

Psalm 120 “A Song of Ascents: Speaking Peace in an Age of War” May 1, 2011
Psalm 120-125
Ephesians 4:17-32

Over the next several weeks we'll be going through the Songs of Ascents –
Psalms 120-134.

In order to help you sing them with greater understanding,
we'll sing the particular Psalm under consideration *after* the sermon.

And in order to really get into these Psalms,
(or better, in order for them to get into us!)
we'll be singing several of them each week.

The Songs of Ascents – like many of the Psalms in books 3-5 of the psalter –
have a lot of exilic themes –
that connect well with Israel's situation during and after the Exile.

Why now?

Why should we work through the Songs of Ascents *now*?
Having just finished a series on Ezekiel,
you might think that we were ready to be done with the Exile!

But the Psalms offer a different avenue into the Exile.
Ezekiel gave us the prophetic denunciation of Israel's sin –
as well as the glorious vision of the new temple and the new city.
The Songs of Ascents help us think about what it means to *be* an exile –
and what it means to *long* for that heavenly city.

Psalm 120 begins the songs of Ascents at the bottom – in a place where I do not want to be.

I am longing for Jerusalem – or, better, longing for the New Jerusalem.

Psalm 121 – which we sang earlier – then looks up to the LORD, the creator,
as the one who alone will keep and protect us in trouble.

Psalm 122 then rejoices in the call to go to Jerusalem –
and prays for the peace of Jerusalem, but, as it would seem, from a distance.

Psalm 123 then lifts up our eyes to the one enthroned in the heavens,
and pleads for mercy.

Psalm 124 blesses God for delivering us from our foes,
while Psalm 125 returns to the theme of the mountains of Jerusalem,
and how the LORD protects his people from their enemies.

Many of the same themes circle round in these Psalms:

pilgrims and exiles longing for Jerusalem –
longing for deliverance –
longing for the day to come when God will make all things right.

Sing Psalms 123-125
Read Ephesians 4:17-32

Introduction: He Answered (v1)

*¹In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.*

We don't know when or why these Psalms were originally written.
What we know is that they were put together in this form.
People come up with all sorts of imaginative reconstructions –
but the one thing we *know* is that they wound up together in this form.

To put it more strongly
God gave them to us in this form!

So I wanted us to sing Psalms 121-125 *before* we looked at Psalm 120,
because Psalm 120 needs to be sung in the light of what follows.

As the first of the songs of Ascents,
it sets up the songs in this series.
You can see this in the way that the Psalm is constructed.

In the first verse we hear that God “answered me” (past tense) –
and yet the Psalm itself only refers to how “I called to the LORD” –
you really don't hear the answer until the following Psalms.

Psalm 120 stands as the doorway into the Songs of Ascents.
The Psalmist declares that the LORD has answered him –
even though you don't get to hear the answer yet!

Of course, the purpose of this is so that the worshiper might take up this song.
The purpose is so that *you* might sing this.
That *you*, in your distress, might call upon the LORD
with confidence because you know that the LORD will answer.

Why do you have such confidence?
Because he has always answered before!

And therefore you can sing,
*In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.*
Even before he answers!

We saw this in 1 John 5 last Sunday evening:
when John says, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him,
that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.
And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask,
we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” (v14-15)

The Psalmist says that it is truly the will of God to deliver his remnant from exile.
Therefore, *In my distress I called to the LORD,*
and he answered me.

Psalm 120 is all about speaking.

In verse 1, I called – and he answered.

In verse 2, there are lying lips and a deceitful tongue.

In verse 3, the deceitful tongue comes back!

In verse 4, the arrow is often used as a symbol of the deadly power of the tongue.

And then in verse 7 we actually have the word “speak”!

In the second part of the Psalm, verses 5-7,
the central image shifts to “dwelling” (v5-6) or sojourning (v5),
and the contrast between peace (v6-7) and war (v7).

I have long been an advocate for the church of Jesus Christ living together –
dwelling together as a community of brothers and sisters in Christ.

But I know full well what I am asking for!

So long as we remain at a comfortable arm’s length,
we can avoid the “mess” of life together.

The barbs and arrows of gossip and deceit will not trouble us.

The dangers of the tongue can be avoided simply by not thinking about each other!

If I don’t think about you, then I can’t injure you with my tongue!

