Far From Home [Psalm 120]

Big Idea: You don't have to love where you are to know you were made for somewhere else.

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11.8.2026

// INTRODUCTION: *Are we there yet?*

// PICTURE: Hannah family road trip photo

The Hannah family. Start of a road trip to family in Shell Lake, WI.

Kids… headphones, earbuds, the face. ***Tara…*** the only one who knows what's coming.

Pittsburgh to Shell Lake, WI, is a 13-hour drive. That's with no stops. Ohio, Indiana, Chicago, and Wisconsin.

Look at the photo… everybody's happy. They've got their music, snacks; right now, they're comfy. Car packed to the ceiling. ***This is hour zero, and the first hour is always fun because it's about what's ahead.***

You know what picture I don't have? **Hour eleven.** Nobody takes a selfie at hour eleven. Snacks are gone, and people are fighting. Bodies are tired, and then there's the dreaded question, ***"Are we there yet?"***

That question is a lot older than minivans and family selfies on road trips. 3000 years ago, Jewish families were asking it on a dirt road headed to Jerusalem. Kids whining, grandparents tired of walking, someone's uncle telling the same story for the 9th time… ***and somewhere on that road they started singing.***

Some of those songs they sang are in your Bible. They are the songs we're going to be looking through the rest of the year.

// THE ROAD [Psalms 120-134]

For the next seven weeks, right up to Christmas, we're going to walk through a collection of songs in the book of Psalms called the Songs of

Ascent. We're calling the series *The Long Way Home.* Psalms 120 through 134. ***The Hebrew word there simply means going up.***

Here's why… Three times a year, God told his people to make the trip to Jerusalem for the great festivals.

[16]Each year every man in Israel must celebrate these three festivals: the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Harvest, and the Festival of Shelters... [Deuteronomy 16:16]

So, three times a year, the whole nation did a road trip to Jerusalem. And here's what you need to know about Jerusalem. It sits up on a ridge in the hill country. There's no way to get there that doesn't involve a climb.

And on these road trips going up, they sang. Whole families and villages walking together and singing the same songs mile after mile. Think of the songs you sang in the car growing up.

Here's a detail most people miss… Jesus sang these songs.

[41]Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival.
[42]When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual.
[Luke 2:41-42]

"As usual" and every year. Which means that every year as a kid, Jesus walked that road with Mary and Joseph and their whole extended family, and He sang the same songs we're about to read.

Eugene Peterson wrote a classic book on these psalms called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. That's what following Jesus is… It's not a sprint or one big emotional moment in a service. ***It's a long walk home, in the same direction, one step at a time.***

// READING CARD: The Long Way Home

*** Read each psalm every day that week. ****

1. Psalm 120: Far From Home

2. Psalm 121: Watched the Whole Way

3. Psalm 122: Glad to Go

4. Psalm 130: Waiting for Morning (Hope)

5. Psalm 131: Still on the Road (Peace)

6. Psalm 126: Laughing on the Way (Joy)

7. Psalm 133: Home Together (Love)

The last four of those land right on the four Sundays of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love. That's not an accident because these are songs about people climbing up to God. ***Christmas is the story of God coming down to us.***

[14]So the Word became human and made his home among us. [John 1:14]

We couldn't make the climb, so God made the descent.

// THE FIRST SONG

If you were making a playlist for a 13-hour road trip, what would track one be?

You don't open with the sad song. Nobody pulls out of the driveway to a funeral hymn. Track one is the song that gets everybody singing. Windows down, volume up, the kids participating for once. That's what's happening in that photo. That's hour zero.

There's a song like that in the Psalms of Ascent. It goes like this…

[1]I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
[2]And now here we are, standing inside your gates, O Jerusalem.
[Psalm 122:1-2]

That's exactly how you'd expect the trip to start. That's the song you'd sing first, right? Nope, it was track three.

The first song on their journey is Psalm 120. And Psalm 120 doesn't sound like hour zero; it sounds like hour eleven. ***It's not excitement; it's exhaustion.***

Why would God's people start the trip with a sad song?

Here's what I think it is... Our family's road trip started with excitement because life at home was good and we were heading toward people we love, and we were glad to go.

