

# A Refugee Prays the Psalms of Ascent

## *A Journey in Prayer, Protest, and Lament*

Carlos Colón

*With additional narration and worship elements added by Joyce Borger.*

### **Intro**

During ancient pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Jewish travelers chanted the fourteen Psalms of Ascent, which derive their name from the literal ascent—a long, arduous climb—that travelers had to traverse to reach the holy festivals. But not all travels—then or now—are voluntary. Jesus himself fled genocide as an infant as he and his family escaped the tyrant Herod to seek refuge in Egypt. Our Savior was a refugee and pilgrim, as am I and many others like me. We refugees generally do not choose our journeys. We flee from threats of poverty or violence. For those of us who hold the Hebrew Scriptures as sacred, the Psalms of Ascent accompany us in our moments of despair and in our pilgrim journeys toward our final destination, the New Jerusalem, even as we seek refuge and a place to call home and flourish in along the way.

What follows is the intertwining of the Psalms of Ascent and stories of refugees from Central America from Carlos Colón, with additional leader/narrator portions and worship elements written or added by Rev. Joyce Borger. This service contains just a few stories of the 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers uprooted from Central America in recent years. They in turn make up a small percentage of the 117.2 million people worldwide, including 43.3 million children, who have been forcibly displaced or are stateless.

Lord, have mercy!

### **Worship Service**

The following service requires three readers:

Main leader / narrator

Scripture reader

Voice of Carlos Colón

Throughout the service you will see indications for *Selah*, a term used in the psalms to indicate silence or a pause. The length of these pauses can vary, but don't be afraid to sit in silence and let the stories and Scripture sink into the souls of those present.

### **Opening of Worship**

*Call to Worship*

Jews traveling to Jerusalem to worship at the temple didn't wait to worship until they arrived; they worshiped God along the way with the Psalms of Ascent.

**May we also journey with God's words  
in our hearts and on our lips.**

As they journeyed, the Jews climbed up and down rugged terrain, traveled through dangerous areas, felt the oppressiveness of the sun, and eagerly awaited the promise of shelter and a cool drink.

**So our lives are a metaphorical pilgrimage  
as we desire the embrace of our God  
and the sacramental food and drink by which we are blessed.**

But for others in our world, such a journey is not metaphorical. They too have climbed rugged terrain, traveled through dangerous areas, felt the oppressiveness of the sun, and eagerly awaited the promise of shelter and a cool drink. They are not traveling to a real or metaphorical Jerusalem, but they are looking for a place to worship in safety and experience the flourishing that God desires for all people. For these pilgrims and refugees, the Psalms of Ascent have a depth and meaning that many of us don't know.

Today we get to hear a few of their stories as told to us through the words of Carlos Colón. His words will be read for us today by \_\_\_\_\_. As we listen to Carlos's story and the stories of those he knows, we do so while reflecting on the psalms:

God's words calling us to lament,  
God's words calling us to care for all people,  
God's words calling us to lives of solidarity,  
God's words calling us to lives of justice.

**God, send us your Spirit to soften our hearts and open our ears,  
so we may be receptive to what God is saying to us on this day.**

God invites us to this journey through the Psalms of Ascent.  
God calls us to worship along the way.  
And God desires that we leave renewed,  
ready to continue our worship in the pilgrimage of our Christian lives.  
Come and worship!  
**We come to worship God.**

*Song:* "[Yo me alegré / My Heart Was Glad](#)" Anom., Trans. Scheer

*Greeting:* Isaiah 41:9–10

You whom I took from the ends of the earth,

and called from its farthest corners,  
saying to you, “You are my servant,  
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;  
do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.  
—Isaiah 41:9–10, NRSV

**Opening Hymn:** “[God of Grace and God of Glory / Dios de gracia, Dios de gloria](#)” Fosdick

## Confession and Lament

“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,” we sang. But do we truly want wisdom and courage—the wisdom and courage to know truth, to speak truth, to live truth, to be willing to die for truth? Too often we say one thing and do another. Listen to these words from Psalm 120 and the stories from the church in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. They are a call to confession for when our actions do not reflect what we say or believe.

