

# From Where Does My Help Come?

*Nehemiah and the Songs of Ascent*

**Ps 120:1** *A Song of Ascents.*

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.

<sup>2</sup> Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.

<sup>3</sup> What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?

<sup>4</sup> A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!

<sup>5</sup> Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

<sup>6</sup> Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

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

**Neh 1:1** "The words of Nehemiah

the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,

<sup>2</sup> that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

<sup>4</sup> As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome

God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

<sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

<sup>7</sup> We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

<sup>9</sup> but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'

<sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people, whom you have

Ps 121:1 *A Song of Ascents.*

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

<sup>11</sup> O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Neh 2:1 " In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

<sup>2</sup> And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid.

<sup>3</sup> I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

<sup>4</sup> Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your

sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."

<sup>6</sup> And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

<sup>7</sup> And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah,

<sup>8</sup> and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

<sup>9</sup> Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen."

## **PSALM 120-121; NEHEMIAH 1:1-2:9**

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# An Unexpected Leader

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH, James Hamilton<sup>1</sup> tells the story of two royal brothers: [Ælfred](#) (Alfred the Great; 849-99) and [Æthelred](#) (Ethelred; c. 847-71) who were, together, supposed to quell the latest Viking invasion in Wessex (South England). Alfred had been rallying the troops like an early version of William Wallace. But as he made his way to the battlefield, his brother—who was to flank him on either side with his own army—was nowhere in sight. All he could do was stare, alone, at the vulgar barbarians and all their derisive howls and jeers.

It turns out that the elder brother was late to battle because he had [not yet finished praying](#) with his priest for its outcome! But since the invading army was smaller than expected, Alfred went into the fight, alone. Hamilton, almost certainly unaware of the resource I am using for this mini-series on the [Psalms of Ascent](#) writes, “[Where does one find strength of character for such a moment? When it looks like the kingdom of the world will overcome the kingdom](#)

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<sup>1</sup> [James M Hamilton Jr.](#), *Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 97 (Kindle Edition).

of our Lord and of His Christ, on what shall we depend? On whom shall we call in the dire hour of need?”<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 121 asks, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?” (Ps 121:1). This is *very* similar language. Unexpectedly, the tie that binds them together is **the man Nehemiah**. Hamilton is introducing the book of Nehemiah. The other<sup>3</sup> advances a compelling theory that gives liturgical parallels between the book of Nehemiah (or what he calls specific Testimonies within Nehemiah) and the Psalms of Ascent. I find his theory both fascinating, and a compelling way to preach these songs so that we can remember and apply them. So, as I introduce the Psalms of Ascent and as we make our way through them these next weeks, we will be taking an unexpected journey into the book of Nehemiah.

## The Psalms of Ascent

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>3</sup> **Michael D. Goulder**, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150)*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 258, ed. David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998), 20-113; especially 28-33 and 111-113.

Book V of the Psalter is itself divided into five smaller units. We have seen the lengthy “Hallelujah” unit from **Psalms 103-118** (with the smaller “Egyptian Hallel” from 113-118). The second unit is only one song—**Psalm 119**. Yet, it is longer than the entire third unit, which is the **Songs of Ascent: Psalms 120-134**.

The ESV Study Bible summarizes these as a, “Diverse group [which] includes individual and corporate laments, songs of confidence, thanksgiving hymns, a song celebrating Zion, wisdom psalms, a royal psalm, and a psalm for a liturgical occasion.”<sup>4</sup> I’m going to suggest that in fact all 15 of these songs, while perhaps not originally for liturgical occasions, were in the days of Nehemiah used for precisely this purpose.

These songs are generally **very short**, with all but one being under 10 verses:

|          |       |          |       |
|----------|-------|----------|-------|
| Ps 120 ~ | 7 vv. | Ps 121 ~ | 8 vv. |
| Ps 122 ~ | 9 vv. | Ps 123 ~ | 4 vv. |
| Ps 124 ~ | 4 vv. | Ps 125 ~ | 5 vv. |
| Ps 126 ~ | 6 vv. | Ps 127 ~ | 5 vv. |
| Ps 128 ~ | 6 vv. | Ps 129 ~ | 6 vv. |

<sup>4</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1102.

