

41. Psalms 120-123

Praying Psalm 120 with Jesus



This is the first of the psalms that bear the title: ‘A Song of Ascents’ (Psalms 120-134). A likely explanation of the title is that these psalms were sung in the caravans by pilgrims who were making their way up to the mountainous regions of Judah, to Jerusalem and the temple.

¹In my distress I cry to YOU, O GOD, seeking your response:

²‘O GOD, save me from lying lips and a deceitful tongue.’

³What do you expect to receive from God,
you who use words to deceive?

⁴A warrior’s sharp arrows, with blazing, red-hot coals!

⁵Woe is me, that I live as an alien in Meshech,
dwelling among the tents of Kedar!

⁶For too long I have dwelt among those who hate peace.

⁷I call for peace, but they are for war.

Here in Psalm 120 the psalmist is either living in a foreign land, or the behaviour of his neighbours makes it feel that way. He is complaining how hard it is to live as an alien among people who have no regard for truth or peace. In his distress he is crying out to GOD.

³What do you expect to receive from God, you who use words to deceive?

Verse 3 has the form of a question. In fact it is an oath. It is the equivalent of saying: 'Let double be done to me if you are not punished!' The desired punishment follows in verse 4.

⁴A warrior's sharp arrows, with blazing, red-hot coals!

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his promise: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives' (John 14:27). Paul says of Jesus: 'He is our peace' (Ephesians 2:14). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews offers the following exhortation: 'Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14).

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Praying Psalm 121 with Jesus



The psalmist has a particularly fine sensitivity to rhythm. Among other elements, he picks up the final phrase of one verse and uses it to introduce the following verse, which expands the idea. The key theme is that GOD is the one who guards [Hebrew samar] Israel. This idea is expressed in the name 'Samaria', given to the capital city of the northern kingdom. The statement 'GOD is your guard' (verse 5) is exactly at the centre of the psalm. The psalmist also uses polarity (sun-moon, day-night, going-coming, now-forever) to emphasise the all-encompassing nature of his trust in GOD.

This is the second of the psalms that bear the title: 'A Song of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134).

Verses 3 to 8 appear to be words of reassurance from the leader of the pilgrimage.

¹I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Will my help come from there?

²My help comes from GOD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

³GOD will not let you stumble. Your guard does not sleep.

⁴Israel's guard neither slumbers nor sleeps.

⁵GOD is your guard, your shade, always at your side.

⁶The sun will not harm you in the day, nor the moon in the night.

⁷GOD will keep you from evil, watching over you always.

⁸GOD will watch over you as you go out and as you return,
now and forever.

Special vigilance was expected of the guard during the hours of darkness (verses 3-4). We can all sleep securely, because GOD is watching over us. We call on God 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 51:9), but it is we who have not been vigilant, and so God responds 'Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!' (Isaiah 51:17), 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 52:1).

That GOD is watching over us is a theme often found in the psalms.

'Guard me as the pupil of your eye;
hide me in the shade of your wings' (Psalm 17:8).

'GOD keeps guard over all their bones;
not one of them will be broken' (Psalm 34:20).

'GOD will command his angels
to guard you in all your ways' (Psalm 91:11).

‘GOD guards the lives of the faithful’ (Psalm 97:10)

‘Guard me, O GOD, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent’ (Psalm 140:4).

‘GOD watches over strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow’ (Psalm 146:9).

In verse 1 the psalmist assured us that GOD, our guard, is not limited by space. In verses 7-8 he states that GOD's protection is not limited by time.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him pray: 'I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I guarded them' (John 17:11-12).

Paul assures us: 'The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one' (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

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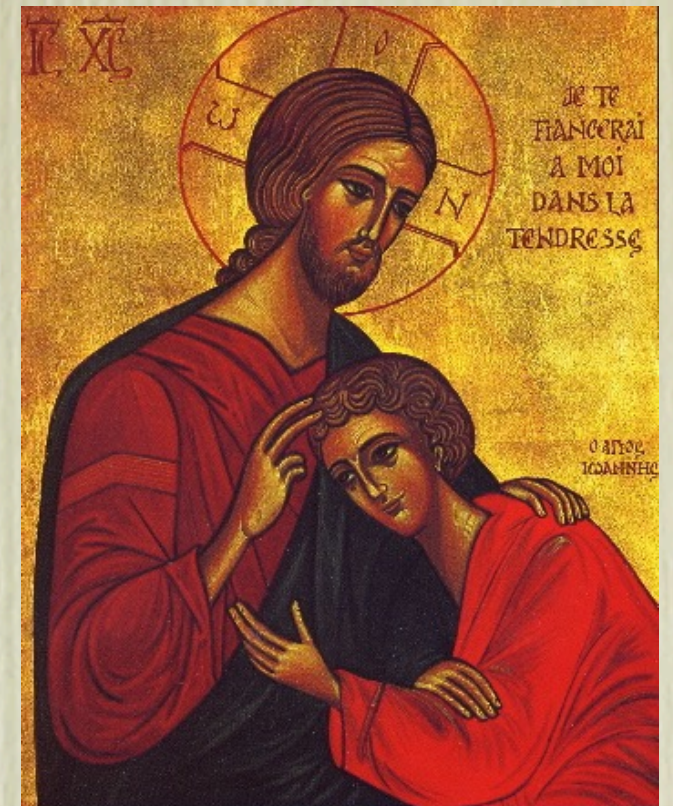
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Psalm 121



