



THE PILGRIM PSALMS

A Sacred Journey to revitalize your life

Kathy McReynolds



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





To My Wonderful Husband, Mike
and
To My Three Beautiful Children, Jessica, Moriah, and Jeremiah
May We All Continue To Be The Lord's Pilgrims
"One Love, One God, One Way"
(KJ52)

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Why This Book?

The alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. as usual. But I was not in my usual mood. Most mornings I wake up at 5:30 a.m. with a sense of excitement and anticipation because it is my time with the Lord. For one blessed hour I have the opportunity to meditate on God's Word and lay my requests at his throne of grace, without interruption. It is usually such a refreshing and uplifting experience. But this particular morning, my heart just was





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not in it. Something was not right, but I could not put my finger on it.

What I mean is that I am usually in some kind of crisis when I feel this way. But things could not have been better. I felt I was “right” with the Lord. My family was healthy, happy, and growing spiritually. I was finishing up my doctoral work at USC and teaching part-time at Biola University in La Mirada, California. Our food distribution ministry in Watts was thriving. What was the problem?

Well, I got my coffee and opened my Bible. I happened to be in the Book of Psalms that day, which is always a good thing when you are feeling a little moody! As I was reading along in Psalm 120, the following words leapt out at me: “Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar!” (Ps. 120:5) I thought to myself, “That’s it! That’s what is wrong with me! I am dwelling in a place that is far from the Lord!”

I know at first glance it may be hard to believe that I could receive that kind of revelation from such a seemingly strange verse. However, the writer of Psalm 120 is conveying that very message. He is physically in a place that is far from the Lord and he is expressing his utter discontentment with his situation. Well, that spoke volumes to me.

My problem was that, from a spiritual standpoint, discontentment had set in. Yes, on the outside, I seemed to have it all together. I was consistently involved in the spiritual disciplines: studying the Bible, praying, involved in ministry, and attending church regularly. But, still, in





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my heart, I got off track. How did it happen? I believe I became so content with my earthly situation that my spiritual life also became “content.”

Without even realizing it, I stopped growing in Christ. I stopped yearning for his presence. I stopped searching for his will. Needless to say, if you are a true believer, this kind of spiritual stagnation will always bring about discontentment. Now, spiritual stagnation happens quite subtly, especially when you are doing the things you are supposed to do as a Christian. But the effects are still the same: something will not be right with you, even when everything apparently is.

As I continued to read through the pilgrim psalms (Ps. 120-134), I had another revelation, so to speak. In the historical context, these psalms were apparently read and/or sung as the Israelites ascended to Jerusalem (since Jerusalem is on a high place) to celebrate the appointed feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex. 23:15-16). Psalms 122-134 may have been read in Jerusalem, possibly even ascending up the steps to the Temple itself.

With this in mind, it came to me that these pilgrim psalms may actually have a wider and more obvious value applied today than in their original setting. Under the Old Covenant, these psalms were used a few times each year when the Israelites were going up to Jerusalem, where the glorious presence of the Lord resided, for a festal occasion. Today, both our individual bodies (1 Cor. 6:19) and the church (1 Cor. 3:16) are the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” So, rather than being used annually, as they were





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in their original setting, the pilgrim psalms can be used daily. Because of the special nature of these psalms, they have timeless value.

Well, I immediately began to apply these insights to my situation. I began to reflect daily on these wonderful little psalms and, before long, I found myself on a journey – a sacred one – into the Lord’s presence. I began to understand in a new and fresh way that God is calling me to be a *pilgrim*. To be the Lord’s pilgrim is to be someone who journeys not just to any place, but to *the* sacred place – to the temple where the glorious Lord resides. The pilgrim psalms represent the pilgrimage we all must take to “ascend” into the Lord’s presence. As I said before, because we are now the temple of the Holy Spirit, this pilgrimage involves the inner life. It means that we must seek the One who indwells us.

When we seek to know God in this way, when we seek to integrate our faith with knowledge and action, we begin our journey into the Lord’s presence. The purpose of this book is to help you to begin this sacred journey. By reflecting on the various themes woven through the pilgrim psalms we will begin to discern the steps that we must take to ascend into the presence of the One who indwells us. Now, this is *not* a formula guaranteed to bring about the desired results if it is followed in a precise way. Rather, it is simply a journey that involves certain spiritual disciplines that are essentially the same for all of us. But for each of us, the journey is always different. We are all unique, and though we are all destined to the same place, the pilgrimage we make is quite unique in many aspects.





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Therefore, a set formula simply could never suffice.

Whenever I discuss this journey with some of my believing friends, I usually get comments like the following: I am a very busy person. How can I take the time to pursue this journey? My family, church, career and community all expect so much from me. I am up at 6 a.m. and it is non-stop as soon as my feet hit the floor. I wake the children, get them dressed, fed, and off to school. I clean the breakfast mess and go to work. After work, I stop by the grocery store. I come home and make dinner, clean the mess, bathe the children, and put them to bed. Then I make lunches, and, finally, I fall exhausted into my bed. As if this were not enough, someone like you tells me that if I want the spiritual contentment I long for, I must take this journey!

