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Satisfied With God, Pt. 2

Introduction to the Songs of Ascents

Regardless of your ethnicity, economics, job, or lack thereof, life in the United States comparatively is pretty easy.

Years ago, at the Football Hall of Fame induction, a gentleman spoke of how hard it was in the south growing up: his very small house, his many brothers and sisters sleeping in

the same bedroom, the two jobs his mom worked, and how little they had to eat. Yet, at around the same time a missionary described the life of the Haitian people, and that they were so poor in Haiti, that the Haitians literally eat dirt to survive. Now that is real poverty!

According to Tim Worstall, writing in Forbes magazine:

Real poverty is that \$600 a year of the CAR [Central African Republic] or most of humanity for most of history, or the \$1.90 a day that the World Bank today identifies as absolute poverty.

America simply doesn't have any of this. It just doesn't exist and it hasn't for at least half a century and was rare even a century ago. (Worstall, 2016)

That is NOT to say that some have it more difficult than others in the United States. But it is to say that in the US we really do NOT know poverty — NOT like the rest of the world.

Now because of this it is easy living here to make this world our home — and so look upon it as the source of security, well-being, protection, and hope. Yet Scripture is clear: we must NOT to do this:

Matthew 6:19, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”

1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world.”

Hebrews 13:14a, “...here we do not have a lasting city...”

Philippians 3:20a, “...our citizenship is in heaven...”

That is the backdrop of our study of the Songs of Ascents. To appreciate this section of the Psalter, you really have to be a pilgrim and have a pilgrim's mindset! For this collection of Psalms was written with the pilgrim in mind.

[The Biblical — Theological Background, Select.](#)

This was written of the Patriarchs who lived long before Israel became a Theocracy,

Hebrews 11:13-16a, “ All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they

would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is a heavenly one...”

This was the mindset of the generations of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. According to Hebrews 11, not one of them viewed this world as their home. Rather, they “confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

But then something happened. At the time of Moses, God organized His people into a theocratic nation. And so, God gave His people a king, a land, an economy, and a position in the ancient world. And rather than take all of this as but a “type”/foretaste of what God was going to do when He ushered in the Messianic Kingdom, God’s people fell in love with the world. Their prosperity was their undoing! And so, they rebelled against God and lived according to their own wisdom and standards. So, what did God do? He removed the Theocracy just as He promised.¹ Speaking of the northern kingdom of Israel, we read this:

2 Kings 17:6a. “In the ninth year of Hoshea [722 BC], the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria...”

Speaking of the southern kingdom of Judah we read this:

2 Kings 25:8-12, “Now on the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar [586 BC], king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. So all the army of the Chaldeans who *were with* the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile.”

And so, once again, God’s people lived as “aliens in a strange land.” That truly became their identity! That is why, when we come to the New Testament, Peter, for example, addressed God’s people with the Old Testament language of the exile.

1 Peter 1:1a, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...”

Recall, 1 Peter was written in 63 AD, at a time when Christianity was becoming incredibly unpopular in the Roman empire. Persecution was on the horizon (in fact, in little short of a year, the Neronian persecution would break out and tens of thousands of Christians would lose their lives including Peter). In preparation for this eventuality, Peter addressed this epistle “to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout [the ancient world]...” Consider the two terms.

- To those who reside as aliens: *παρεπίδημος (parepidēmos)*; the idea with this word is that of a temporary resident alien. It is THE term used in the Old Testament of God's people both prior to the Theocracy and after it. This was to be their identity, for truly they were...
- Scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...: the word used here likewise is of OT significance. The word is *διασπορά (diaspora)* which referenced NOT so much *what* God's people had become, BUT *where* they had come. Like the OT people of God, they were scattered throughout the Roman empire!

Peter wanted God's people to understand that, with their Old Testament brethren, this world is NOT our home! It is NOT a friend of grace! To be a servant of God is to become nation-less- for "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20)!

