

THE PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

Rev. A. A. Brugge - Psalm 120

Sing: Psalter 416:6, 7

Read: Psalm 120

Sing: Psalter 343:1, 2

Sing: Psalter 343:3, 4

Sing: Psalter 107:3, 4

Congregation, we wish to meditate on verses 5-7 of Psalm 120.

5 Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!

6 My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace.

7 I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.

These words form the basis of the theme of this sermon, namely *The pilgrim's journey*.

We wish to unfold this theme in three thoughts:

1. Who are these pilgrims?
2. Where do these pilgrims live?
3. How are these pilgrims recognised?

1. Who are these pilgrims?

This Psalm is the first in a group of Psalms that belong together, namely Psalms 120-134. When you compare these Psalms in your Bible, you will notice that they all have the same title, namely, 'A Song of Degrees.' The original Hebrew word for 'degrees' literally means, 'a journey to a higher place' or a 'song of ascent'.

The people of Israel went up to Jerusalem during the major religious feasts. They travelled from the cities, towns and villages to the temple in Jerusalem to worship the Lord and to bring sacrifices unto Him. They came from far and near, even from very far and remote places. The effort required to travel was no obstacle for these worshippers. No, they went up because there was love in their heart, a love that constrained them, the love they had to the God of Israel.

Jerusalem has almost the highest elevation among the cities of Israel, the land of the Bible. That explains why the titles of these Psalms mention ascending, or going up. The worshippers travelled from the lower country to that elevated city, several hundreds of meters above sea level. Finally, after a shorter or longer journey, the people of Israel arrived in Jerusalem and entered the temple.

We do not know exactly how the pilgrims sang these Psalms. Some expositors say that they would start singing this series of 15 Psalms, these ‘Songs of Degrees’, the moment they saw the city from afar. Other expositors are of the opinion that these psalms were sung when the people climbed the steps of the temple, concluding with the singing of the 15th Song of Degrees when they entered the temple. In that case they would end up standing in the temple court and singing Psalm 134, concluding with a profound benediction.

In any case, Psalm 120 is the song of a pilgrim. (Have you already become such a pilgrim through God’s grace in your life?) It is a Psalm about a pilgrimage, a pilgrim’s journey, made by people who travelled to Jerusalem from all places in Israel, and from far and near.

Let us shift the picture for a moment because there is not only a *literal* journey spoken about in this Psalm, a journey to Jerusalem at the time of the three major temple feasts, but there is also a *spiritual* journey.

That journey takes us through this short life to the great white throne of the Lord. We begin that journey at the moment of our conception. We continue that journey, boys and girls, at our birth and still today if we may go to primary school or maybe this year on to secondary school or on to university or the work place. For each of us it is true: an unknown future lies before us. Nobody knows how their life’s journey will go.

We continue that journey when we may get a boyfriend or girlfriend and get married and may receive children. Some may continue on that journey to an old age, some to a very old age. And so, whether our life is short or long, this journey through life is very solemn. Let me therefore ask you this question again: “Have *you* become a *pilgrim*?” By this I mean, “are you a traveller journeying to that

heavenly Jerusalem?” This is the crucial question. This is the all-decisive question in our life!

In Psalm 120 we encounter people who do not always sing in the same tenor. Sometimes they sing low notes, especially when they experience difficult and trying times, dark times, troubling times, times of crosses, afflictions and sorrows. Those are the times when the ‘why’ questions well up in their hearts and when fears and agonies dominate.

But there are also sweet and good times in the life of a pilgrim. Then they sing at a somewhat higher tone; they lift their voices and sing praises to their God. They cleave to Him Who leads and draws pilgrims. He is the One Who cares for them. They lack nothing on their pilgrim journey.

We do not know who the pilgrim was that penned Psalm 120. He does not tell us who he is but what he does tell us, openly and honestly, is how it is with him in his heart. He sings about it. Still today there are pilgrims who sing this song along with him in their heart.

The poet is a stranger to us because we do not know his name. But do you know what is so remarkable? The poet is also a stranger to himself.

No, he does not pretend anything, he does not wear a mask, he does not have ideas above his station. Honestly he tells us about his situation, complaining about all the things he has to endure. In this regard, this stranger is a human, just like we all are. But he is also someone who fears the Lord, someone called by the Lord. He has been brought on the pathway of life.