Perhaps that is why Paul, in Ephesians 4,
immediately after emphasizing the unity of the body and the necessity of life together,
goes on to say, “Therefore, having put away falsehood,
let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor,
for we are members of one another.” (Eph 4:25)

What does it mean to speak *truth* to your neighbor?

Or to use Paul’s earlier phrase,

what does it mean to “speak the truth in love”?

It means to speak the truth of the gospel in this person’s life.

It may be a comforting truth to one who is suffering.

It may be a rebuking truth to one who is slipping.

Speaking the truth to your neighbor

because we are members of one another
means that our unity in Christ requires us to speak truth
for the good of our brother.

Proverbs 9 says “Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.
Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man and he will love you.
Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.” (9:7-9)

The church of Jesus Christ is to be characterized by instruction, reproof, and correction.
And therefore, we pray together with the Psalmist:

1. My Plea: What Shall Be Done to Deceitful Tongues? (v2-4)

²*Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.*

There is nothing more deadly than lying lips.
From the false prophets of Jeremiah’s day proclaiming
“peace, peace,” when there is no peace –
to the false witnesses of Jezebel
who slandered Naboth so that Ahab could take his vineyard –
lying lips and deceitful tongues have slain many!

The place where we start in our plea to God,
in our prayer for deliverance,
is with the tongue.

And so the Psalmist prays, “O LORD, deliver my soul...”
The ESV has rendered this “deliver me.”
That’s fine – the modern connotation of “soul”
does not fit well with the Hebrew conception of *nephesh* –
a living thing.
It could be translated, “deliver my life” – “deliver my soul” – or just “deliver me.”

But the important thing is to recognize that this “deliverance” is not ambiguous.
The lying lips and the deceitful tongue are out to kill me.
We’re not talking about some minor verbal squabble between neighbors here!

We’re not talking about someone complaining about the height of your grass!

We’re talking about someone who wants you *dead*.

This could be someone who is actually conspiring to kill you –
as in Hamann’s schemes to slaughter Mordecai and the Jews –

or it could be someone whose conspiracy is more indirect –
as in the false prophets who said “peace, peace” when there was no peace –
with the result that Israel became complacent, ignored God’s warnings,
and thus went to their death.

In other words,

the lying lips and deceitful tongues that we face today
are not so much the people who annoy us in our everyday lives –
(I don’t think they are out to kill you!)
but the dangerous lips belong to people who *don’t* annoy us!

Those who would beguile us into thinking that Babylon isn’t so bad!
Those who would have us make peace with the world, the flesh and the devil.

But Psalm 120 reminds us what shall be done to the deceitful tongue:

³*What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?*

The implied subject in verses 3-4 is God.
You could translate it,
“What will he give to you? What will he add to you? O deceitful tongue?”

The traditional oath formula in Hebrew is “God do to you and more also”
if I do not ... [do X, Y, or Z]

The Psalmist adds a twist to this:
what more shall be done to you?

I’ll tell you what more God will give you!

⁴*A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!*

Arrows are commonly used in scripture as a metaphor for slander.

Psalm 52:4 – “Your tongue devises mischief, like a sharpened razor”
Psalm 57:4 – “I lie down among man-eating lions whose teeth are spears and arrows.”
Jer. 9:2,7 – “They bend their tongues like bows... Their tongue is a sharpened arrow.”

Apparently the broom tree is a hard wood,
which made for good coals to use as flaming arrows.

In other words, the punishment fits the crime.

Lying lips will be met with sharp arrows.

The one who lives by deceit will die by deceit!
As one commentator put it:
“He who curses awakens the retribution that results from the dastardly act.
He knows that Yahweh is at work as the judge.
Malice will reap its ‘recompense’ (cf. Hos. 9:14; Ps. 28:4).
Since in the Psalter lying tongues are frequently compared to sharp arrows
(Pss. 7:12f.; 11:2; 57:4; 64:3),
the enemies, according to v. 4, are to be defeated with their own weapons.
The accuser and slanderer is heir to the same sad fate for which he pursues his prey.”
(Kraus p. 424, vol. 2).

2. My Situation: Peace Surrounded By Warmongers (v5-7)

⁵*Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!*

Now we discover where we are:
in Meshech among the tents of Kedar.

