



Songs for the Ascent

Psalms 120-134

This morning I would like to address a wound that the pandemic has inflicted upon us that has been detrimental to a critical aspect of our identity as followers of Jesus. I'm sure it's not news to any of you that because of the prolonged isolation, we've been immobilized, shut in to virtual worlds that deprive us of the multi-faceted dimensions of our humanity that make us fully alive. On the one hand, I am incredibly grateful for the technological capabilities that were harnessed through the heroic efforts of our staff at the beginning of the pandemic. In one week's time we were able to pivot and stay connected, transporting our worship services and classes far and wide. For shut-ins and others who were physically compromised, this has been and will continue to be a life saver. To this day I am thrilled to have the capability to conduct classes with friends in other states and to connect with my Romanian family on a weekly basis, instead of once every two years. Online services are a blessing and they are here to stay.

On the other hand, online services are **no** substitute for incarnational worship. Technology can capture "sight" and "sound," but it cannot transmit "touch" (hugs), taste, or smell; nor does it require a regular commitment to a particular place and time that is sanctified with layers of memory and singing and praises that ignite our imaginations, broaden our perspectives and enlarge our hearts that we "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

And for those who have physically returned, I think many of us are still emotionally isolated and tentative about engagement. To help us break out of our lethargy and crippling fears, I would like to introduce you to a collection of fifteen psalms (120-134) known as the "Songs of Ascents." These psalms were gathered together to be sung by pilgrims as they went up ("ascended") to Jerusalem three times a year for the great worship festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Three times

a year our Hebrew forefathers reminded themselves who they were and where they were going (Exod 23:14-17; 34:22-24).

**Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Weeping,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion. (Ps 84:5-7 NIV)**

These yearly pilgrimages forged their identity in the saving acts of God's grace. In the spring, the Feast of Unleavened Bread refreshed their memories of how their redemption had been accomplished at the exodus. The Feast of Pentecost, which coincided with the culmination of the first fruits gathered after the spring grain harvests, reminded them of God's generosity, blessing his people with a land flowing with milk and honey—a new Eden! The Feast of Tabernacles, during which time they lived in huts made from palm fronds and leafy tree branches, reminded them how God preserved them during the forty years in the wilderness. As Eugene Peterson writes,

The trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity. What Paul described as *'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'* (Phil. 3:14).¹

As Israel's history progressed from Abraham to David, from the monarchy to the exile, these songs took on greater significance as the pilgrims found themselves homesick living further and further from home. Though life in Babylon was good for many, all was loss for the godly in exile, for the riches of Babylon were tainted by the taunts of the captors, who "demanded them to sing songs of joy."

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill. (Ps 137:1-6 NIV)**

And then came the grand reversal and the indescribable JOY celebrated in Psalm 126. "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream" (v. 1).

Jesus was well acquainted with pilgrimage and the tensions that came with it. Leaving his heavenly home, he came to his own, but his own did not receive him. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mark 8:20). His life and longings are inscribed in every line of these songs.

“Pilgrim” is an essential aspect of our identity that we need to recover as followers of Jesus. Peter addresses his first letter “to those who are *elect exiles* scattered throughout the provinces...” (1 Pet 1:2 NIV). As God’s *elect*, we are beloved sons and daughters; but as *exiles*, we are not at home in this world. We are citizens of another world, making our way to a heavenly “city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

The Songs of Ascent give voice to the pain and alienation we experience as foreigners and exiles in a strange land, juxtaposed with deep longings for God, which break us out of our paralysis and launch us on pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a visceral discipline, engaging the entire body and all our five senses as we follow in the way of Jesus. The collection has a definite shape with a chiastic structure of groupings of 4 - 3 - 1 - 3 - 4.

A Pss 120-123 - Footholds for the Rugged **Ascent**

B Pss 124-126: Taking in the Vistas: **Reflections Looking Back**

X Ps 127: **Insight at the Summit**

B’ Pss 128-130: Taking in the Vistas: **Reflections Looking Ahead**

A’ Pss 131-134: Spiritual Disciplines for the **Descent**

We begin with *climbing*, we end *descending* and in the middle, we are *taking in the vistas*.