All pilgrims are not always able to sing in the same tone. There are times of darkness; times when the life of the soul is shrouded in mist and darkness. It is not light all the time. But thanks be to God neither is it always darkness. We would do injustice to the Lord if we would say or think so.

As we noticed, this pilgrim opens up with a very personal confession. He tells us about his thirsting after God, his groaning and crying to his God in this Mesch of

misery, in this valley of tears. But his groaning and crying is not a detached resignation to the circumstances nor is there any bitter hardness to his crying so that the children could not even be jealous of it.

Oh wonder! There are no bitter and harsh complaints in his heart! Instead, we hear an ardent desire of the soul for the Lord in his personal confession. This pilgrim on earth has a homesickness that is peculiar to all God's children: he longs for the Lord.

It is not unusual for such people to be ridiculed and attacked by others. Perhaps a colleague looks at you somewhat pitiful and says, "Man, don't be so legalistic and pious. What are you crying about? You should be more trusting of God and be more hopeful. Leave it over unto the Lord!" And someone else says, "Don't take things so seriously! The outward form, the customs, that is sufficient." But no, that has become impossible for the pilgrim, because he thirsts for the Lord.

Do you thirst for the Lord too? You too, my young friend? Do you thirst for the Lord? Do you expect everything from Him? Do you look for His coming in your heart? Do you look for Him also when all things are well in your life? If only that were so! Often the contrary is true, when all things are going well in my life then I usually do not look for the Lord.

Hungering and looking for God - do you do that only when things weigh you down, when there is adversity in your life? Again I say, if only that were the case! Because then, my young friends, if the Lord does not give His grace in those trying circumstances, we are ready to lift up our fists unto heaven. No, here it is God Who in His love draws the sinner and causes him to expect all things from Him alone.

The pilgrim's journey is a journey through this life. The traveller of Psalm 120 started to call on the God Who dwells in heaven, in contrast to many others in his company who perhaps take things easier and do not call unto God. The secret of this traveller however, is that God has made him a pilgrim. That is the only reason why he began to seek the Lord! He seeks Him not for selfish reasons as to receive

only good things from the Lord, nor to push his own way. No, he desires to follow Him whatever the consequences! Unconditionally! Why? Because he believes that there is but One Who directs his life. There is but One Who carries him through this life and Who knows him most perfectly.

As we already said, this pilgrim also knows of the good, the sweet times! We read that in verse 1, “In my distress I cried unto the LORD”, and then the verse ends so beautifully, “... and he heard me.” He personally knows what it means that God has heard him. But then again there are also those other times. We hear him continuing his prayer unto the Lord, the God of the covenant, the I AM THAT I AM! “Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue.” The poet looks up to God as he says, “I expect all from Thee alone, Oh Lord!” With utmost respect he prays to the Triune God, Whom he esteems so highly. He, the stranger, prays to God Who, in His Son, became a Stranger Himself here on earth. The Son of God submitted Himself to a pilgrim’s life but without sin, without discord. He was a Stranger on this earth. Without blemish. Perfect.

Why did Christ come to this earth? After all, God cannot have communion with sin, can He? And He cannot cleave to iniquity, can He? The Psalter explains it like this:

*I never have within my heart
Thy faithfulness concealed
But Thy salvation and thy truth
To men I have revealed*

Christ became a Stranger here on earth so that other strangers would be drawn and led by Him, to follow Him through this Mesech, this earthly life.

But, He did not remain a Stranger on earth. He returned unto His Father’s House, the House that has many mansions. Why? To bring strangers who do not feel at home here on this earth to their heavenly home! He causes them to experience homesickness and a deep longing for God. Christ has merited everything for these strangers, these sinners, sinners such as we are! Through His

merits He gives them all that they lack and removes all that stands in the way. This is Him! Does He not entice your heart in holy love?

Who are those pilgrims, boys and girls? They are all those who have a new heart: the rich and the poor, the small and the great. If you have a new heart, you hate the evil and you do not try to push the boundaries of sin to see how far you can go. You no longer say, “What’s the problem; we all are sinful anyway aren’t we?” No, there is love in your heart to go in the ways of the Lord. What a wonder that would be when you, as a child, as a teenager or as a young adult, may cast your eye upon the Lord alone to guide you through life, through this world which draws and allures you on all sides.