Praying Psalm 122 with Jesus



The pilgrim is singing of Jerusalem. Verses 1-5 focus on the first part of the name 'Jeru-salem.' 'Jeru' derives from the Hebrew *yarâ* meaning 'to lay stones', 'to found'. It is similar in sound to the Hebrew word for city, 'îr. Jerusalem is called simply 'the city' in Psalm 87:1 and 3.

Verse 1 recalls the pilgrim's joy when he sets out on pilgrimage.

¹What joy when I heard them say, 'Let us go to GOD's house.'

Verse 2 expresses his delight at having arrived at his destination.

²And now we are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³Jerusalem, you are built as a city so integrated and compact.

⁴To you the tribes go up, the tribes of GOD.

Israel's law it is, there to praise GOD.

⁵There is the seat of judgment, the throne of the house of David.

Verses 6-9 focus on 'salem' (peace), the second part of the name 'Jeru-salem.'

⁶For the peace of Jerusalem pray: 'Prosperity for all who love you!
⁷May there be peace within your walls, security within your towers.'

⁸For love of family and friends I pray: 'Peace be within you!'

⁹For love of the house of GOD, I pray for your welfare.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his lament: ‘As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19:41). ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (Matthew 23:37).

Psalm 122

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‘Let us go to GOD’s house.’

²And now we are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³Jerusalem, you are built as a city
so integrated and compact.

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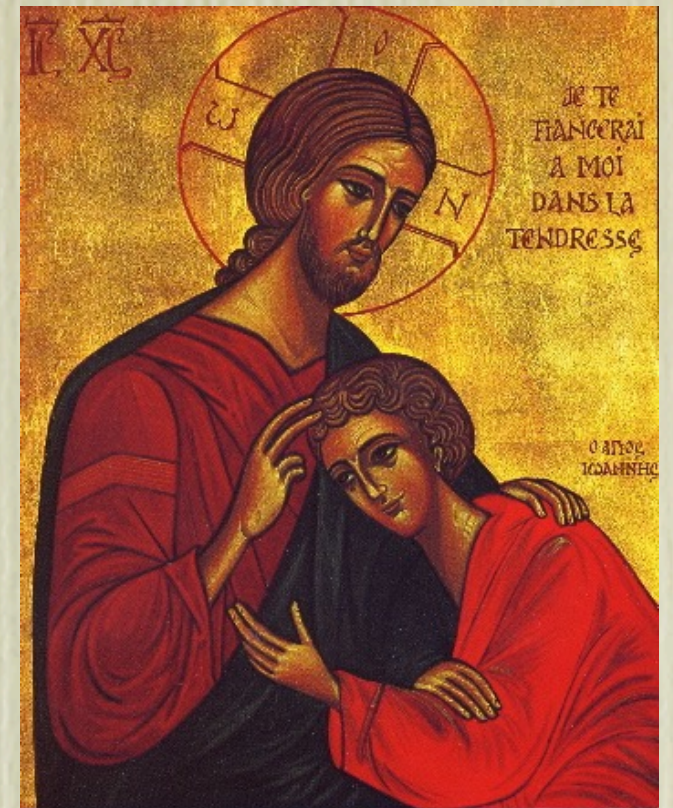
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⁷May there be peace within your walls, security within your towers.’

⁸For love of family and friends I pray: ‘Peace be within you!’

⁹For love of the house of GOD, I pray for your welfare.



Praying Psalm 123 with Jesus



¹I lift up my eyes to you,
to you who are enthroned in the heavens.

²A male servant watches his master's hand,
a female servant, the hand of her mistress.
So our eyes look to our God,
waiting for a sign of God's favour.

³Have mercy upon us, O GOD, have mercy upon us.

⁴We have had more than we can take
of the scorn and contempt of the proud.

The psalmist is being humiliated (verse 4). Does he belong to a social class in Judah that is being humiliated by others of their own people (see Nehemiah 5)? He looks to God, knowing that his real value is in relationship to God, and that God will never humiliate him.

³Have mercy upon us, O GOD, have mercy upon us.

