

Psalm 120

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[0 : 00] Confused, aren't I? Let's read Psalm 120, not Hymn 120. Psalm 120 is described as being a song of ascents.

I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me. Save me, Lord, from lying lips. And from deceitful tongues. What will he do to you? And what more besides you, deceitful tongue? He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom bush. Woe to me that I dwell in Meshach, that I live among the tents of Kedar. Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I'm for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.

[1 : 17] Interesting psalm. Pray that the Lord will bless us as we consider its words a little bit later on. So have you ever been distressed?

Perhaps you're distressed at present. What sort of thing makes you upset, distraught, anxious? Psalm 120, verse 1. The psalmist tells us that he knew about distress. The psalmist said he called upon the Lord in his distress.

And we look at the causes of his distress and how he dealt with his distress. But what causes your distress?

You'd be a very unusual person if you knew nothing of distress. So how do you deal with distress?

[2 : 26] It's a very practical problem for us to deal with. And the psalmist here dealt with just that problem. The problem of distress.

In verse 2, we read about the cause of his distress. He wanted saving from lying lips and deceitful tongues.

Didn't say whether the lies were about him behind his back or to him about someone else. Perhaps it was just simply the distressing situation of a lying culture in which he found himself.

And a lying culture is distressing because it offers no certainty of anything. And have you noticed how lies come out of other things such as hatred, jealousy, greed, ambition, or guilt?

Lies are just part of our fallen nature. And it wasn't just that lying culture that distressed the psalmist.

[3 : 38] It was the violent, unruly, aggressive society that upset him. That society behind those lies. It wasn't just the conversation, but the attitude behind him, behind it, that wore him down.

And the writer of Psalm 120 felt that he needed to get away from this atmosphere. In verse 6 he said, Now, bonfires are great fun.

It's exciting to be close to a bonfire with its billowing smoke, with its sudden explosions and bangs and roaring flames.

Particularly, that's true, later on in the year when we enjoy bonfire night. But you know, you can be near a bonfire too long.

And if you're close to that bonfire for a long time and you go back and join others at a bonfire party, they know that you've been close to that bonfire.

[5 : 01] They can actually smell the bonfire on you. And when they look closely at your clothes, they can see little holes in your clothing. Been in that smoky atmosphere for too long.

And that's how it can be with our atmosphere, with the atmosphere of lying, aggression, hatred, division, and so on.

And that's the sort of atmosphere that distressed the psalmist. And it hung along there with him. It's a very important psalm, I think, particularly for young people, but everyone.

Proverbs 13 and 20, it says this, Walk with the wise and you become wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm.

And the writer of Psalm 120 knew that he was being harmed by his company. It distressed him. It unsettled him. And he longed for something better.

[6 : 13] So, what about you? You know, it's distress, the distressing society that we experience, that makes us to long for heaven, for that glory to come.

That's the way it works on us. That's what God has chosen. He weans us away from this world by his distress, that distress that it causes us.

Well, we'll look to see how the psalmist responded to that society shortly. But there's another hint of instability about his life.

In verse 5, he said he lived among the tents of Kedar. Well, he was from Israel, but hundreds of miles to the south of that land was this place, Kedar.

It's actually in northwest Arabia. And at the time of the psalmist, it was inhabited by violent, warlike Arabian tribesmen. Maybe not changed all that much.

[7 : 24] But there were people who were ignorant of the God of truth and grace. Now, he didn't live in their tents, but among them. He felt he didn't belong there.

He might well have been envious of those who lived in a house among relatively trustworthy, reliable, peaceful friends. So he said too long had he been in that place of Kedar with its aggression, with its lies, and so on.

But he also said that he dwelt in Meshach. Now, Meshach was in the opposite direction, near the Black Sea. It was up to the north, to the northeast.

And the people living in Meshach were traders, different sorts of people. But one of the things that they traded in was slaves, or were slaves.

They were heartless people. They were cruel people. So no wonder this man was distressed. It could be that he was some sort of trader himself, having freedom to wonder widely about the ancient world.

[8 : 33] Some people think, no, that isn't really the case. But the person who wrote the psalm wrote it to capture lots of people's experience, and they put all of it into one psalm.

And it wasn't just one psalmist, but it was the sort of characteristic of those who were described in Psalm 120.

