

SONGS THAT JESUS SANG (1): SONGS OF ASCENT PSALM 121

BIBLE: Psalm 121

A song of ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains –
where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot slip –
he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord watches over you –
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm –
he will watch over your life;
⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and for evermore.

Today in preparation of Easter, we begin a mini-Lent series looking at some songs that Jesus sang on His way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross.

The claim of the Bible is that God doesn't just speak, he sings!

Authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S Lewis have drawn our attention to the God of the Bible being a singing God and have portrayed God singing the world into being. In C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series in the first book *The Magician's Nephew*, Lewis depicts the great lion Aslan (the Christ figure) singing Narnia and the stars, grass and animals into existence.

Maybe you're thinking, where does this idea come from?

This idea is rooted in Scripture itself! One example is in the Book of Job, which many scholars view as the oldest of the Old Testament books. In chapter 38:4-7 we read that as God was making the world and laying the ⁴ **earth's foundation...**⁷ **...the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.**

That God is a life-giving, singing God was something that God's people embraced and rejoiced in. We read this in the Old Testament book of Zephaniah 3:17

The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

As well as pointing to the poetic nature and form of the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, theologians have also pointed to its song-likeness because of the meter and rhythmic cadence. In the same way we love because God loved us first, in the same way we speak because God spoke first, we sing because God sang first! If you love musicals and have ever wished that life was more like a musical, then there you go!

God being a life-giving singing God as well as being a life-giving speaking God and what that communicates about what He's like, is well worth pondering! That music and song is woven into the fabric of the universe is worth pondering too! I think that helps explain why music registers so deeply in our hearts.

It's also worth pointing out that Scripture does not give us the tune or melody or style of God's singing. This means that no one can lay claim to a particular genre or style of music being 'divine' and other styles and genres being unholy! The variety of music and styles and instruments doesn't just point to our wonderful human creativity, it points to the Creator's even more wonderful creativity in making us!

We are blessed by God to be able to have and enjoy rock, metal, jazz, blues, house, garage, techno, drum and bass, rap, opera as well as classical or Celtic music!

That's a bit about God being the life-giving singing God!

Now a bit about God's people being a singing people and singing in response to Him.

One of the biggest books in the Bible is the book of Psalms. Which is actually 5 books. They are books with song lyrics - 150 song lyrics!

In this song book there are:

Songs of praise – **bless the Lord o my Soul and that is within me praise his holy name** (Psalm 103:1)

Songs of lament – **Lord from sorrows deep I cry** (psalm 130:1)

In this Psalm song book there are:

Songs of thanksgiving – **give thanks to the Lord for he is good his love endures for ever** (Psalm 136)

Songs of distress – **my soul faints...when will you comfort me?...how long must I wait?...they have almost wiped me out...when will you deal with them?** (Psalm 119:81-84)

Songs of confession – ¹ **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love...** ² **Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.** (Psalm 51)

This song book was compiled over generations and was complete by Jesus' day. The book of Psalms was Jesus' song book.

These are the songs that Jesus sang in the synagogue, at home and on walks. We're told in Matthew 26:30 that after the Last Supper Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before going to the Mount of Olives.

There may have been other songs too that Jesus sang that are not recorded.

In the book of Psalms there are 15 songs called the *Songs of Ascent*, literally the 'going up' songs. They are Psalms 120-134. They were sung by God's people on the way to the Temple in Jerusalem particularly around festival time. These pilgrim, journeying, traveling songs were culturally embedded. We have some of those!

Here are some well-known travelling/journey songs. I'll start them and let's see if you can finish them! Extra points if you can tell me who sang them or where they come from.

