

Psalm 120

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[0 : 00] Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord.

May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is the maker of heaven and earth. Let's begin then by singing our first hymn, it's number 808.

808, the Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me lie in pastures green. He leads me by still, still waters.

His goodness restores my soul. It's good to sing one of the psalms together. Let's stand and sing 808. Let's sing the song of the Lord.

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 your deceitful tongue?

[1 : 24] 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 am for peace. But when I speak, they are for war. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord, as we turn to your word now and to your message from us, to us from Psalm 120, as we consider tonight the ungodly man, the godly man in an ungodly world, we pray that you would teach us.

Help us to listen. Speak through my words tonight, Lord. Let us hear you speak. May we be blessed, preacher and hearer alike in your presence tonight. Amen.

So the title then, this evening, as we look at Psalm 120, is this.

[2 : 36] A godly man in an ungodly world. Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? Maybe you think of Catholics visiting lords in France or the Shrine of Knock in Ireland or Woldstigum in East Anglia.

Or maybe you think of people going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Or Muslims going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Sometimes today, though, people go on a sort of a pilgrimage.

As a tourist experience, they walk the path across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, right up in the northwest of Spain.

And it becomes a tourist thing to do. Or to Croke-Patrick, the holy mountain of St. Patrick in County Mayo in Ireland. And after we left Whitby Beach Mission last summer, my family and I, we went over to Ireland, did a week's mission at Kilke.

And then we had a holiday up in the west of Ireland. And we visited Croke-Patrick. It's not just that people do it for a religious pilgrimage. All the tourists go up there. So we joined the tourist trail.

[3 : 44] We set off up this mountain. Now, to say we got to the top with only half the story.

Two-thirds of the family got to the top. I gave up halfway. Now, I am older than them, to be fair.

But they were determined, Daniel and Ben, to get up to the top. And they did. I decided to wait at the halfway point. It started to rain. So I went back down and got a lovely piece of cake and a coffee and a coffee at the bottom.

But it's an experience just to go up that mountain. But, you know, people go up there at certain times of the year on a pilgrimage, barefoot on all the stones, because they think that by doing that, they're going to do something to please God.

There's a strange thing to want to do. Pilgrimage. They're just random examples. But it could be that you're one who follows your football team across Europe.

Your pilgrimage is to go where your team are going. Or maybe you see life itself being described as a pilgrimage. We're all on a journey from the cradle to the grave and beyond.

[4 : 47] And this evening, we're going to look at one of the psalms. It's known as one of the songs or the Psalms of Ascent in Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134.

15 psalms in total. We're just going to look at the first one tonight. Known, as I say, as the Songs of Ascent, or the authorised version put to the Songs of the Grease.

You can see it says that in the title as it begins. Each one, a Song of Ascent. Spurgeon called this group of 15 psalms A little Psalter within the Psalter.

The most common interpretation of these psalms is that they are pilgrim psalms. They are a journey from a long way away to the very heart of God.

And they're going up to God there at one of the three great pilgrim festivals of the year. To the Passover or to Pentecost or the Feast of Tabernacles. And we can imagine these pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem singing these psalms as they ascend towards Mount Zion, to the temple, to the presence of God on earth.

[6 : 02] For the great festival. And these psalms are intended to take us on a spiritual journey to take us closer to God. From wherever we are, somewhere away from God perhaps, to take us close to God.

Through difficulties, through trials, that may come, that probably will come, along the way. But these psalms, together, form a coherent path along which we may travel to the very centre, to the very heart of God.

The psalms are intended to help us make our pilgrimage back to God. They're a perfect companion to a more modern pilgrim's progress. Now, I've got in front of me the English Standard Version of the Bible and the titles at the start.

Remember the titles they're given in any Bible, not part of the sacred scripture. They're there just to help us. But looking at the headings, for these 15 psalms in my Bible, there is an element of progression illustrated here in this journey.

Psalm 120 begins as the title, A Call for Deliverance. Psalm 121, My help comes from the Lord. 122, Let us go to the house of the Lord.