A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY

A Pss 120-123: Footholds for the Ascent

- 120: Thrust out by slander and oppression
- 121: 360° protection throughout the journey
- 122: Joyous arrival in the city of *shalom*
- 123: Intercession before the throne

The rugged ascent



B Pss 124-126: Reflections Looking Back

- 124: God's faithfulness for survival
- 125: The stability granted to those who trust
- 126: Resounding joy when set free from bondage

Taking in the vistas



X Ps 127: Insight at the Summit

B' Pss 128-130: Reflections Looking Ahead

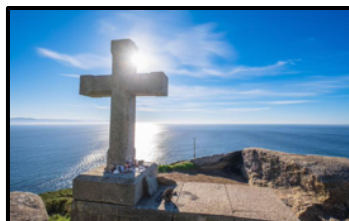
- 128: The blessed life
- 129: Let justice roll down
- 130: Out of the depths

Transformation



A' Pss 131-134: Engaging Spiritual Disciplines

- 131: Lightening the load—> Contentment
- 132: Renewing covenant vows
- 133: Reveling in our companions
- 134: Unceasing praise inviting heaven to earth



WEARY OF CONFLICT, LONGING FOR PEACE

PSALM 120²

I. The Pilgrim's Cry

- 1 To I AM³ in my distress
I called and he answered me.
- 2 "I AM rescue my soul,
from lying lips and from a tongue of deceit."

II. The Pilgrim's Confidence

- 3 What will he give to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you tongue of deceit?
- 4 Arrows of the warrior, razor sharp,
with burning coals of the broom tree!

III. The Pilgrim's Lament

- 5 Woe to me, for I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
- 6 Too long has my soul had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.
- 7 I am for peace, but when I speak—
they are for war!

The Christian Hebraist, Wilhelm Gesenius suggested in 1812 that the fifteen songs may also have had their name from their step-like progressive rhythm of the thoughts and repeated vocabulary (several word pairs occur in each psalm) that "move onward in incremental *steps* towards a climax, creating a climbing movement of thoughts which plants upon a preceding word and carrying it forward"⁴ until we reach the summit. Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford notes, "The 'step connections,' which were most likely fashioned as mnemonic devices so the songs could be easily memorized and sung."⁵

The word pairs for Psalm 120:

- | | |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| vv. 1 & 2 | "I AM" (יְהוָה) |
| vv. 2 & 3 | "tongue of deceit" (רִמְיָה) |
| vv. 2 & 6 | "my soul" (נַפְשִׁי) |
| vv. 5 & 6 | "dwell, dwelling place" (שֹׁכֵן) |
| vv. 6 & 7 | "peace" (שָׁלוֹם) |

I. The Pilgrim's Cry (1-2)

- 1 **To I AM in my distress
I called and he answered me.**
- 2 **"I AM rescue my soul,
from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue."**

The psalm is framed with conflict: It opens "in distress" and ends with "war." "Distress" (*tzar*) comes from the verbal root that means to "bind, tie up, shut up." The noun describes a "narrow, tight" place with little room to breathe, creating intense anxiety and anguish. The emphatic repetition of "lying lips" and "deceitful tongue" along with the oath cited in verse three indicate that the source of distress is that our pilgrim has been the target of malicious slander and betrayal of a covenantal agreement, that has cost him dearly. His enemy is a gifted and forceful liar, who has successfully maligned his reputation and thwarted all his attempts at mediation (v. 7). As Jeremiah observed in his own life,

**Their tongue is a deadly arrow;
it speaks deceitfully;
with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor,
but in his heart he plans an ambush for him. (Jer 9:8 ESV)**

When you are facing a powerful and pervasive liar you are facing evil at its worst. You have come face to face with demonic forces. Jesus did not mince any words when he confronted his enemies who were seeking to kill him (John 8:40).

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

James expands the thought:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. (Jas 3:6)

The devil is a murderer and the way he murders is through lying and deceit. How was Hitler able to kill 6 million Jews? The answer is through years of lies and propaganda that ignited hatred and murder. As we have seen in our own day—if you boldly repeat a lie over and over again, people will eventually believe it. What recourse does an unnamed immigrant have when he has no voice, no advocate and no legal recourse?