1. *Show me the way to go home, I'm tired...and I want to go to bed.* (from the film 'Jaws')
2. *The wheels on the bus go...round and round.*
3. *Maybe tomorrow I'll want to settle down until tomorrow...I'll just keep moving on.* (from the Littlest Hobo)
4. *Row, row, row your boat...gently down the stream*
5. *Oh, we're halfway there woah-oh...living on a prayer* (Bon Jovi)
6. *Five little ducks went swimming one day, Over the hill and far away. Mother duck said, "Quack, quack, quack, quack." But only...4 little ducks came back.*
7. *Let me tell you that I love you, that I think about you all the time...Caledonia you're calling me, now I'm going home* (Dougie MacLean)
8. *You take the high road, I'll take the low road...and I'll be in Scotland before ye.*

These travelling, journeying, leaving home, home coming songs are ingrained in our cultural psyche through teaching and sharing and repeating from an early age.

These last two songs are maybe the closest us Scots have got to a home coming Song of Ascent. You could also make a case for *Oh Flower of Scotland* as we're going up to Murrayfield or Hamden.

I wonder how you feel when you are driving home, getting the bus or train home to Edinburgh and you see the Pentlands or Arthur's Seat in the distance? That happens if you are coming from the North or the South or the East. What are you thinking? What are you feeling?

If you're not from Edinburgh change the hills to your local ones.
The Gramps or Brimmond hill if you're from Aberdeen
The Campsies or Kilpatrick hills if you're from Glasgow.

When you see them, what are you thinking or feeling?
For me part of it is...*I'm nearly home!*
And to a lesser degree...*I'm home to the heart/the capital of Scotland.*
Maybe this helps us to understand a bit what the pilgrims to Jerusalem were thinking and feeling.

For Jesus and those pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem there were a few hills.

SEE SLIDE

Jerusalem was built on and around Mount Zion, Mount Moriah (the temple mound) with the Mount of Olives close beside.

The palace of Herod was on top of mount Zion. (Boo)

The temple was on top of Mount Moriah hence The Temple Mound! (Hurray!)

The mount of Olives was just across the Kidron Valley.

These hills weren't Munro size, but they were/are 3 times the height of Arthur's Seat, higher than the Pentlands.

Pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem for the festivals would see these hills, hills with stories and significance. These pilgrims would need to travel through other hills and valleys to get there. Some of these hills and valleys were not easy to navigate and they were not always safe due to robbers. Some of these hills would have been used to worship and sacrifice to other gods.

The Songs of Ascent would be sung travelling through these hills with the Temple hill in mind and in view.

Some scholars wonder if the 15 *Songs of Ascent* correspond to a set of 15 stairs at the Temple. Did those processing to the temple for the festivals stop on each stair to sing the next song of ascent? Sounds very possible even likely.

The goal was to get to the hill with the Temple on it.
Because the temple was where the presence of God was meant to be.
The temple in Jerusalem was the epi-centre of the Jewish people.

There was a time when God's holy presence was recorded being present in the temple and above the Ark of Covenant in the form of a pillar of fire or a cloud. But those days were long gone. The temple worked at its best when God was at the heart and centre of everything – the heart of the people, the hearts of the priests, the centre of Sanhedrin (the leaders) and the sacrificial systems. But this was not always the case.

Year after year the people of God kept coming, from miles around. One historian, Josephus, refers to a census in AD 66 that counts 2.5 million people coming for Passover. In comparison, Edinburgh has 3 million for the Festival! Edinburgh is a lot bigger than Jerusalem was in Jesus' day! Estimates for Passover Pilgrims in Jesus' day range from 100,000 – 2,500,000.

Passover was a time when the Israelites remembered God coming to rescue them when they were slaves in Egypt under the cruel rule of Pharaoh. Part of that Passover story was that a lamb that was killed and its blood was painted on the doorposts of the Israelites' homes. Wherever there was the lamb's blood, God's judgment would...pass-over...hence Passover. The lamb died so they would live. A roast lamb feast for each household was part of the annual Passover celebration.

In Jesus' day, the Israelites weren't enslaved by the Egyptians under the cruel rule of Pharaoh, they were a conquered people, oppressed by the Romans under the rule of Caesar. It was Caesar Augustus when Jesus was born, then it was his stepson Caesar/Emperor Tiberius when Jesus was older.

Things were far from well even with Roman innovation and aqueducts and safer travel within the empire.

