



# A PSALM

IN YOUR HEART

The Psalms of Ascent

Psalms 120—134

GEORGE O. WOOD



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I N Y O U R H E A R T

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR. GEORGE O. WOOD is general superintendent of the U.S. Assemblies of God. Before being elected to his present office, he served as general secretary for fourteen years. He was assistant superintendent of the Southern California district from 1988–1993, after pastoring Newport-Mesa Christian Center in Costa Mesa, California, for seventeen years. The son of missionary parents to China and Tibet, Wood holds a doctoral degree in pastoral theology from Fuller Theological Seminary and a juris doctorate from Western State University College of Law.

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# Too Long in the Wrong Place

PSALM 120

**A** young couple, fresh in the ministry, sat at their piano and composed the melody and words to this well-known and loved invitational hymn, “Room at the Cross.”

The husband, Ira Stanphill, went on to write many gospel songs; but, the bride who sat with him that day, Zelma—herself a preacher’s daughter—soon began frequenting nightclubs. Five years after leaving Ira, driving with her manager after a late nightclub singing engagement, she was killed in an auto accident.

We don’t know if, in her dying moments, she made it back to the Cross, the place “where there’s still room for one.” From all appearances, she stayed too long in the wrong location.

Psalms 120 is the first of fifteen psalms of ascent—the songs pilgrims sang during festival seasons as they made the steep climb up the Jericho road from 1,200 feet below sea level to the 2,400-foot-high city of Jerusalem.

These ascent psalms begin with the words of one who decided he had stayed too long in the wrong place, and the time had come for him to embark on the journey back to God.

The Psalmist tells us what triggered his decision to begin the pilgrimage home.

## Personal pain

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**<sup>1</sup>I call on the LORD in my distress,  
and he answers me.**

How blessed we are when God permits enough spiritual discomfort that we are ready to decide

to get out of the place we're in. The prodigal son never started toward Father until the pain of remaining became greater than the pain of going home (Luke 15:17–20).

Martin Luther reminds us the central mission of Jesus is to help us in such a moment: "Jesus never gave himself for our righteousness, but He did give himself for our sins. The first link between my soul and Jesus Christ is not my goodness, but my badness; not my merit, but my misery, not my standing, but my failings; not my riches, but my need. He comes to visit His people, not to admire their beauties, but to remove their deformities; not to reward their virtues, but to forgive their sins."

## **Disappointment with others**

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**<sup>2</sup>Save me, LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. <sup>3</sup>What will he do to you, and what more besides, you deceitful tongue? <sup>4</sup>He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom bush.**

Whom did you place your confidence in only to find out later it was all a trick? Is your life messed up because that trusted person lied to you and for a good period of time pulled the wool over your eyes? You never spotted their duplicity. You were so naive.

The Psalmist knows the path back to personal spiritual health lies in asking God for help (v. 2). A victim often never gets to "unload" on the one who hurt him or her, so the only alternative is to engage the victimizer in imaginary conversation (v. 3). In the flush of anger, you may also wish God would stick and burn your antagonist (v. 4).

You'll do better if you turn that anger into forgiveness (Matthew 6:14–15).

## **A decision to move on**

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**<sup>5</sup>Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek, that I live among the tents of Kedar! <sup>6</sup>Too long have I**

**lived among those who hate peace.**

**<sup>7</sup>I am for peace;but when I speak, they are for war.**

Jesus said that no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). You can't alternate between the old life one moment and the new life the next. The Psalmist rues the length of time he lived with a split personality, "Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek, that I live among the tents of Kedar!" (v. 5).

Actually Meshek and Kedar form two geographical polarities in the dispersion of the Jews: Meshek to the far north (Ezekiel 39:1); and Kedar, the secondborn to Ishmael who settled to the south near the border of Egypt—a clan described as living "in hostility toward all the tribes related to them" (Genesis 25:13,18; compare with vv. 5–6).

The Psalmist wanted to let go of his Ishmaelite split personality which put him in a location halfway between the Jerusalem of promise and the Egypt of bondage.

Are you having a terrible time getting unified again? The world pulls you in one direction, and the Holy Spirit tugs at you in another? It's your choice which pull prevails.

The pilgrim's journey begins with this psalm. Whether you are far north or far south, you must decide to leave the place of pain or compromise. The poet said it well:

*There is a place I know not where  
A time I know not when  
Which marks the destiny of men  
To heaven or despair*

You're "valley low" when you begin. How will you ever get up the hill, on top? Follow the example of this Psalmist. He began his ascent by letting God know he wanted out. He put his heart in the right direction even before his feet had climbed the first step upward.

