalm 121](#): Joyful praise to the Lord
- [Psalm 122](#): Prayer for Jerusalem
- [Psalm 123](#): Patience for God's mercy
- [Psalm 124](#): Help comes from the Lord
- [Psalm 125](#): Prayer for God's blessing upon His people
- [Psalm 126](#): The Lord has done great things
- [Psalm 127](#): God's blessing on man's efforts
- [Psalm 128](#): Joy for those who follow God's ways
- [Psalm 129](#): A cry for help to the Lord
- [Psalm 130](#): A prayer of repentance
- [Psalm 131](#): Surrender as a child to the Lord
- [Psalm 132](#): God's sovereign plan for His people
- [Psalm 133](#): Praise of brotherly fellowship and unity
- [Psalm 134](#): Praise to God in His temple

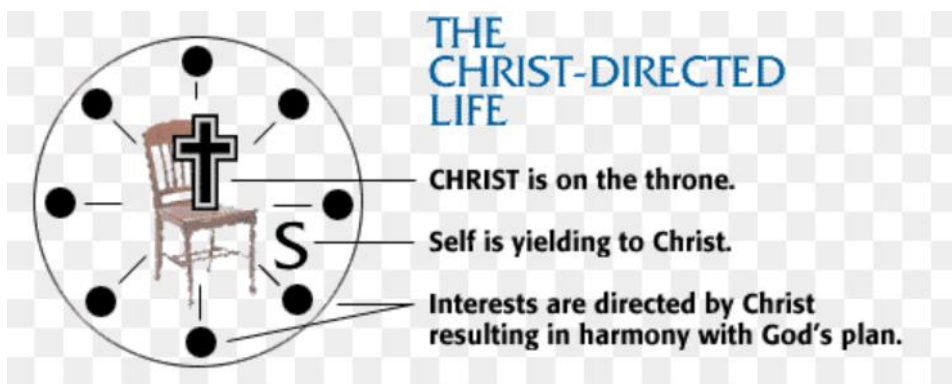
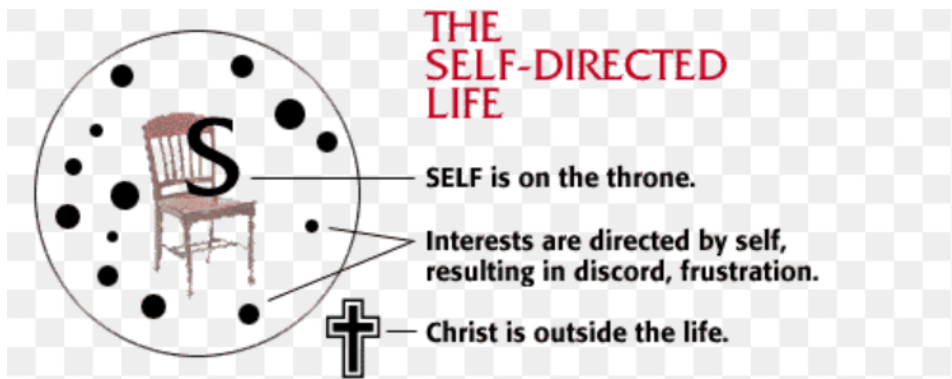
It is interesting to see that some of the themes of these Psalms of Ascent are cries of distress. Spiritual life can seem like an uphill trek at times. We have to conclude that life's crises are part of *the normal Christian life*. The trek up the final hill to the temple begins with this psalm. It is essentially a psalm about how much we do not fit in with the ways of this world. These are people longing for something different than this world provides. These Songs of Ascent end with the satisfying glory of God in his temple.

We tend to think of living in this fallen world as a severe disadvantage to spiritual progress. Is it really a disadvantage...or is it actually a necessary advantage? According to scripture, this messed up world cannot be a disadvantage.

...we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

How can a world of disappointments and strife and failure and fear be good for us? We misunderstand what is really happening. It is like baptism. We really cannot come alive and live in a higher perspective until we give up on what is sitting in front of us. The futility of this world weans us off of our hope on material things and aspirations of our own glory. Most of what Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes is about not letting go of his remaining hope in himself. We are born with a natural desire to have *a self-directed life*. It takes a lot of repeated failure to get over ourselves; and make room for a better hope. We learned from the Garden of Eden that we are not motivated by our current situation, or even from a perfect life. That dream is a mirage. It is the devil's hamster wheel to nowhere. We are motivated actually by hope; and our idea of our future.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; (Romans 8:20)



Read Psalm 120:1-7: The psalmist is like a fish out of water. The Bible tells us to be gentle; but he surrounded by angry and abusive men who are nothing like him. They seek to injure others.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. (Matthew 10:16-17)

Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion. (Psalm 22:12-14)

There is a distinctness to how a Christian speaks; and how the world speaks. I can sometimes tell that a person is a Christian without their specifically saying so. The tongue is a dipstick to the heart. We say whatever is in our heart. Even when people joke with an edge; it is because they have an issue inside. As believers, we can either promote healing, or do damage with our tongue. The words of these evil men are compared to *fiery arrows*. Evil men are not really the main problem. They are pawns who are being driven by a *master puppeteer*. There are dark forces that push the unsaved people in this world around.