### *Reading of Psalm 120:5–7 and Reflection*

Woe is me. . . .  
Too long have I had my dwelling  
among those who hate peace.  
I am for peace;  
but when I speak,  
they are for war.

Recently, at a visit to a Salvadoran church near the Guatemalan border, I prayed Psalm 120 with brethren in Christ whom gangs have extorted and threatened. Each of these worshipers knew of someone murdered for refusing to pay.

This extortion is a part of the standard playbook of gangs throughout El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, or “The Northern Triangle.” Gangs recruit young people and terrorize communities in their attempts to satisfy North American demand for illegal substances. To escape their chokehold, many migrants, both adults and children, flee north to seek asylum in the United States.

But this violence did not emerge overnight. It is the result of decades of transnational interests, including those of the United States and Canada, designed to exploit Central America’s natural and human resources for profit. And in many cases, the architects of those structures are themselves Christians.

When I speak with people like these churchgoers, I am challenged by this question: In my world, who speaks for peace? Who speaks for war? And whose side do I take with my action or inaction?

**Song:** “[Al Señor clamé / I Am Crying Out to God](#)” Colón

Video: [carloscoloncomposer.com/2021/07/14/al-senor-clame/](https://carloscoloncomposer.com/2021/07/14/al-senor-clame/)

### ***Prayer of Confession***

Awesome and compassionate God,  
you have loved us with unfailing, self-giving mercy,  
**but we have not loved you.**

You constantly call us,  
**but we do not listen.**

You ask us to love,  
**but we walk away from neighbors in need,  
wrapped in our own concerns.**

We have been called your own,  
**and yet we fail to see the world the way you do.**  
We condone evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed.

God of grace, as you come to us in mercy,  
we repent in spirit and in truth,  
admit our sin, and gratefully receive your forgiveness  
through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

—adapted from a prayer by Arlo D. Duba, *Reformed Worship* 52:17

## **Cries of Faith in the Face of Despair**

We cannot confess as we just did and then quickly move on. True confession includes a desire to change, a desire to continue on the journey towards righteousness. Today that journey includes listening to the cries of faith in the face of despair and the cries of the oppressed, particularly refugees and immigrants from Central America. Hear this declaration of faith from Psalm 121.

### ***Reading of Psalm 121:1–4 and Reflection***

I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot as he led Mass at a cancer hospital chapel in San Salvador, El Salvador. Behind the attack was the right-wing government who opposed the archbishop's stance in favor of the poor and oppressed. And behind the government junta was military training and weapons from the United States. Days later, many civilians were killed at Romero's funeral.

I was fourteen years old at the time. About a year later, my family and I were forced to leave our native El Salvador because my mother and other relatives had been threatened for their involvement in the teachers' union and their public support of representative democracy. We left because many friends had been already killed, and we were under imminent threat.

I became a refugee. I escaped to Guatemala, thinking I would stay a few weeks. Instead I stayed five years, separated from my family. Even today I do not live in El Salvador. My own sojourn has lasted more than forty years.

I have prayed Psalm 121 by myself in many different cities on my journey. But I prefer to pray with others because the protection God offers is communal. My help has come from Christ in the company of others who follow him.

*Selah*

### ***Reading of Psalm 122:1–2 and Reflection***

The journey continues with Psalm 122.

I was glad when they said to me,  
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”  
Our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

When I fled El Salvador for Guatemala, Iglesia Bautista Bethania became my Jerusalem, my own miniature city of peace. Even though there was violence in Guatemala too, the church became my family. In this house of the Lord, I was glad, because the love of God reached me through the church members who embraced, protected, and disciplined me.

Today, Central American migrants often form large groups—caravans—to travel north together. An untold story of theirs is that many of them pray and sing as they walk or as they rest, either in shelter or in open, unprotected spaces. They support one another, and groups throughout Mexico and the United States alike support them on their journeys.

**Song:** “[Me alegré con los que me decían / I Was Glad When They Said to Me](#)” Colón, SSS 397

*Video:* [carloscoloncomposer.com/2021/07/14/al-senor-clame/](https://carloscoloncomposer.com/2021/07/14/al-senor-clame/)

### **Reading of Psalm 123:1, 3 and Reflection**

To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

...