The **answer**: Because our pilgrim knew the scriptures, he was confident that he did have an advocate, One in the highest court of the land.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19)

“Sick of lies and crippled by hate, the pilgrim’s pain penetrates through despair and invigorates him to venture out of his world to a rugged pilgrimage of discipleship, as he longs for an alternative life of shalom.”⁶

This is the prod that gets him going. It is harsh and painful, but it gets things started. It is in the midst of these dark moments when evil is done with impunity that we realize we were made for something different and better and are looking for a better country whose architect and builder is God.

When we made our first mission trip into Romania in 1988, it was a little more than a year before the brutal, 20-year regime of Nicolae Ceausescu would come to an end with his execution on December 25, 1989. Ceausescu’s evil regime ravaged the nation, exporting most of the food supply to pay the national debt and mercilessly attempted to stamp out all vestiges of faith and religion. It was in the midst of that cruel terror that the faith of believers became extraordinary—ablaze with passion for God, courage to resist evil and love for one another. The week before I arrived in Cluj, the secret police bulldozed their church, forcing them to meet secretly in homes under the cover of darkness. Though it was illegal to take foreigners into their homes, it was unthinkable to our hosts to have it any other way. Despite this raging sea of suspicion and hate, believers embraced us with outrageous generosity that knew no limits. Families were rationed six eggs a month and a few meager ounces of meat. But as guests in their homes, we found two eggs and significant portions of meat on our plate when we arrived at breakfast. The depth of their generosity was matched by the intensity of their worship, singing the Immortal Songs of their poet, Traian Dorz.⁷ Hearing them for the first time, I felt that I was transported to another place and time where one touches the face of the Holy. In every resonant syllable of a language I could not yet understand I “felt a grim energy verging on elation.”⁸ Like our pilgrim in Psalm

120, I discovered that the greater the rejection of the world, the more meaningful is our pilgrimage and the more powerful is our worship.

When we are in significant distress how should we pray? Notice how short and simple our pilgrim's prayer is—a mere **7 words in Hebrew**

I AM / deliver / my soul / from lips / of liars / from the tongue / of deceit

It is a simple, but profoundly theological prayer. God's name dominates both lines as he makes his appeal for deliverance from injustice. No sooner have the words left his lips, then the Lord has given an answer. **"I called and he answered me"** — The pilgrim is given assurance that God heard his prayer either by a priest (1 Sam 1:17; Ps 121) or a prophetic oracle (2 Kgs 19:20). Imagine how surprised he must have been to learn how motivated God is to save us when we are afflicted. Of great theological "significance are those passages that seem to indicate that God himself suffers when his people are in the throes of affliction.

**In all their affliction he was afflicted,
and the angel of his presence saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isa 63:9)**

This suggests that the sufferers are saved by God's loving presence and compassionate participation in his people's affliction."⁹

Nicholas Wolterstorff is an American philosopher and theologian, whose son, Eric, died in a mountain climbing accident. In his book *Lament for a Son*, he shares how he struggled and questioned God about this tragedy that would forever change his life. The comfort he found was not in "overcoming" the death of his son, but in his lament for his boy he began to glimpse **the suffering of God with him**.¹⁰

For a long time I knew that God is not the impassive, unresponsive, unchanging being portrayed by the classical theologians. I knew of God's response of delight and of his response of displeasure. But strangely, his suffering I never saw before.

God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of the humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.

It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend of mine said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor.

Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.

But I never saw it.

Through our tears we see the tears of God.¹¹

The assurance that God has heard his prayer, bolsters our pilgrim's confidence and strengthens his petitions as he waits for the fulfillment of God's word.

