

1. Pilgrim's Progress

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we're going to pray together. Praise the Lord. Praise God in His sanctuary.

Praise Him in His mighty heavens. Praise Him for His mighty deeds. Praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Praise Him with trumpet, lute and harp.

Praise Him with the sounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Our Father, we are indeed willing and eager to praise You.

We thank You for the beauty of today, for late summer, the sense of fulfillment of Your ancient promise that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, seed time and harvest, day and night will never cease.

We thank You are committed to this world that You have made. We know that it has fallen under a curse, but that has not set aside Your ancient promise to bring a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

[1 : 04] We thank You for the different stages of human life, for the freshness and joy of a child, for the excitement and exploration of the teenager, for the challenges of middle life and for the maturity of old age.

We thank You for all these things. And yet we know that each stage of life has its problems, has its difficulties. Each stage of life often seems too hard to bear and the journey too long and too difficult. And we pray as we look together at Your Word that we will find strength, that we will find encouragement. We will find You speaking to us in the middle of our lives.

We thank You for these moments when we can draw aside from the good things and the bad things, from the things we enjoy and the things we would rather avoid, from all of our lives and all their busyness.

Not to retreat into a ghetto or a huddle, but rather to listen to You and to return to our lives, better able to live for You, better able to be the kind of people You have created us to be.

[2 : 17] And so speak to us today, Lord. We ask that we may know Your presence and know Your blessing, not only in these few moments we are here together in this building, but when we leave again.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So if we could, if you have the Bibles there, please, if you turn to page 516, and we're going to read three of these psalms, these songs for climbers, these ascent psalms, and we're going to begin with Psalm 120.

That's Psalm 120, reading to Psalm 122. And Psalm 120 is described as a song of ascents.

In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me, Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?

A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree. Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar.

[3 : 32] Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war. In the second song of ascents, I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in.

From this time forth and forevermore. And then the third song of ascents, which is by David himself. I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

[4 : 39] Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was the creed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

Their thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May they be secure who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers. For my brothers and my companions' sake, I will say, Peace be within you.

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. Amen. May God bless to us these readings from his word. The writer R.L. Stevenson wrote, To travel, hopefully, is a better thing than to arrive.

We all know that feeling, don't we? We anticipate something for months, we plan for it, and then sometimes it turns out to be an anticlimax. We all have that sense often, that the expectation, that the preparation, is actually often more enjoyable, than the actual reality.

[6 : 05] And I think sometimes, in the Christian journey, in the Christian pilgrimage, it's sometimes difficult to avoid that same kind of feeling creeping in.

Will the destination, will the eternal life, be all that it's been promised to be? Will we actually enjoy it?

And will the destination be a disappointment? And I think we think this often, because we draw too sharp a distinction between the journey and the arrival.

We don't see that the journey itself is part of what God has promised. Once we begin that journey, God has already called us into fellowship with himself.

And when we arrive, it's not so much an end, it is the beginning of something new and wonderful, the journey we've been on. This is how C.S. Lewis puts, and I'm going to bring him in early.

[7 : 08] I was going to say get rid of him early, but I'm not going to do that. At the end of the Narnia stories, this is what he writes, all their life in this world, and all their adventures in Narnia, had only been the cover and the title page.

Now if you like, we are on the cover and the title page. And he says, now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

And I think that helps us when we think of pilgrimage and arrival. The arrival is not an anticlimax. The arrival is the beginning of something far more glorious than the journey.

Now in these psalms, Psalm 120 to 134, the theme is pilgrimage and arrival, starting out on the journey and arriving.

That's why they're called Songs of Ascent, probably sung by the pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem on the great festivals. It begins with their own situation, begins here with Meshech and Kedar, 120 verse 5, and then in 134, ending in Zion, standing in the house of the Lord, lifting up their hands to the holy place.

[8 : 32] So we are on a journey that leads us, and I'll come back to Meshech and Kedar in a moment, that leads us from where we are to the destination, which is Zion, Jerusalem, city of our God.

Now that's the pattern of the whole 15 psalms. One of the commentators points out, helpfully, that each group of three psalms in miniature mirrors that.

Each group of three psalms, in other words, begins in a state sometimes of depression, sometimes of despair, and then at the third psalm, as here, we stand in Zion.

