

I'm sure like me, you would love to be in a church building to worship God with your fellow believers on the Lord's Day. And hopefully, if things continue to improve, we will be able to get back to some degree of normality by the end of the summer. While we can worship God anywhere at anytime - even sitting in your comfortable chair at home reading this!) - there is something special about gathering together with God's people to offer our worship to him.

In the book of Psalms there is a whole section devoted to songs used by the people of Israel who went to the Temple in Jerusalem for the three annual feasts - Passover in Spring, Pentecost in early Summer and Tabernacles in the Autumn. It consists of Psalms 120-134. The pilgrims sang these psalms together as they journeyed in family groups to help focus their minds on what the Lord had done for them.

Listen to Psalm 122

*¹⁻² When they said, "Let's go to the house of GOD," my heart leaped for joy.
And now we're here, O Jerusalem, inside Jerusalem's walls!
³⁻⁵ Jerusalem, well-built city, built as a place for worship!
The city to which the tribes ascend, all GOD's tribes go up to worship,
To give thanks to the name of GOD — this is what it means to be Israel.
Thrones for righteous judgment are set there, famous David-thrones.
⁶⁻⁹ Pray for Jerusalem's peace! Prosperity to all you Jerusalem-lovers!
Friendly insiders, get along! Hostile outsiders, keep your distance!
For the sake of my family and friends, I say it again: live in peace!
For the sake of the house of our God, GOD, I'll do my very best for you.*

Singing these songs the pilgrims remembered the afflictions that Israel had suffered at the hands of other nations, the gracious way God had protected and cared for his chosen people and the blessings of being in Jerusalem to meet with God in his holy temple. For many years the Israelites had been a nomadic people, but after they settled in their Promised Land and built a temple in Jerusalem, the Lord required them to go there regularly to remind them that they were still a pilgrim people and needed to depend on the Lord.

We can so easily become settled Christians rather than pilgrims. In recent times we have been quite happy to settle down in our comfort zones and live as though Jesus never died, Jesus is not coming again, and our lives will never end. We have been guilty of what Eugene Peterson calls "the tourist mindset" - content to make occasional brief visits with the Lord that are leisurely and entertaining, all the while conforming to this world and enjoying it.

But things have changed and changed dramatically for all of us over the past few months. We have been disturbed in our comfort zone and we've even been denied ability to gather with God's people for worship. Who knows the purposes of God in all that has gone on - his ways are not our ways - but maybe he is reminding us that we are a pilgrim people that, as Jim Reeves sang, "This world is

not my home, I'm just a passin' through" (younger people - ask your granny who Jim Reeves was!). Our citizenship is really in heaven, as Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:20

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

And that fact should make a difference in our lives here on earth. Perhaps what we are going through at present is to shake us out of our comfortable settledness and help us to "feel temporary" as we make this pilgrim journey we call life.

Let's look for a moment or two at the first of these "Songs of Ascent" - Psalm 120.

A song of ascents.

¹ I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me.

² Save me, LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues.

³ What will he do to you, and what more besides, you deceitful tongue?

⁴ He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom bush.

⁵ Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek, that I live among the tents of Kedar!

⁶ Too long have I lived among those who hate peace.

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

This psalm makes a strange start to the group of songs for pilgrims to sing on their way to Jerusalem as it talks about distress, deception slander and war. It would seem that the (unnamed) writer was not able to attend the celebrations in Jerusalem, but was stuck at home with people who were making life difficult for him. (I wonder if any of us feel a bit like that after over 3 months of lockdown!). The singing of this psalm would remind the pilgrims that they were indeed privileged to be able to go and worship God and that others didn't share that privilege. Maybe it could remind us also that we are very privileged to be able to worship God freely in our land - that we can normally go to a church service without restrictions and that we don't have to have a secret secure hiding place for our bible in case an unexpected knock comes to the door - as is the case for many Christians in other parts of the world.

Worship of the living God is a privilege and the blessings we receive are meant to be shared with others who don't know about God's love for us and the great salvation he has provided through his Son the Lord Jesus.

This psalm reminds us of three things we must do when we are experiencing distress or disappointment.

We must pray. Verse 1 begins with the writer telling us that when he's in trouble and calls out to the Lord in prayer, he gets an answer. Instead of complaining about his situation, he has the confidence to pray again and share it with the Lord, because he knows that the Lord has a plan and will work it out for him. People were lying about him and slandering him and would not make peace with him.

We too can have confidence in the Lord, no matter what our present troubles may be. Often these days churches are facing opposition and we as individual Christians are more likely to face persecution for our beliefs that would have happened even a decade ago. We need to continue to pray, but more than that the second thing this psalm teaches us is that:

We must trust God. Verses 3&4 are the message God gave in answer to the writer's prayer. Here's how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*:

*Do you know what's next, can you see what's coming, all you barefaced liars?
Pointed arrows and burning coals will be your reward.*

Arrows and fire are images used in scripture for lying words. The writer is assured that God would punish his enemies with their own weapons, but the consequences for them would be far worse. When we are slandered, lied about or misrepresented, when we hear God's name being derided and used as a swear word, we must simply trust God and leave it in his hands.

As well as praying and trusting God there is a third thing that we must do:

We must endure. Verses 5 mentions two places. Meshek was in Asia Minor to the north-west of Israel and Kedar was a nomadic nation in northern Arabia descended for Abraham's illegitimate son Ishmael. Obviously the writer could not be living in these two places thousands of miles apart. He is using figurative language to represent his enemies who were Jewish people who were behaving like people who were outside the covenant blessings of God. It would have been very difficult for the writer to physically live with the Kedarites or the people of Mehek, but it was even more of a problem to live with Israelites who acted like Gentiles. Christians today have not only to live with unbelievers but sadly often with professed believers who act more like unbelievers.

Despite his frustrations, the writer of this psalm was at heart a peacemaker and verses 6 & 7 tell us that he tried to encourage his godless Jewish neighbours to be peaceable even when they were more intent on making war. His loving words just made them more and more angry. All he could do, and all we can do in our situation is be patient and endure. We must make sure that we are humble peacemakers, not arrogant troublemakers remembering Jesus' words in Matthew 5:43-48:

⁴³ 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour^[1] and hate your enemy."⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We are going to look at some of these Songs of Ascent over the next few weeks, as we prepare, hopefully in the not too distant future, to get back to worshiping God in our church buildings. In the meantime let's, like the writer of Psalm 120, keep praying, trusting God and enduring patiently.

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