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

The Israelites in Babylonian exile and the Jews under Roman occupation knew what it was to be treated with contempt. And though refugees today may encounter compassion, they are equally as likely to be met by people and systems who treat them as less than human.

A woman I know, who I will call Rosa, belongs to an Indigenous people group from Central America whose lands are located near the ocean. When powerful people decided to build a resort on their land, the people of her community were forced from their homes. Her husband and others dared to protest the injustice.

One day, while Rosa's family ate together, hired assassins broke in and killed her husband. With no other choice, Rosa and her children fled north with only the clothes they were wearing, a Bible, and their church songbook.

**Song:** "A Ti, Señor, Yo Alzo los Ojos / I Lift My Eyes" <sup>Colón</sup>

Recording: [carloscoloncomposer.com/2023/03/16/a-ti-senor-i-lift-my-eyes](https://carloscoloncomposer.com/2023/03/16/a-ti-senor-i-lift-my-eyes)

Sheet music can be purchased at:

[giamusic.com/store/resource/a-ti-senor-yo-alzo-los-ojos-pdf-du01367](https://giamusic.com/store/resource/a-ti-senor-yo-alzo-los-ojos-pdf-du01367)

## **The Lord Sees**

Our siblings in Christ in Central America have lifted their eyes to the Lord. They have been obedient to God's call on their lives in the midst of horrific situations. And they still look to God and testify to God's goodness.

### **Reading of Psalm 124:1–5 and Reflection**

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
—let Israel now say—  
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,  
when our enemies attacked us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive,

when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone  
the raging waters.

After a journey of over a year, Rosa arrived at the Mexico-US border. To get to the muddy waters of the Río Grande, she and her children had walked and rode in buses, trains, and trucks. A priest on the Mexico side said they had a good chance of being received as refugees in the United States.

Rosa waded the river with her children, carrying their papers, their Bible, and their hymnbook in a backpack. An unknown man carried her youngest child. She never saw the kind stranger again.

Once in the United States, immigration agents quickly apprehended them. The next day, the agents sent them by bus to a faraway city, saying maybe a church or another institution would help them. No one received them at the bus station.

For two days, Rosa and her family stayed in a local park as Rosa asked strangers for help. One day, a woman told them her church had a refugee shelter in a converted garage. This woman was Pastor Jane, who asked them to come with her. At the shelter, Rosa and her family received shoes and food. It was the safest they had been in months.

*Selah*

### ***Reading of Psalm 125:1–2 and Reflection***

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.  
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the LORD surrounds his people,  
from this time on and forevermore.

Rosa's cousin Isabel reached the States months later with another caravan. On her journey, she encountered many compassionate people, but also hostile police. She never slept away from her group because it was dangerous. When she arrived at the shelter where Rosa and her children were, her shoes were in pieces. Isabel collapsed and could not get up for a month.

Pastor Jane said the doctor said Isabel suffered from knee damage, dehydration, and malnourishment. It would take months before Isabel felt like herself again. Isabel, Rosa, and Rosa's children are currently receiving trauma counseling.

*Selah*

### ***Reading of Psalm 126:4–6 and Reflection***

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.  
May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

When I first arrived at Iglesia Bethania Bautista in Guatemala, I met seventeen-year-old Guido. When Guido found out that I needed a place to stay, he invited me to live with him. He lived in a run-down neighborhood in a house that had barely survived an earthquake a few years earlier. Guido had been on his own since he was 13. He too had found a family at Bethania Baptist.

Next door to Guido's place was a bakery, where I met Manuel and José, the night shift bakers. They often shared their midnight meals with me. The first time they handed me a bread roll, I devoured it, and they gave me a terrified look. José, the younger one, said gently: "You didn't break the roll." Seeing my puzzled look, he continued: "Remember, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us to break bread."

I was astonished at their level of reverence at meals. I'd watched them carefully handling the food they prepared, and noticed they uncovered their heads every time they made the sign of the cross to give thanks to God. It was a sacred moment.

*At this time your congregation may want to break bread and drink of the cup together in the sacrament of communion.*

### **Do We See?**

Our Lord sees. But do we? We go about our lives, filling our days with important business, but is God a part of it? As we go about our life, do we see with God's eyes? The Word of the Lord from Psalm 127:

### ***Reading of Psalm 127:1–3 and Reflection***

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
the guard keeps watch in vain.  
It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.