Ps 130 ~ 8 vv.  
Ps 132 ~ 18 vv.  
Ps 134 ~ 3 vv.

Ps 131 ~ 3 vv.  
Ps 133 ~ 3 vv.

Each song has **the same superscription**. In the Masoretic (Hebrew) text it is “**A Song of Ascents**.” But “ascent” of what? The Study Bible continues,

Some traditional Jewish interpreters have suggested that these were songs sung on the “steps” (as the same word can mean, e.g., **Ex 20:26**), either in parts of the temple or up from a spring in Jerusalem; others have taken them as geared toward returning to Jerusalem from exile (cf. **Ezra 1:3**).<sup>5</sup>

The “**step**” idea seems to be what the LXX translator(s) was thinking, as he translated it as *anabathmos*, “**the act of ascending up steps**” (hence, “**A Song of Degrees**”). The steps of what? **The temple**.

The Targum has consistently, “**A Song that was Uttered Concerning the Ascent of the Deep** (or “the Abyss).” What could this possibly mean? The Talmud describes “**the Setting ... [as] David’s digging of the pits, apparently in**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

preparation for the building of the Temple. This excavation project results ... in a welling up of the waters of the deep, which threaten to flood the world. This in turn necessitates David's actions to save the world and [hence] the praying of the Songs of Ascents.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever you make of that, clearly, the temple idea is at the center of this interpretation. There is also the idea of describing the act of going up to Israel more generally from a foreign land. This is what we will see today.

## *Songs of Ascent as Festal Liturgy*

So how might these songs have been used liturgically? Here, I want to return to some things we talked about way back when we introduced Book V in Psalm 107. We looked at Psalms 105-118 as “evening” and “morning” songs that were put together in this in this order to help Israel celebrate the Passover during the week-long festival, which was one of three commanded pilgrimage feasts to Jerusalem. While I didn't make much of it, in the background for this was (in

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<sup>6</sup> Harry P. Nasuti, “Plumbing the Depths: Genre Ambiguity and Theological Creativity in the Interpretation of Psalm 130,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman & Judith H. Newman (Boston, Brill, 2004), 102.

part) **Ezra 1-6**. That is, those songs follow the same basic outline as these Ezra chapters.

| Passover Liturgy Based on Ex 12:16; Deut 16:1-8; Ezra 1-6, and Modern Jewish Practice <sup>7</sup> |  |                     |         |         |
|--|--|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Nisan<br>(month)   | Exodus<br>Event/Place                                    | Exodus<br>Reference | Psalm   |         |
|  |  |                     | Evening | Morning |
| 15th   | Passover in Egypt (Rameses)                              | 12:6-10             | 105     | 106     |
| 16th   | Succoth  | 12:37               | 107     | 108     |
| 17th   | Etham  | 13:20               | 109     | 110     |
| 18th   | Pi-hahiroth  | 14:1                | 111     | 112     |
| 19th   | Pharaoh sends army/Pillars of Cloud and Fire/Sea Divided | 14:21               | 113     | 114     |
| 20th   | Crossing the Sea/Egyptians drowned                       | 14:24-25            | 115     | 116     |
| 21st   | Song of the Sea  | 15:1                | 117     | 118     |

This part of the book of Ezra describes events that take place prior to Ezra’s arrival in Israel, which happened in 458 BC. It tells of how King Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles living in Babylon could return home (**Ezra 1:1-2:70**). Soon thereafter, they begin to rebuild the temple on its original site (**3:1-6:22**). It describes the foundations being laid (**3:1-13**), enemies who conspire to stop the project (**4:1-24**), the resuming of the work (**5:1-17**), the death of Cyrus the Great and the reaffirmation of Darius to complete it (**6:1-22**). In this way, the Hallelujah songs all celebrate a new kind of Passover-Exodus, where God takes them out of captivity in Babylon and restores them to their Promised Land with reinstated temple worship.

<sup>7</sup> Goulder, 192-95. This exact chart appeared in the sermon on Psalm 107.