But God not only speaks to you about *living* this life, He also seriously warns you that there will come a time that you will have to *leave* this life. And what will happen then? That brings us to our second point.

2. Where do these pilgrims live?

Verse 5 speaks of Mesech, “Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!” The tents of Kedar were black Bedouin tents, in which nomads lived. They were strangers in the real sense of the word, having no ‘home’, travelling from place to place in the wilderness. They travelled from very far, from Mesech, an area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and from Kedar, an area in the Syrian-Arabian desert, from places far away from Israel. And from these distant places there have been travelers who came as pilgrims to the three main feasts in Jerusalem. You can also think of Acts 2 which speaks of the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia. In other words, Jews who were living outside of Israel.

Besides its literal meaning, the text suggests at the same time that it speaks figuratively: it refers to spiritual pilgrims coming from spiritually distant places. You will recall that we heard of homesickness. We heard that the pilgrims *could* no longer be part of the world, but also that they no longer *wanted* to be part of

the world. There is much around them that attempts to draw them into sin, but thanks be to God, the Lord's drawing is stronger than all those worldly allurements. When He draws us we give sin a bill of divorcement, not because we have to but because we also want to!

These pilgrims came from distant places. The Lord drew them! And that is why they could come from great distances, crossing unknown chasms that seemed to be impossible to cross. Has the Lord begun to draw you? Or do you consider you were always very close to Him? Perhaps you have never left your seat in church empty, always being close to that which was holy - and yet your heart was so distant? Young people, does sport occupy your mind? And keep you far from the Lord? What is going on in the world can keep us so occupied, but at the same time we remain far from the Lord. We are busy with the cares of our family, our business, our boyfriend or girlfriend and our marriage, even when sitting in church. Sure, we fold our hands, we say our prayers, but our minds are occupied with a host of other things. Oh, by nature we live so far from God! We live outside of the Kingdom of God.

Whoever you are, whatever age you are and whichever way you conduct your life, this is the world we live in ---and this applies also to God's people. It is a world that keeps us at a great distance from God. You know what the world says, don't you? "Give us bread and games, give us entertainment, then we are happy."

Young people, take a moment and be honest before God. Do you ever get tired from that internal antenna which you carry with you 24/7 and which connects you with all that the world offers? We so often go along with the world, if only to avoid being excluded as an odd one out. The world in which we live says, "Is sin really such a big issue?" The world only wants to enjoy itself, entertain itself, and have fun. But is there something deeper in your life? Have you already become a stranger who can no longer go along with the mainstream? Do you know something of that homesickness, that thirsting for the Lord? I really wish I could give you that, that you would be a stranger on earth. Sure, the world can be very

friendly at times. Sometimes the world comes to us smiling and before we know it, we err and are drawn away by the apparent attractiveness of it. Where do you live? Has it become your comfort that there is One Who has said, "I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is"?

"Woe is me. I dwell in Mesech, in the tents of Kedar," the poet says. "I dwell in a very faraway place." Congregation, I think you cannot have peace anymore with the great gulf between you and the Lord when your eyes are opened for it. I believe you will begin to pray, as it were, automatically. You will become hungry and thirsty for His light to shine in your darkness, supplicating Him for His guidance for today and tomorrow. You become a beggar at His throne, begging Him that He will not withhold from you His comfort and His help.

Perhaps there are moments that you think despondently, "My prayers are in vain. My calling is in vain. My crying is in vain." But know this congregation, that this petitioner on his pilgrim's journey did not call in vain in this Song of Degrees, in this pilgrim's song. The Lord let Himself to be found. Soon the pilgrim arrived at the temple court, by the altar, the place of the ministry of reconciliation. There the poet at times experienced that the Lord knew of him, saw him and heard him.

Congregation, are you able to let a text make an impression on your soul? Can you make a sermon have an impact on you? No, you cannot. A blessing in your soul comes by way of the preaching of the Word when the Lord Himself comes along with it. That is not something that we have in our own power, and just as well, because otherwise His blessings would never be a wonder to us. Then there would never be the fruit of worship and adoration for His sovereign work.