The ungodly are not so But are like the chaff which the wind drives away. (Psalm 1:4)

In our spiritual battle against the forces of evil, the enemy uses these “flaming arrows” against us. Arrows on fire are effective because they cause a distraction from the main battle. You cannot fight both fire and the enemy at once. Why does it seem like so many things are going wrong when we step out into ministry? *The car won’t start, the house has a problem that requires our attention, a business connection blows up*, etc... This is exactly what is happening. I remember one year agreeing to go to AWANA camp to minister to children up in the mountains. As I pulled into the campground parking lot, my business associate called and informed me that he was ending our current business arrangement. That made it very difficult to focus on ministry with a thankful heart.

*...we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so **the tongue** is a little member and boasts great things. See how **great a forest a little fire kindles!** And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that **it defiles the whole body**, and sets on fire the course of*

nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. (James 3:3-12)

The devil uses fiery arrows to destroy men's.

...above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. (Ephesians 6:16)

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

We desire to be around like-minded men. Sometimes our job, or our neighborhood or our travels places us in the middle of a *nest of these angry hornets*. It becomes obvious pretty quickly that we do not fit in. We really do not even need to say anything. They will just sense that we are different than they are. I met a spiritual medium one time by chance at another person's house while having dinner. He kept looking at us. He said that he was definitely picking up on a strong commitment vibe coming from us.

The psalmist is willing to live way up north; or way down south...or be anywhere else to stay clear of these troublemakers. Forcing us to be with haters is going to be uncomfortable. The concept of holiness is to stay away from this world's influences and corruption.

For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8)

The setting of this psalm is around people who are motivated to hurt other people. They are *takers* and they want to *steam roll* over anyone in their way. We are in favor of having peace; whenever that is possible. That is one reason that God needs to be our *home away from home*. We always need to establish a quiet time to regroup with God. Especially in hostile areas.

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. (Psalm 90:1)

All said; this confirms our spirit of holiness who lives inside of us. At the same time; we are called to be *a light in a dark place*. We are called to be *salt in a decaying world*. There is really no refuge or monastery to escape the effects of a fallen world.

"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.' (John 15:18-25)

We have tried both ways of living; and we are clear about our decision to do something more meaningful and less destructive with our lives.

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-16)

Most of us know what the selfish life is all about. We have no intention of going back to that way of living.

And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had the opportunity to return. (Hebrews 11:15)

The word used for the distress of being around hateful men is H6869. It relates to the psychological suffering and anguish and difficulty that is introduced into our lives. If God allows it; it has to serve a purpose. It may be a *door opener* for spiritual progress. It is the first step to having a face to face meeting with God. Most of our faith journeys did not begin with joy and contentment. They began under siege and fear. The very thing that we hate has served to help give birth to our spirit.

My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, (Galatians 4:19)

Ministering from the Heart of the Dragon

There are times when God takes believers, and sets them in places of worldly influence, outside of the church. Daniel was taken as a captive amongst a disobedient people. He was taken to the world capital of idolatry and imperialistic power. It was a challenge for him to retain his spiritual identity. They tried to feed him propaganda and idolatry. He was even renamed to honor a local idol. Daniel was named Belteshazzar by Nebuchadnezzar. Shadrach, Meschech and Abednego were also kidnapped and re-named in the same way.

All four of these Hebrew names had meanings connected to faith in God. But upon arrival in Babylon, their names were changed: “The chief official [of Babylon] gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego” (Daniel 1:7). The boys’ names were changed as a way of encouraging them to forget the God and traditions of their homeland and become conformed to the ways and gods of Babylon. It was a forced assimilation; Nebuchadnezzar wanted Daniel and his friends to “conform to the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2), and a name change was one step toward that goal. Daniel humbled himself, and he became a servant to his at-hand circumstances, for the benefit of many.

Each name Daniel and his friends were given carried a meaning associated with a different Babylonian deity. *Abednego* means “servant of Nebo,” for example. *Belteshazzar*, the name given to Daniel, means “Bel protects his life.” The meaning of the name *Daniel* is “God is my judge.” The suffix of Daniel’s name (and Mishael’s) is *-el*, which refers to *Elohim*, one of the names of the God of Israel. *Azariah* and *Hananiah* carry the suffix *-iah* or *-yah*, which is short for *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God (see Isaiah 26:4).

Miraculously, God kept these young men alive, even though they refused to conform to the indoctrination, diet, and religion of Babylon. Daniel and his companions asked to be fed vegetables rather than the king’s unlawful food, and they were granted their wish on the condition that their health did not suffer. God made them thrive physically beyond their peers, because of their God-honoring obedience (Daniel 1:8–16). They would not bow down to the idol of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar’s image, and were sentenced to death, but God saved them from the midst of a fiery furnace (Daniel 3:23–27). In the end, Nebuchadnezzar was forced to acknowledge the miracle, and he decreed that the people of Babylon

honor the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (verses 28–29). A day came when Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind; and Danile probably ran the Babylonian empire for 7 years.

After the wonders of God were shown to him, Nebuchadnezzar himself acknowledged Daniel’s true name and honored the God of Israel, writing, “Daniel came into my presence. . . . (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him)” (Daniel 4:8). Years later, the queen of Babylon still referred to Daniel by his Hebrew name, although she knows of Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to change it: she spoke of him as “Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar” (Daniel 5:12).

Joseph was likewise captured by his own family and handed over to a passing caravan. He thrived as a slave, who became a manager of servants. Again he was falsely accused, and thrown in prison; amidst criminals. Once again God prospered him until he was actually managing the day to day prison activities. He was then called upon to interpret a dream of Pharoah. Afterwards he became the governor over Egypt; and he essentially kept God’s people and the Egyptians from starving. Joseph knew that he had a special purpose from a young age. It was a gift that was to be used in an ungodly idol-worshipping empire.