Now, I wonder if you can identify with him in his distress. I guess most of you have never dwelt with violent, deceitful Arabian tribesmen, or brushed shoulders with heartless slave traders.

But what about ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram? They're constantly in our news, and they have an impact upon us, on our psychology. And they're not only active in Syria and Iraq, but Manchester, Westminster, and Borough Market, much closer to home.

And violent hate crimes are hatched in Cardiff and executed in Finsbury, and they reach our TV sets. They come into our ears, to our eyes, and so on.

[9 : 42] violence, sharp turns, and deceitful words are not the preserve of the ancient world. We're all too familiar with fake news, bullying, intimidation, using social media, Facebook, Twitter, and so on.

And even school children learn at an early age how powerful words are in threatening and humiliating others. And there must be few people around who haven't experienced office politics, or gossip at work, or malicious village talk.

And we're all aware of the telephone and email scams coming from deceitful people. How many of us have not heard a small print on contracts?

Living in this world is distressing, if not challenging. And believers find this world distressing. Lot, way back there in the Old Testament, was not perhaps the most eminent Old Testament saint, but listen how Peter wrote about him, the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 2.8.

The Lord rescued Lot, a righteous man who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless, for that righteous man living among them day after day was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard.

[11 : 16] It wasn't just the behavior he witnessed, it was a speech of those around him that tormented him. And if you come up from London to York on the train, so often you hear things on the railway carriage which are absolutely distressing, which hurt you, which penetrate you, even though they've got nothing to do with you, yet you're conscious that you're living in a kind of Meshach and Kedar.

Those of you who are street angels and Whitby witnessed bad things happening, but speech, the speech you hear is distressing too, and so often you know how it goes into your innermost parts. And we all hear this sort of thing each day in town, whether we're standing in a queue or wherever we are. And you don't have to live in Kedar or Meshach to be distressed.

The spirit of Kedar and Meshach comes into our homes and destroys our family relationships. They're very close to us indeed.

You might not live with noisy and thoughtful inconsiderate neighbors, but you may have been in a university hall of residence where you were oppressed by bad talk, evil talk, and the spirit of Kedar and Meshach is entwined around all our lives.

[12 : 42] It's the spirit of this world. And the spirit of Kedar and Meshach can even come into the life of churches.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 17. I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.

You must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor for we are all members of one body.

In your anger do not sin. See how the spirit of the world engulfs us all in one place or another. In fact, it's almost impossible to free ourselves from this spirit which clings so closely to us.

So, what should we do about it if we find ourselves living in Kedar or Meshach? What should you do if you're distressed and oppressed and tormented by the world around you and long to be released from its effects?

[13 : 53] Well, the psalmist tells us verse 1, I call, I call on the Lord in my distress and we're encouraged to call upon him whatever our distress.

Now, perhaps the psalmist went back in his mind to even more ancient Israel when the Israelites were suffering as slaves in Egypt. He would certainly know about the harsh brutal regime of the pharaoh.

Remember how the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush? He introduced himself as the Lord and the Lord said to him in Exodus chapter 3 verse 7, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.

I've heard them crying out. I've heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I'm concerned about their suffering. And you know how the Lord rescued them and how he brought them to the promised land.

But more importantly, what should we do if we find Kedar or Meshach living in us, in us as individuals?

[15 : 14] Well, perhaps you've been intimidated by the world and carelessly swept into making foolish statements by those around you. And when you find the chips are down, you find yourself standing on the wrong side, the side of Kedar and Meshach.

Perhaps it's the effect of your family and friends which has that dreadful effect upon you. It might be the effect of unbelieving religious people and you lack the moral and the spiritual strength to be different.

Perhaps you're plagued with guilt because of that moral and spiritual weakness. Remember, the Lord does not change.

He listens to the cry for salvation from distressed, desperate people. Remember when the apostle Peter was preaching to the crowds in Acts chapter 2.

The crowd had been swayed to call for the crucifixion of Jesus by the high priest and the religious leaders. Peter had spoken about coming judgment and widespread distress and then quoted a prophet from the Old Testament and said, everyone, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

[16 : 43] That's the way to respond when we're distressed. And God was even willing to forgive those responsible for crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ if they called upon him for mercy, confessing their sin.

The psalmist, the psalmist felt distressed in the world. He felt his weakness. He called upon the Lord. What else did he do? Well, he remembered something.