Emilia grew up on a ranch in northern Mexico. She came to the United States fifteen years ago to escape violent crime. She works in custodial care at a university. Every May, the university lays her off, and she lives on food stamps and odd jobs here and there until she is hired again in August.

Recently, a professor who is also a pastor asked if she had health insurance. She said no. He asked what she does when she gets sick. Emilia told him that she seeks public assistance. He was upset and said a Christian institution should do better. She was astonished: after ten years, she had no idea her workplace was a Christian institution.

*Selah*

***Reading of Psalm 128:1–2 and Reflection***

Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways.  
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;  
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Consistently, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures teach that we should help “the foreigners” to flourish. Non-refugees, or the economically stable, can easily develop a paternalistic view that as long as refugees are not starving, they are not owed anything. But “not starving” is not the same as flourishing, and every person deserves to flourish.

Employers are responsible for paying adequate wages and making sure their employees have access to leisure and healthcare. And we should advocate for policies that protect newcomers from exploitation in their vulnerable situations.

*Selah*

***Reading of Psalm 129:1–2 and Reflection***

“Often have they attacked me from my youth”  
—let Israel now say—  
“often have they attacked me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.”

Like the Israelites in Babylon, many of us have been oppressed our whole lives for the crime of being “other.” Yet Christians are called to love their enemies and to forgive.

Still, it’s not loving at all to allow injustice to continue to exist in the name of “forgiveness.”

Defending the oppressed does not contradict the pursuit of justice. As persistent as our enemies are, God is more persistent in God's lovingkindness. And God's representatives are those who show active love.

In 2014 and 2015, I witnessed how God works through our actions as I co-produced a documentary at the Texas-Mexico border. Even though the policies of the United States and the dangers of the desert create a perilous situation for asylum seekers, I witnessed Catholics and Protestants uniting to provide the migrants with aid.

**Video:** "Lament with Wings," [vimeo.com/118193318](https://vimeo.com/118193318)

**Design:** is there a way to embed the video here for the digital and web version and for the print have the title image with the following link underneath: [vimeo.com/118193318](https://vimeo.com/118193318)?

"Lamento con Alas" ("Lament with Wings") is a short documentary about good Samaritans Lavoyger Durham and Lori Baker, who attempt to make a difference during the immigration surge in the summer of 2014. Durham breaks stereotypes as a Texan rancher who sets up water stations that keep immigrants alive even as they illegally cross his land. And Baker, an associate professor of anthropology at Baylor University, exhumes deceased immigrants from unmarked graves and works to return the dead to their families in Latin America.—Film producer Pilar Timpane.

### ***Reading of Psalm 130:1, 7 and Reflection***

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. . . .

O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

The documentary I co-produced with Pilar Timpane honors those who have died in border crossings and those who seek to prevent future deaths and identify the dead. After public showings of the film, I often read Psalm 130 to the audience.

I have rarely felt more as if I cried from the depths than I did after filming on location in Texas in temperatures above 100 degrees. I despaired, looking for a prayer for all the people who die alone and away from home. All I could pray was: "Lord, today, please receive them in paradise." The only thing I know how to do is cling to my hope in Jesus Christ, who suffers with us as he redeems us.

*Selah*

## Living into a New Vision

By God’s grace Carlos Colón has held fast to his faith. Carlos and Christians like him not only cling to Jesus Christ as their Savior, but also lean into a new vision. This vision is different from the one the world paints. This is a vision of the New Jerusalem—not a specific nation or city that exists today, but the promised city where there will be no more tears and no more death, where all people will find their home and flourish. As they lean into this vision, they call all who name Christ as Lord to do the same. Yet even as we await the return of Christ, we have work to do. The Spirit invites us to join in the redemptive act of creating places in our communities where people and creation can flourish, working in harmony for the good of all. Let us pray, let us worship, let us work, and let us hope. Listen to these words of hope from the book we love and to Carlos’ call for us to join in the Spirit’s work of re-creation.

### *Reading of Psalm 131:1–3 and Reflection*

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.  
O Israel, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore.