II. The Pilgrim's Confidence (3-4)

3 **What will he give to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you tongue of deceit?**

4 **Arrows of the warrior, razor sharp,
with burning coals of the broom tree!**

Reflecting on God's commitment to uphold justice of divine retribution that fits the crime, protects our pilgrim from taking his own revenge. The two-fold "*what...what more*" indicates his persecutor had entered into a covenant with him and sealed it with an oath upon his life with the terrible words of self-destruction: "**God do so to me and more...**" (1 Kgs 2:23; 2 Sam 3:9). He had sworn a lie in God's name. The tormentor must now bear the destruction he had called down upon himself, for God will not be mocked—"sharpened arrows of the warrior...with burning coals of the broom tree." Slander not only cuts and wounds deeply, it seethes and burns.

Why select the arrow from all weapons? All other weapons strike close up, while this one strikes from afar. This is the way of evil tongues: **What is said in Rome kills in Syria.** And not any ember, but only white broom embers—for all embers extinguish inside, while the broom embers, even when they are extinguished externally, still burn inside. (Bereshit Raba 95,19)

God's commitment to uphold justice is further affirmed in Psalm 52:

**You love all words that devour,
O deceitful tongue.**

**But God will break you down forever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. (Ps 52:4-5)**

Psalm 64 builds on the same theme with more graphic and chilling consequences.

**[they] whet their tongues like swords,
who aim bitter words like arrows,
shooting from ambush at the blameless,
shooting at him suddenly and without fear.**

**They hold fast to their evil purpose;
they talk of laying snares secretly,
thinking, "Who can see them?"**

**But God shoots his arrow at them;
suddenly, they are wounded.**

**They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them;
all who see them will wag their heads (with scorn). (Ps 64:3-5; 7-8)**

The wicked will be judged, no question about it. Therefore, we never have to seek our own vengeance, as Paul warns, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" (Rom 12:19; cf. 12-14). That's the good news, but it begs the question, "Lord, how long?"

III. The Pilgrim's Lament (4-5)

- 5 **Woe to me, for I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!**
- 6 **Too long has my soul I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.**
- 7 **I [am for] peace, but when I speak—
they [are for] war!**

"Woe is me" is an impassioned word reflecting despair. For too long our pilgrim has been called to live in an oppressive world he names Meshech and Kedar. Meshech lies to the extreme northwest in Asia Minor, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in what is now southern Russia. The descendants of Meshech were a warlike and barbarous people, well known as shrewd traders, exporting slaves and copper (Ezek 27:13) with Tyre the capital of Phoenicia. Their great military might posed a constant threat to Israel from the north.

Kedar was located in the south-east in the Arabian Peninsula. They were the "sons of Ishmael" and as such were implacable enemies to Israel. In Arabic *Qadir* means "to possess power," and for four centuries they flourished as the most powerful tribe within the Ishmaelite confederacy. Here they are portrayed as bloodthirsty Bedouins who refuse to negotiate for peace.

We know from history that as one generation succeeded another, far from becoming more amenable to the God of Peace, these nations became more hostile towards Israel. A 5th century Egyptian inscription names one of the kings of Kedar, Geshem “the Arabian,” who may have been the same king who became Nehemiah’s staunch adversary. Every time Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Geshem vehemently opposed him. Later in the wheels of history, the founder of Islam, Mohammed, traced his lineage back to Ishmael through Kedar. From Meshech will come the Prince of God, who in the latter days will amass an army so great the prophet described it as a cloud covering the land, to destroy “the quiet people who dwell securely...with no walls, bars or gates.”

Meshech in the north and Kedar in the south are archetypical labels of the warlike world that surrounds us, where we feel out of place as outsiders and aliens living a world so distant from God and hostile to his ways. So what do we do?

IV. The Wrong Responses

A. Monastery Approach: Isolation

Withdrawing from the world is not an option, for it violates our identity as “exiles” and “sojourners” on the earth. In the upper room Jesus encouraged the disciples that, though they would face hostility in the world, they must not withdraw from it, but remain as “salt and light” in it.