Then we come to [Psalm 119](#), the great song of Torah. Placing it after these songs is a good parallel of the way the book of Ezra finishes. It is only at [Ezra 7:1ff](#) that the great priest comes to Jerusalem to establish Torah for the people, and the rest of the book describes this. To put it another way, Ezra is bringing the people a renewed love for the word of God, like Psalm 119, which as I mentioned last time, could very well have been the Psalm which was meditated upon through the [second commanded pilgrimage feast: Pentecost](#) (or the Feast of Weeks). Ezra is the Great Man of Torah of his age. No one cared more about fidelity and love of God's word than Ezra. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find anyone in history who loved it more. And I think this man was responsible for putting together the editing of the Psalter as we know it today.

This is so remarkable because as we move into the [Psalms of Ascent](#), a very good case can be made that we then move directly into the book of Nehemiah for more parallels, thus giving the fullness of the Ezra-Nehemiah history books a liturgical background in the Psalter and bringing even more cohesion to this collection. Michael Goulder shows how

these songs parallel much of Nehemiah, and basically in the order the book follows.

| The Feast of Booths Liturgy, Nehemiah's History, and the Songs of Ascent <sup>8</sup> |                                      |                       |         |         |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| Tishri<br>(month)   | Topic                                | Nehemiah<br>Reference | Psalm   |         |
|   |                                      |                       | Evening | Morning |
| 15 <sup>th</sup>  | Lament at Jerusalem's Plight         | 1:1-11                | 120     |         |
| 15 <sup>th</sup>  | Artaxerxes: Journey from Susa        | 2:1-9                 |         | 121     |
| 16 <sup>th</sup>  | Arrival at Jerusalem, Seeking Good   | 2:10-18               | 122     |         |
| 16 <sup>th</sup>  | Contempt and Scorn                   | 2:19-20, 3:33-38      |         | 123     |
| 17 <sup>th</sup>  | God Frustrates Planned Attack        | 4:1-17                | 124     |         |
| 17 <sup>th</sup>  | Usurers and Enslavers Capitulate     | 5:1-13, 19            |         | 125     |
| 18 <sup>th</sup>  | Wall Completed Despite Plots         | 6:1-14                | 126     |         |
| 18 <sup>th</sup>  | Gates Guarded, Houses to Build       | 6:15-7:5              |         | 127     |
| 19 <sup>th</sup>  | Repopulation                         | 11:1-2, 7:26-33       | 128     |         |
| 19 <sup>th</sup>  | Tobiah and Eliashib Discountenanced  | 13:4-14               |         | 129     |
| 20 <sup>th</sup>  | Sabbath-Breaking                     | 13:15-22              | 130     |         |
| 20 <sup>th</sup>  | Mixed Marriages Forbidden            | 13:23-29              |         | 131     |
| 21 <sup>st</sup>  | Priesthood Cleansed and Provided For | 13:30-31              | 132     |         |
| 21 <sup>st</sup>  | Dedication Procession                | 12:27-43              |         | 133     |
| 22 <sup>nd</sup>  |                                      |                       | 134     |         |

His idea is that after the wall was completed, Nehemiah, working with the Scribes like Ezra, established “**Testimonies**” which were later put into book form. These Testimonies were what God had done for him (2:8, 18; 4:3; 6:12; 7:5; etc.). Many of them begin with a kind of formula such as “**now it happened**” or “**in those days**” or “**when \_\_\_\_\_ heard of it**” (1:1; 2:1, 10; 3:33; 4:1; 6:1; etc.) and end with prayers, usually of remembrance (1:8; 5:19; 6:14; etc.). As the Psalms demonstrate, kings of old and other leading

<sup>8</sup> Table in Goulder, 111. This exact chart appeared in the sermon on Psalm 107.