The pilgrim's first song sounds different, and here's why… ***Before he sings about where he's going, he gets honest about where he's been living.*** Every day, back in his town, he's surrounded by lies, sharp words, and people who want a fight. And three times a year God says, *"Come up. Step out of the noise. Remember who you are and where you really belong."*

That's why the first song isn't excitement; it's exhaustion. ***He doesn't go up to worship because life at home is perfect; he goes up because it isn't.***

Eugene Peterson… *"A person has to be thoroughly disgusted with the way things are to find the motivation to set out on the Christian way."*

Here's what many of you need to know today… If you walked in and you're not at hour zero on this road trip of life, but in hour eleven, you're in a good place. If you're filled with exhaustion, not excitement, that's ok. ***That's exactly where this journey begins.***

// READ THE TEXT [Psalm 120]

[1]I took my troubles to the LORD; I cried out to him, and he answered my prayer. [2]Rescue me, O LORD, from liars and from all deceitful people. [3]O deceptive tongue, what will God do to you? How will he increase your punishment? [4]You will be pierced with sharp arrows and burned with glowing coals. [5]How I suffer in far-off Meshech. It pains me to live in distant Kedar. [6]I am tired of living among people who hate peace. [7]I search for peace; but when I speak of peace, they want war! [Psalm 120:1-7]

That's how this journey home starts. Not with joy but with someone who's had enough. ***And here's the main chorus of this song, if you will…***

You don't have to love where you are to know you were made for somewhere else.

What do you do when you're living somewhere that doesn't feel like home?

This psalm gives us three answers… ***Cry out. Call it what it is. Carry peace.***

// CRY OUT [Psalm 120:1-2]

When you're living somewhere that doesn't feel like home, cry out.

[1]I took my troubles to the LORD; I cried out to him, and he answered my prayer. [2]Rescue me, O LORD, from liars and from all deceitful people. [Psalm 120:1-2]

Past tense… He answered. This isn't his first time praying. He's been here before, and God came through. So, when trouble comes again, he knows where to go.

Memory fuels prayer. What God did *then* should give you courage to ask God right *now*. Some of you are in a hard season, and you don't feel like you have the faith to pray. Don't start with how you feel; start with what God has already done. Go back to the last time he showed up and pray from there.

LYRIC: "I sought the Lord, and He heard, and He answered… that's why I trust Him."

What I love is that the writer doesn't polish his prayer. He doesn't clean it up or make it churchy. He says, *"I'm surrounded by liars and deceitful people. I'm in trouble. Rescue me!"*

Some of us grew up thinking you had to get your prayers dressed up before you brought them to God. ***God would rather hear your honest complaint than your polished performance.***

I don't believe it's coincidental that about a third of the psalms in our Bible are laments. They're complaints. People telling God, *"This stinks!"* It's in our Bible as an example and reminder that God can handle and desires our authenticity in prayer.

So, what exactly is this man crying out about? It's not his health. It's not his finances. It's not his job. It's the noise around him.

// CALL IT WHAT IT IS [Psalm 120:3-6]

When you're living somewhere that doesn't feel like home, just call it what it is. Cry out and identify it.

[3]O deceptive tongue, what will God do to you? How will he increase your punishment? [4]You will be pierced with sharp arrows and burned with glowing coals. [Psalm 120:3-4]

The writer is describing a world where lies are the norm. Where words are used as weapons and people talk past each other. He uses two images for damaging words… arrows and coals.

An arrow is fast, direct, and can strike from a distance. Think about harmful words that hit that way and come from a person who doesn't have to look you in the eye. Sound familiar? We call those "keyboard warriors" today.

But then there are painful words that burn like coal. They don't just hurt when they're spoken; they keep burning even as time goes on. Some of us are still carrying a coal someone handed you 20 years ago… parent, coach, an ex.

[5]How I suffer in far-off Meshech. It pains me to live in distant Kedar. [6]I am tired of living among people who hate peace. [Psalm 120:5-6]

Here's the geography lesson that's important to understand this… Meshech was far up north, near the region of the Black Sea. Kedar was way out in the Arabian desert. These two places are hundreds of miles apart, in opposite directions. ***No one lived in both places.***

The writer is using poetic language here to describe how distant his life feels. It's as if he's saying, *"I feel like I'm living in Siberia and the Sahara at the same time."*

Five days ago this country voted. Some relieved. Some grieving. Same row.

