

THE PSALMS - PART III

THE PILGRIM PSALMS

I. The pilgrim psalms, i.e., psalms 120-134, appear as a group in the Book of Psalms, each containing the heading "psalm of ascent."

A. The most common explanation is that these psalms, although very possibly written independently, were grouped together to be prayed by the ancient Israelites as they went up to the temple, especially for major feasts. The Navarre Bible describes how the psalms may have reflected a progression from the first stages of setting forth to Jerusalem, to the gates of the city itself, to the Temple itself, and ends with prayers to be offered in the Temple itself.

B. Some of the Church fathers, including St. Augustine and Cassiodorus, saw in the pilgrim psalms descriptions of fifteen steps along the path of the soul toward God.

C. The psalms do not describe a neat progression from lower stages consistently to higher ones. There is an alternation between more joyful and more difficult circumstances, along with an overall sense of advancement as one moves through the psalms. This structure is not inconsistent with the notion of the pilgrim psalms describing the path of the human soul toward God, for such a path is not in this life usually one of simple progression, but one of an alternation between struggle and advancement.

D. The pilgrim psalms can also be seen as five sets of psalms (which for the most part consist of three psalms each) that progress through three themes in succession: (1) an appeal to God for assistance against guilt and/or enemies, along with a recollection of past assistance from God; (2) a moral exhortation, along the lines of wisdom literature, to rely on God and abide by His law; and (3) a peaceful vision of God present to His people. These themes roughly reflect the theme of the three greatest feasts in Judaism: (1) Passover, which celebrated God's deliverance of His people from Egypt; (2) the Feast of Weeks, which emphasized the contrast between slavery in Egypt and the law and an offering back to God of His blessings; and (3) the Feast of Booths, which was a joyful celebration of prosperity in the presence of God. See Deut 16:1-17. The following outline will organize the psalms along the lines of these five groups, with comments on how they can reflect both the progress to the Temple and the progress of the human soul toward God.

II. Psalms 120-122 focus on a movement away from isolation amidst enemies to unity among those who worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

A. Psalm 120 begins with a call to God for help amidst enemies, and in particular those who are deceitful and warlike.

- The references to Meshech and Kedar indicate places far away from Jerusalem. Meshech was in the far north, either in the mountains of modern day Turkey or even beyond the Black Sea, close to the Caucasus mountains. Kedar by contrast was a tribe in the Arabian Peninsula, far to the southeast.

- This psalm reflects the desire of one to begin on a journey to the Temple, or the journey of the soul to God, in the midst of difficult circumstances.

B. Psalm 121 reflects a pilgrim progressing along the path to the Temple, seeing the hills of the Holy Land, or most likely, even of Mount Zion itself. The Psalm then begins to give wisdom advice to others about God providence when traveling. The reference to the sun and the moon were based upon the dangers of being in the desert sun too long, as well as the belief that excessive exposure to the moon could cause mental problems. Although literally about travel toward the Temple, by extension, it is also advice to trust in God to protect one from all that would threaten one's virtue and faith.

C. Psalm 122 then reflects the arrival in Jerusalem and anticipation of entering the Temple. Now there is a celebration at the presence of God in the midst of "the tribes of the Lord" under the guidance of the heir to David. There is a final benediction wishing peace upon all who love Jerusalem. By extension, this psalm reflects both the joy of Christians at worship in which hosts of the heavenly Jerusalem joins us and the joy of a new saint arriving in paradise.

III. Psalms 123 to 126:3 focus on God's providential care of His people, especially in the midst of opposing forces.

A. Psalm 123 begins by invoking the image of a man who is seeking mercy or a favor from a master or mistress. It confesses to a proud mind and asks for deliverance of God's people from the influence of the insolent and the arrogant.

- The Psalm could reflect a sense of repentance as an ancient Israelite approached the sacred presence of God in the Temple, or as a person sees his sins more clearly when he comes closer to God.

B. Psalm 124 then gives vivid natural images to symbolize God's deliverance of His whole people. The images are those of threatening chaos, with Israel's enemies compared to vicious sea animals, floods, wild beasts, and snares. It forms a connection to Psalms 121, saying "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," extending to the whole people the

proclamation of the earlier psalm.

- The psalm is fitting for one entering the Temple, reflecting on the dangers that his people have overcome in establishing and keeping the Temple and the worship of God. It is for all the faithful a reflection on the providence with which God has guided the Church as well.

C. Psalm 125 then turns to a moral exhortation, with the contrasting image of Mount Zion representing the stability of a faithful life.

- It would reflect the sentiments of one entering into the glory of Jerusalem and applying God's protection of His temple there to His protection of each person.
- There is a bitter irony here, for the mountains surrounding Jerusalem did not in the end protect her from the Babylonians, or later from the Romans. However, there is an assurance that, for the sake of preserving the faith, God will always free His people from oppression. There is, however, an implication that one may allow enemies to enter by one's unfaithfulness.
- It is especially applicable to the guidance and protection God gives His people and the worship we offer. See Matt. 16:18; Eph. 5:29-30; Hebrews 12:22.

D. Psalm 126, verses 1-3, then describe a joyful scene in which God restores His people from exile. The restoration brings even pagan peoples to honor God.

- These verses probably describe the return of the Chosen People from the Babylonians exile, and a pilgrim's reflection on God's continuing guidance of them.
- This part of the psalm can easily represent a faithful person looking back on God's restoration of him to a state of innocence.