figures used to give testimonies about God’s faithfulness to the people in worship settings. (**Psalm 71:15-24** does this for example).<sup>9</sup> So, as the leaders of Israel were reestablishing temple worship after the exile, they created a liturgy of Testimony and an accompanying psalm that would be read, evening and morning, during the annual feast. In this case, it is **The Feast of Tabernacles**, which curiously is the **third of the three pilgrimage festivals** of the OT. So, much of Book V of the Psalter may actually have been used to help Israel celebrate the recounting the amazing events that began the Second Temple period:

| <b>Three Commanded Pilgrimage Feasts to Jerusalem</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Passover</b>                                       | Reading Ezra 1-6 with Psalms 105-118 as evening/morning songs during the seven-day feast.         |
| <b>Pentecost</b>                                      | Reading Ezra 7 with Psalm 119 during the eight parts of the Jewish day during this one-day feast. |
| <b>Tabernacles</b>                                    | Reading (portions of?) Nehemiah 1-13 as evening/morning songs during the eight-day feast.         |

**Why the Feast of Tabernacles?** During this feast, the sojourner would make for his family a *sukkah* or “booth” or “tabernacle” that they would live in during the eight-day

<sup>9</sup> Goulder, 31-32. He cites J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (The Biblical Seminary, 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1980), pp 181-95.

celebration. This would remind them of how they lived when they came out of Egypt. This temporary dwelling, the ancient equivalent of a tent, is described by the current wiki as a “walled structure” covered with something like palm leaves. It says, “The walls can be free-standing or include the sides of a building or porch.” I found this language interesting, because the book of Nehemiah is all about rebuilding “the walls.” Thus, a celebration of such an event would make a lot of sense during this festival. With this short introduction, let’s turn to our Psalms today, and their parallel in Nehemiah.

## **Psalm 120 and Nehemiah’s News and First Prayer**

Someone has explained, “Psalm 120 is an individual lament, sung by someone living away from Israel (v. 5); his distress concerns the way that deceitful people are stirring up war, while the psalmist prefers peace.”<sup>10</sup> It has a very simple structure:

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<sup>10</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, 1102.

- A. Psalmist in **Distress**, God hears him (1)
- B. **Soul** needs deliverance from evil tongues (2)
- C. What shall be done to those with **evil tongues**? (3)
- D. **Sharp, fiery arrows of the warrior** (4)
- C<sup>1</sup>. **Woe** to me for dwelling with Meshech and the tents of Kedar (5)
- B<sup>1</sup>. My **soul** dwells with those who hate peace (6)
- A<sup>1</sup>. I am for peace, they are for **war** (7)

How do we know that he is living far from Israel? He talks about **dwelling with Meshech and Kedar**. This is the riddle of the song. In Nehemiah's day, there was a King of Kedar named Geshem.<sup>11</sup> Geshem also "happens" to be one of the chief rivals of Nehemiah. He is called "**Geshem the Arab**" and he "**mocked us and despised us**" and accused Nehemiah of rebelling against king Artaxerxes (**Neh 2:19**). This either took place as he was traveling to Jerusalem, or even once he got there.

In the same verse, Nehemiah's other nemesis is named **Sanballat the Horonite** or possibly Haranite.<sup>12</sup> There is no known place called Horon. But **Haran** was home to Abram for a time, and it was the center of the worship of Sin, the

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<sup>11</sup> Goulder, 38.

<sup>12</sup> We do not know of any Horonites. However, it is important to remember that the vowels we have in our Hebrew text were inserted much later, perhaps around 900 AD by the Scribes. They are not inspired. Hebrew was written with no vowels. The word HRN can also be pointed as Haran: Sanballat the Haranite.

moon god. Sin is the part of Sanballat's name (San = Sin). Meshech is a tribal name for people living on the Upper Euphrates in the days of Nehemiah, and Haran is in the very same place.

To put this another way, the enemies described in Psalm 120 are exactly the same two enemies of Nehemiah, and their sin of the tongue is very sin in mind in the song. It is into this context that he then prayerfully sings for the LORD to **deliver him** from lying lips and deceitful tongues (Ps 120:2). The parallel in the chiasm is “**Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace**” (6). And again, “**I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!**” (7). For Nehemiah, this would include both the land of Persia, the greatest military force in the world at that time, and Jerusalem to which he is going to travel, where all kinds of unbelieving rabble were now living.

“**Deliver me**” becomes “**What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?**” (3). Again, the parallel here is “**Woe to me**” because I sojourn in Meshech and Kedar, even when I'm in the Holy City (5). **His deliverance must come from God.** Therefore, “**A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom**

tree” (4) becomes the center. This is God’s deliverance. Yahweh Sabaoth must defeat them with his strong, fiery arrows.

