

Vacation Devotional
Summer 2017
Psalms of Ascent

Introduction

In the time of Jesus, obedient Jewish believers took time away from the regular routine of their lives to travel a long uphill journey three times a year to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem. Although the temple was the destination, their worship was not meant to be done solely in the temple. Instead, their worship was something done throughout the several weeks of their journey. The Psalms of Ascent (120-134) were: songs sung within families and communities on their trips *up* the mountain to Jerusalem. The ascent was not only literal but also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, a life that over time develops and grows in maturity and intimacy.

These specific psalms were intended to be sung and heard as *prayers* to help *prepare* these travelers to be in the presence of God. Similar to today, believers are walking this pilgrimage of faith being shaped, transformed, and prepared to one day be in the full presence of God. Others have blazed the trail of faith before us so we can now participate and walk on this path with eyes fixed on Jesus, the One who both began and finished this race we're all in. We can be energized, encouraged, and met exactly where we are as we look to Christ who has already perfected and finished this race we are all on in our faith (Heb. 12:1-2) and inquire what he would call us to next.

We are all on a journey, trying to decide the paths to travel on. Because every trip has a destination, the question we're left to ask is: what destination am I aiming towards? Throughout the summer the youth ministry at Bethany will be going through these psalms of ascent and our hope is that they bring up questions to consider along the journey of life we're all on and that they would remind us of the God we love and his heart for his people.

Day 1

Psalm 123: A Focused Service

When a rock climber ascends up the mountain, there is a feeling of life or death, a need to cling or risk falling. To make it to the top, the one climbing must remain focused on each grip, watching every stone, and looking up at the path in which they will take to reach the final destination. It is similar in our faith, believers juggle focusing on both the immediate path and *where that path leads*.

Read Psalm 123

Psalm 123 is an instance of service. In this, as so often in the psalms, we are not instructed in what to do, we are provided an example of what is done. In this psalm we observe an aspect of the life of discipleship that takes place under the form of a servant. God revealed

himself in history through Jesus who came as a servant to others. Jesus, being above all things, did not use His status as something to hold over others but instead lowered Himself to become a servant of others obedient to the end (Phil.2:5-8). Jesus invites us to this same posture of service. This Psalm helps us to see the posture we can have as we remain focused on God's direction for our lives following him. Just as Jesus remained focused on heavenly things, with the posture of a servant remaining gazed on the will of their master, we are also called to serve others.

Serving others can be both difficult and rewarding. Sometimes we are encouraged by appreciation of those we serve and sometimes we can our service is not only unrecognized but is met with contempt (v.3-4). Yet as Christ gave as an example others contempt does not mean we stop serving. When in the midst of the discouragement that comes with contempt we are encouraged in this psalm to look to God (v.1). And more than a 'quick glance' it's a steady, reflective and adoring gaze (verses 1-2) filled with longing and desire (Matt.6:23; Josh.7:21). The psalmist, as well as those who sing along, focus both their attention and the yearnings of their heart on God in prayer (verse 2). As opposed to the response of the people around them.

Just as on any long walk or journey, it is easy to lose focus or shift our eyes away from the things that will help us on the journey. Sometimes we can get distracted and inadvertently drift onto a trail we didn't intend. In these times we do not need to be afraid. We don't need to run and hide from God or our community, because as the psalm tells us when we direct our attention to God (v1) we will experience his mercy (v.3). God keeps no records of wrongs and extends to us open arms of forgiveness (Psalm 130:3-4), keeping us from falling (Ps.121:3).

Questions:

1. When are the times in your life that you find yourself getting the most distracted?
2. What are ways you can 'keep your eyes on God' amidst all these distracting things?
3. Who in your life do you find it most difficult to serve? Why?
4. Are there people who have hurt you and you feel like giving up on? Have you ever been this person to someone else?
5. How can this Psalm help us 'cry for mercy' in our own life as we give mercy to others in serving them as Jesus did?

Prayer:

Lord, we live in a fast paced society where one thing after another is coming into our sight one second and is gone the next. Teach us how to truly focus on you. Let us always keep you in mind during the day and help us gaze long and lovingly on You in prayer as we look to You and Your new mercies each day (Lam.3:22-23) and out of that be a servant to others as you have been. Amen.

DAY 2

Psalm 125 - Solid as a Rock

Read Psalm 125

Psalm 125 opens with this image of Mount Zion unmoving, like our own Mt. Rainier. Right away, the author wants us as Christians to see that in God we are unmovable, unshakable. Just as the mountain is solid so is our security in salvation when we trust God. The emphasis of this psalm is on God's sturdiness and solidarity. The life of a Christian is not walking a tightrope without a safety net: it's sitting in a secure fortress cared for and watched over by Christ.

Just like the mountains surrounded Jerusalem, He will always surround us; we are not left to fend for ourselves (v. 2). Jerusalem was an intricately built city with defenses and great detail to the outer and inner walls. Our defenses are not something we have to construct ourselves because just as great care was given to the city, there was also a ring of mountains to protect the city. There is assurance in Christ protecting our souls from any enemies, as well as God being ever-present around us.

We are faced with trials regularly, but in v.3 we are reminded that wickedness will not last forever; we can be encouraged that it is only temporary. Just as God was steadfastly with the Israelites through their whole journey, so is He with us, unmovable. His love is not dependent on what we do. When our fears or insecurities arise we can confront them directly and forthrightly: we need not fear facing them as it is not possible to accidentally drift from faith to non-faith because we are relentlessly pursued by a faithful shepherd. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us.

