

# Nomads and Pilgrims

## The Songs of Ascent

### A Modern-Day Journey

Pilgrimage. The word brings to mind many different images, from the trivial to the sublime. In Natchez, Mississippi, it is a reference to the annual springtime tour of antebellum homes, when visitors flock to the town to see period costumes and enjoy the blooming azaleas. Elvis fans are intent on making their pilgrimages to Graceland, Elvis's home in Memphis. In every major religion annual pilgrimages, trips to places of sacred significance, are undertaken by the faithful; Muslims go to Mecca, Jews (and many Christians) go to Jerusalem, Catholic Christians go to the Vatican in Rome or to sites where miracles are reported to have occurred.

The image of a pilgrimage has often been used as a metaphor for the Christian life and with good reason. As Christians, we recognize that we are on a journey, that this world is not our true home, that we should never get too comfortable in this present world. Pilgrims making their way to their destination, adding to their numbers as they go along, often find that the trip itself becomes part of the spiritual experience. This is the case for the Christian walk as well. We are learning as we go along.

Nomads are on the move, too. They carry their homes with them and follow their herds or pursue new markets for their handiwork. But unlike pilgrims, they are simply wanderers with no final destination. Wherever they make camp is home for the time being. Pilgrims, on the other hand, have a destination in mind and their journey has a purpose. Pilgrims are restless to reach their journey's end; they press on and don't linger too long in any one place.

The focus of our Lenten sermons and study this year is this theme of pilgrimage. Our texts will come from a group of Psalms called the Songs of Ascent. These are songs that were used by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the three annual festivals of the Jewish year. In some ways, they probably served as "trail songs," songs to pass the time and keep people entertained. But their content and themes also helped to focus the pilgrims' minds on the purpose of their journey. These songs helped the pilgrims prepare their hearts to worship God when they reached their destination.

In the same way, the themes of these songs can help us on our journey. They remind us of the tools we have to help us press on, they inspire us when we are tempted to feel discouraged, and above all, they keep us focused on the God who is at the heart of our true home and who is with us on the journey as well. Catherine of Siena writes, "All the way to heaven is heaven, for has He not said, 'I am the Way?'" As we study these Songs of Ascent, may our hearts be warmed by the thought of our destination and may our eyes be opened to the gracious God who accompanies us on our journey.

# Nomads and Pilgrims

## The Songs of Ascent

### Introduction

Refugees are a fact of life in our world. War, poverty, persecution and many other hardships force people to leave everything that is familiar and seek safety in another town or even another country. Desperation, despair, and sometimes the threat of danger are the strong forces that motivate people to take this step.

Psalm 120 is a cry of desperation, the kind of desperation that moves people to take drastic action. It is also an affirmation of faith that God can and will provide a way out.

~ D.S.

### Study Notes

#### Question 2

• Meshech and Kedar are the names of places that are both a long way from Israel and from each other. So, the references to these places are not actual geographic references but are meant as symbols of a way of life. For the psalmist, these places bring to mind the strange and hostile. Writer, Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse, "I live in the midst of hoodlums and wild savages."

## Repentance

### Psalm 120

### Observe & Interpret

1. When have you made a move or a dramatic change in your life (for example, moved to a different city, changed jobs)? What were some of the things that motivated you to make that change?
2. *Read Psalm 120.* How does the psalmist describe his culture? In what specific ways do you see some of these same issues in modern American culture?
3. How does the psalmist describe his feelings as he reflects on his circumstances? What actions does he take (or consider) in response?

## Study Notes

4. What does the psalmist expect from God as he brings his complaint to the Lord?

## Apply

5. How do you deal with your own frustrations with things in our culture that are not as they should be? What do you expect God to do about these things?

6. Some things about our culture are easy to spot as problems that hinder our spiritual lives. Our lax attitudes toward sexual promiscuity or alcohol abuse are clearly not what God intends for us. Other things are so much a part of our own way of thinking that it is hard to recognize them for the problems they are. Look at the following list. In what ways do these attitudes reflect your own way of thinking? In what ways can they be a problem in your relationship with God?

--Everyone has a right to a big house and at least one nice car.

--Your career is the most important thing you do.

### Question 6

• In his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson contends that society lies to us. The information we receive is factual, as far as it goes, but it is untrue because it leaves God out of the picture. As Peterson puts it, "...they claim to tell us who we are and omit everything about our origin in God and our destiny in God. They talk about the world without telling us that God made it. They tell us about our bodies without telling us that they are temples of the Holy Spirit. They instruct us in love without telling us about the God who loves us and gave himself for us."

## Study Notes

--Recreation is the most important thing you do.

--It's okay to lie to avoid hurting someone's feelings.

--Some things are unforgivable.

--I deserve the best.

--I have a right to be happy.

--The only actions that are really bad are those that hurt someone.

7. As we see how the world around us has shaped our own thinking, we begin to realize that we also carry the problem with us. Our only hope is to make a radical decision to believe that what God says about us is true and begin to let that shape our thoughts and actions. In what ways does Psalm 120 help us to express this decision?

## Study Notes

8. When we make a decision to turn from our current way of seeing the world (and the actions that are based upon it) and follow God's way, what hope can we find in Psalm 120 that God will help us? In what ways have you experienced God's help as you've made decisions to follow his way?