

PSALMS 120 and 121

Psalm 120 and those following up to Psalm 134 all have the heading, "A Song of Ascents." The Hebrew word used for *ascents* in this heading, according to Leupold, allows for four major interpretations, each of which has found adherents. The first interpretation renders the Hebrew word "steps," referring to the internal structure of the psalms themselves. But some of the psalms fail to show this type of progression. The second interpretation refers the word "steps" to the actual steps of the temple, those that lead up to the Court of the Men. There were fifteen of these steps. The third interpretation notes that the singular of the noun used in these titles means "ascent," in the sense of the going up of the children of Israel from captivity in Babylon to the Holy Land. This interpretation fails to explain why the plural should be used at the heading of the psalms. Leupold favors the fourth interpretation, that the title means "a pilgrim song." He writes, "a rather common usage of the verb root involved is that wherever the verb is used it means 'to go up' to Jerusalem or to the holy place (cf., 1 Sam. 1:3)." Such going up was characteristic of the three major festivals in Israel. Yet Leupold freely admits that Psalm 120 does not give the impression of having been written for use of pilgrims on their journey to the holy city, but perhaps reflects a postexilic situation.

Some scholars like the title "Songs of Degrees." Spurgeon, in *The Treasury of David*, vol. 3, gives a good summary of the interpretations offered. Beginning with his exposition of Psalm 120, Spurgeon writes: "These appear to us to be Pilgrim Psalms, but we are not sure that they were always sung in company; for many of them are in the first person singular. No doubt there were solitary pilgrims as well as troops who went to the house of God in company, and for these lonely ones hymns were prepared."

Psalm 120 **A Song of Ascents.**

- 1 In my trouble I cried to YAHWEH, and He answered me.
- 2 Deliver my soul, O YAHWEH, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.
- 3 What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?
- 4 Sharp arrows of the warrior, with the *burning* coals of the broom tree.
- 5 Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech, for I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
- 6 Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace.
- 7 I am *for* peace, but when I speak, they are for war.

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Psalm 121 **A Song of Ascents.**

Here is a psalm of trust. It counsels men to trust in Yahweh in all situations of life. Like most psalms in this small collection (120-134), it breathes a somewhat subdued faith, but faith nevertheless. Its tone is very plain and practical, and thus it allows for the broadest possible use under all manner of circumstances. Let us meditate upon it and reap its benefits.

- 1 I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?
- 2 My help *comes* from YAHWEH, Who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 YAHWEH is your keeper; YAHWEH is your shade on your right hand.
- 6 The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.
- 7 YAHWEH will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul.
- 8 YAHWEH will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.

PRAYER

O Lord God, you are a refuge for all who put their trust in you. Have mercy upon us, for we live in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Keep us from the tyranny of ungodly men, that we be not ensnared by evil conversation nor led astray from the paths of peace and godliness. Purify our hearts through the sanctifying influence of your Holy Spirit, that in all our thoughts, words, and actions we may always seek your honor and glory. Let charity reign in our hearts, elevating our minds to you, the Author of all good, whose mercy extends over all your works. Let your special grace go before us and put into our hearts good desires, and by your continual help we shall bring forth fruit unto eternal life, to the praise of our great Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.