Let’s read the song in light of Nehemiah 1. It is the month of Chislev (Nov/Dec), and Nehemiah is in Susa, near Babylon in today’s modern Iraq (Neh 1:1). Suddenly, one of his brothers comes back from Judah. He asks them about the those who survived the exile and about Jerusalem (2). They report that the people are in great trouble and suffer terrible shame. Though the temple is rebuilt, the wall is broken (probably recently), and the gates have been destroyed by fire (3). Suddenly, Nehemiah finds himself in great distress, weeping and mourning for days. Then he begins to pray (Neh 1:4). The beginning of this song perfectly reflects this Testimony of Nehemiah. “In my distress I called to the LORD...” (Ps 120:1).

There are some things to here notice. First, Nehemiah prays: “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the

people of Israel your servants...” (5-6). Psalm 120:1 says, “... and he answered me.” So, God heard and answered a very specific prayer, and these psalms and this book of Nehemiah together will show you how.

If this was true, then you can trust God’s promises to hear your prayers, if you pray in the will and name of Jesus Christ. For **Christ is the greater Nehemiah**. He takes *our* prayers before the very throne of heaven, where he has gone before us, to open the way to the throne of glory, that our prayers might be heard and answered in his Name! Therefore, do not be discouraged in your prayers, but redouble your efforts to pray for the things that distress you, and by faith believe that as he has done in the past, so also he will do now. God answers our prayers.

A second thing to notice is **the opening content** of Nehemiah’s prayer. “... confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned” (6). Though the Psalm speaks only of the sin of these Gentiles, when read with Nehemiah, we see that he has first looked inward and **confessed** his own **sins** and the sins of his people. Indeed, in Goulder’s reconstruction of this first evening liturgy of Tabernacles

(perhaps in 445 BC), Nehemiah stands before the people in Temple and gives this Testimony of Nehemiah 1 to them, and then, at the leading of the Priest (perhaps Ezra himself), the psalm is sung in response! Therefore, that first time this happened, the sins of the people would have been contemplated before the sins of anyone else.

This is **the kind of humility** that all prayers and petitions demand by God. If you want to be heard, you must come into the presence of God through Christ on your knees with your own sins on your lips, confessing and repenting of them. He will not listen to the prideful prayer.

Next, Nehemiah is also a leader of the people, so **he prays for them**. This shows the kind of humility leaders are supposed to have as well. There must be no hypocrisy among God's people. Hypocrisy in this case is going to God as if you are sinless and everyone else is sinful. Confess your sins to the Lord and acknowledge that your own ability to come into his presence to ask for anything is because of his grace alone.

Finally, **“We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses” (7)**. His prayer of

confession is rooted, not in the things he thinks are sin, but in things *God* says are sin in the Holy Scripture.

Did you hear those three words: **commandments** (*mistvah*), **statutes** (*choq*), and **rules** (*mishpat*). These are three of the eight key-words that are found in every verse of Psalm 119! In other words, Nehemiah is demonstrating from his prayer in action that he believes Psalm 119. Hamilton writes,

Nehemiah's strength of character was forged from his study of God's Word. ... he knew he could rely on the one true and living God to answer his prayers because he knew from his study of the Bible what God had promised to do ... the boldness that grows from Bible study and the blessing that falls when prayers are answered enable[s] ... others to stand for the cause of all that is good and right and sacred.<sup>13</sup>

There are some very beautiful things to think about as we wrap up the first song. First, he thinks specifically about something Moses said, “**If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my**

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<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, 98.

commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my Name dwell there” (Neh 1:8-9). Nehemiah has let the word of God dwell richly in his heart. He has mediated upon it. He has done what Psalm 119 has taught him. He couldn’t pray this if he didn’t know it was there. The words come from Dt 4:25-31 and Lev 26:40-42. This is the covenant and God has sworn it. But of course, in order to pray the word, you must know the word. This man knew it and amazing things happened because of it.