The most famous Hilly Psalm and Song of Ascent is Psalm 121!

After Psalm 23 (The Lord's my Shepherd) it's probably the Psalm we sing most often.

What's really interesting is to think about what Jesus thinking when he sang this Psalm on His way to Jerusalem this last time.

What was he thinking and feeling as he sang each line?

What was he thinking about when he was looking at the other hills?

What was he thinking about when he saw the Temple hill and the Temple?

Which other hill did he have in view and in mind?

We get some insight from the Gospel according to Luke and Matthew.

Luke 19:41 ⁴¹ **As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.**

Matthew 24:37 ³⁷ **'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.**

God was coming to meet with those He loved on the hill of Calvary.

That's where God's help and deliverance and peace would be worked.

God's help and salvation was going to be worked out on a cross on top of Mount Moriah.

God had promised a saving and substitutionary lamb on Mount Moriah many years before. Jesus had come as the Lamb of God to fulfil that promise. He had come as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world.

When it came to Psalm 121...

Jesus could sing the line **The Lord is your shade at your right hand** because in Christ God had come up close and personal to us humans.

Jesus could sing the line ⁸ **the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.** Because by dying in the cross for the forgiveness of our sin he would be offering and ensuring eternal life with God.

Jesus could sing the line **where does my help come from?** Knowing that time after time after time, us humans, you and I sought help everywhere and anywhere and turned to all sorts of things instead of Him. Jesus sang Psalm 121 as the Maker who had come down from heaven to earth.

In the Psalm in the original Hebrew the word שָׁמַר shamar appears 6 times. It is sometimes translated as watches and sometimes as keeps.

³ ... he who watches over you will not slumber;

⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The Lord watches over you –

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life;

⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going

The English word ‘watches’ doesn’t quite capture the full meaning because ‘watches’ could sound like God is just passively observing what is going. Kind of like He’s looking on at a distance. But that is not what is being communicated. That is not what is being revealed. The word ‘keeps’ also doesn’t fully capture the meaning or picture. God isn’t being presented here as a bullet proof vest or magical force field, he is being presented as a guardian and protector who is present, active, involved and close.

This is communicated in the other Songs of Ascent, like Psalm 125...

¹ Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures for ever.

² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people
both now and for evermore.

POEM: I lift my eyes to the hills, what do I see?

I lift my eyes to the hills, what do I see?...

...Lofty mountain grandeur, majesty and beauty?

...the crags, the climb, the slips and falls the obstacles and scree?

I lift my eyes to the mountains, what do I see?...

...enemies on the horizon, threatening and overwhelming me?

...how far I've fallen, how I'm insignificant and wee?

I lift my eyes to the mountains, what do I see?...

...me and mine stuck and struggling and others ascending with apparent ease.

...man-made monuments, altars, edifices, totems and follies?

I lift my eyes to the mountains, what do I feel?

A God that is close, who loves and cares or one who has abandoned me?

I lift my eyes to the hills where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Maker, the Lord over all you can see.

Who says...

Look to the hill that I climbed for you - look to the hill where I cried.

Look to the hill of calvary - where for you I bled and died.

Look to the face of your Saviour - Look to the face of God

Look to the One who loves you with arms stretched broad.

Come to me for forgiveness – come to me to belong.

Come to me in your weakness for I am safe and kind and strong.

Look to the God who suffers – look to the God who weeps

Look to the One who holds and cares, listens, helps and keeps...and keeps, and keeps, and keeps, and keeps and keeps.

Look to the One who is risen - look to the One who is near

Call on the One who rules over life and death when you fear.

I lift my eyes to The Hill that He climbed for me.

My help comes from that Lord who has the victory.

PRAY: Lord with all that is going on in the world and in our families lift our eyes to see you. Holy Spirit help us behold Jesus. Jesus, help us to know and enjoy you as our Maker, Helper and Saviour and the One who loves us, surrounds us and is with us now and forever more.

SONG 6: *I cast my mind to Calvary Where Jesus bled and died for me.*