

Holy Discontent—The Journey Begins

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Psalm 120:1–7 (NKJV) “In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me. ² Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue. ³ What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? ⁴ Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals of the broom tree! ⁵ Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! ⁶ My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace. ⁷ I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.”

Psalm 120-134 collectively are called the “Songs of Ascent”. These fifteen psalms are believed to have been recited or sung by Jewish pilgrims as they journeyed toward Jerusalem three times a year during the festival pilgrimages for Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The pilgrimage was a journey from the pilgrim’s earthly dwelling place to the dwelling place of God in Jerusalem. In the Temple at Jerusalem, these fifteen psalms were represented in the fifteen steps that led from the Court of the Women to the Nicanor Gate that opened into to the Court of Israel. Spiritually speaking, this mortal life is a pilgrimage from this temporal world to the eternal dwelling place of God in the New Jerusalem in heaven.

Each of these fifteen psalms address a different aspect of the pilgrim’s journey. The first psalm, Psalm 120, is sometimes referred to as “the Pilgrim’s Renunciation.” Pilgrimage is a journey toward God. This pilgrimage toward God begins with a renunciation of this world. God calls us out of this world to be a holy people unto Him.¹

The renunciation of this world is preceded by a holy discontent with this world. There is a difference between carnal discontent and holy discontent. Carnal discontent is characterized by complaining due to a personal dissatisfaction with current circumstances. The Christian life, however, is characterized by contentment with little or much. Paul had learned how to be content in the will of God regardless of his outward circumstances.² What then is “holy discontent”? Holy discontent is being grieved and unsettled by what is contrary to the will and nature of God.

The pilgrim in Psalm 120 was in a state of holy discontent. He was in distress: “*In my distress I cried to the LORD...*” He was tired of the lies and deceit: “*Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips and a deceitful tongue.*” He was tired of living among a people who treated him like a foreigner rather than a friend: “*Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!*” Meshech and Kedar were warlike and barbarian tribes. This pilgrim was tired of trying to make peace with those who wanted to make war. Holy discontent is a deep-seated frustration we feel about the corruption in the world around us.

Usually progression toward holy discontent begins with *idealism*. In our youth we are often idealistic in our outlook in life. We trust that people are righteous, just, and truthful. We start off this life believing that we can make this world a better place. In time we find ourselves disappointed and disillusioned. Our idealism gives way to *realism*. We are forced to face the fact

¹ 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 Peter 2:9

² Philippians 4:11-13

that the corruption in this world is systemic. Corruption is ingrained in the heart of man and corrupt men engineer corrupt systems that benefit and protect themselves. Often, realism gives way to *fatalism* once we realize that these corrupt systems work against us and that we have little power to change them. We often become negative and cynical in our discontent and seek a way to isolate ourselves or to escape.

Some describe holy discontent as a “Popeye” moment in our life when we say, “That’s all I can stand, and I can’t stand no more!” Holy discontent is not fatalistic. Holy discontent makes us hungry for something pure, holy, and true. Holy discontent drives us to God, the One who can uproot evil and establish righteousness, justice, and truth. Holy discontent seeks a better way and a better place. Holy discontent makes us willing to change, to leave what is evil and familiar for a place that is good but unfamiliar. Holy discontent makes us willing to leave this world in search of a better world. Holy discontent makes us willing to leave the kingdoms of this world in search of the kingdom of heaven. Holy discontent causes us to step out in faith and begin our spiritual pilgrimage with God.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived as pilgrims in this life because they looked for a better, that is a heavenly city: *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰ for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”³*

Holy discontent is the work of God in our hearts. He unsettles our life so that we might begin our pilgrimage into the will of God. This world is no longer our home; we are just passing through. We are homesick for a home to which we have never been before: *“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”⁴*

The Bible is like a journal of pilgrim journeys. Abram experienced holy discontent while in his home city of Ur of the Chaldees. His discontent with the corruption associated with pagan worship prepared him to leave and go to a land which the LORD would show him. Jacob experienced holy discontent while working for his corrupt father-in-law while living in Haran. Holy discontent caused him to go back to the land that God had promised to Abraham and Isaac. Moses experienced holy discontent while living as an Israelite in the palace of Pharaoh. Moses had everything a king could offer, but the corruption in Egypt and the unfair treatment of his brethren caused him to reject Egypt and be identified with his brethren. David experienced holy discontent when he heard the blasphemies of the giant Goliath. He was willing to leave his comfort zone to be used by God to bring deliverance for his people. Nehemiah experienced holy discontent when he heard reports of the pitiful condition of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. He was willing to leave the comfort of his position as cup bearer before the king of Persia in order to go to Jerusalem to rebuild its ruins.

³ Hebrews 11:8–10 (NKJV)

⁴ Hebrews 11:13-16 (NKJV)

I too have experienced holy discontent at different seasons in my life. The first experience with holy discontent led to my conversion. The second led to my call into the ministry. The third led to my call to East Texas. The fourth led to me embracing God's plan rather than my own. Maybe you too have experienced holy discontent when God began to unsettle your life. Maybe you are experiencing holy discontent now. You have moved from idealism to realism. You are ready to do things God's way. You are ready to leave what is familiar but corrupt in order to begin your pilgrimage with God.

If you are experiencing holy discontent, then you will have a holy hunger for truth and what is real. You are tired of cotton candy religion and are ready for something with substance. You are hungry for God. Embrace the change that God requires. Embrace the call to holiness so that you might walk with God. Embrace the holy zeal for righteousness—to do the right things in the right way. Embrace the holy desire to be part of the divine solution instead of part of the problem. Embrace the holy call to be different from the world—to be a light in the darkness and corruption around you. Embrace the holy passion to cultivate and encourage the same holy discontent in others.

We are called to pilgrimage. Our spiritual journey begins with holy discontent. Let your holy discontent propel you into your pilgrim journey to do the will of God on earth and to seek to enter the holy city of God in heaven.