Second, he has great affection and regard for God’s chosen people. Those passages said that when you are in “distress” and cry out to the LORD, he would be compassionate and will return you to the land. The prayer of Nehemiah is full of this. He prays for God’s people and pleads with God for them. All Christians are to be consumed with love for the Lord’s people that they pray for them day and night. The song shows the flip side of this. In order for God to do this, their enemies will be taken care of. Thus, the center of the Psalm “A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing

coals of the broom tree” (Ps 120:4) are appropriate responses to the covenant.

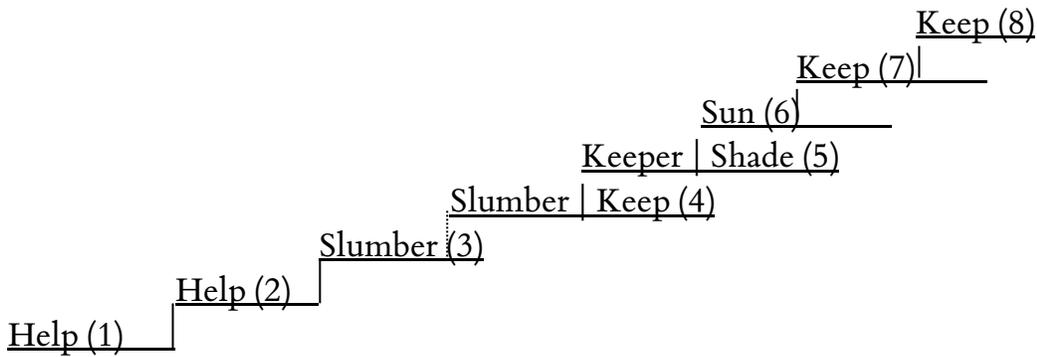
But this shows something else. Nehemiah not only knew the terms of the covenant, **he believed God**. Thus, he calls upon God to remember his own sworn covenantal promises. “They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your Name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man” (11). This is Nehemiah praying for the Kingdom to come. Something Jesus told us to pray for as well.

## Psalm 121 and Nehemiah’s Bold Request

Dahood calls Psalm 121 “**a liturgy of blessing**” that uses a “**stairlike pattern**” of successive verses repeating words or ideas from previous lines.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms III: 101-150: Introduction, Translation, and Notes with an Appendix: The Grammar of the Psalter*, vol. 17A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 199.



It clearly describes a sojourner looking up to the far away hills. He is on his way to Jerusalem. It begins with that verse we saw earlier: “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?” (Ps 121:1). Of course, Zion is God’s holy mountain. It is here that he dwelt in his special presence through the Angel and Spirit among God’s people.<sup>15</sup>

The answer, “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (2). This is the great and only real answer for God’s helpless people. When they find themselves helpless against others, helpless against Satan, helpless against their own heart, our help comes from the LORD!

<sup>15</sup> In Ezekiel’s time, the Shekinah-Glory left, symbolizing God’s turning his face away from his people, thus sending them into exile. But God never forsook Zion. It is his holy habitation in Nehemiah’s day, even as it was in Ezekiel’s and later in Jesus’.

Let's look at **Nehemiah 2:1-10** for the parallel. It is now the month of Nisan (**March/April**). Several months have passed and Nehemiah has been in deep prayer and fasting for this long period of time. Why? He is preparing to talk to the great King Artaxerxes, ruler of the world (this is why it is vital to see that he knows that God rules heaven and earth). It reminds me of Esther, who prior to going to the King prepares herself. What follows is not some half-baked idea he came up with on the spur of the moment. Advancing the Kingdom never is! He is planned, prayed, but unlike **Æthelred**, also prepared for action.

Now, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king, meaning that he tasted everything before the king did in case it was poisoned. Not an enviable job. Yet, it shows he was a man of some power in Persia, even though he was a Jew. This gave him an audience with the king.

Once day the king asked him why his face was sad (2). Knowing this was the time he had been praying about, yet dreading, Nehemiah answers that **the place of his father's graves is in ruins and its gates have been destroyed** (3). The king knew he was asking for something, so he tells Nehemiah to speak plainly. Nehemiah's response? **Prayer**

again! (4). Even though he had been preparing for this difficult day as best he could, even though he had taken it to the throne of heaven for nearly four months day and night, Nehemiah was still afraid. Rather than quickly answer, he spends a moment in prayer, gathering strength.