This truly is the mindset we must have as children of God, that of the sojourner, the alien, the stranger, the pilgrim! Now in this context, what is it that God laid upon His people as their highest calling? Worship, formally delighting in the Lord! Recall the words of Christ:

John 4:23, "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers."-

God's redemptive work in this world is defined throughout NOT as saving people from hell BUT as "bringing true worshippers to God." That is what the work of Christ was and is all about in this world! As such, God gave this call to His people:

Romans 12:1, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [this is the language of worship as if we were a sacrificial offering] a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship."

As we live as "aliens and strangers", we must make it our passion NOT to "entangle ourselves in the affairs of everyday life" (2 Timothy 2:4), BUT to strive to use our bodies, mind, and soul to honor, exalt, and glorify God! From Genesis 3 onward, authentic Judaism/Christianity has been a religion in which God's covenant people- and so a people in relationship with God — present themselves to God as living sacrifices unto His praise, glory, and honor.

This meant that in both the Old and New Testament people of God were to frequently go to the tabernacle/temple in order to worship. In fact, Judaism required all Jewish males to worship the Lord at the tabernacle/temple no less than three times a year.

Exodus 23:14-15a, 16-17, “Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread [Passover]... Also *you shall observe* the Feast of the Harvest *of* the first fruits of your labors *from* what you sow in the field [Pentecost]; also the Feast of the Ingathering [the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths] at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit of* your labors from the field. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.”

Now as God’s people were “scattered” throughout the ancient world as “aliens” this meant *THREE PILGRIMAGES* to Jerusalem a year. And lest God’s people arrived at Jerusalem unprepared to worship on account of the many distractions that accompanied the journey, God commanded His people to redeem the time as they travelled by singing.

Isaiah 30:29, “You will have songs as in the night when you keep the festival; and gladness of heart as when one marches to *the sound of* the flute, to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.”

In other words, as God’s people travelled to the tabernacle/temple they were to prepare their hearts by singing. And what were they to sing? God gave His people fifteen Psalms known as “the Songs of Ascents.” And depending on how far the pilgrim travelled, they would have sung this section of the Psalter over and over and over again.

Yet, what are these Psalms? And why are they so named?

As you thumb through the book of Psalms (known as The Psalter), you will note that God has organized this book of the Bible into five sections or as they are called in the Psalter, “Books” (e.g., Palms 1, 42, 73, etc.). Using Robert Godfrey’s work on the Psalms, notice their content:

- Book One (Psalms 1-41) can be titled “Confidence in God’s Care.”

The psalms in Book One tend to be personal, reflecting some level of distress that quickly resolves into confidence in God. They are where you should look for comfort in distress, being psalms for those who are oppressed, sick, or suffering. (Godfrey, 2017, p. Lesson One)

- Book Two (Psalms 42-72) can be titled “Commitment to God’s Kingdom.”

The psalms in Book Two are less personal and more community oriented. They take into consideration the whole people of God and how God is providing for His people. (Godfrey, 2017, p. Lesson One)

- Book Three (Psalms 73-89) can be titled “Crisis Over God’s Promises.”

The psalms in Book Three are the emotional heart of the Psalter, containing the most distressful psalms in the entire book. They represent a great crisis in the life of the psalmist, a spiritual crisis of doubt and disillusion when it comes to the promises of God. (Godfrey, 2017, p. Lesson One)

- Book Four (Psalms 90-106) can be titled “Comfort in God’s Faithfulness.”

These psalms reflect on God’s work in creation and His covenant with Abraham. They set out to answer the cry of the psalmist in Book Three by proving that God is faithful to His promises. (Godfrey, 2017, p. Lesson One)

- Book Five (Psalms 107-150) can be titled “Celebration of God’s Salvation.”

These are a review of Israel’s history and show that God has had a plan throughout the history of Israel, even amidst exile! They further prove that God is a promise-keeping God. (Godfrey, 2017, p. Lesson One)

This final Book contains four different collections used in the context of worship.² For example:

- Psalms 113-118 are known as The Egyptian Hallel- so named because this section was sung during Passover.
- Psalm 119 is an acrostic Psalm sung each year during Pentecost.
- Psalms 120-134 are The Songs of Ascents sung while pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths/Pentecost/Passover.
- Psalms 146-150: The Hallel Psalms.