This is a problem!
Because Meshech is far in the north – (one of the allies of Gog in Ezekiel)
and Kedar is far in the south (in Arabia).
It would be very difficult for one person to sojourn in Meshech
and dwell among the tents of Kedar at the same time!

So verse 5 helps us to see who is speaking.
The “I” here is not a solitary individual.

The “I” is Israel – the people of God in exile.

The only other place where Meshech and Kedar are found together
is in Ezekiel 27 (and you thought we were done with Ezekiel!)

Ezekiel 27 recounts all the trading partners of Tyre –
those who pursued wealth and power in this age.
If I am sojourning in Meshech,
then I am living among the violent and treacherous.
If I am dwelling among the tents of Kedar,
then I am living among those who seek plunder and spoil.

Kedar in the Song of Songs is associated with darkness
(Kedar sounds like the word for “darkness”),
and Meshech is found in Ezekiel 32:26 dwelling in Sheol
because they spread terror in the land of the living.

In other words, Kedar and Meshech have associations with darkness and the grave.
So perhaps Jerome was not so far off when he suggested
“Kedar means darkness, and darkness stands for this present world.”

Woe is me that I sojourn in exile in this present age –
that I dwell in darkness – among those who are obsessed with power and wealth.

Which is precisely where Psalm 120 takes us in verse 6:

⁶*Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.*

Again in verse 6 “my soul” appears (and disappears in the ESV)!
Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace.

Again, it is true that “my soul” means “I” (or “my life”).
But remember verse 2 –
“deliver my soul from lying lips” –

now I can see that “my soul has dwelt too long among those who hate peace.”

I have been here too long.
My soul – my life – my self – longs for the day when I will be free –
the day when I will no longer sojourn among the exiles –
when I will no longer be surrounded by lies and deceit.

⁷*I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war!*

The Songs of Ascents will say several times:
“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” – “Peace be upon Israel.”
The Songs of Ascents look forward to the day when “Shalom” will come.

Shalom is not merely the absence of military action.
Shalom is the comprehensive well-being of God’s people
when God himself dwells with them.
Shalom comes in the new city – The LORD Is There (from Ezekiel 48).
Shalom comes in the new temple – the new inheritance – the new covenant.

I am for Shalom!

Of course, remember the lying lips that said “Peace, peace” when there was no peace!
I am not for false peace.
I am not for deceptive words that make it sound like peace!

I am for *peace* –
indeed, in the Hebrew it says “I am peace”
“and they are *for* war.”

You can see here how Jesus is the singer of Psalm 120!
Jesus *is* our peace.

Without Jesus Christ, there is no peace!
Without his atoning sacrifice, which covers our sins,
there is no peace!

But Jesus himself said,
I did not come to bring *peace*, but a sword!
There is an unrelenting hostility between the world and the gospel!
That’s what verse 7 says!

Jesus *is* peace.
He *is* the peace that comes
in his resurrection from the dead!

And when the peace of Christ rules in your heart,
then you find that the words of Psalm 120:7 come true for you:

“I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war!”

Conclusion: When Do You Speak?

The Psalms of Ascents expressed for the Jews of the Diaspora
“their renewed conviction that the God Israel was on their side
and would give resources to cope with the hostility of foreign neighbors.
They came as pilgrims, weary of life’s struggles.
Their coming to the sanctuary brought them renewal of hope
and courage to live as God’s people in an alien land.” (Allen, p. 148).

And of course, that is precisely the sort of message that Peter speaks of in 1 Peter 1:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion
in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,
2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit,
for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood... (1 Peter 1:1-2)
11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh,
which wage war against your soul.
12 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 Peter 2:11-12)

Notice how Peter interprets the warfare imagery!

The warfare is especially directed at the passions of the flesh!

The Gentiles are not your enemies.

The pagans around you should see your honorable conduct,
as you wage your unrelenting war against the passions of the flesh –
and they should glorify God on the day of visitation,
because they have seen the Christ of Peace among you.

We live as elect exiles in the midst of the warlike nations.

And in Christ, we come to the holy of holies in the heavenlies
and we come before our Lord Jesus Christ,
and we bring to him the longings of our hearts –
that we might one day have peace.

And the God who promises that he will hear the cry of the oppressed
will surely hear you when you come to him and pour out your heart to him!

You are called as children of God to be peacemakers –

as Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers” –

as you speak peace in the midst of a warlike generation.

Close with *singing* Psalm 120