

## The Psalms of Ascent as a preaching resource for the Long Obedience in the same direction

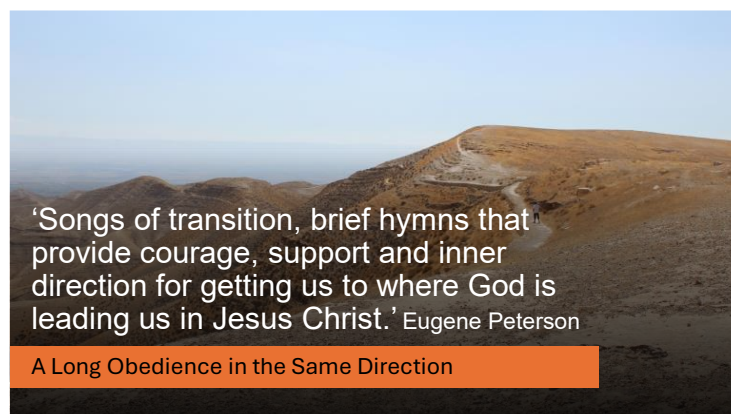
Psalms 120-134

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- In his book *A long obedience in the same direction*, Eugene Peterson describes the Psalms of Ascent as:



'Songs of transition, brief hymns that provide courage, support and inner direction for getting us to where God is leading us in Jesus Christ.'

As such, these Psalms provide a *wonderful preaching resource* for helping people in our churches navigate the '*Long Obedience in the Same Direction*' to where God is leading *them* in *Jesus Christ*.

*Every journey* – such as that of the Hebrew pilgrims setting out from their homes in rural Israel bound for Jerusalem – involves *motion* in *three dimensions*:

- *laterally* (East/West);
  - *longitudinally* (North/South)
  - and *vertically* over the mountainous topography of Israel.
- So with plenty of help from *Eugene Peterson*, we're going to explore the Psalms of Ascent as a journey in *three dimensions*.
- In the *first dimension* each of these 15 climbing Psalms function as an *object lesson in perseverance*.
  - In the *second dimension* these Psalms for the road serve as the pilgrim's *navigation guide*.
  - And in the *third dimension* these Psalms of endurance function as a *map marker* for plotting *how far we've come and how far to go*.

With these *three dimensions* in view, the Psalms of Ascent offer an *exceptional preaching resource* for *any pastor* wanting to help their congregation *persevere, navigate, and arrive safely* at where God is leading *us* in Jesus Christ!

### **First dimension: *object lesson in perseverance***



- The Psalms of Ascent *came alive for me* as a pastor and preacher when I first read *Eugene Peterson's* description of them in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

He writes:

'I have found, tucked away in the Hebrew Psalter, an old dog-eared songbook. The old songbook is called, in Hebrew, *shoray hammaloth* – Songs of Ascents. These 15 Psalms from 120 to 134 were likely sung, possibly in sequence, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals. Topographically Jerusalem was the highest place in Palestine, and so all who travelled there spent much of their time *ascending*. But the ascent

was not only *literal*, it was also a *metaphor*. The trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity – what Paul described (in Phil 3:14) as “*the goal*, where God is beckoning us onward – to Jesus.’

Or in *other words*, as the Psalms of Ascent were sung while hiking uphill to Jerusalem, they functioned as an *object lesson in perseverance* for the lifelong journey toward God.

Now every journey has a *starting point* – and *two starting points* for the uphill trek to Jerusalem are named in the *first* of the Ascent Psalms. *Meshech* and *Kedar*, were places *far away* from Jerusalem and both place names were *synonymous with violence*.

Every journey also has a *destination* – and *Zion*, where the *house of the LORD* was located is clearly identified as the destination in Psalm 134, the *last* of the Ascent Psalms. According to that Psalm, it is *from Zion*, that the LORD blesses the faithful pilgrim on their upward journey.

Yet *in between* the *departure points* of Meshech and Kedar and the *destination* of Zion lie many *hazards* and *forks in the road* before arriving safely at the LORD’s dwelling place in Jerusalem.

Let’s take a *quick tour* through a *selection* of the Psalms between 120 and 134 to see *how they function* as an *object lesson in perseverance*.

➤ In *Psalm 121* the pilgrim *lifts his eyes to the hills* in search of *help*. Peterson points out that what they would’ve seen on the hill tops were *pagan shrines* in much closer proximity than Zion, offering a *much easier* option for seeking a blessing from the gods. But the faithful pilgrim’s eyes were set on the *distant hill* from where help comes from.

➤ Psalm 121 contains *further imagery* for the *object lesson* in how *God watches over the pilgrim*, ‘He will not let your foot slip’; (v3)

the Lord is your shade at your right hand;  
<sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night....(v6)

<sup>7</sup> The Lord will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;

<sup>8</sup> the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore. (vs7,8)

➤ In *Psalm 124* the perils that Israel could easily have succumbed to – if the LORD had *not been on their side* – are remembered. For *if the LORD had not been on their side*, the pilgrim would *not* have been able to *go to Jerusalem* to worship the LORD – *despite* still living under foreign occupation at the time.