‘**Mercy**’ translates the Hebrew ḥanan (to be gracious). The Greek Septuagint translates verse 3 ‘Kyrie eleison’ – words used in the Christian liturgy.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we think of him raised by the Father and enjoying divine intimacy ‘**enthroned in the heavens**’ (verse 1). We ‘**lift up our eyes to him**’ (verse 1), wanting to share his intimacy with God (verse 4).

We keep our eyes on Jesus for we want to do the will of his Father as he reveals it to us. We want to be like servants, ready to do the will of their master or mistress. Jesus was ‘obedient to the point of dying’ (Philippians 2:8). We pray for the grace to share in Jesus’ obedience.

Obedience is basic to Christian living. Obedience to God is as basic to prayer (including, of course, praying the psalms) as it is to every other aspect of our lives. Since ‘there are many paths along this way of the Spirit’ (Teresa of Avila Foundations 5.1), it is important that we follow the path along which God draws us.

The goal of prayer is communion with God which John of the Cross defines as ‘an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (Spiritual Canticle 28.10).

John is very direct: ‘What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks another of you? Consider what it is that God wants, and then do it. You will as a result better satisfy your heart than with whatever it is towards which you yourself are inclined (Sayings of light and love 70).

Teresa concludes her '*Life*' with the following prayer: 'May it please the Lord that I might succeed in doing the Lord's will in everything' (*Life* 40.24).

In her Interior Castle she writes: 'The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and don't forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare yourself with determination and every possible effort to bring your will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good' (*Interior Castle* II.1.8).

This teaching on the radical importance of obedience is repeated by two Carmelite saints from the modern era. Having mentioned her spiritual yearnings, Therese of Lisieux writes: 'Now abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way' (*Story of a Soul*).

Her contemporary, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes: ‘The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills’ (*Heaven in Faith*).

In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of harp string that is tuned so that it can sound the note intended by Christ when he chooses to play upon it, and she adds: ‘The soul remains under his touch like a lyre, and all his gifts to it are like so many strings which vibrate to sing, day and night, the praise of his glory’ (*Complete Works Volume I, page 158*).

The importance of listening attentively

Communion in love between two people is possible only to the extent that they are able to listen to each other and are committed to do so. It is the transcendent God who takes the initiative in communicating with us, and God does so through God's Word and through God's Spirit. How can we respond if we are not listening for God's invitation to share God's life and to enjoy the intimacy of communion with God in prayer?

It is not accidental that the word for obedience in the Hebrew Bible is identical with the word for listening. Listening from the heart is essentially what obedience requires.

In the Greek New Testament the word 'to obey' is based on the word 'to listen' with a prefix which adds the idea of listening from a position of submission.

Our English word 'obedience' derives from the Latin, which, once again, is based on the word for 'listening'. In Latin the prefix '*ob*' adds the idea of listening that is from right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest expression of God's will, with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God's will is the most liberating thing we can do.

Jesus' obedience and the obedience he expects of his disciples

Jesus, whose prayer we are invited to share, constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God's will. In essence Jesus is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God's inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God's inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion.

Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). Elsewhere we hear Jesus say: 'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work (John 4:34). It was the same, even when he found himself facing crucifixion: 'Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:39, 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

Obedience from the heart

God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. God's will is discovered in the circumstances of our lives, but always invites a response from the heart. This is what we mean by conscience: an attentive listening to the movements of our heart that are inspired by God. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and if we humbly and faithfully respond from our heart to these inspirations, we are promised a special blessedness.

If we are wondering how we are to listen to God and how we are to know God's will, we have the basis for an answer already. God is inspiring each of us, pouring God's loving Spirit into our hearts in the very best way, and wants us to welcome this gift and respond. We do not have to begin the conversation. Our primary task is to listen. To do this, we must, first of all, learn to live an attentive, reflective life, and to do this we must resist the temptation to live our life away from our hearts, for God is speaking to our heart.

The kanji for the Japanese 'busy' is made up of two elements. One stands for heart and the other for destruction. If we are 'busy' we are in danger of destroying our heart. Most of us live in cities, away from the natural, and generally slow-moving, rhythms of nature. Life is getting faster and faster, and it getting easier to flick a switch and fill up our time with whatever distraction is on hand. The speed of change has swept us up and gobbled us up.

It is possible to spend a whole day without encountering moments that invite us to quiet reflection. We sense that this is not good. We sense that our heart is being destroyed. At the same time, to call a halt and make time and space to connect with our inner spirit can be quite difficult. At least many people find it so. My sense is that this is mostly because we are afraid of what we might find when we go deep into our hearts. This is our biggest mistake.