Finally, he answers. **Send me to Judah to rebuild** the cities gates and walls (5). The king (with the queen sitting beside him ... perhaps Nehemiah planned this, knowing that she would make the king more favorable) wanted to know how long he would be gone (6). With a satisfactory answer, he sent Nehemiah on his way.

But he didn't dare go empty handed. He needed **official letters** in order to prove to the governors of the various provinces on the way that he had been sent by the king (7). Basically, it was his passport. There's nothing new under the sun. But clearly, these men were not favorably disposed towards Jewish travelers. He asked another letter be given to for the wood needed to begin construction (8). This would also hopefully quell the rabble in Jerusalem that had been pillaging and burning.

It is very difficult to fully appreciate **the anxiety** that Nehemiah surely was feeling as he traveled that long road to

Zion. Thus, in Goulder's reconstruction of the liturgical events the first morning of that Feast of Booths around 445 BC, after reading this testimony before the worshipers, the priests led them all in Psalm 121. This song shows the feelings but also provides the only answer.

My help comes, not from king Artexerxes, but from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth (Ps 121:2). He who does not slumber, will not let your foot be moved (3). He is the keeper of Israel and he never slumbers or sleeps (4). This interesting phrase may have had a certain resonance with the people of those days who called the gods "Watchers" (Dan 4:13, 23). This was their title for the Sons of God. The idea being that their eyes are always on us below, they never sleep. But those angels were nothing like Nehemiah's, who made heaven and earth. His Father in Heaven sees everything, not just upon one people. His Spirit has eyes everywhere, covering all things so that there is not a place in the world that he does not see.

This includes watching you all the way through a long travel, through hot deserts, dangerous nights, and strange gods. "The sun shall not strike you by day" (6a). This could refer to its scorching heat, which would have begun in

earnest at just this time of year. This seems to be the natural progression from vs. 5, “The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.” He alone can keep you. He is your keeper. He protects you. So, you must trust in him.

But the complementary line shows that something more may be in mind. “... nor the moon by night.” Obviously, the moon doesn’t burn. But people were often afraid of the moon, and it was worshiped as a god. The next verse intensifies the thought: “The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life” (7). Neither desperados nor demons, bandits nor banshees, governors nor ghouls will cause them harm. “The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore” (8). It is an appropriate benediction for a first day of a week’s long liturgical celebration which celebrated the year-end ingathering harvest (Ex 34:22) and the Exodus (Lev 23:42-43), but also anticipated the coming of Christ.

We will look more at this in coming weeks. But for now, consider Amos predicted long ago, “In that day I will raise up the fallen booth/tabernacle of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the

days of old” (Amos 9:11). According to James, this refers to the ingathering when God would begin to take from among the Gentiles a people for his Name (Acts 15:14-18).

What shall we then say to these things? Long ago, the prayers of a righteous man accomplished much. Why? Because he knew and treasured the word of God in his heart, and because he believed God when he gave promises through them. He knew that his help only came from the LORD; only Yahweh could deliver him. He prayed fervently, patiently, and at all times, for himself, his own sins, and for others. He prayed as he prepared to tell the king his heart. He prayed on the way to Jerusalem.

He was not a superman, but was just like you and I. Today, the Booth of David has been rebuilt, and the exodus of God’s people from among the nations continues in mass as we travel to the heavenly Jerusalem. He is not abandoning his people, even when they face persecution. The devil can do nothing to them. The Lord is powerful over him. The kings of this earth put them down, but the Lord lifts them up to glory.

You and I are, in a very real sense, walking this same journey, even as we also realize that many more need to

begin it. As you walk, know that God is with you. As you realize, pray. Pray for your sins. Pray for God's people. Pray that the fields may become ripe. The darkness is creeping into our nation as never before. Many harvest fields are ripe. Ours, not so much. We must pray that God would be pleased once more to bring one here, and we must become as Nehemiah, so full of faith that our obedience to the word of God consumes our every thought.