➤ In *Psalm 125*, with their *eyes set on Mt Zion*, the pilgrim likens the *security* of those who trust in the LORD to that of the *surrounding mountains* they were walking toward – as an *object lesson* in how God *surrounds his people securely*, now and forevermore.

- In *Psalm 126*, the pilgrim *recalls the joy* that had been expressed when the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion and God's people were able to resume their triannual pilgrimage for the worship festivals that had been denied them while in exile. Even so, the pilgrim yearns for the LORD to restore their fortunes *like streams in the Negev*.
- In *Psalm 127*, children are appreciated as a heritage from the Lord and offspring as a reward from him. Since the pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem in *extended family groups* – children also took part in the pilgrimage. We have an example of that in *Luke's gospel* when Joseph and Mary with the boy Jesus travelled from Nazareth to Jerusalem *for the Passover*.
- In *Psalm 133*, as the crowds of pilgrims converged upon Jerusalem from all over Israel, they had a visual demonstration of *unity*:  
How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together in unity!

Like I said before, the Psalms of Ascent *came alive for me* when I read Eugene Peterson's explanation of the upward journey to Jerusalem being not *just a metaphor* but an *acting out of a life lived upward toward God*.

*How much more* must these psalms have *come alive* for the pilgrims as an *object lesson in perseverance* as they acted out *their* long obedience in the same direction towards God!

- I believe that when the *preacher* takes notice of this *first dimension* of the Psalms of ascent as an *object lesson in perseverance* – these Psalms will also *come alive* for the congregation as an *object lesson* for *their* long obedience in the same direction toward God!

### **Second dimension: *navigation guide***



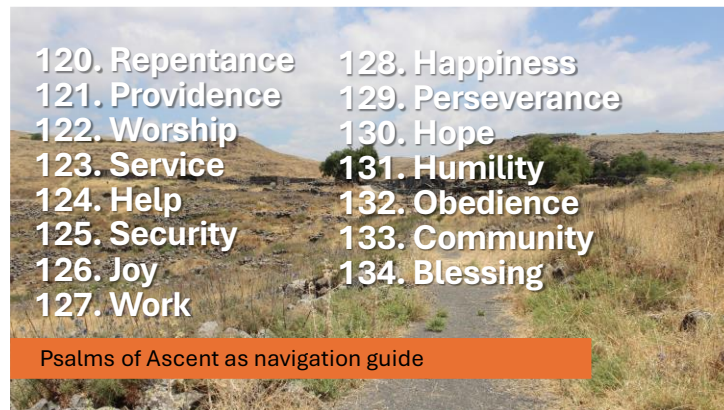
- In the epilogue to *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Peterson writes about his *convictions* that undergirded his pastoral ministry. He writes:

'The first conviction was that everything in the gospel is liveable and that my pastoral task was to get it lived. It was not enough that I announce the gospel, explain it or whip up enthusiasm for it. I wanted it lived – lived in detail, lived on the streets and on the job, lived in the bedrooms and kitchens, lived through cancer and divorce, lived with children and in marriage. Along the way I found that this also meant living it myself, which turned out to be a far more formidable assignment. I realised that this was going to take some time. I settled in for the long haul. That's when the phrase (from Nietzsche) "a long obedience in the same direction" embedded itself in my imagination and eventually became this book.'

- In the *second dimension* of the Psalms of Ascent – the preacher is *applying* how the psalms function as a *navigation guide* for the pilgrim's long obedience toward God.

Each chapter of Petersen's *Long Obedience* was written to help the *modern-day pilgrim* live out the Psalm in *their everyday life*. Each chapter has a *one-word title* summing up how the Psalm functions as a *navigation guide* for the life *lived upward toward God*.

Here's a list of the *one-word titles* that Peterson gives each Psalm of Ascent.



- Repentance
- Providence
- Worship
- Service
- Help
- Security
- Joy
- Work
- Happiness
- Perseverance
- Hope
- Humility
- Obedience
- Community
- Blessing

These *titles* could easily be the *chapter headings* of a *discipleship course* for new Christians – which is *kind of what they were* – it's just that the classroom was *on the road to Jerusalem!*

Of course there *isn't time* to look at each of these, so I've selected *Psalm 127* and Peterson's corresponding chapter title, as an *example* of how he uses the psalm as a *navigation guide* for *living out the gospel*.

➤ Psalm 127 is one of the *best-known* Psalms of Ascent that begins:

Unless the Lord builds the house,  
the builders labour in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city,  
the guards stand watch in vain.

'Work' is the title that Eugene Peterson gives it.

Peterson likens the warning in verse 1 to the disastrous way in which the *tower of Babel* was built.

The psalm shows both the *right way* and the *wrong way* to work – positing a *warning* and providing an *example* to guide Christians in work that is done for the *glory of God*.

He goes on to say that *western culture* takes up where *Babel left off* by *deifying human effort*.

'Technology promises to give us control over the earth and over other people. But the promise is not fulfilled... Structures become more important than the people who live in them. Machines become more important than the people who use them...'

However, Psalm 127 *navigates* the modern-day pilgrim to a 'way of work that is neither *sheer activity* nor *pure passivity*. It doesn't *glorify work* itself, and it doesn't *condemn work* as such.'

