

Summer of Psalms: Psalms 121 and 1

Digging Deeper: a study for individual or groups

The Songs of Ascents, compiled as a songbook for the road to Jerusalem, begin with two that capture the heart of discipleship, and the nature of the pilgrim road. Psalm 120 (with Psalm 2) was the subject of our last study. There we found a psalmist provoked to pilgrimage out of dissatisfaction with his life, wounded and betrayed, no longer belonging to his tribe. From that psalm we learned that pilgrimage requires leave-taking: we forsake the world's claims on us – we take up our cross, daily – knowing that our home is with the Lord and His people.

That sets us up for Psalm 121, a justly famous song full of promise for those who cleave to the road. Read that psalm aloud, at high volume if you can! Then read it again, slowly, paying attention to any particular line that leaps out at you (this is known as *lectio divina*).

1. What stands out to you? Take a moment to pray the line, amplifying it in your own words.

In the course of a psalm the “subject position” (who’s talking to whom) often changes. In Psalm 121 the change comes at verse 3.

2. Who is speaking to whom from verse 3 on?

Originally, the change in voice may have come because psalms were often recited in congregational worship, where the Levites and priests might voice some verses and the congregation the rest. But in the text as we have it, the effect for one person praying is worth reflecting on.

Psalm 121 begins with observation on the road. The psalmist looks up and reflects: if I meet with danger on the road, where will help come from? She consents to bring a little theology to bear, and tries it out in her own voice: my help comes from YHWH, the maker of heaven and earth!

At this point, maybe, she realizes that this truth is something she needs to lay hold of, and deeply, if she is to make the journey to Jerusalem without fear and anxiety. So she takes up a different “subject position”: she moves to stand alongside herself, and offers priestly teaching and reassurance to her mind and heart. She speaks to herself as “I” to “you”: “He will not let your foot be moved! He who protects you will not doze off!” The psalmist continues this way until the end.

3. Try praying the psalm again, this time addressing yourself from verse 3 onward. It might help to preface with your name, e.g. “Matthew, the Lord is your protector, your shade at your right hand”. Alternatively, speak to your soul, or your heart – use a word the names your “interior” self.
4. What’s it like for you to pray in this way?

What Psalm 121 dramatizes is a highly intentional way of relating to your inner self. It figures our selves as in need of formation, if we are to make it to Jerusalem. And it shows us at work in speaking God’s formative truth to ourselves. This project – a partnership between us and God’s Spirit in forming our inward selves – is deeply and variously woven into the Scriptures. It is a form of “sanctification”, a “working out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

At the same time, it is profoundly at odds with what our culture encourages us to do. Listen to the message from Sunday 14th February, to learn more about our culture’s attitude to the “inner life” and how we’re encouraged to relate to it. In barest summary, we are encouraged either to ignore it (the “real” world is where we should focus our attention), or to worship it (“discover and defend yourself!”), or to despair of it (as too complex, too hidden or simply too powerful to contend with).

5. How do you relate to your “inner world”? Why?
6. In what ways are you “intentional” in managing your thoughts and feelings?

A very stark admonition to form our inner world is given at the outset of the Book of Psalms, in Psalm 1. Read it. See how it enacts Psalms 120 and 121 together. The blessed life starts with “does not” and “does not” and “does not” – each in relation to tribes we must not belong to. It then requires us to cleave with delight to the “Torah of YHWH”, on which we “meditate” day and night. The metaphor of the deeply-rooted, healthy tree suggests our relationship with God’s truth as one of feeding and nourishment: organic and dependent, and thoroughly natural. This is how we thrive.

7. What sources of God’s truth are available to us?
8. What truths about God or about God’s world – and your place in it – most need intentional “sowing” in your heart?
9. How do you go about speaking God’s truth to your inner world?

Conclude by praying for believers around the world who do not have ready access to Bibles, or who are awaiting translations into their own languages. Pray for our own Hannah Prince, working toward a translation role with Wycliffe.

Going Further: suggestions for putting this into practice

Consider four invitations to step forward, learning to regain the helm – with the Spirit alongside – in steering the ship of your inner life. Choose one to discuss (if with others) or reflect on (if by yourself), and put it into action over the coming week.

