

Ascend:
When Life Gets You Down, Look Up!
Psalm 120

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Text Introduction: Today, we are beginning a new series. It will be a little bit of a lengthy series—15 sermons spread across at least 16 weeks. Every sermon thought stands on its own, so that will be helpful to us this summer as people travel.

We are considering Psalm 120-134. As you turn to Psalm 120, you will notice the heading, “A Song of Ascents.” Each of the Psalms from 120-134 bears this introductory heading. The songs of ascents are a compilation of Psalms in the larger book of Psalms.

To what does this heading refer? Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sung as they made their way to Jerusalem (being on a higher plain) for thrice annual special times of worship.¹ If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. This thought will guide us in the weeks to come. This is not so much as a practical guide to the “how to” of worship, but instead a theological mine for what prompts earnest worship.

One other item that we might note in the organization of the whole of Psalms. Note that this collection of Psalms immediately follows Psalm 119—a Psalm devoted to the glory of God’s Word. So, when you think of the importance of the Word of God alongside the importance of the worship of God, you are significantly on your way in growing as Jesus’ disciple.

Text: In my distress I called to the LORD,
and He answered me.

²“LORD, deliver me from lying lips
and a deceitful tongue.”

³What will He give you,
and what will He do to you,
you deceitful tongue?

⁴A warrior’s sharp arrows
with burning charcoal!

⁵What misery that I have stayed in Meshech,
that I have lived among the tents of Kedar!

⁶I have lived too long
with those who hate peace.

¹ Other ideas include: Psalms that reflect entering the Promised Land the first time, re-entering after Exile, correlating to the climb up the steps to the Temple (one Psalm for 15 steps), and/or figurative for the journey back to God.

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

Introduction: Raw. Real. Honest. Deep. Heavy. These are all words that describe Psalm 120. To put it in musical terms, since the Psalms are songs, the Psalmist here is “singing the blues.”

If we are going to learn anything at all about worship, here is a good place to begin. We must worship even when worship is about the last thing that we want to do.

A few weeks ago as I was preaching on discipleship as a way of life, I used a phrase by Eugene Peterson (pastor and author of *The Message*) that goes like this: “A long obedience in the same direction.” As I began to study these Psalms, I learned something else about that phrase. The origin of that phrase is the title of a book that Peterson authored on the Songs of Ascents. In fact, the sub-title also is very instructive—“Discipleship in an Instant Society.”

Do you hear what Peterson is saying in the title and sub-title? We do not mature in our discipleship when life is easy. Our best times of growth come in distress. Not in pleasure, but in pain. Not in plenty, but often times in poverty. In distress, disappointment, despair, and yes, even sometimes in disease.

The lesson we learn in this Psalm is that we worship anyway. When life has us down, we look up! When we are unsettled by the times, we must focus on the Throne in order to be strengthened.

So, notice these three movements in the text. You actually see them all in verse 1, and then the rest of the Psalm supports the truth set forth in verse 1.

Desperation

The Psalmist is in distress—despair. Again, this is a heavy Psalm. The Psalmist is in distress for at least these three reasons.

- Because others have deceived.

This Psalm is anonymous so we don’t know for sure what the deception is. At least one Old Testament commentator has a rather lengthy, but interesting theory that the back story to this Psalm is from the days of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah, you might remember, is the King who was granted by God 15 additional years to his life. There are 15 Psalms of Ascents. The sign of his 15 additional years is that a sundial miraculously goes backwards 10 degrees. The Hebrew word for degrees is the same Hebrew words for “ascents” leading the KJV to label these songs “Songs of Degrees.” There are 10 anonymous Psalms among the 15 Psalms.²

If this theory has any merit whatsoever, Hezekiah was certainly familiar with the power of deception. During Hezekiah’s reign, the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, threatened Judah. He taunted the armies of Judah deceitfully by saying, “Don’t let Hezekiah deceive you; he can’t deliver you from my hand. Don’t let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord by saying: ‘Certainly the Lord will deliver us.’” This incidentally is the letter that Hezekiah received that he

² The theory is that of J.W. Thirtle.

brought into the Temple and “spread it out before the Lord” as if to say to the Lord, “Here it is, Lord.”³

I can’t think hardly of anything more unsettling than when someone is telling lies and worse spreading lies. I have found myself praying, “Lord, let the truth of this situation be revealed.”

And, when truth seems to escape us, we are left, as the Psalmist, in distress.

- Because the world around us is in decline.

The Psalmist also lamented the decline of those around him as expressed in the misery of living in Meshech and Kedar. Meshech was to the far North of the Land of Israel; Kedar to the extreme Southeast in the desert. Most commentators feel that the Psalmist was using a bit of figurative language here to express how far away he felt from God. The Israelites would have experienced such collective misery in exile.

Many feel like that today in our American society. We are strangers in our own land. We feel far away from home. We barely recognize our own home. We live in a world of decline. And, we are distressed.

I think about what has happened just in my lifetime. I was born in 1970. In 1969 a Gallup Poll on morality indicated that 68% of persons polled believed that sex before marriage was morally wrong. Now, that has exactly reversed. We are more comfortable lamenting that society doesn’t have a proper Biblical worldview on the issue of homosexuality, but we don’t have a proper Biblical worldview on heterosexual sexual activity. In my lifetime, America has legalized abortion, marginalized Christianity, and now authorized a change of definition for marriage.

God, help us, we are a world in decline, and we are distressed.

- Because we are drained.

I had the wonderful privilege to pray last Wednesday as the House of Representatives opened their session. Afterwards, a particular legislator sought me out, thanked me for the prayer, asked me to keep praying, and said: “People are weary.”

That’s what I see in this text. The Psalmist is weary. He is weary with life. He is drained. He longs for peace, but cannot find it.

So, what do we do? Do we give up? Are we to be like Elijah who after defeating the gods of Baal on Mount Carmel was chased by Jezebel seeking his life? Elijah sat down underneath a tree, begged for God to take his life, and said, “I have had enough, Lord.”⁴

God did not let Elijah get away with that, and I don’t think He is going to let us get away with that.

We see our answer here in verse 1.

³ 2 Kings 18:29-30 and 19:14.

⁴ 1 Kings 19:4

In desperation, our response should be to call out to God.

It is easier to despair than to call out to God, but we must call out to Him. The times of desperation ought to lead us to calling out to Him. But in order to call, we must trust. This seems like a pretty bleak hymn, but he calls. The lines of verse 3 and 4 even indicate his steadfast trust in God to deal with his enemies.

We join a long line in history of those who have called out to the Lord. In Genesis 4, we see the first mention of this. This is instructive. The beginning of Genesis is the beginning of so many things— creation itself, family, unfortunately sin, and nations. In the middle of this story of beginnings is the story of people calling out to God. The last verse of Genesis 4 reads, “At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.”

God may very well call us to do more than pray, but we can do nothing before or nothing better than call out to Him.

When we call, God answers.

Still in verse 1, we see an amazing simple resolution to the Psalmist’s distress and call. God answered. And He answers today. He answers us in worship. That is why we must make much of worship. There will be times where we feel so far away, worship anyway! He answers us in His Word. Does God speak today? He has spoken in His word. There will be times when we feel so away from God that we will not want to have anything to do with His word. Read anyway.

Let me close by just sharing with you that this Psalm is a great foreshadowing of the Gospel. We are all sinners. Sin separates us from God. We feel away from God. But the Gospel reveals that He came down, He died for our sin, He rose again, and He offers grace. The Gospel reveals that if we call on the name of the Lord to be saved, He answers that call.