Our focus in the coming weeks will be on the collection known as The Songs of Ascents- a section which Spurgeon identified as “A Psalter within the Psalter. (Spurgeon C. , 2004, p. 290)

The Meaning of the “Song of Ascents”

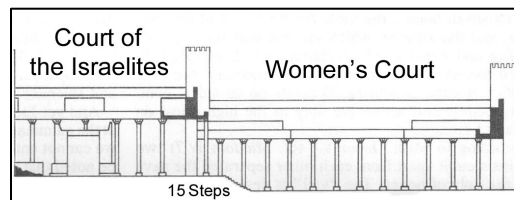
When one looks at the Hebrew at the Psalms in this collection, you would note that all but Psalm 121 contain the heading put there by God, “A Song of Ascents” or in the Hebrew, **שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת** (*shir hama’aloth*).

- Song: **שִׁיר** (*shir*); which quite literally means “a hymn” or “a psalm” and so is rather straight forward. There is no debate as to its meaning.
- Ascents: **מַעֲלָה** (*maalah*); this word has a broad use in the Bible and is

translated as (1) “a going up, an ascent”, (2) “a rising in the mind”, (3) “a step” or “stairway”, (4) “high estimation”, and (5) “upper chamber”. Notice that the word is used in these Psalms in the plural. So, whatever this word means we are talking here about multiple things.

Because of the broad definition of “ascent” there is significant discussion as to what this collection therefore is AND why God gave it. Scholars generally give four suggestions:

1. “Ascents” are Steps (or Gradations) Within the Psalms. In the 1800’s, scholars noted that each Psalm in this section seems to build upon the previous one. And so, utilizing the Hebrew linguistic tool, known today as Progressive Parallelism, this view contends that each Psalm in their content and theme overlaps with the previous one and then advances the thought. While that pattern can be seen in these psalms, nevertheless, today most do NOT believe that is what is meant in this Collection by “Ascents”.



2. “Ascents” are Steps Leading up to the Sanctuary. This view believes the designation refers to the fifteen steps leading from the Court of the Israelites to the Women’s Court on the temple mount. In fact, the Talmud says that the fifteen songs correspond to the fifteen steps between these courtyards (Middoth ii. 5; Succa 51b). And so, some have supposed that the songs in this section were sung by the Levites from these steps. Yet today, most do NOT accept this view.
3. “Ascents” are the “goings up” of pilgrims to the annual feasts. This is the predominant view today which holds that this section of Scripture contains the psalms God gave His pilgrim people to sing as they made their way to Jerusalem for all the feasts, BUT most specifically the three annual festivals- Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles. This is my view and so how I will be interpreting each Psalm. That being said, there is fourth view.
4. “Ascents” are the “goings up” of pilgrims unto their heavenly home with God. As God’s people long for their heavenly home (Hebrews 11:10, 13-16), these songs were given to aid them as they make their way to the New Jerusalem. This view oft-times serves as the basis for application when it comes to the third view — an application to which I too will reference in this study. For example, James Boice describes it this way:

These fifteen psalms (Psalms 120–34) seem to have been used by pilgrims who were making their way to Jerusalem for the three major annual feasts. Joseph and Mary would have sung these psalms as they made their way to the city with the young Jesus (see Luke 2:41), and

Jesus would have sung them himself when he went up to Jerusalem with his disciples. ¶ It has been said that these psalms do not reflect the high level of faith and spirituality found in other psalms. 'They are marked by a kind of plaintive note, by a mild sadness.' If so, it is appropriate for those who were on their way to God's city but had not reached it yet. It is this note of sadness that makes these songs so descriptive of the Christian's similarly hard and upward pilgrimage through this dark world toward heaven. (Boice, 2005, p. 1070)

Accordingly, sometime in Redemptive History these fifteen Psalms were placed together by God to form a Collection of Songs which God wants us to use in preparation for worship- both in this age and as we anticipate our heavenly home!³

The Importance of These Songs for God's Pilgrims

Recall the exhortation of Paul in Romans.

Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

In our fallen world, it is so easy to forget who we are and, more importantly, whose we are! In this regard, the Psalter has been given us by God to help us on our way. Consider^{4,5,6} what C. H. Spurgeon wrote, speaking of David as one of the authors of the Psalms:

His worst foes came from his own household: His children were his greatest affliction. The temptations of poverty and wealth, of honor and reproach, of health and weakness all tried their power upon him. He had temptations from without to disturb his peace and from within to mar his joy. David no sooner escaped from one trial than he fell into another, no sooner emerged from one season of despondency and alarm than he was again brought into the lowest depths and all God's waves and billows rolled over him. This is probably the reason that David's psalms are so universally the delight of experienced Christians. Whatever our frame of mind, whether ecstasy or depression, David has exactly described our emotions. He was an able master of the human heart because he had been tutored in the best of all schools- the school of heartfelt, personal experience. As we are instructed in the same school, as we grow mature in grace and in years, we increasingly appreciate David's psalms and find them to be 'green pastures' (Ps. 23:2). My soul, let David's experience cheer and counsel you today. (Spurgeon C. H., 1991, p. August 20)⁷

Based on this, it should be no surprise that the Psalter was a mainstay in the early

church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

In the ancient church it was not unusual to memorize ‘the entire David.’ In one of the eastern churches this was a prerequisite for the pastoral office. The church father St. Jerome says that one heard the Psalms being sung in the field and gardens in his time. The Psalter impregnated the life of early Christianity. Yet more important than all of this is the fact that Jesus died on the cross with the Psalter on his lips. ¶ Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power. (Bonhoeffer, 1974, p. 26)

With that, let us commend to ourselves A Collection of Psalms which God specially intended for pilgrims as they make their way to the “city of God”- the Songs of Ascents!

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End Note(s)

¹ Cf. Lev. 26:14-33.

² “The concentration of festival psalms in the middle of Book Five suggests the intentional shaping of a collection of festival psalms in this portion of the Psalter.” (Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 890)

³ One Bible commentator wrote, “The Songs of Ascents were a miniature song book, a ‘pilgrim hymnbook,’ used for the journey to Jerusalem. They were probably written at different times but grouped together later to form this collection.” (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 185)

⁴ Speaking of the Book of Psalms, John Calvin wrote, “There is not an emotion of which any one

can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves... call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy. In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine. Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need, and next, from faith in the promises of God. It is by pursuing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book." (Calvin, 2009, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii)

⁵ Martin Luther said, "[The Psalter] is the favorite (Weiser, 1962) book of all the saints, [for in the Psalter, the true believer, whatever his circumstances, may find] psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake, and in such a way that he himself could not improve on them nor could find or desire any better psalms or words... [if you get hold of the Psalter], you will have in your possession a fine, clear, pure mirror which will show you what Christianity really is; yea, you will find yourself in it and the true 'know thyself', and God himself and all his creatures, too." (From Luther's second Preface to his German Psalter of 1528 [quoted by Weiser, *Psalms*, 20])

⁶ Weiser said, "Apart from its use in public worship it serves as a means of individual edification, as the foundation of family worship, as a book of comfort, as a book of prayers, and as a guide to God in times of joy and affliction." (Weiser, 1962, p. Psalm 19)

⁷ The quote included the following preface which I left out on account of time, "Among all the saints whose lives are recorded in Holy Scripture, David possesses an experience of the most striking, varied, and instructive character. In his history we meet with trials and temptations that are not found, as a whole, in other saints of ancient times, and as a result he provides us with a shadowy picture of our Lord. David knew the trials of all ranks and conditions of men. Kings have their troubles, and David wore a crown. The peasant has his cares, and David handled a shepherd's crook. The wanderer has many hardships, and David hid in the caves of Engedi. The captain has his difficulties, and David found the sons of Zeruiah too hard for him. The psalmist also faced trials from his friends; his counselor Ahithophel forsook him: '[He] who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me' (Psalm 41:9). His worst foes..." (Spurgeon C. H., 1991, p. August 20)