That's the way we're going to look at it. We're going to look at three psalms each of these weeks. We're not obviously going to go into them in detail. That's the way we're going to look at it. And I've called this one the Pilgrim's Progress.

So, we're briefly going to look at 120 and 122, the beginning and the end of the journey, then look in slightly more detail at 121, the actual journey itself.

[9 : 34] Psalm 120 begins the journey, and notice how it begins. In my distress, I called to the Lord. Now there's a very, very good spiritual principle in our lives.

In my distress, I complained and told other people. In my distress, I started to, I started to become resentful. No, in my distress, I called to the Lord.

I called to the covenant God. And the psalmist is lamenting here. And where is he? Woe to me, verse 5, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar.

Now Meshech is in the north. On the shores of the Caspian Sea. And Kedar is in the South Arabian Desert. That would be about the extremes of your geographical horizons in those days. Meshech, about as far as you can imagine in the north. And Kedar, about as far as you could imagine in the south. You see what the psalmist is saying? He can't obviously be in both places at once.

[10:39] What he's saying is, wherever I happen to be, whether it's Meshech or Kedar, or anywhere in between, I can begin the journey to Zion. I can call on the Lord.

And that's the point I want to make. From the place of exile and bitterness, he calls to the Lord. As we can do from our equivalent of Meshech and Kedar.

This would be a very surprising group of people, if some of us are not, at this moment, in the equivalent of Meshech and Kedar. We all run in our lives into difficulties, into dangers, into times of despair.

You see, these songs are realistic songs. They don't tell us, come to Christ and everything will be wonderful. Your life will roll on in an endless burst of song, an endless burst of joy.

No, they don't say that at all. They say the journey will be dangerous. The journey will be difficult. There will be hardships. There will be times of despair. And there will be the sheer hard grind.

[11:45] So they're realistic songs. But they're also reassuring songs. They point out, while there is danger, there is also protection. While there is hardship, there is also the Lord's mercy.

And while so often the journey seems to be going nowhere, we are certainly going to arrive safely. And that arrival is talked about in Psalm 122.

Let us go to the house of the Lord. Now the house of the Lord can of course mean the earthly sanctuary. But the much deeper meaning of course is that it is the heavenly sanctuary, the place where God lives.

Jerusalem, Zion, is not just the earthly city, but is the destination of the believer, the place where God is and to which he calls his people.

Now you see, this series is for all of us. Many here will have been on the journey a very long time. The climb will have been long. The climb will have been hard. There will be many dangers and difficulties.

[12:52] Others may be going through a very tough time at the moment, wondering whether we ought to drop out or whether we ought to stop climbing. There may be here those who are wondering whether we should start climbing at all.

Whether it's worth it. So you see, these songs are going to have a great deal to say to all of us. Wherever we are on the Christian journey or even not yet on the Christian journey.

So, beginning in Mechach and Kedar, the place of difficulty and danger, the actual circumstances we are in, and then, standing in Zion, verse chapter 1-2, sorry, Psalm 1-2-2, verse 2, our feet standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

And then, looking at Psalm 121, what comes between Mechach and Kedar and Jerusalem? And here is this great 121st Psalm.

Now don't sentimentalise verse 1, as it often is. I lift up my eyes to the hills. Now the psalmist is not saying, if I get out and go up into the hills and into the woodlands and so on, everything will feel better.

[14:02] Now of course there is something therapeutic in getting away from cities and into the countryside, the seaside and all the rest of it. That's absolutely true. But that's not what the psalmist is saying here.

The psalmist is saying actually almost exactly the opposite. I look up to the hills. Well there's actually no help in the hills is there? Ultimately. Because if you go up into the hills feeling despairing, you'll probably come down from the hills feeling despairing as well.

No, he's saying I'm lifting my eyes above the hills because my help doesn't come from the hills. My help comes from the Lord, the God of the covenant. You see what the psalmist is doing.

The psalmist is saying if you're finding the climb tough, if you're finding the journey hard going, don't look at your environment, don't look at your feelings, don't look at your circumstances, obviously we don't ignore these.

That would be stupid and thoughtless. Nevertheless, he says look beyond these to the Lord. And he says three things about the Lord which are so important for us on the journey.

[15:13] First of all, he is the Lord of creation. Verse 2 really is a concise summary of Israel's faith. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Israel was surrounded by gods but they were all human inventions. They were all less than the people who made them. This God, this Lord, Yahweh, the God of the covenant made heaven and earth.