After losing everything, a refugee might gain new perspectives on what matters. I don’t mean to suggest that this perspective excuses the unjust circumstances that cause someone to flee their home; I don’t wish anyone to go through what I did. But there is a kind of clarity that comes in moments of crisis, and in my own case, I’ve found myself losing that clarity with time. Living now in a system that rewards egoism and consumerism, I’m tempted to spend my time pursuing material goods and status instead of the love and community I craved in my first days of exile.

In this psalm, the “weaned child with its mother” is an image of what it feels like to be embraced in the arms of God and in communal care. When a child is cared for, she does not worry about pursuing status, wealth, or any of the things materialism tells us are valuable, so she has room for contentment.

As beloved children of God, we are always cradled in God’s parental love. And as Christians, we are called to show that love especially to those people who—like refugees—the world has overlooked.

### *Reading of Psalm 132:15*

I will abundantly bless her provisions;  
I will satisfy her poor with bread.

Psalm 132 summarizes moments in Israel's history, including reflections of David building a temple for God and messianic visions of the Lord's Anointed, and the beautiful verse above.

Any time bread is mentioned in the Scriptures, it can be easy to jump to a typological reading and apply a eucharistic lens to the passage. But we cannot afford to skip the literal meaning to fully understand the psalmist's message. What would the world look like if even the poor have their basic needs taken care of? There are enough resources in the world for everyone to be "abundantly bless[ed]." Do our churches share their abundance, or do they build bigger barns to stockpile their grain? Can we imagine a just world where we refuse to take part in oppression?

The early church father John Chrysostom said: "If you do not find Christ in the beggar at the church door, neither will you find him in the [communion] chalice."

### ***Reading of Psalm 133:1–2 and Reflection***

How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes.

In the New Jerusalem spoken of in the last chapters of Revelation, we will live in the blessing and unity the psalmist speaks of. But for now we live in the already-but-not-yet of the kingdom of God. We must work here and now to realize that New Jerusalem. Each church, each city must become a city of peace—a peace that is not the absence of conflict, but the courage to challenge the oppressor and dignify the oppressed.

**Song:** "[Miren qué bueno / Oh, Look and Wonder](#)"<sup>Sosa</sup>

### ***Reading of Psalm 124:1–3 and Reflection***

Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,  
who stand by night in the house of the LORD!  
Lift up your hands to the holy place,  
and bless the LORD.  
May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth,  
bless you from Zion.

As pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem exhausted from their journey, they sang Psalm 134, blessing those who served God at the temple in praise. What if today, as pilgrims in this life, we considered every person as a temple of God?

God loved our physical world enough to become part of it, to redeem it for our sakes. What would it look like to show even a fraction of that love to refugees, asylum seekers, and other fellow pilgrims? Wherever you live, there is likely an organization already dedicated to assisting and resettling refugees. They need your advocacy, your financial help, and your encouragement. The group might not be in your own denomination, or even any Christian one, but if they serve their neighbors and learn from them, they are workers in God's temple.

Non-refugees have much to learn from refugees—people like Emilia, Rosa, and Isabel. Those who flee to preserve themselves or their families in a world that devalues them are courageous protectors of the temples of their bodies.

### *A Prayer for Pilgrims*

God, help us journey with you toward the city of eternal joy and peace:  
Jerusalem, Jerusalem, where the night will not hurt us,  
because night will not exist  
and because we will behold Christ, the Eternal Light, the Sun of Righteousness.  
We will dwell with you, in whose presence every knee will bow,  
every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord,  
for the glory of God the Father, in the company of the Holy Spirit.  
One triune God, ours forevermore.  
Amen.

*Song:* [“Come, All You Servants of the Lord / Vengan acudan al Señor”](#)<sup>Duba</sup>

### *Sending and Blessing*

God has shown you what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?

**To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with our God.**

—adapted from Micah 6:8 (NIV)

May the grace of Christ, which daily renews us,  
and the love of God, which enables us to love all,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which unites us in one body,  
make us eager to obey the will of God until we meet again,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

—based on 2 Corinthians 13:13

***Doxology:*** [Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow / Al Dios de toda bendición](#)” Weatherbogg.