The last line in this psalm commands peace, or in a more colloquial way, the psalmist is inviting the Israelites, and current readers, to relax, because of who God is, we can KNOW that we can relax and be at peace within.

1. Does your faith right now feel more like a tightrope or a secure fortress cared for by God? Can you give an example of what makes you feel this way?
2. What are some places that you feel you can depend on God?
3. What are some places that you feel insecurity right now? (If you'd like to as this psalm suggests you can discuss those insecurities directly, knowing that God accepts you the way you are)
4. According to this psalm, what do you need to do to trade those insecurities for peace?

Prayer:

Take a moment to silently talk to God about your insecurities, ask him what he'd like to do in response to them, ask for peace. If you hear something from God be sure to tell someone in your family or a close friend. If you don't hear anything from God that's okay, his immovable peace is still offered to you and real even if you can't feel it right now.

Day 3

Psalm 131 - Humility

Read Psalm 131

At first this Psalm might seem odd to us in our upwardly mobile and highly ambitious culture. As it's calling us to be humble and be careful to not pursue the very things that will ruin us. Though ambition can be a really good thing, it can also persuade us to do more, to be more, and to have more in a never ending way. Anything can be an object of desire and ambition, and whatever it is, we often convince ourselves the next thing will bring us what we need.

In the Christian walk, many times people start their relationship with Jesus because they're in a place of desperation, hurt, or pain. There is no wrong place or way to start a relationship with Jesus and this Psalm reminds us that we all are in the midst of growing up in our relationship with Jesus. Through that process of growing up we, just like trees and bushes are being pruned in order to produce a more healthy crop.

Specifically this psalm is speaking to the places where our ambition has gone too far as well as the places where we are being overly dependent and not growing in our faith. David says in v.2 that we must respond as a weaned infant. The infant has a choice to be with its mother; it is no longer crying out for help with everything but begins to willingly trust the one who cares. It is not a smooth transition without difficulty, but one that ultimately leads to a deeper relationship. It is the difference between unruly arrogance (v.1) and faithful aspiration (v.2) that David illustrates.

This psalm ends with a picture of hope and contentment in Christ alone, as we know the history of Israel we can take comfort that the same is true for all people that God loves, even when we can't see It ends with the simple yet powerful reminder to hope always in Him. It is the hope in the things unseen.

1. Is there something particular that you are working rather hard for right now?
2. How do you know whether it's over ambition in a healthy way or faithful aspiration?
What do other people think of what you're pursuing?
3. Has there been a time, either right now or in the past, that ambition or pride has gotten in the way of your relationship with God?
4. What does it feel like you'd have to give up in order to put God ahead of those desires?
What do you think you'd gain by doing so?

Prayer:

Pray for God to give each of you discernment to know the difference between healthy and unhealthy ambition. Ask God for the willingness to trust Him more and to put your hope in Him above all else for what you truly need.

DAY 4**Psalm 133- Getting Along in Community****Read Psalm 133**

It might not instantly make sense why getting along with others (together in unity) would be illustrated by pouring oil on someone's head (v.2) or morning dew (v.3). Oil is a sign of God's presence throughout Scripture, a symbol of the Spirit of God. This psalm uses the command of God to anoint priests, given in Exodus 29, to illustrate the setting apart for service. With Christ, there is no hierarchy within the family of God, meaning that each of us are set apart for service to one another and we all need each other to encourage one another, remind us of the truth, and be a proclaimer of the word of God.

The second illustration refers to the dew that falls on the tops of mountains in the early morning. Mt. Hermon was the tallest mountain in their area, north of Israel at 9,232 feet. This is just a little bit shorter than Mt. Baker at 10,781 feet, and a lot warmer! The picture of early morning dew that drenches everything gives an illustration of morning freshness, anticipation of the new day, and a way that God cared for His creation. All this dew helped nurture the drier portions of barren Judean country. This imagery brings the people of God together when we view each other with the expectation of wondering what God will do today in, and through, each of us--how He'll use us to care for His creation: all people, creatures, and/or the earth.

This psalm celebrates the gift of warm relationship with others and expectancy of what God will do through each of us today.

1. Is there someone in your life who is particularly encouraging to you?
2. Is there anything you're wondering, hoping, or expecting God will do in and through you today?
3. Is there a way that you'd like to serve or care for God's creation today (another person, an animal, or a portion of the earth)?

Prayer:

Take a moment to either silently or out loud thank God for the gift of encouraging people in our lives. Ask that God would give us clarity to see not only how we can serve those around us today but also to see and appreciate those who serve us.

DAY 5

Psalm 134- Invitation of Praise

Read Psalm 134

The pattern throughout this set of Psalms, of which 134 is the last one, starts with repentance and ends with praise. This praise is not something that we do out of duty or obedience but out of gratitude and recognition of all the ways God has blessed us: being with us in the midst of hard things, the people who surround our lives, and the gift of unconditional love through Christ. This praise is what comes out of us when we see the gifts of God and express our gratitude.

This Psalm invites us to praise the Lord, recognizing that we don't have to wait until we reach the end of the road to enjoy what's there. Rather, all along the way we can be grateful and thankful for what we're enjoying in the moment, during the journey, as we get closer to the end.

1. Can you think of a time that you could say God blessed you? If so, what was happening and how did you know it was from God?
2. How easy is it for you to be grateful and thankful? What helps you be that way or what makes it harder for you to be that way?
3. Is there something from this week that you'd like to thank God for? Is there something from this week that you'd like to thank someone in your family for?

Prayer:

Thank God for all the blessings He gives us whether we can or cannot see them. Ask God to give us eyes to see where He and others bless us and that we would be quick to recognize those gifts and blessings.