Do you feel far from the Lord? I would almost say, my words are not able to help you.

But you have a good companion, namely the poet. You may recognize yourself in the poet of this Psalm! Do you feel left alone? Do you feel insecure? Who can deliver you from oppression? Oh, may you join the prayer of this poet, "Jehovah hear thee in thy grief. Send from His holy place relief."

“Oh Lord, may I know that Thine eye is upon me? So will I also know to Whom to direct my eyes; so I will look upon Thee.”

Child of God, are there times that you are far away? Do you spend your time in good company, and yet it does not change neither your burden nor the barrenness of your soul? Do you recognize yourself in the poet of Psalm 63? We hear him complain in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, where no one is able to quench his thirst. Will there ever be fountains and streams of water? Your soul melts when you hear others sing and rejoice:

*With copious show'rs Thou didst assuage
The thirsting of Thy heritage,
Thy congregation dwelt secure;
Thou, God, art gracious to the poor.*

“But..., I live in a dry and weary land, not a single drop of rain comes down. There is never a word of blessing nor a word of comfort for me.” At least, that is how it seems. The world around you pities you and says, “Let it go, give up.” It is a wonder when the Lord grants perseverance in prayer, when He gives that prayer, “And yet I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me” and “to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.”

The Lord knows where you live, beloved! Do you know why the Lord knows it so well? Because He is the LORD, the Triune God, the covenant JEHOVAH. He Himself has lived in Mesech. He Himself dwelled in the tents of Kedar. Jesus Christ became like unto His brethren in all things, sin excepted. He knows that for you, child of God, it is easy to *say* that we are in the world, but not of the world, but He also knows that having to actually *live* in two worlds creates a huge tension. He knows that no one can remain standing in his own power.

How is your life in that regard? How is my life? Do I make people jealous by my conduct of life, how I live and what I say? Does the church of God radiate something of the love of God in such a way that it makes children and young

people jealous? Child of God, what is your testimony in your family? What is there in your life that makes people jealous? Are you a real pilgrim? Sure, you are confronted with your weaknesses, your failures. But remember! His strength is made perfect in weakness! Only by His power can you remain standing in all your weaknesses. This black, faltering, hopeless pilgrim can only arrive at his destination through the power of that great Pilgrim.

Child of God, does this not cause you to humble yourself deeply and worship Him? He is yet willing to look upon you in His Son. Therefore, be of good cheer. He has said it, “I have overcome the world.” You shall not want. Is that a life of forced efforts? Is it a legalistic life? No, it is a life of prayer, prayer for His nearness, and for His searching your ways and His making known to you the thoughts and intents of your heart.

Before we will meditate upon our third thought, we shall first sing Ps 34:3, 4.

Verse 3

*Alas for me, whose lot is cast
With those who find their joy in strife!
With those who hate the paths of peace
I long have dwelt and spent my life.*

Verse 4

*In thought and act I am for peace,
Peace I pursue and ever seek;
But those about me are for strife,
Though I in love and kindness speak.*

3. How are these pilgrims recognised?

Yes, how can you recognise these pilgrims? I don’t mean in the sense of outward appearances that probably comes to your mind now. Do you know how you can recognise these pilgrims? Let me take you to the text, to the Psalm, because God’s Word has more authority than my word. God’s Word is surer than your and my word!

You can recognise these pilgrims by the cross they have to bear. Perhaps you say, “How can one be made jealous for a cross? How can difficulties, thorns and

thistles, opposition and adversity be attractive?" Yet, there is something peculiar about their cross even though it is true that every heart bears a burden, every home has its own cross and every time in life brings its own struggle. That also applies to the spiritual pilgrims. In that sense a pilgrim and an unconverted person are cut from the same cloth.

Boys and girls, you must not think that when someone is converted, that from that time onward their path of life is strewn with roses. Often they do not understand God's ways with them. Their life is not perfect; it is not only good that befalls them. No, the same thing befalleth the righteous and the ungodly. But there is something peculiar about their afflictions; there is something to their sorrow and their path through life. They do not trudge, they do not complain, they do not have self-pity, they do not throw the cross from them. Although ..., child of God, what if your thoughts would have become words?! Nevertheless, as they travel through this pilgrim's journey, they have hope in the Lord and expect all things from Him alone.

