

Surrounded by Lies, Looking for Peace

Psalm 120

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

A Song of Ascents.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction: The Songs of Ascents

I have always been a sucker for journey stories. As a child, I loved *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain's novel about Huck and Jim's journey down the Mississippi. In high school, I fell in love with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, especially the story of Eliza's daring escape and journey to freedom. Later, as an adult, I came to really love JRR Tolkien, both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, both of which are epic journey stories. And of course, *Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the most influential books in my life.

For a journey story to work well, the person on the journey needs to have a clear destination and a purpose in going there: In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is helping Jim escape and find freedom. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza is taking her baby to freedom. In *The Hobbit*, the company of dwarves has recruited Bilbo to help them get their mountain back from Smaug, the evil dragon. In the *Lord of the Rings*, the Fellowship of the Ring sets out from Rivendell to seek to destroy the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom.

This morning, we are beginning a journey this summer through the Songs of Ascents, a collection of pilgrim songs in the Book of Psalms. Psalms 120-134 are collected together intentionally and each is titled "A Song of Ascents." Scholars disagree over the exact meaning of the term "ascents" here – some saying the 15 psalms correspond to the 15 steps going up in the Temple from the Court of the Gentiles to the Courts of the Jews, the final steps in the Jewish pilgrimage to the Temple. Yet the consensus seems to be that these psalms were collected right after the return from exile to the Promised Land to

be sung by pilgrims three times per year on their journeys to Jerusalem for the big three national festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Thus, these 15 songs are “Songs for the Journey” or Pilgrim Songs, as God’s people journey from wherever they are to Jerusalem and to the Temple for the national assemblies of worship. While these psalms were written by different people – David, Solomon and others – over a number of centuries, they were intentionally collected for the purpose of being sung on pilgrimage.

As believers, we are on a journey, on a pilgrimage, through this world to our heavenly home, to the Mount Zion that is above, the New Jerusalem, the eternal city of God where night never comes, as the darkness has been forever banished by the light of the glory of God shining in Christ Jesus.

These songs have a clear progression to them and they are intensely emotional and sometimes raw – some are joyful and celebratory, some are humble and simple, some express quiet contentment and faith, others express deep desire and longing. We begin with a sad and longing psalm this morning, in Psalm 120.

A. Crying out to God, v. 1

Psalm 120 begins with distress:

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

While the overall tone of this psalm is heavy and negative, the psalmist is doing what he should be doing in distress, calling out to the Lord. And the Lord is answering him.

The negative tone here is appropriate for the beginning of a pilgrimage. Setting out on a journey requires you to get up and get going from where you are. In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian set out on his journey to the Celestial City because he was weighed down by his heavy burden and wanted relief. Eliza hated being a slave herself, but she couldn’t stand the thought of her baby growing up in slavery. Frodo sets out with the ring because he knows the Nazgul are seeking him, putting everyone he loves in danger.

Setting our sights on heaven and having a proper pilgrimage mindset about life in this world requires a level of deep dissatisfaction with this world. You can hear the heaviness of this dissatisfaction and the depth of the longing in the heart of the psalmist in Psalm 120. This prompts me to ask two questions:

1. Have we grown too comfortable and complacent with life in this world so that our hearts are not truly longing for heaven?
2. When we are in distress in this life, do we call to the Lord? Are we too quick to look to ourselves or to some distraction or to some other source of comfort or aid in our distress?

B. Surrounded by Lies, vv. 2-5

What has the psalmist in deep distress and dissatisfaction? Lies.

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

Evidently, the psalmist has been the victim of malicious lying gossip. We don't know what has been said about him by whom or why. The vagueness of the situation allows us each to apply it to ourselves. Have you ever had someone lie about you? It's a very painful and devastating experience.

Growing up, we were taught to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Those who taught us this had good intentions, I'm sure, but they were wrong. The bruises and breaks caused by sticks and stones heal relatively easily compared to the damage done by lies. It should be "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can devastate me."

Being insulted to your face is bad enough, but being lied about behind your back is the worst. A very old saying, which has been attributed in various forms to a number of people, says "The lie goes halfway around the world before the truth can get its boots on." If you've ever had lies about you spread maliciously behind your back, you know the pain of Psalm 120.

In my own life, the deepest pain and greatest frustrations I have faced have come because of lies or half-truths people have spread about me.

In Psalm 120, the psalmist is so distressed by the lies surrounding him that he asks

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

He then answers his own question by foretelling God's swift and terrible judgment on lies:

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

This is the psalmist, in his distress, trusting in the Lord and His judgment of evil. "A warrior's sharp arrows" is an allusion to the swift and penetrating truth of God, which God will send forth to counter the lies. "Glowing coals of the broom tree" refers to the fiery judgment of God, which will destroy all lies and all liars.

C. Looking for Peace, vv. 5-7

Yet even as the psalmist is trusting in God, calling out to Him in his distress, and looking forward in faith to the judgment of God, he is still in distress over his situation:

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

These strange references are to far-off pagan places known for their violence. Meshech was far to the north of Israel, in present-day Turkey, while Kedar was far to the south of Israel, in the Arabian desert. Both lands were occupied by savage pagan warring people. Obviously, the psalmist could not have literally been in both of these far off places, lying in opposite directions from Jerusalem.

