



A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society

Eugene H. Peterson

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As a society, we are no less obsessed with the immediate than when Eugene Peterson first wrote this Christian classic. If anything, email and the Internet may have intensified our quest for the quick fix. But Peterson's time-tested prescription for discipleship remains the same--a long obedience in the same direction.

Tucked away in the Hebrew Psalter, Peterson discovered "an old dog-eared songbook," the Songs of Ascents that were sung by pilgrims on their way up to worship in Jerusalem. In these songs (Psalms 120-134) Peterson finds encouragement for modern pilgrims as we learn to grow in worship, service, joy, work, happiness, humility, community and blessing.

This 20th anniversary edition of *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* features these Psalms in Peterson's widely acclaimed paraphrase, *The Message*. He also includes an epilogue in which he reflects on the themes of this book and his ministry during the twenty years since its original publication.

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society Details

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Alan Briggs says

It's a classic for a reason. Solid, like every Eugene does and writes.

Andrew says

If you find anything written by Eugene Peterson, I recommend that you read it. I could find a spirit-filled wisdom in that man's grocery list.

Sarah says

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society by Eugene Peterson, is a sixteen-chapter book which, while the scope is limited to fifteen Psalms of ascent, the broader purpose of discipleship is not limited in its scope. Indeed, Peterson calls this small volume, writing which has characterized “everything I’ve written since.” This idea is important because through this book one can see Peterson’s heart for “men and women who believingly follow Jesus” to be “best guided and energized by a fusion of Scripture and prayer.” Everything Peterson has written in this book is just that, a lifelong guide for discipleship.

Anyone involved with discipleship or mentoring would benefit from reading this book. In the epilogue, found in the 20th anniversary edition, Peterson alludes to the title of the book being a jab at Nietzsche’s idea that Christians are “weak, inadequate, ineffectual and unfit.” There are still people today who feel this way about Christians. Peterson has done his best to change that by growing those who read this book, take it to heart and do the work to apply it to make the gospel livable in their lives.

Kyle says

In this work, Peterson uses the fifteen songs of ascent (Psalms 120-134) as a model for Christian discipleship. Although some of the ideas occasionally seem forced into this framework, I like the design nonetheless, and his comments on discipleship are insightful and applicable. From humility to joy to perseverance and a whole host of others in between, Peterson provides an array of helpful angles from which to peer into discipleship. I would recommend this book for new believers, small group studies, and any Christian who needs to be reminded that growth in Christ is not an overnight occurrence but rather a long obedience in the same direction, the march up the hill to "Jerusalem" to worship God in the temple by means of His Son, a Son who has already walked this road before us.

Tracy Groot says

I'm convinced there's a time for every book. This one sat on my shelf for about 600 years. I'm not sure what made me take it down, but I did, and I read it, and I loved it. I read it bit by bit, a few pages at a time, because that's how I usually roll with books about Christianity, either the disciplines thereof or the adventure thereof. This book is about the maintenance thereof. It's well-written, inspiring, strengthening, and heartening. It's a book for the long haul, about the long haul, with insights into the workaday glories through an examination of the Psalms of ascent. When you feel a little bereft after finishing a book, it's a good one.

Amanda says

An overall decent book, but one I would recommend to people looking to disciple others. New Christians especially should wait on this book and read something else.

Pro: Peterson delves into Psalms that are pretty well-known but little discussed or preached on, and many of his insights are fascinating.

Con: There is very little talk of Jesus or the gospel, and while I know you can write books about God that don't talk about these subjects (because there is so much to talk about when it comes to God), Jesus and the gospel should absolutely be part of discipleship discussions.

Marti Wade says

Winsome book of biblical theology drawing from the 15 Songs of Ascent (Psalm 120-134) which were likely sung in order by Hebrew pilgrims on their journeys to Jerusalem for the great festivals of worship. Each of these songs, Peterson proposes, has a primary theme: repentance (120), providence (121), worship (122), service (123), help (124), security (125), joy (126), work (127), happiness (128), perseverance (129), hope (130), humility (131), obedience (132), community (134), and blessing (135). The revised and expanded 2000 edition uses the language of The Message for scripture quotations.

I'd always meant to read this and am now scrambling to finish my library edition... with plans to get and mark up a copy of my own. I would love to read and discuss this with a small group or use it as the foundation for a series of teachings or devotions. Looks like there's a study guide available for purchase as well, but it only deals with six of the chapters/psalms/themes.