Now you see, that's not just a nice theory. It's not just a theological statement. If he made heaven and earth, then nothing in heaven and earth can stop his purposes.

Nothing and nowhere in heaven and earth is beyond his power. Nothing we are likely to meet on the journey is going to be beyond him. It's very practical, you see.

This is strength on the journey. And also, as the devout Jew tumbled out of bed in the morning and said the words, Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

[16:18] See, what he was saying is my whole life belongs to the Lord. I don't have one God who looks after my leisure time, another God who looks after my work, another God who looks after my relationship.

That's why paganism was so muddled. Because you have to play these different gods off against each other. This is one Lord. He looks after me wherever I may be, whatever I may be doing.

He is the creator. Nothing can prevent him carrying out his purpose. Wherever we are on the journey, he will be there. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Whole created order belongs to him. Whether it's the hills or the valleys. Whether it's the sea or the land. Secondly, verses 3 and 4, he is Lord of history.

He is not just Lord of, he's not just Lord of the, if you like, the environment in which he lived. He is Lord of the times through which we pass. He will not let your foot be moved.

[17:19] He who keeps you will not slumber. He will not let your foot stumble is another way of putting this. He who keeps you will not slumber.

The you in verse 3 is singular. This refers to individuals. And then of course in verse 4 it's plural. Israel, which of course doesn't just refer to old Israel, but to all the people of God.

Just as there's no place where he is not, there is no time where he is not. So he is the Lord of everything that is made. He is the Lord of the past, the present, and the future.

And thirdly, he is, in the rest of the psalm, he is Lord of eternity. He is Lord not just of our earthly lives, but of the life beyond.

The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. Sun and moon is the totality of time, if you like.

[18:26] Back in Genesis 1 he made the two great lights, sun to rule the day, and the moon to rule by night. He means every day and every night. What does verse 7 mean?

It's obvious enough, isn't it? But what does it mean? The Lord will keep you from all evil. Now, that clearly cannot and does not mean that no danger, no harm, no tragedies will ever strike us.

Let me, a cruel and insensitive thing to say, and we all know it's not true. What is it saying? Surely it is saying that even in all these circumstances of life, everyday, and circumstances of tragedy, nothing can ultimately, ultimately harm the child of God.

Christians sin, Christians suffer illness and death, the same as everybody else. But, the difference is that they are protected by someone who is going to lead them beyond it.

Not surely what it means. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. Now, once again, going out, if you like, is the, suppose, leaving your house in the morning and going about the normal business of the day and then returning in the evening.

[19:46] But also, it means more than that. It means our coming into the world and our going out from the world. You see, you see what all this means. This God is not, doesn't just operate on a vast scale of the universe, of history, of the whole sweep of events throughout, throughout time and space.

God is interested in you as an individual. Now, we all know that if we simply think about the huge, gigantic scale, you know, the whole world, the whole of history, the whole of creation, we can become lost and feel small.

On the other hand, if we are simply concerned about ourselves, then the God we believe in is going to be very small as well. See, the reality of God is both the God, if you like, of the macrocosm, the one who is in charge of everything, is also the God of the microcosm.

He actually does care. And, I mean, when you think of it, this is astonishing. It's truly astonishing when you think of it. How can the God who made heaven and earth, who holds the whole course of history in his hands, how can he possibly be concerned with the affairs of a tiny ball of dust which is circling a remote star in a tiny galaxy on the edge of a milky way?

How much less can he be concerned? How can he possibly care about my work, about my relationships, about my future? And the answer that the scripture consistently gives is that he can and does.

[21 : 26] He is not too great to care. He is too great to fail. That seems to me what this psalm is saying. He will never let us down. And the going out, you see, and the coming in is actually the moment when the climb ends.

the going out, leaving this world and the coming in is when the pilgrim's feet stand in Zion. Only then when we look back on the whole journey will we see why you had to climb these hills and go through these valleys.

So this is a powerful message to all of us, isn't it? If you're on the journey tempted to give up and I don't know any Christian of any experience who's not often tempted to give up and keep on climbing, if you're not sure whether you can sustain it, the bad news is you can't.

But the good news is that there is someone who will lead you and guide you who will sustain you. As the psalmist says, the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Amen. Let's pray.