Here's what I've noticed through this election season… everyone reads verse 2, *"rescue me from liars and deceitful people,"* and knows exactly who they are. The people on the other side. We'll read verse 6, *"people who*

hate peace," and we can name them. The people who vote differently than us.

We're not going to fix that this morning. Partially because the people sitting by you who voted differently aren't a problem to fix; it's what the church looks like… ***People who disagree about almost everything, worshiping the same King.***

But I'm not going to pretend it's not hard. Some of you are exhausted. Tired of all the feeds and group texts. Some of you are already anxious about what the Thanksgiving table is going to feel like.

But that feeling of *"I'm tired of living among people who hate peace."* The exhaustion and tension you're living in- that's exactly how this Psalmist felt 3000 years ago. ***You're not the first, and you're not alone.***

C.S. Lewis put it this way in his book Mere Christianity… "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

That ache you feel deep within you doesn't mean something's wrong with you. It's proof of where you're from. ***We're pilgrims,*** just like the people who sang these songs years ago. There's something very freeing in that.

If you expect this world to feel like your home, it will break your heart and disappoint you every election season. But if you know you're a pilgrim, you won't be shocked when the road gets tough. It'll just remind you that you're not there yet.

Name your Meshech. Where do you feel most out of place right now? Work? Family? Culture? Your own body? Name it. Bring it to God the way the Psalmist did.

Here's the way most of us would want this psalm to end if we were writing it… *"So, I'm out"* or *"So, I finally just told them off."* But that's not what he does.

// CARRY PEACE [Psalm 120:7]

When you're living somewhere that doesn't feel like home, carry peace.

[7]I search for peace; but when I speak of peace, they want war!
[Psalm 120:7]

The Hebrew translation here literally reads, "I am peace." Not "*I'm in favor of peace,"* or *"I'm pro-peace."* I am peace. Peace isn't just his position; it's his identity.

Notice, though, what he can and can't control. He can't control whether those around him want war. In fact, they do. He can't control the people around him, but he can control what he carries into the room.

This is exactly the thing this psalm is asking us to do right now. ***We are to be peace carriers to those around us.*** We're not to disengage, put our head down, and just wait for heaven.

Listen to what God told his people when they were living in a foreign country in exile…

[7]And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.
[Jeremiah 29:7]

Being a pilgrim doesn't mean you check out from what's happening in our community, city, or country. ***You can be homesick for heaven and invested in the North Side, the city of Pittsburgh, and our nation. Both at the same time.***

So where does that kind of peace come from? Peace isn't something I can manufacture.

[14]For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. [Ephesians 2:14]

There were no two groups in the first century further apart than Jews and Gentiles. Paul says Jesus took the wall of hostility between them and broke it down in his own body. ***He doesn't just give us peace; He is our peace.*** And when He lives in us, we start to carry it.

Jesus said…

[9]God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. [Matthew 5:9]

Peace is work.

- It's the work of listening to understand, not to argue or prove someone wrong.
- It's the work of having empathy. The ability to understand another person's experience, background, or perspective.
- It's the work of asking more questions than giving answers.
- It's the work of assuming the best of others.
- It's the work of recognizing that every human being is created in the image of God.

I believe that's why God has positioned ACAC where He has. A church like this reflects God's kingdom. It's a sign that a different kingdom is coming. When you sit next to someone you disagree with, and you sing the same song to the same Savior, you're preaching a sermon louder than I ever could.

Here's what I want to leave you with today… It's one question. It's the most practical thing I'll say this morning, and I want you to carry it out of this room. Every time you walk into a room this week, ask yourself this.

Am I carrying peace, or am I carrying war?

Don't just be for peace. Be peace.

So back to the car. Are we there yet?

// PICTURE: Hannah family road trip photo

That's hour zero. We're just starting out on a long journey. Lots of excitement. What gets you through the long journey isn't the snacks or the playlist. ***It's knowing what—and who—is waiting at the end of the journey.***

And here's something else… Somewhere along the way, the backseat gets quiet because kids are asleep. No more *"Are we there yet?"* But they didn't stop asking because we arrived; ***they stopped asking because they trusted whoever was driving to get them home.***

As followers of Jesus… are we there yet? No, we're not. This world isn't our home. But here's what Jesus said…

[2]There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? [3]When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. [John 14:2-3]

Trust the One who's driving.

Cry out. Call it what it is. Carry peace.

You don't have to love where you are to know you were made for somewhere else.

// PRAY