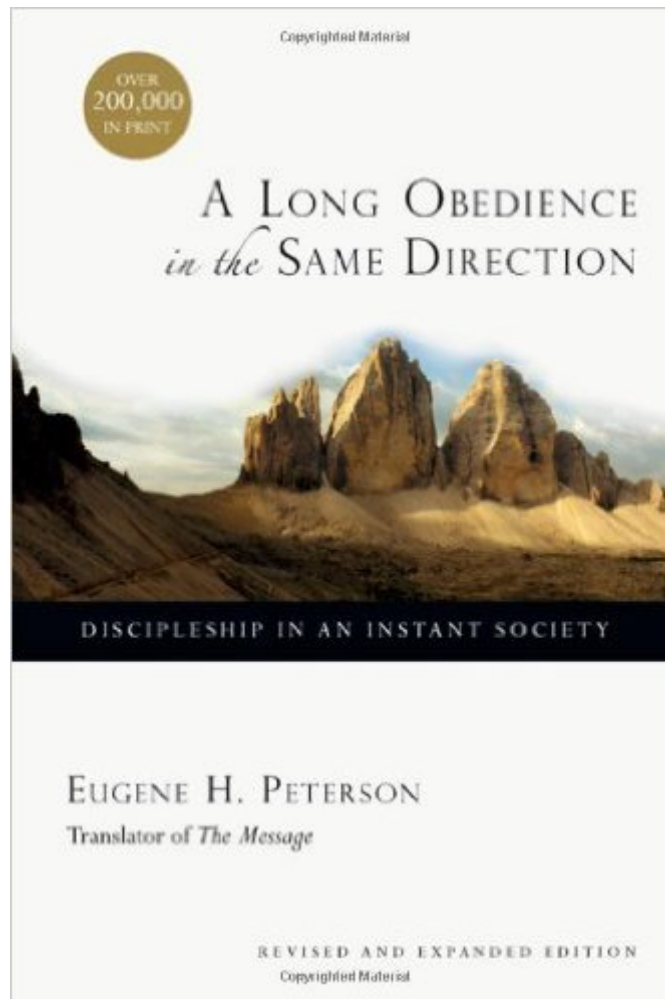


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A Long Obedience In The Same Direction: Discipleship In An Instant Society



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

Paperback: 216 pages

Publisher: IVP Books; 20th Anniversary ed. edition (July 28, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0830822577

ISBN-13: 978-0830822577

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (135 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #8,953 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #11 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Bible Study > Old Testament](#) #18 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Old Testament](#) #23 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Worship & Devotion > Meditations](#)

Customer Reviews

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction This is one of Eugene Peterson's earlier books, published about twenty years ago. During a lecture in May of 1999 in Vancouver, B.C. he remarked that many people had said to him that they loved the title, but hadn't quite gotten around to reading the book. This, of course, might be a sign that it's a bad book. Or it could be an indication that it simply doesn't deliver what some folks are looking for. I would suggest that it's a very good book indeed, but that you need a certain orientation in order to read it. You need to love the Bible, for one thing. I don't

mean love the Bible sentimentally. You need to be one who is willing to embrace the Bible for exactly what it is as it defines itself. It is not a promise book or a guide to "effective" living. Nor is it a book on how to keep out of hell. It is rather an immensely frank compilation of writings that point out God's presence in human history as a whole and God's presence in each person's life. It becomes God's word to us by virtue of its insistence upon God's "take" on reality at all points. That may not be so popular. In fact, I'm sure of it. It is certain that this reading of the Psalms of Ascent will not go down that well with the North American Christian who is looking for inspiration or solace or affirmation or any of the other self-gratifications we tend to require. On the other hand, if you like to get to the bottom of things, Peterson's your man. Witness this excerpt: "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 disappointments 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." These psalms chronicling the rhythm of yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem, a return to the presence of God, are handled with such grace by Peterson that one wonders how we've read them all these years without hearing the humble clumps of singing Jews walking along the dusty, gradual incline of the shephelah to the holy city. Speaking of the pilgrim path that we share with the Jews of the first millennium A.D., Long Obedience includes the following: "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 that 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. Psalm 120 is the song of such a person, sick with the lies and crippled with the hate, a person doubled up in pain over what is going on in the world..." Peterson is no enterprising preacher repackaging his sermons in volumes of garish luminosity for eager visibility in the local Christian consumer shop. He is at once an authentic pastor and a poetic, writing scholar. So hitch up your pants, turn your head sideways, spit, and step into the gracious grit of Eugene Peterson.

Perhaps the best thing about this book is the premise it is written on -- that being a Christian means embarking on a journey, away from the world, toward the City of God. Not an original idea, but certainly one we can stand to be reminded of often, and one I'd love to see more books devoted to that. Eugene Peterson finds in the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134), a cycle of songs sung by

Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to worship, a wonderful parallel to the modern (and timeless) Christian pilgrimage. Each chapter is a meditation on one of the songs, and Peterson draws out the ways each of them show us an aspect of the Christian faith (Repentance, Providence, Worship) and how they relate to each other. (It is natural that the journey begins with repentance and ends with blessing; the rest of the sequence is just as intuitive.) Eugene Peterson has a poet's heart and a theologian's training, but the former prevails. Others may be perturbed that he does not explain exactly why suffering exists in the world; I am grateful that instead he chooses to meditate upon the way that suffering is a central ingredient of human experience.... "in suffering we enter the depths; we are at the heart of things, we are near to where Christ was on the cross." (134) I enjoyed and appreciated this book not because it taught me a lot of new things, but because it caused me to slow down and reflect; to remember things I had learned, and see them with new eyes. Like the songs sung on the journey, it is not so much intended to impart new information, but to bring back into mind (and spirit) the old things, the ancient things -- the things that have the power to redeem us and heal us.

Eugene Peterson uses selections from the book of Psalms to examine old truths of the Christian walk in fresh and sometimes jarring ways. Each chapter explores topics such as "Perseverance" or "Joy" according to Peterson's sometimes peculiar (but thoughtfully appropriate) perceptions. Christians who have been walking for a while will appreciate a new and intelligent slant on "old" news. Those newer to the faith may find themselves somewhat frustrated by the lack of clear and basic theological information. This book works well for group discussions; chapters are relatively short and there is always something pertinent and provocative to talk about.

Peterson's work here is spectacular. In a society that wants everything fast--include the mature fruit of Christianity spent years in the making and gestating--one cannot biggy size this or get it while speeding through the window. There isn't even a toy surprise inside! However, these serious, thought provoking, careful reflections into the shape and heart of discipleship bear patient reading, perhaps only a page or two at a time, and then more patient reading, and thinking on--and then more. If you want a quick fix--this book ain't it (I'm by nurture a Southerner, so ain't is quite appropriate), but if you want something to sit for a spell with and chew on a while--read this book slowly and learn...you'll be the better for it.

tv3 says in his review, "Eugene Peterson uses his own translation of the Bible, The Message, as

the scriptural references for the entire book."This is incorrect.Quoted from the copyright page of the book: "Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1946, 1952, 1971, 1973, and are used by permission."This book was written in 1980 - a long time before Mr. Peterson finished his own translation, The Message.

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