Katie Krombein says

This book took me longer than others, because I wanted to think about the individual sections a little longer. Each chapter is another of the Psalms of Ascent, and he uses the Message version of them. He picks a theme for each psalm and titles the chapter accordingly, with the vision of the Christian life being the interplay of scripture and prayer, which outworks across a lifetime (long obedience).

Some bits I was thinking about:

Repentance (Ps 120): p. 27: "Christian consciousness begins in the painful realization that what we had assumed was the truth is in fact a lie. ...Rescue me from the lies of advertisers who claim to know what I need and what I desire, from the lies of entertainers who promise a cheap way to joy, from the lies of

politicians who pretend to instruct me in power and morality, from the lies of psychologists who offer to shape my behavior and my morals so that I will live long, happily and successfully, from the lies of religionists who 'heal the wounds of this people lightly,' from the lies of moralists who pretend to promote me to the office of captain of my fate, from the lies of pastors who 'get ride of God's command so you won't be inconvenienced in following the religious fashions!' (Mk 7:8). Rescue me from the person who tells me of life and omits Christ, who is wise in the ways of the world and ignores the movement of the Spirit. ...they are lies all the same, because they claim to tell us who we are and omit everything about our origin in God and our destiny in God. They talk about the world without telling us that God made it. They tell us about our bodies without telling us that they are temples of the Holy Spirit. They instruct us in love without telling us about the God who loves us and gave himself for us."

p. 29: The usual biblical word describing the no we say to the world's lies and the yes we say to God's truth is repentance.

Providence (Ps 121): p. 45: The Christian life is going to God. In going to God, Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on....The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil, he guards our very life.We Christians believe that life is created and shaped by God and that the life of faith is a daily exploration of the constant and countless ways in which God's grace and love are experienced.

Worship (Ps 122): p. 51: The psalm singles out three items: worship gives us a workable structure for life; worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God; worship centers our attention on the decisions of God.

p. 57: shalvah, 'prosperity'...it is the security of being at home in a history that has a cross at its center. It is the leisure of the person who knows that every moment of our existence is at the disposal of God, lived under the mercy of God. Worship initiates an extended, daily participate in peace and prosperity so that we share in our daily rounds what God initiates and continues in Jesus Christ.

Service (Ps 123): p. 67-68: The work of liberation must therefore be accompanied by instruction in the use of liberty as children of God who 'walk by the Spirit' (Gal 5:25). Those who parade the rhetoric of liberation but scorn the wisdom of service do not lead people into the glorious liberty of the children of God but into a cramped and covetous squalor.

Help (Ps 124): p. 72: The proper work for the Christian is witness, not apology, and Psalm 124 is an excellent model. It does not argue God's help; it does not explain God's help; it is a testimony of God's help in the form of a song. The song is so vigorous, so confident, so bursting with what can only be called reality that it fundamentally changes our approach and our questions. ...The witness is vivid and contagious.

Security (Ps 125): p. 87: saw toothed history of Israel - up one day and down the next. "But all the time, as we read that saw-toothed history, we realize something solid and steady: they are always God's people. God is steadfastly with them, in mercy and judgment, insistently gracious. We get the feeling that everything is done in the sure, certain environment of the God who redeems his people. And as we learn that, we learn to live not by our feelings about God but by the facts of God. I refuse to believe my depressions; I choose to believe in God. If I break my leg I do not become less a person. My wife and children do not repudiate me. Neither when my faith fractures or my feelings bruise does God cast me off and reject me. My feelings are important for many things. They are essential and valuable. They keep me aware of much that is true and real. But they tell me next to nothing about God or my relation to God. My security comes from who God is, not from how I feel. Discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about

him or myself or my neighbors. 'As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people.' The image that announces the dependable, unchanging, safe, secure existence of God's people comes from geology, not psychology."

Joy (Ps 126): p. 97: We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own dying selves. We can decide to center ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own egos which greedily grab. One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy, the kind expressed in Psalm 126.

p. 100: One of the most interesting and remarkable things Christians learn is that laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed. A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks, get rid of disappointment by depersonalizing your relationships. And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment. There isn't a hint of that in Psalm 126...Joy is what God gives, not what we work up. Laughter is the delight that things are working together for good to those who love God, not the giggles that betray the nervousness of a precarious defense system. The joy that develops in the Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirits that comes from feeling good not about yourself but about God.

p. 132-133: The central reality for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment God makes to us. Perseverance is not the result of our determination, it is the result of God's faithfulness.