Well, that is exactly what I am saying! Look, I am just like you. I know the hustle and bustle of daily life. I know what it is to be tired and stressed. And, like you, I also know spiritual discontentment. I have experienced it long enough to know that I do not want to live my life under its cloud. I have also learned that coming to this point in my life was the best thing that ever happened to me. Discontentment brought me to that place where I was ready to become the Lord's pilgrim again.

Unlike any other group of psalms, the pilgrim psalms speak to our common longings and experiences. Consider again that seemingly strange verse from Psalm 120, "Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar!" This psalmist is clearly in distress. He lives among a people who do not know his God. In the country





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in which he was living, he was probably quite well off materially but, still, there was something amiss. He was clearly unsettled and motivated to seek change.

Like the psalmist, our pilgrimage into the Lord's presence begins with the experience of discontentment and with a desire for change. If you are discontent with your spiritual life and motivated to move on, then this book will probably prove to be a great source of encouragement to you. However, a steadfast heart and mind is needed in order to hear and to act on the truth revealed in these psalms. The reason for this is that obstacles are bound to cross our path.

The Pilgrim's Stumbling Stones

As you may know, a journey to any place can sometimes be filled with obstacles. There may be flight delays or a car that breaks down. Someone may become ill or lose a plane ticket. Any number of things may occur to delay a person's arrival at a certain destination. In the same way, as pilgrims on a spiritual journey, our path can become riddled with stumbling stones. I have already mentioned how our hectic schedules can short-circuit our progress. In this book we will focus not only on this "stone" but also on the intellectual and emotional stones that can block our way.

Intellectual blocks may include a lack of confidence. Sometimes we can tell ourselves things like, "I'm not theologically educated enough to really understand Scripture." This can become a huge stumbling stone! But the truth is that *all* believers can learn to be confident





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in the knowledge of Scripture. We can all learn to think through the implications and applications of God's word. It is a matter of the will to do so.

Sometimes we refuse Scripture's instruction because we think we know enough to get us through our trials. During these times an examination of our motives is needed. Learning to discern whether our struggle is with spiritual darkness or with the pull of worldly values or with our own desires sometimes takes great effort. During these times it is also important to realize that our intellect plays an enormous role in these battles.

Emotional blocks can include a lack of desire for God's presence. This can happen when emotions are the sole basis of our relationship with God. We short-circuit our ability to grow spiritually because we only desire God when we feel good. An inability to express our emotions properly can also stifle our journey. This difficulty to express our emotions may spring from childhood experiences, from poor choices, or from fear of taking risks. As overwhelming as these emotional stones can be, they nevertheless can be overcome *if* there is a will to do so.

Only a willing and humble heart-- a heart that is open to the Lord's mysterious ways-- can enable us to overcome these seemingly insurmountable stumbling stones. On the more practical side, what is also needed for the journey are some "tools" for the study of psalms.

Practical Tools for the Study of Psalms

There are several principles involved in reading, applying, and understanding the psalms. As our journey unfolds,





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we will gain further insight into these principles. But at the outset, we want to mention a few things here. In order to unlock the door to the deepest treasures in the pilgrim psalms, three principles need to be kept in mind: 1) each individual psalm should be read completely; 2) each individual verse should be interpreted in light of the whole psalm; 3) the author's intent in the psalm must be discerned *before* we apply the psalm to our lives.

The other issue of interpretation worth mentioning here is the use of poetic repetition. The repetition of words and thoughts stated in slightly different ways is common in the psalms. Frequently this poetic language paints word pictures by comparing similar and dissimilar objects to emphasize a point.¹ When thoughts, words or phrases are repeated or reworded, the thought is intended for further meditation. These repetitions emphasize important themes within the psalm. It is truly a blessing that spiritual growth consists of many daily steps and small decisions because we can build continuously on each small success. But we may also need to stretch ourselves in faithful response to the Lord's leading. Yes, we can make this pilgrimage into the Lord's presence. The pilgrim psalms provide us with some wonderful metaphors and illustrations of this sacred journey. The willing heart may stumble, but the Lord of heaven has promised that he will lead his faithful followers to his holy hill.

Our pilgrimage will begin with a closer look at what it means to be the Lord's pilgrim. Then, by reflecting and meditating on the pilgrim psalms, we will first examine the ways in which discontentment prompts our pilgrimage





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(Ps. 120). Then we will explore God's role in providing for the journey (Ps. 121-125) and how our dependence on him leads to a deeper revelation of where true blessings come from (Ps. 126-129). We will then discuss in light of God's provisions and blessings what our responses to him ought to be; namely, confession, humility, and consistent meditation on his promises (Ps. 130-132). These disciplines prepare us to metaphorically draw near to the Temple in Zion, where the glorious Lord resides (Ps. 133-134). We will draw parallels between this sacred entrance into Zion and spiritual maturity. The implication is that the mature believer is a "worshiping" believer. By drawing practical applications from our pilgrimage to Zion, we will learn of ways to consistently abide in the holy presence of our Lord.

Notes

¹ For more on this see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Chapter 7 (Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 245.