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:32-33)

B. Fighting Fire with Fire

When we’ve cried “**Woe is me**” for “**too long**,” it’s so tempting to throw down the gauntlet and go to war. To use the weapons of this world to advance the kingdom of God, however, violates our identity as “beloved saints in God’s household” and creates a “war” within our souls, such that we become like them (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:11-12; Rom 12:14-21). Peter understood the temptation was strong among believers scattered across what is now Turkey, who were facing sever hostility and persecution. But they must never strike back in kind.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Pet 2:11-12)

One of the greatest evils in the church today is the rise of Christian nationalism. Its leaders have hijacked the gospel and perverted it for their own political agendas, which has unleashed division, hatred and violence, and tarnished the name of Jesus to outsiders.

V. Maintain a Long View

A. Justice is Certain

To help us endure, living between “promise” and “fulfillment,” we need to have a “long view” of history. Justice is certain. In two eschatological passages, Meshech and Tubal are ruled by Gog of the land of Magog (Ezek 38:2-3; 39:1). Gog stages a military assault on God’s people (Ezek 38:14–16; 39:2), but the prophet says that God will oppose him and his armies and will bring about their destruction and death (Ezek 38:18–33; 39:3–6).¹² A similar fate is spelled out for Kedar.

B. Justice is Delayed

So justice is certain, but it is delayed, as Peter explains, for the benefit of our salvation (and that of others).

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

Thus the pain of judgment, “called down against evildoers could turn them from their deceitful and violent ways to join our pilgrim on the way of peace.”¹³ The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that a time is coming when the inhabitants of Kedar will be drawn into the net of praise.

**Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the habitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the top of the mountains. (Isa 42:10-11)**

One day, our pilgrim will meet the inhabitants of Kedar in a New Heavens and New Earth and, with a tear in his eyes, he will bless the Lord, thinking, "The wait was worth it."

C. An Everlasting Peace is Already at Work

We can't be sure of when our pilgrim penned his lament, but I would like to imagine he may have heard Isaiah's prophecy, which would have thrilled his heart.

**It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it...
and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isa 2:2-4)**

What a vision! First we **see** God's holy mountain lifted higher than all mountains. Then we **see** nations streaming to God's city like a flood. Then we **hear** the pilgrim voices encouraging one another to come to Zion for the privilege of being taught by the Messiah. When they arrive, he instructs them rightly and judges their disputes equitably. Finally, as a result of being taught, all who came return home as new creatures, taking all the resources they once used for war ("swords" and "spears") and transforming them into implements to cultivate life ("plowing" and "reaping"). If pastors fulfill their calling to expound God's word rightly, this is what should be happening in every nation where the gospel is preached. Instead of children growing up in fear of mass shootings with assault rifles, they would thrive and flourish in an atmosphere of peace. When the Spirit writes God's instruction on our hearts, the transformation is permanent, for **never again shall they learn war**. Our pilgrim's dream

has become true, and we can shout with him, **“Thank God Almighty, peace at last, peace at last!”**

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 14.

² The translation has been adapted from the ESV to make it closer to the word order and vocabulary of the Hebrew text.

³ “I AM” is the translation of the Lord’s personal name (*Yaweh*), which is normally translated with the title LORD.

⁴ C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. 10 vols.; (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers 1996), paragraph 19089.

⁵ John J. Collins and Amanda Geysler-Fouché eds., *Scribal Practice, Text and Canon in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 155-159.

⁶ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 21.

⁷ Traian Dorz was imprisoned for sixteen years because his poetry was so powerful it was causing revival. The police confiscated all his poems, placed them in an oxcart and burned them. But they could not silence his voice. Over the next seventeen years of imprisonment, house arrest and brutal torture Dorz worked with relentless energy. Equipped with only his memory, a glass shard for a pallet, lime and spittle as his paint, and a matchstick for a brush, he resurrected his poems from the ash heap—some 4500 poems. When we arrived, over 300,000 Romanians were singing his songs as if he was their King David.

⁸ John Felstiner’s description of “becoming conversant” with the poetry of Paul Celan. *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xix.

⁹ Swart and Robin Wakely, “צִרְרָה,” *NIDOTTE*, 3:852.

¹⁰ A colleague of mine added that similar comfort is found in “the suffering of other pilgrims with us, along the journey toward God.”

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 81.

¹² David W. Baker, “Meshech,” *AYBD*, 4:711.

¹³ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 26.