...Christian discipleship is a process of paying more and more attention to God's righteousness and less and less attention to our own; finding the meaning of our lives not by probing our moods and motives and morals but by believing God's will and purposes; making a map of the faithfulness of God, not charting the rise and fall of our enthusiasms.

Hope (Ps 130): p. 138-139: The psalm begins in pain: 'Help, God--the bottom has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help! Listen hard! Open your ears! Listen to my cries for mercy.' The psalm is anguished prayer. By setting the anguish out in the open and voicing it as a prayer, the psalm gives dignity to our suffering. ...Suffering is set squarely, openly, passionately before God. It is acknowledged and expressed. It is described and lived. If the psalm did nothing more than that, it would be a prize for it is difficult to find anyone in our culture who will respect us when we suffer. ...The gospel offers a different view of suffering: in suffering we enter the depths; we are at the heart of things; we are near to where Christ was on the cross.

Humility (Ps 131): p. 156: The time of weaning is very often noisy and marked by misunderstandings: I no longer feel like I did when I was first a Christian. Does that mean I am no longer a Christian? Has God abandoned me? Have I done something terribly wrong? The answer is, neither. God hasn't abandoned you and you haven't done anything wrong. You are being weaned. The apron strings have been cut. You are free to come to God or not come to him. You are, in a sense, on your own with an open invitation to listen and receive and enjoy our Lord.

Obedience (Ps 132): p. 167: A Christian who has David in his bones, Jeremiah in his bloodstream, Paul in his fingertips and Christ in his heart will know how much and how little value to put on his own momentary feelings and the experience of the past week. ...A Christian with a defective memory has to start everything from scratch and spends far too much of his or her time backtracking, repairing, starting over. A Christian with a good memory avoids repeating old sins, knows the easiest way through complex situations and instead of starting over each day continues what was begun in Adam. Psalm 132 activates faith's memory so that obedience will be sane. 'Each act of obedience by the Christian is a modest proof, unequivocal for all its imperfection, of the reality of what he attests.'

p. 170: We need roots in the past to give obedience ballast and breadth; we need a vision of the future to give

obedience direction and goal.

Community (Ps 133): p. 181: When we see the other as God's anointed, our relationships are profoundly affected. Bonhoeffer wrote, 'Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.' 'The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.'

p. 182: Important in any community of faith is an ever-renewed expectation in what God is doing with our brothers and sisters in the faith. We refuse to label the others as one thing or another. We refuse to predict our brother's behavior, our sister's growth. Each person in the community is unique; each is specially loved and particularly led by the Spirit of God. How can I presume to make conclusions about anyone? ...A community of faith flourishes when we view each other with this expectancy, wondering what God will do today in this one or that one....

Blessing (Ps. 134): p. 195: by changing our behavior we can change our feelings. ...Feelings don't run the show. There is a reality deeper than our feelings. Live by that.

p. 198 (quoting Karl Barth): 'Charis always demands the answer eucharistia (that is, grace always demands the answer of gratitude). Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the void an echo. Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightning.' God is personal reality to be enjoyed. We are so created and so redeemed that we are capable of enjoying them. ...[Newman quote] 'May it be our blessedness, as years go on, to add one grace to another, and advance upward, step by step, neither neglecting the lower after attaining the higher, nor aiming at the higher before attaining the lower. The first grace is faith, the last is love; first comes zeal, afterwards comes loving kindness; first comes humiliation, then comes peace; first comes diligence, then comes resignation. May we learn to mature all graces in us; fearing and trembling, watching and repenting, because Christ is coming; joyful, thankful, and careless of the future, because he is come.'

Barnabas Piper says

This book really deserves 6 or 7 stars. It is a balm, a kick, a nudge, a lesson, counsel, conversation, realistic, hopeful, and profoundly biblical and beautiful. Peterson is a master of the simple yet profound, the accessible yet expansive. And in that way he reflects the teachings of Jesus. This book is a treasure.

