

“The Lord surrounds his people...” Songs of Ascents – Part 2

Psalms 125 to 129

The Book of Psalms is Israel's hymnbook; indeed many are addressed ‘to the Chief Musician’ – they were intended to be sung. The psalms are poetry (laced with some very strong theology). But unlike western poetry, which has a parallelism of sound (rhyme) or tempo (rhythm), Hebrew poetry has a parallelism of *ideas* – which can be *comparative* (“He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” Ps 37 v 6); *contrastive* (“For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” Ps 1 v 6); or *completive* (“The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart; the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes” Ps 19 v 8). We need to learn to *meditate* on the psalms, so that they become gateways into the presence of God...

Psalm 125 – “the Lord surrounds his people...”

The mountains and the holy city, much in view and much in mind to the pilgrims, make their presence felt again; and once again the thoughts they arouse are searching, pointing to the realities behind these impressive sights...

- Mount Zion and the mountains surrounding Jerusalem (v 1, 2) – what do they symbolize?
- Notice the ‘permanence’ of God’s care and protection (see Deuteronomy 33 v 27).
- What dangers are described in v 3, and how does this lead to prayer in v 4?
- What is the key to ‘peace upon Israel’ (v 5)?

Psalm 126 – “Restore our fortunes, O Lord...”

The first three verses of this psalm express a ‘too good to be true’ feeling of euphoria, and may refer to Israel’s return from the Babylonian exile – there were three such returns: with Zerubbabel in 536 BC; with Ezra in 458 BC; and with Nehemiah in 444 BC (see Ezra 1 to 3, and 8; Nehemiah 2). But memory, so far from slipping into nostalgia, gives the impetus to future hopes (v 4 to 6)...

- How does the psalmist describe the national feelings of joy, stemming from deliverance and restoration?
- How was this a witness to peoples of other nations?
- What two images of renewal are given in the later verses?

Note that few places on earth are more arid than the Negeb, and few transformations more dramatic than that of a dry gully becoming a raging torrent – this first image speaks of sudden, unexpected bounty and blessing. By contrast, the second image is based on patient farming with its heart-breaking toil, and its rewards hard-won (2 Corinthians 9 v 6) and long-awaited (James 5 v 7) – but hard work and good seed are certain to result in joyful harvest...

Psalm 127 – “Unless the Lord builds the house...”

This psalm singles out three of our most universal preoccupations – building, security and raising a family (noting that the Hebrew word for ‘house’ (בַּיִת, *bayit*) can also mean ‘household’ or ‘family’). For the two human activities in verse 1 (building and watching), there are only two possibilities: either they will be the Lord’s doing, or they will be “in vain”. The phrase “in vain” (v 1, 2) reminds us of the central teaching of Ecclesiastes, which refers to ‘toil under the sun’ as ‘vanity’. But how do we ensure that our Christian work is “not in vain”? See 1 Corinthians 15 v 58).

- What wonderful gifts from the Lord are described in this psalm (v 2, 3)?
- In what ways do you think children can be “like arrows in the hand of a warrior” (v 4)?

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Psalm 128 – “Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord...”

The blessings of the man “who fears the Lord” (v 1, 4) can be traced from the centre outwards – from the godly man (v 1, 2); to his wife and children (v 3); to grandchildren; and to Israel (v 5, 6)...

- What, according to this psalm, is the secret of true prosperity?
- What blessings are described here?

Psalm 129 – “We bless you in the name of the Lord...”

Whereas most nations tend to look back on what they have achieved, Israel reflects here on what she has *survived*. The psalmist takes courage from the past, and encourages Israel to face God with gratitude and her enemies with defiance. “My youth” (v 1, 2) may refer to the exodus (Hosea 11 v 1), the starting point of Israel’s sufferings and deliverance.

- The ‘afflictions’ are described in terms of “furrows” on Israel’s back (v 3) – how do they foreshadow Christ’s scourging and suffering for our healing and salvation (Isaiah 53 v 4 to 6)?

Zion’s enemies are described as fading grass (v 6), and the contrast between this and the sheaves of corn which the reapers bring in reminds us of the cheerful exchange of blessings (v 8) in another harvest scene (Ruth 2 v 4).