'The premise of the psalm for *all work* is that *God works* – *God builds the house*, *God watches over the city*... Before anything else, *work* is an *activity of God*... *God works*. And since God works and *humans* were made in the image of God, then *humans work too*. Our work goes *wrong* when we *lose touch* with the God who works "*his salvation in the midst of the earth*."

But after the Psalms *warning*, comes an *example* of what working *with God* is like.

Peterson writes:

'In contrast to the anxious labour that builds cities and guards possessions, the psalm praises the *effortless work* of *making children*.... The example couldn't have been better chosen... The entire miracle of procreation and reproduction requires our participation, but hardly in the form of what we call our work. We did not make these marvellous creatures that walk and talk and grow among us. We participated in an act of love that was provided for us in the structure of God's creation.

By joining Jesus and the psalm we learn a way of work ... that *places people at the centre*. The character of our work is shaped *not* by accomplishments or possessions but in the *birth of relationships*... We invest our energy in *people*.'

Peterson *imagines* what it might have been like as pilgrims who'd *expended much effort* getting to Jerusalem – and upon arrival making comparisons on *who had made the longest* or the *fastest pilgrimage*, who had brought the *most neighbours*, who had come the *most times*. Then through the noise of the crowd, someone strikes up the tune and starts singing the words to Psalm 127 "*If God doesn't build the city ...*" Peterson concludes that Psalm 127 insists on a perspective in which *our effort* is at the *periphery* and *God's work* is at the *centre!*

➤ I believe that when the preacher takes notice of the *second dimension* of the Psalms of ascent – these Psalms become a *navigation guide* for the congregation on *their* lifelong journey in the same direction to where God is leading *us* in Jesus Christ.

## Third dimension: *map marker*



- Whenever I travel a lengthy journey, I like to know *how far I've come* and *how far is left to go*.

*If only there was some way of marking how far we've come on our lifelong journey in the same direction and how far is left to go!*

In this *third dimension* for preaching the Psalms of Ascent they function as a *map marker* for the congregation's *long obedience in the same direction*.

A few years ago, my *Carey College year group* held a *reunion – 21 years on* from our *first year* at Baptist College. We spent a significant amount of the weekend hearing each other's *faith journeys* thus far since departing from College.

*Prior to graduating*, I remember being asked at a pastoral search interview: "Where did I foresee myself in 20 years time?" My answer was something like, "*I foresee myself pastoring a large, flourishing, church that's reaching the lost and transforming the local community with the good news of Jesus Christ.*" I expect each of my classmates would probably have had *their own* versions of where they foresaw themselves 20 years on.

But if that were to be *my map marker* for measuring *how far I'd progressed on my long obedience in the same direction* – well *now 24 years on* from graduating – *I haven't gone very far!*

At our *year group reunion* if we'd each attempted to *plot our progress* against our initial *pastoral career ambitions* – that would've been quite a *demoralising task* for us, I suspect!

But *what if* we could plot *how far* we'd come on *our* long obedience by using the *Psalms of Ascent* as a kind of *map marker*?

Of course, these *aren't* sequential lessons that are being learned from Psalm 120 to 134. They're learned *in parallel* and *repeatedly* as we navigate our way through life's challenges with Jesus as our tutor and God's word and Spirit as *our guide*.

But *I reckon* that if we could use *each of Peterson's 15 titles* for the Psalms of Ascent – as *map markers* for *our* long obedience – we'd be able to:

remember trials we'd gotten through with *God's help*, moments of *repentance* from getting *off track*, high points of *worship* and *joy*, low points when we'd had to trust in *God's providence*, learning to *work for* and *with* the Lord, lessons in *humility* and *obedience*, the immense value of *community*.

And as we shared our *pilgrim stories*, we'd be *encouraged to keep going* on the long obedience to where God is leading us in Jesus Christ.

- *I believe* that when the preacher takes notice of the *third dimension* of the Psalms of Ascent – as a *map marker* for the long obedience – these psalms can help the congregation gain a *sense of how far they've come* and how far they have *left to go*.
- Something that in *my experience* can help a congregation gain a *sense of progress* beyond the *numerical progress* through each of the psalms – is by *illustrating* the psalms with an *episodic travel narrative*.

The *most famous* episodic Christian travel narrative is of course: *John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress*. I've tried, *illustrating* each Psalm of Ascent with an *episode of Pilgrims Progress* – and I think it helped the congregation gain a *sense of pilgrimage* and *anticipation* for *what lies ahead* as we've gone on a journey through the *Psalms of Ascent*.

- So with help from *Eugene Peterson* (and possibly *John Bunyan*), a preacher can develop a *three-dimensional preaching series* on the Psalms of Ascent:
  - as an *object lesson in perseverance*
  - as a *pilgrim's navigation guide*;
  - and as a *map marker* for the long obedience in the same direction.

With these *three-dimensions in mind*, the Psalms of Ascent offer an exceptional preaching resource for any pastor wanting to help the congregation on *their* long obedience in the same direction to *where God is leading us in Jesus Christ!*





➤ *May the Lord bless you from Zion,  
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth!*