Ebookwormy1 says

I thoroughly enjoyed this devotional on Psalms 120-134, and used it for my quiet time. I read the psalm (each chapter begins with the actual text - a big plus to me), the chapter in the book (which focus' on a theme of the Christian life as presented in the psalm), the psalm in my Bible (different translation) and then the African Bible Commentary on the Psalm.

I found this to be a nourishing read. Encouraging. Good. Simple. Principles for Christian life. Not necessary

groundbreaking, but walking the well-worn paths of ancient relationship with the God of Israel as revealed in the Bible.

Certain chapters hit me very deeply, and i found myself pondering certain quotes in almost every chapter. Other chapters were merely okay, but whether this was due to a change in writing/ analysis by the author, or a reflection of my own internal state, I cannot say.

Scott says

I am currently reading this book at my "direction" for Renewal Time. I am taking about five days per chapter or Psalm. Already, I notice that Peterson's writing about these songs is something that is touching me deeply inside. I appreciate his words even though I would appreciate him using "disciple" more than "pilgrim". :)

Rachel B says

This book is based on the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134). Each chapter focuses on one of these psalms and an aspect of the Christian life to which it speaks. (Except for the first chapter, based on Jeremiah 12:5.) The topics are: Discipleship, Repentance, Providence, Worship, Service, Help, Security, Joy, Work, Happiness, Perseverance, Hope, Humility, Obedience, Community, Blessing.

Overall, I quite liked this book. I loved Peterson's emphasis that the Christian life is not based on our emotions and feelings about God or ourselves.

In the chapter on worship, he states, "We think that if we don't *feel* something there can be no authenticity in *doing* it. But the wisdom of God says something different: that we can *act* ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can *feel* ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an *act* that develops feelings for God, not a *feeling* for God that is expressed in an act of worship." (p. 54)

I also liked this bit in the chapter about repentance: "A person has to be thoroughly disgusted with the way things are to find the motivation to set out on the Christian way. As long as we think the next election might eliminate crime and establish justice or another scientific breakthrough might save the environment or another pay raise might push us over the edge of anxiety into a life of tranquility, we are not likely to risk the arduous uncertainties of the life of faith. A person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he, before she, acquires an appetite for the world of grace." (p. 25)

Peterson's thoughts often seemed abstract and big-picture, rather than practical steps to be taken, so while it was a good and helpful read, it requires more thought for those of us who aren't very intuitive.

One thing I wasn't crazy about was the use of *The Message* paraphrase instead of an actual Scripture translation.

Sometimes I felt there was a lack of continuity tying the chapters together, and I'm not sure if that's because each chapter is based on a different psalm and aspect of the Christian life, or because I read through this slowly. I think that I'll benefit from reading through it again, more quickly.

Sarah says

To be brief: this is one of the best books I've ever read. Ever. And I'm so thankful that I read it. There's no gimmicks here, no easy answers, no quick fixes. This book is saturated in scripture and truth. This will be a new regular re-read, and one I'll suggest and give away to many others.

Melanie says

A work on discipleship built on and around the Psalms of Ascent. Peterson's gift for bold, fresh expression caught and kept my interest as a reader. But it is how he helps the reader to join him in coming to the Scriptures "slowly, imaginatively, prayerfully, and obediently" that makes *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* worth reading.

A favorite quote: "For Christian faith cannot be comprehended by examining an Instamatic flash picture which has caught a pose of beauty or absurdity, ecstasy or terror; it is a full revelation of a vast creation and a grandly consummated redemption" (ch. 14).

Jessica says

This book is phenomenal. Perhaps it came at exactly the right moment in my faith and my appreciation for artistic writing style, but I loved it and would now rate it as one of my top 5 favorite books ever. Peterson writes beautifully, and with clarity, using the Psalms of Ascent as springboards to discuss aspects of long-term discipleship. The result is an honest assessment of the joys and tribulations of a walk with Christ. He does not candy-coat the faith or make apologies for sin, but instead communicates truth in such a lovely way that I couldn't stop copying quotations into my journal. It shocked me to read, in the afterword, that this book was rejected by thirteen publishers on the claim that it was "not relevant to the church in North America today." I beg to differ: it is precisely what we lackadaisical, feel-good Christians need to read, and to know, to find the deeper peace that comes with knowing God in a way that is true. I loved this book and will read it again, probably soon.