When we are halfway in we do discover stuff we are not happy with. If only we dared to go right in! For then we would find what God sees. Then we would share in God's delight. Then we would discover the founts of energy that would enable us to make the changes that are necessary if we are to do what Jesus wants us to do: 'to live to the full' (John 10:10). If only we would make space for prayer, we would be in a position to hear God and respond to God, the source of our life who initiates the conversation and the communion.

Listening to others

Furthermore, we must realise that if God is speaking to us God is speaking also to others. We should listen attentively to those whose words issue from their prayer, for God speaks to us through them. In fact, because we are so prone to self-deception, God will always confirm God's inspirations to us by also inspiring those who genuinely care for our soul and are concerned for our spiritual growth.

John of the Cross writes: 'God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings, and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon supernatural communications, or be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through the human channel of the mouth of another human being. As often as God reveals something, God confers upon the soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to someone appropriate. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves' (Ascent II.22.9).

We find an example of this in the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He experienced Jesus in a dramatic and extraordinary way. Yet when he asked: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' (Acts 22:10), Jesus did not tell him directly. Rather he told him to go into Damascus, and there a man called Ananias would tell him what to do.

So the more attentive we are to others and especially to the community of faith in which Christ has promised to be present, the more we will be able to listen to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). To be obedient, therefore, we must be attentive to all the ways in which God speaks to us. While we listen to others, however, it is essential that we are also in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us, the echo that says 'Yes' or 'No' or 'Perhaps' to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God's word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

Both Teresa and John consider the role of a spiritual director or confessor. We are, indeed, blessed if we can find a soul-companion to whom we can open our heart, holding nothing back and knowing that we are loved whatever our weakness or confusion. This is a safeguard against self-reliance. It offers to God a channel of grace that is free from our inherent capacity for self-deception.

Being a soul-companion for another person is a delicate art. People are as diverse as flowers and God has mysterious ways of leading each one into communion. If someone has entrusted the care of their soul to you, you should act towards them out of spiritual love: a love that is free of self-interest, seeking only their spiritual good. If we are to be helped by a soul-companion, we will need to have faith that God is working in and through them. We need to be simple and straightforward, revealing the state of our soul as we see it.

How can the director, confessor or soul-companion be an instrument of the Physician of our soul if we are not honest or are selective in what we choose to reveal? If we have chosen to open our heart in trust to a spiritual guide with whom our soul feels at home, God will not let us down if we humbly listen to the words that come to us through the one to whom we are opening our soul.

As we listen to his or her words, let us listen to the echo of those words, the echo that arises in our heart. If we are humble, honest and prayerful, the Spirit of him who loves us will use the director's response to guide us.

Discerning what it is that God will

Discerning God's will is sometimes quite difficult. People can be very confident that they are doing God's will, when it is obvious that they are deceiving themselves. On the other hand, people can be very unsure of themselves when it is clear that they are doing God's will. How do we know? What does doing God's will look like? Are there signs that show us that we are not doing God's will?

Much of what we have already touched on in this reflection is relevant here. We need to live an attentive, reflective life in touch with our own heart. We need to have an expectation that God is revealing God's will to us, and we need to be listening for it. However, we need to guard against putting too much trust in our own convictions. The fact that we judge that we are living a prayerful life is no guarantee that it is God's will that we are pursuing in our day to day life. Since God's will is revealed to us also through others, our listening to others, including spiritual direction, is essential.

Suffice to add here that we must see what happens when we do what we think God is calling us to do. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians is useful here. He writes: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23).

If it truly is God's will that we are doing, we will find ourselves growing in these virtues. If, by contrast, we find ourselves becoming less loving, we should have another look. It is likely that we are being deceived and are in fact resisting God's inspiration and not carrying out God's will. Likewise, if we are experiencing a disturbance and lack of joy that won't go away, we should look again at what we are doing.

If we are doing God's will, even when this involves the cross, there will be a profound joy and a profound peace that sustains us below the pain and difficulty. Jesus felt abandoned on the cross but he was still able to address God as 'Father'; he was still able to commend his spirit into God's care. The same goes for the other virtues mentioned by Paul. Jesus said: 'It is by their fruits that you will know them' (Matthew 7:16).

Obeying a loving God

God is love. God is no lover of distraction, waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live as we have seen Jesus live: lives that are self-giving, life-giving and love-giving. God is love. Created in the image of God, we, too, are love. Love is not something we have. It is what we are. No wonder we want to receive love and give love. No wonder we are profoundly disturbed when we find ourselves unable to give or receive love.

Obeying a loving God

No wonder we are profoundly disturbed when we find ourselves unable to give or receive love. May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds, hearts, soul and strength. After all, it is God who creates us, holds us in being and draws us into the fullness of divine communion. To welcome God's offering of love is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness. Wanting what God wants is wanting what is truly best for us and for our world.

Psalm 123

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