

Psalms 120 to 124

Psalms 120 to 134, the ‘Songs of Ascents’ are the songs of the pilgrim caravans. There were three compulsory Jewish feasts in the year, in which every able-bodied man (and his family) was required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16 v 16). Pilgrims making their way to and from Jerusalem would travel together in caravans, and there were special caravan rallying points (see for example Luke 2 v 41 to 50). ‘Ascents’ may refer to the fact that no matter from what direction you approach Jerusalem, you will always ‘go up’, as the city is surrounded by hills (Psalm 125 v 2).

Psalm 120 – “Deliver me, O Lord...”

- The pilgrim is distressed (v 1) – what is he distressed about (v 2, 5 to 7)?
- How does he deal with his distress (v 1, 2)?
- Notice this is an ‘imprecatory psalm’, crying out for vengeance (v 3, 4).

Where does this pilgrim live – where does he come from (v 5)? Meshech was a grandson of Noah, but not a son of Shem (from whom the ‘Semitic’ Jews are descended); rather, he was a son of Japheth (Genesis 10 v 2), and so the ‘land of Meshech’ is Gentile territory. Kedar was a grandson of Abraham, but his father was Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian (Genesis 25 v 13); the Bedouin Arabs who live in tents are descended from Kedar (see Song of Solomon 1 v 5, Isaiah 42 v 11). With this background, we gain an insight into the plight of the pilgrim, and his plea for peace (v 7) – he bemoans the fact that he has been living “among those who hate peace” (v 6). What light does this shed on the political situation in the Middle East today, bearing in mind that Israel’s enemies do *not* want peace with Israel?

Psalm 121 – “My help comes from the Lord...”

As the pilgrim continues his journey, he can see the hills of Jerusalem in the distance. The image of ‘hills’ is enigmatic – does the psalmist have an urge to take refuge in them (as in Psalm 11 v 1), or are the hills themselves a menace, the haunt of robbers? Either way, he knows something better (v 2) – his help is not in the hills, but in the God who made both them, and the entire universe. Here is real help – loving, personal, wise, immeasurable...

- What does the psalm teach us about the infinite concern and care of God our Father?
- How, when and where can a person look to such a Father?
- What will he always do for us? What will he do for Israel?

The poetic ‘opposites’ – sun by day, moon by night (v 6); going out and coming in (v 8) – are Hebrew expressions that indicate ‘totality’. To be kept “from all evil” (v 7) suggests not a cushioned life, but a well-armed one (Psalm 23 v 4).

Psalm 122 – “Let us go to the house of the Lord...”

Jerusalem and the house of the Lord come into sight and we have arrived! “Bound firmly together” (v 3) uses the same Hebrew word (חָבַר, *chabar*) as in Exodus 26 v 11 in the instructions for ‘coupling the tent together’ – such was the blueprint, and such will be the ultimate reality (Revelation 21 v 1 to 3), despite Jesus’ indictment in Luke 13 v 34.

- For what purpose do the “tribes of the Lord” go up to Jerusalem (v 4)?
- What is the pilgrim’s attitude to Jerusalem, and why does he obey the summons to come and to pray? See Deuteronomy 12 v 5, 6 and Psalm 87 v 1 to 3.
- In verses 6 to 9 note the repetition of the words “peace” and “within” – what is the focus of the psalmist’s prayer?

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Psalm 123 – “Our eyes look to the Lord...”

- “Eyes” (v 1, 2) – where do the psalmist and his companions focus their gaze?
- What do we learn about God, and where we stand in relation to him?
- Why does the psalmist ask God to “have mercy” (v 3)?
- “Contempt” (v 3, 4) – this is one of the most painful wounds (one of the ‘pains of hell’, see Daniel 12 v 2); but remember that Jesus also was “despised and rejected by men” (see Isaiah 53 v 3).

Psalm 124 – “Our help is in the name of the Lord...”

This psalm was sung each December 12th in Geneva, celebrating their victory over the Duke of Savoy in the Escalade of 1602. On 22nd August 1900 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions received a cable-gram from Chefoo, China, where CIM missionaries were being massacred during the Boxer Rebellion: “Psalm 124” with the list of those who had escaped was better than any code. At the feast of Purim this psalm celebrates deliverance from Haman.

- “If...” (v 1, 2), “then...” (v 3 to 5) – what difference does it make if the Lord is “on our side”?
- What does the psalmist learn from his narrow escape?