Their cross can be bitter at times. Oh, a sharp, false tongue can cause so much pain! Read verse 3, "What shall be given unto thee? or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue?" The enemy lashes out with his words. They cut, hurt and wound! And his blasphemies cause the pilgrim to cringe from heavy inner pain. The Lord is robbed of His honour and that hurts the pilgrim. The sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper (verse 4) wound! That is why he says, "Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar! My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace."

When the soul is at peace with God then there is abundance of inner serenity. The poet however is tired, in a way tired of life, and yet there is that lively need for the Lord. Perhaps there are here people who struggle with their mental health. How great a darkness that can bring to your soul! But however dark it may be, please do not stop calling on the Lord. Continue to seek after Him in all your trials.

The poet is greatly distressed. But yet he says, “I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.” How can he say that he is for peace? Of course, we may not ignore his sharp words with which he condemned the ungodly and, so to speak, take a broom and sweep them into the garbage. No, then we would do injustice to the poet.

But still, why is he “for peace”? Is he an optimist? No, he is not. Congregation, when I am being sifted through trials, I am not optimistic at all. Neither am I as submissive as I often appear to be. Do you know why he can speak like that? Because there is One Who is near him. There is One in Whom he believes, for Whom he waits, on Whom he has put his hope. He believes that God knows of him and that is what gives him strength.

The strength given by God enables a child of God to be a father or mother in their family. The strength of the Lord enables them to warn their children or to be quiet. In the tension that accompanies the upbringing of children, it is the strength of the Lord that enables God’s children to deal with such issues as: how far can we go along with the fashion, with the music, with all those “new things” of this world? Often a child of God must say, “I have been too lenient to the world again; I always go along too far!” Yet, it is their prayer, “Take my life and let it be; consecrated, Lord, to Thee. For Thou art real, regardless of how much man may mock, regardless of what man may say!”

What a wonderful privilege it is when you may say,
*Whatever ill betides me,
He will restore and bless;
For His Name's sake He guides me
In paths of righteousness.*

How is it possible to say, “I am for peace”? If I go according to my feelings, I will turn hostile and become defensive. How then is it possible to be for peace? Well, the poet calls upon God, the Triune God. “Bless them that curse you,” said Jesus, Who is God’s image, His Word. Oh, let our prayer be that we may be conformed

to the image of Gods’ Son, *May we Thy children here below; In all our deeds Thine image show.* When He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not.

Of course, black remains black and white remains white; sin remains sin and righteousness remains righteousness. But if you are for peace, then you can give all your enemies and their enmity over unto the Lord. The poet says, as it were, “Vengeance is not mine, I must not avenge myself, but I rather give place unto wrath: the Lord will repay.” Do you know why he can say that in such a deeply experiential way? Because he has looked into the mirror; he has pleaded guilty to his own condemnation; after all, what is he but a vile sinner by nature? What a wonder it becomes that God yet helps him, carries him, supports him and guides him.

The pilgrim poet was for peace because there has been One Who has been for peace in a perfect way, even unto the cross. What depth there was in His prayer, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” God’s child may receive rest from Christ through His Spirit. He knows: He will care for me, and also for my children, and for our youth, even though the temptations of this world allure them. They are not safe in my hands, but they are safe in God’s hands; safe in Him Whose hands and feet were pierced. He blotted out the handwriting that was against us. The Lord will take care of them, and that sweet experience makes us to long for more.

Congregation, do you travel along with the world or is your journey a pilgrim’s journey and do you expect everything from the Lord alone, like this pilgrim does? Then you will sing along with the poet of Psalm 119:

*Wicked men Thy law forsaking
Stirred my indignation strong,
For in all my pilgrim journey
Thy commandments are my song.*

Amen.

Concluding Psalter 107: 3, 4

Verse 3

*O Lord, regard my fears,
And answer my request;
Turn not in silence from my tears,
But give the mourner rest.*

Verse 4

*I am a stranger here,
Dependent on Thy grace,
A pilgrim, as my fathers were,
With no abiding place.*