Invitation One: practise delight in the Torah of YHWH

The thriving tree in Psalm 1 is someone who “delights in the Torah of YHWH”. In Old Testament discourse, “delight” is less about feeling and much more about action. One who delights in Torah is *exactly* one who meditates on it extensively (“day and night”), resolving to put it into practice. Psalm 119:11 is indicative, and good for us to pray as a godly resolution: “I store up Your words in my heart, so that I might not sin against You.” Thus “all Scripture is inspired by God and useful ... for training in righteousness,” 2 Timothy 3:16.

The primary love language of the Torah of God is quality time. Give quality time to the Scriptures this year, in ways that work with the seasonality of your life, and with your temperament and energy. Extraverts will want to join a study group, or a devotional prayer group that prays the scriptures. If you’re based at home, quality time might mean getting out: hook into a group that meets together in person. If you’re forever out and about, hook into an online group. Introverts may want a Bible-in-a-year plan, of which there are many. Either may want to hook up to a podcast that’s focussed on the Scriptures, weaving attention to the Bible into the fabric of your life, when driving or walking. In Lifepoint we preach primarily from the Scriptures, and there’s a resource that goes with every message preached. Choose to make use of it this year, alone or with others. The point with all of this is not to figure out the perfect strategy, but to start investing thought and agency in building a relationship with the Scriptures, intended exactly for our formation. Remember: energy follows attention. Give your attention to the Scriptures this year. Ask trusted people in Lifepoint to help you do so.

Invitation Two: learn to pray

Direct the modern love affair with the inner life to the project of learning to pray. Wake up to the teasing excitement of the idea that a tripersonal God is communicating with you, and you get to discover how, and to respond. Thus “with every kind of prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit!” (Ephesians 6:18a). “Unceasingly pray!” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

All of the previous applies here too. You are distinctively you in time and space, and the Lord loves to work with you in the way that He’s made you. Extraverts

pray with others particularly; introverts by themselves. If you value structure, get into liturgy; there are some great apps for this. If you prefer to extemporise, open your eyes wide and respond to what you see and hear and experience.

When life is busy, “snack” throughout the day; but embrace some form of regular Sabbath where you can give time more generously and attend more closely. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy!” (Exodus 20:8). A blend of time alone and with others on the Sabbath is best.

Ask the Lord to bless you in this. Pray, “Lord, please teach me to hear Your voice, and to speak honestly and openly with You. Keep me faithful in bringing the needs of others to you in prayer.”

Invitation Three: create space for your inner world, to allow for growth

Metaphorically, this is about obeying water restrictions. Switch off the sprinkler and grab a watering can. You don’t have to pay attention to everything. You don’t have to read about the latest in Gaza or Ukraine, several times a day. You don’t have to loop through half a dozen apps when someone sends you a message. In fact, put your phone down, since it is ingeniously designed to get you watering every interest you have, healthy or un-. Walk more – it’s summer, after all. Listen to forms of music that, for you, can sit in the background, rather than calling for your attention. Read some well-written fiction that enlarges your “moral imagination”.

The logic here is that we hunger for what we feed on; more exactly, energy follows attention. If you refuse to dissipate your energy by directing attention to everything that crosses your mental path, you release a lot more energy to the intentional work of prayer and scripture. Above all, don’t water weeds – addictive, valueless habits of thought and practice. Remember that without the “no” there is not much value in saying “yes”.

Ask the Lord to help you in this. Pray, “Forgive me, Lord, for filling my life with distraction. Work with me to simplify. Teach me to water only what you would like to see grow.”

Invitation Four: take responsibility – appropriately – for the spiritual growth of others

Most of us cannot tolerate hypocrisy for long in ourselves, and if we’re in healthy relationships with others, they will soon name it. Because of this, stepping into responsibility will bring a positive pressure on you to get intentional around your own discipleship, including of your inward life. Heed Paul’s instruction: “Instead

of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Look not to your own interests but to those of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4)

Don't just attend a group; take leadership in it in some way. Become a mentor, however casually, for someone less experienced in the Christian Way. All of this will require you to upskill. Learn to preach; learn to lead a small group; learn to lead a prayer meeting; learn to lead an Alpha group; learn some skills in friendship, not least with a view to helping others hear your Jesus story. Staff, elders and others are all keen to help you learn, and to connect you with good options. Learning the skills of leadership in ministry and mission is challenge for a good purpose, and an excellent way to hothouse your spiritual growth.

The Lord is in this too and will help. Ask Him: “Give me courage to step up this year, Lord. And keep me from hypocrisy.”