## *Prayer of response*

*Lord Jesus, I too have pitched my tent in the wrong place. No matter how far away or low down I am today, I'm choosing to move toward You. I can't continue living as I have. I need Your help to change.*

*My thoughts on Psalm 120 . . .*

# Four Fears

## PSALM 121

**W**ith my daughter and son, then ages fourteen and twelve, we set out for a brief summer morning stroll down a path from the southern rim into America's Grand Canyon. So rapid and enjoyable was our descent that before we knew it we had reached Indian Gardens—a drop of four thousand feet on four-and-one-half miles of switchback trails.

We should have paid attention to all the hikers struggling on the upward climb; instead, we bantered among ourselves about how out of shape they were.

How foolish. By the end of the afternoon my wife, who had remained behind, was just about to call for the rescue squad when we rounded the final bend.

I learned two lessons that day: it's easier to go down than up and never underestimate the difficulty of the climb.

The Psalmist had no such miscalculation. In Psalm 120 he began his pilgrim journey of ascent to Zion by deciding he had remained too long in the wrong place. Now in Psalm 121, he stood in the Jericho Valley twelve hundred feet below sea level and gazed upward to the mountains around Jerusalem. A long, tough climb lay ahead.

### **You are no match for the difficulty**

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**<sup>1</sup>I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? <sup>2</sup>My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.**



The Psalmist immediately concludes he can't make the ascent on his own power. So, he asks, "Where will my help come from?"

Don't make the mistake of thinking verse 1 teaches your help comes from the mountains. Not so. The mountains are against you—they're the problem, not the solution.

Perhaps you face an insurmountable obstacle today. Your problems appear as big as a mountain; your answers, the size of a molehill. Don't let the difficulty become bigger than God. Instead, declare your faith, "My help comes from the Lord" (v. 2).

## You won't make it

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**<sup>3</sup>He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; <sup>4</sup>indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.**

The Psalmist worries about his foot slipping. Such could be a momentary setback, resulting in a serious injury, or far worse, a fatal fall.

Are you slipping today? Into grief? Depression? Feelings of worthlessness? Are you saying to yourself, *What's the use? I've tried and tried and it doesn't make any difference. I might just as well give up.*

From his exile as a prisoner on the island of Patmos, the apostle John keys in on the same concept as the Psalmist. John sees the Lord Jesus securely holding the "angels" (i.e., messengers or leaders) of the Church (Revelation 1:20). Jesus will not let go of you (v. 3). He's on guard round the clock. When you sleep, He doesn't (v. 4).

## You are vulnerable and unprotected

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**<sup>5</sup>The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; <sup>6</sup>the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. <sup>7</sup>The Lord will keep you from all harm—he**

**will watch over your life; <sup>8</sup>the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.**

Five times in this short psalm the word “watch” is used of God’s care for you. It means far more than the Lord looking at you. He’s looking out for you, guarding and protecting you from the hardships and terrors of the trail, including exposure to sun and moon.

He knows when the sun, the heat of circumstances, is too much for you. He will give you shade. But, He also knows when the moon tears at your viscera—when it brings you haunting memories of an action which caused you great injury, of someone close who shattered your love and trust or preceded you in death. He won’t let that “moon by night” harm you.

You ask yourself if God will really come through.

The potential disasters on the pilgrim climb to Zion are: the difficulty of the ascent itself (v. 1), a slip or fall (v. 3), and exposure (v. 6). Lest any danger be omitted, the psalm closes with a promise the Lord will keep you from all harm (v. 7) at all times (v. 8).

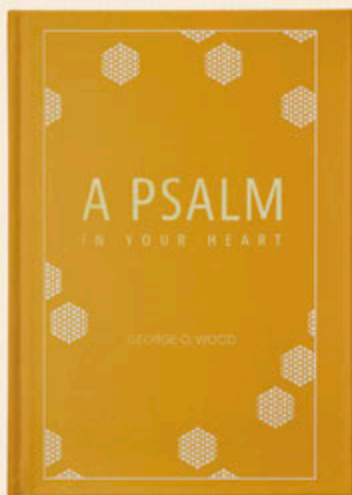
You may not understand how the Lord spared you from harm until you have gained the perspective that can only come through time and distance. Remember, it wasn’t until Easter morning that the preceding Friday was called good.

## *Prayer of response*

*Lord Jesus, I am having trouble on the climb. If You do not help me, I won’t make it. My fears often overwhelm my faith. I know it should be the other way around. I take this moment to still my heart and honestly say, “I trust You.” I hear You answer, “I am with you.”*

*My thoughts on Psalm 121 . . .*

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