He remembered that the Lord heard his prayers when he was distressed. He looked back and saw the deliverances of the Lord in the past. Let me take you to another psalm, Psalm 34.

David, another psalmist wrote, I sought the Lord and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears. This man called and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

The righteous cry out and the Lord hears them. He delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord's close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. When we're distressed and we call upon the Lord, we do well to remember, remember past deliverances for ourselves.

[18:04] Remember how the Lord helped you when you were in distress in the past. That gives you confidence. It gives you confidence for yourself. It gives you confidence to encourage others that we might be a help to them in their distress.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 8, we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the trouble we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we received the sentence of death.

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead. He's delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he delivers us again.

On him, we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. Paul reminded his readers there at Corinth of his own distressing situation there in Asia, and said, he has delivered us from such a deadly peril and will deliver us again.

[19:26] The psalmist said, I call, I call upon the Lord in my distress, and he answers me. So have you got that confidence in the Lord?

Do you look back to his deliverance in the past so that you can trust him in the present and in the future? Can you reassure others that the Lord is faithful because you know that it's so?

And you see that the Lord is faithful to you in life and in death. The apostle Paul was able to speak in those ways. He remembered the past.

Does the psalm teach us anything else that we should do in an unstable, unpredictable, untrustworthy world? Was there anything else that gave him a sense of stability?

Well, we have a clue in the words before the psalm. psalm 120 is the first of 15 songs of ascents.

[20:32] Three times a year, God-fearing pilgrims used to go to the temple in Jerusalem for special feasts. It's thought that these songs of ascents were sung by the pilgrims for mutual encouragement on their journey.

Perhaps they even sang them thankfully there on the steps leading up to the temple. The pilgrims used to travel from different parts of the country, different parts of Israel and indeed the ancient world.

Jews scattered amongst other countries in the east. They would gather there in Jerusalem for those feasts. And we have an example of such a gathering there in Acts chapter 2 which I referred to earlier.

And there in Acts chapter 2 verse 5 we read this. There were many staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs.

All of those people used to gather in Jerusalem where they went for centuries. Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place where the Jews used to meet for worship.

[21:56] It was a place where the godly assembled to meet with God and encourage each other. It was so different from centers like Kedar and Meshech where there's such instability, lies, hatred, quarreling.

The contrast between the ideal of Jerusalem and the disquiet lies and violence of Kedar and Meshech is brought out in another psalm of a sense.

One that is probably even more known, Psalm 133. The psalmist there says, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

You can imagine the gathered godly there in Jerusalem saying how good it is to be here. And the experience of distress in Kedar and Meshech was replaced by one of pleasantness when they reached their destination there in Jerusalem.

And they confessed of their being of one mind. And that was good, it was pleasing, it was pleasant, it was quenching. And those assembling in Jerusalem would have particular opportunities to hear the truth of God's word taught by the prophets.

[23 : 12] They could pray together, encourage one another, comfort one another. But it must have seemed an awfully long time between those happy visits to Jerusalem.

The psalmist complained, I've lived too long among those who hate peace. We can meet twice on Sundays and in the middle of the week too.

And it's so different from the world where you spend most of your time. It's a privilege to spend time with those that you are one with in Christ.

To rejoice in the same things, having the same hope. It's like an oasis in the desert. So how do you prize those opportunities?

Do you grasp them? Are you careless about them? Do you find other things to do? do you? The psalmist was grieved that he spent so much time with those of a country spirit.

[24 : 17] It pained him and he couldn't get to Jerusalem too soon or too often. There's a saying, birds of a feather flock together.

What an interesting statement that is. So does it hurt you when you're unable to meet with the Lord's people? What sort of bird are you?

But there's something else. It wasn't just about meeting with like-minded people. The psalmist valued Jerusalem. Jerusalem was unique.

What was unique? about Jerusalem. Well, it was the site of the temple. The one legitimate place where Jewish priests could sacrifice animals for sin. It wasn't just the magnificence of the temple that made it unique.

The stones of the temple were actually dispensable. Do you remember on one occasion the Jews asked Jesus for a sign of his authority? Think about John chapter 2 verse 19.

[25 : 29] Jesus responded with the statement that he would destroy this temple and raise it again in three days. His enemies replied, it's taken 46 years to build this temple and you're going to raise it in three days.