IV. Psalms 126:4 - 128 then focus primarily on domestic scenes, such as those of the city, the home, work and farming.

A. Psalm 126, verses 4-6 take a dramatic turn, as the optimism of the first three verses turns suddenly to a plea for help in the

midst of distress.

- The reference to the dry streams of the Negeb recalls to mind areas of the Promised land where the river beds and area surrounding them would be desolate until a rain, at which time they would suddenly blossom.
- The idea would be one of a pilgrim entering Jerusalem, but more reflecting on the struggles of his people.
- This psalm reflects the struggles in growing toward God in the midst of difficulties and disappointments. It ends with a declaration of trust in God, with the notion of using one's sorrows as seed for a greater life. See Matt. 5:3-10; Luke 6:20-26.

B. Psalm 127 then picks up on the moral exhortation at the end of Psalm 126. It begins by focusing on the establishment of a house or the preservation of a city, declaring that trust in God is what is most central. It then focuses on children, which would have been the natural implication, for a city or a house was considered worthless without children to defend and inherit them. See Gen. 15:1-6. In 2 Samuel 7, the term house is applied both to the house of God (i.e. the Temple) and to the house of David.

- The psalm especially focuses on the notion of children as a defense against opponents in one's old age.
- The psalm could easily be prayed by one entering the Temple, but knows that all of its protections are useless if it does not remain faithful. The psalm is also particularly fitting for the more stable times in one's life in which one may be tempted to trust in oneself.

C. Psalm 128 then picks up on the domestic images of Psalm 127 and asks God's blessing on the just in general and on a family in particular.

- It asks for prosperity and happiness based upon one's work and one's family. This scene contrasts with the fruitless toil of those who work without God describe in Psalm 127. In the agricultural economy of the Chosen people, vines and olives trees were common symbols of health and vigor.
- The psalm would naturally be addressed to a friend or relative that one meets in the Temple or as part of a faithful life.

V. Psalms 129 - 131 focus on God's righteousness, mercy, and blessings for those who are humble before Him.

A. Psalm 129 continues the agricultural imagery from Psalm 128, but now in the context of suffering. It compares the sufferings of a faithful person to the tearing up of a field for planting.

- But there is a more positive aspect both with the declaration that God has freed the speaker and with the implication that the field is plowed up, but for the sake of producing fruit.
- This fruitfulness is contrasting with the quick withering of the grass that grows easily and without effort on a rooftop, symbolizing the fate of the wicked. See Mark 4:1-29.
- This psalm may be the prayer of one in the Temple who knows that it could be more glorious if it were not for foreign interference. It is also fitting for the faithful in times of struggles with the world, calling for trust in God's righteousness.

B. Psalm 130 then tempers the call for punishment with a reflection on the mercy of God that we all need.

- The psalm begins by calling for God's help again, but this time in the context of mercy.
 - The image of sentinels watching for daybreak reflects a desire that the danger pass and that one can rest again.
 - It is fitting that this prayer would be offered as a pilgrim was making atonement for sins in the Temple. It describes well our eagerness for reconciliation with God.

C. Psalm 131 then describes a calmness in the presence of God. Anxieties about mysterious matters no longer concerns the psalmist. Rather he trusts God as a young child trust his mother, knowing that certain things are beyond his understanding

- This psalm reflects the attitude of one with a profound sense of mystery in God's presence in the Temple, or of one of God's people deep in prayer beyond anxieties and concerns about resolving all disputes.

VI. Psalms 132-134 then conclude the pilgrim psalms with reflections on Jerusalem, The Temple, and the Ark of the Covenant. It ends with positive scenes of the people of God together in worship.

A. Psalm 132 may have originally been written for the dedication of the Temple or for a new king. It recalls the establishing of the Temple and the Davidic line and the promises that God made through it.

- The first ten verses contain an appeal for help, based upon God's promises to David.

- In the Temple, a pilgrim would pray this prayer on behalf of the king, or at least with a desire for the restoration of the line of kings. The promises made to the line of kings is based upon their fidelity, but the promise to Zion is absolute, seemingly resulting in the restoration of the kingship. See Isaiah 11:1. There is thus a call for reliance on God, especially made to the king.

- Today, one of God's faithful could offer this prayer calling upon Christ to lead His Church and "fill her with bread [especially the Eucharist]," "clothe her priests with blessing" and "make her faithful shout for joy."

B. Psalm 133 begins the peaceful vision with a reflection on the rightful unity of God's faithful people.

- The reference to oil upon the beard of Aaron reflects the consecration of the priesthood who would lead in the Temple worship and the sanctification of all the people. See Ex. 29:7-9; Lev. 8:1-4, 11-12. Mount Hermon was far in the north, with Jerusalem being the capital of the south. The image of dew from Mount Hermon watering Jerusalem thus is an image of a unified nation whose different areas support each other.

- This psalm stands in dramatic contrast to the isolation of psalm 120.

- The ancient Jew in the Temple would have prayed this psalm both in thanksgiving for worship with his fellow countrymen and possibly as a prayer for national unity.

- Today, this psalm reflects a desire for worship within a brotherly communion, and a prayer for ecclesial unity.

C. Finally Psalm 134 presents a vision of enthusiastic prayer continuing in the Temple through the night.

- The first two verses may have been addressed by the people to the priests, with the last verse a response of blessing by the priests.

- The pilgrim psalms thus end with a unified people at rest praising God night and day.