The point seems to be that the psalmist is so surrounded by lies and liars that he feels as if he is far removed from his own people and his own land. He might as well be in Meshech or in Kedar, so vile and hateful are his enemies and the lies they are spreading about him.

It's not just the fact that people are lying which has the psalmist so upset either. He is seeking to be a man of peace, but all they seem to want is conflict, and he is weary and exhausted by it -

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

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

We live in a world of lies and of conflict. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” Christians are called to seek peace. Psalm 34:14 says, “*Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*” Peter picks up on the words on Psalm 34 in 1 Peter 3:10-11 –

*“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.*

We are very clearly called to turn away from lies and to seek peace, but we live in a world where the truth is not prized, lies are bought and sold and traded for personal advantage, division is capitalized on and promoted for the sake of political power. It's so easy to get cynical. We need to recognize – “*Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.*” We need to be rightly weary of the world and its ways, lest it suck us in and we become like the very things we hate.

And yet, here's the truth: As much as I have been distressed in my life by the lies others have told about me behind my back, what about my lies? If I can look with the psalmist in hope for the judgment of God against all lies and liars, what about me?

At the Banner of Truth Minister's Conference this past week, Alistair Begg shared this short old poem:

Left Forever Unsaid
If all that we say in a single day,
With never a word left out.
Were printed each night
in clear black and white
'Twould prove strange reading, no doubt.
And then, just suppose,
'ere our eyes we could close,
We must read the whole record through;
Then wouldn't we sigh,

and wouldn't we try
 A great deal less talking to do?
 And I more than half think
 That many a kink
 Would be smoother in life's tangled thread.
 If half that we say in a single day
 Were left forever unsaid.

--Author Unknown

Oh, the things I wish I had left unsaid. What about the lies I've told, the times when I've been the liar? How often have I indulged and spread some juicy bit of gossip that has torn down another person because in some way it either worked to my advantage or made me feel good about myself. How often have I done the exact opposite of the Golden Rule and treated others the way I never want to be treated myself? Ouch!

The prophet Isaiah said it well when he was confronted by the majestic, holy glory of God in Isaiah 6. He said, "*Woe is me! I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*" (Isaiah 6:5)

If I'm going to be honest and I'm going to set out on an earnest pilgrimage away from the lies and destruction of the world, I need to acknowledge the ways I've been infected and affected, the ways my own heart has been desperately wicked and deceitful above all else.

Conclusion: How Do We Respond to Lies?

So, what do we do? How do we respond? We live in a world of conflict and deception. We live with hearts of conflict and deception. What do we do?

Earlier, I asked, "Have we grown too comfortable and complacent with life in this world so that our hearts are not truly longing for heaven?" What do we do if we're not complacent but we're just weary? Psalm 120 is a psalm thick with world-weariness. In his sermon on this psalm, Derek Thomas says that if the psalms were sounds, the sound of Psalm 120 would be a deep and heavy sigh.

Sometimes I get so weary from dealing with the world and my own heart that I sit down and just let out a deep and heavy sigh. Beth will sometimes ask me, "What is it?" and I will sometimes respond, "Everything. Just everything." That's kind of the feel of this psalm.

You might not like that. You might want our summer series in the psalms to begin with hand-clapping joy. Certainly, some psalms are more like that. But the psalms are so wonderful because they are so real, so earthy, so honest, and life is not always a happy hand-clapping time. Our pilgrimage to heaven is often motivated by our deep weariness with this world.

So what do we do? How do we respond? We do what the psalmist here does and we call to the Lord, and we remember what the psalmist himself is only barely remembering or barely calling to mind – We remember the goodness of God and the greatness of His salvation of us.

We have been infected by the ways of the world. Our hearts are prone to telling lies as much as to being broken by the lies of others. In the world of deceitful tongues, we have been on the giving and the receiving end of the sin, haven't we?

But One Man never lied. He never spoke deceit. He suffered the lies of others and never lashed out in cynical anger. He never lost sight of His Heavenly Father's goodness and never stopped entrusting Himself to His faithful Father. He is the truly innocent singer of Psalm 120, slandered and accused by scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, members of the Sanhedrin, priests, and King Herod. He was the Prince of Peace who only ever sought peace, but the world conspired against Him and put Him to death.

Yet His death was no tragedy. It was the plan of God for our salvation. For He was pierced for our transgressions, and he was crushed for our iniquities. The warrior's sharp arrows and the burning coals of the broom tree that our lying lips deserve were instead unleashed on Him. He took the lies and the hatred. He bore our sins and our suffering. He carried our weakness and our suffering our betrayal, in love for us.

And because Jesus has reversed the curse in Himself, by overcoming death and emerging victorious with eternal life in hand, we can revisit Psalm 120 and this time pray it in reverse, trusting that, in Christ, deliverance will have the final word –

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

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

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