Jesus. But the temple he had spoken of was his body. The body of Jesus replaces that temple that was such a center of Old Testament worship.

And after Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he said. the temple was but a picture of Jesus himself. Very interesting to note that Jesus didn't invite his hearers to come to the temple.

He invited his hearers, he invited the distressed, the weary, to come to him to find rest. To save them if you like from the spirit of Kedar within them and around them.

You have to come to him and you can come to him anywhere. You can believe in him in any place. You can call upon him in Kedar, in Meshach, in Jerusalem, Rome, Whitby, anywhere.

[26 : 48] The hymn writer said, Jesus, where'er thy people meet, there they behold thy mercy seat. Where'er they seek thee, thou art found, and every place is hallowed ground.

But you must come to Jesus for yourself. Jesus is the only way. He's the way, the truth, and the life. You must feed upon him. You must come to Jesus himself and believe in him to know the salvation and the blessing of God.

God. When you do this, you see everything in a different way. You see Kedar and Meshach in a different way.

You even look at your own tongue in a different way. And you're willing to see things God's way. Indeed, you're able to see things in God's way.

[27 : 57] How does God view your tongue? How does God view the tongues of those around you? How does he regard you as an eternal, in an eternal, everlasting way?

Well, look at verses two and three. What will he do to you, and what more besides you deceitful tongue?

He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom bush. It's very hard for an unbeliever in Christ to come to those verses and see those things which are written down there.

Indeed, if you don't believe in Jesus Christ, you don't want to look at those verses and take in their significance because the psalm there reminds us that God is against evil tongues.

He's against lying, deceitful tongues and boastful tongues and tongues that stir up strife. Revelation 21, verse 8, reminds us just how much God is against the evil tongue, against lying.

[29 : 25] It tells us this, the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars.

They will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. and Jesus elsewhere. You'll be familiar with it. Jesus spoke of everlasting punishment just as he spoke of everlasting life.

What about the reference there to the broom bush? Is there anything special about the broom bush? The sort of broom that grew in the Middle East as referred to in Psalm 120.

It's very interesting. People used to make charcoal of that broom bush. The thing about the charcoal made from that bush is that it kept its heat for a long, long time.

Really unusual. So the hot coals from the broom tree was a well-chosen picture by the psalmist of the seriousness of singing with our tongues.

[30 : 46] I don't believe that the psalmist was being self-righteous at all. But when you come to Jesus in reality, in truth, and call upon him, thankful for his spotless righteousness, for his life laid down for you, you become awfully aware of that awesome holiness of life and speech.

It puts you in the spotlight. But you don't hide from that light. You walk in that light. Remember the call of Isaiah to preach.

Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord. What did he see? Well, Isaiah tells us, I saw the Lord, the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

He saw the seraphim calling one to another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. The vision was awesome.

The doorposts and the thresholds shook. The temple was filled with smoke, a sign of judgment to come. What did Isaiah do? He cried. He cried, woe is me.

[32 : 10] I'm ruined, for I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.

What can you identify with him? I remember the apostle Paul, when he considered his sin, he said, who can deliver me from this body of death?

Well, Isaiah was there. What happened there to encourage Isaiah? Well, one of the seraphim flew to him with a live coal, taken from the altar, touched his lips, his guilt was taken away, his sin atoned for.

What altar? What sacrifice? What can take away my sin? What was the burnt sacrifice there? Why are you referring to the Lord Jesus Christ? Isaiah himself referred to it later on.

Isaiah chapter 53 verse 9. Though he, obviously speaking about Jesus, had done no wrong, no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth, yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

[33 : 25] And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many and will bear their iniquities.

So is this where your confidence is? Is your confidence in this righteous, crucified, and risen saviour? Now you might feel relatively safe from a restless, deceitful world when you meet with believers in the worship of God, but are you trusting in God's answer for our fallen world of which you and I are a part, by believing in that one unique saviour, the one who died to take away our sin. That's the ultimate challenge of this passage. So let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you've made provision for us in this world.

We thank you for being able to come together to encourage one another. We thank you for the peace of being able to gather, which we all experience, but we thank you for that which is infinitely greater, even the Lord Jesus Christ who came into this world to bear our sin, to take it away as far as the east is from the west.

We thank you for him and we pray that each one of us might trust in him with all our hearts and we ask it for his name's sake, for his glory.

[35 : 09] Amen.