[7 : 19] 123, Our eyes look to the Lord. 124, Our help is in the name of the Lord. 125, The Lord surrounds His people. 126, The Lord restore our fortunes, O Lord.

127, Lest the Lord builds the house. 128, Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord. 129, Affliction from my youth. 130, My soul waits for the Lord.

And then we get to Psalm 131, I have calmed and quietened my soul. See, the previous psalms are all about great needs and concerns and the difficulties of the journey and having to look to the Lord with all the problems.

But now as the psalmist approaches nearer to Jerusalem, things start to calm down. He starts to feel settled and calmed and quietened his soul as he goes up to the Lord.

132 says, The Lord has chosen Zion. 133, When brothers dwell in unity. If we're honest, we don't always get on, perhaps, as well as we should.

[8 : 29] And of course, there are churches who we would have many disagreements with and yet, to recognize that even in those churches, God has His people. A time will come when we come together as the people of God in heaven and we will dwell in perfect unity.

And then it finishes on a climax. Psalm 134, I read this at the start of the service this evening. Come, bless the Lord. That's our desire.

That's our aim. That's our journey. That's our purpose in life. That we might come and bless the Lord and praise the Lord. And so in these psalms, there's a common link and there's a progression. The journey starts far away, but it ends with the psalmist standing in the house of the Lord. The destination has been reached maybe after many days or many weeks.

The goal of the journey, the goal of the pilgrimage has been achieved. The pilgrim has arrived where he wants to be, in the house of God, worshipping God.

[9 : 37] Why are we here tonight in the house of God? Why have we come to church tonight? Well, it's good to see other Christians, see your friends, but more than anything else, our desire must be, the purpose must be to worship God.

That's our number one reason for being in church tonight. Is that why you're here tonight? Because you want, you desire with all your heart to worship God. What a great God that we have.

The God of the universe. The God of all the vastness we see in the sky down to the things we cannot see with the naked eye. And in all of that creation, God's most concerned about you and about me.

Have we not got cause to worship our God tonight? Our life in the world is a journey. It's a pilgrimage from the cradle to the grave.

There's also a spiritual dimension. One day, we will stand in the presence of the Lord himself. Being in church, being with the people of God is but a foretaste of the greater things that are yet to be.

[10:46] You see, we're all together on this same pilgrimage. Though we're at different stages on the journey. We've been Christians, maybe, from different lengths of time.

We have different levels of spiritual maturity. Some of us have grown quicker than others in our Christian walk. And as we think of that walk, we think of that pilgrimage, there will be setbacks. There will be trials. There will be enemies along the way. But as we're on this journey, as the people of God, we've all been to Calvary.

We've all been and started our journey, our spiritual journey, at the foot of the cross. Like Pilgrim, Pilgrim's Progress, we have removed our burden of sin and laid it at the foot of the cross.

Or the Lord removed it for us, actually. Laid it at the foot of the cross and takes it upon himself when he died there at Calvary. And that's the entry to the pilgrimage that we are on. Let me just add something before we move on and say this.

[11:49] When I say we, I'm only referring to Christians, to those who trusted the Lord Jesus Christ. This tonight, in one sense, is very much a message for Christians.

It's a message for Christians to the extent that the wonderful things we speak of can only be experienced by Christians. But if you're not a Christian tonight, if you've never come and trusted the Lord Jesus Christ, I want you to listen very carefully tonight for this reason.

Tonight, I want to make you jealous. I want to make you jealous tonight. And I say that in a loving way. I want to make you jealous of what these other Christians around you have got.

I want you to realise what you are missing out on in life. That you too may seek after God with all your heart. And all who come to Him, He will not reject.

Am I talking to someone like that tonight? You're not the people of God. And so in a sense, what I'm saying when I say we is not for you. But you can be part of the people of God.

[12:59] But I want you to leave this place jealous tonight. Because I want you before you leave this place tonight to say, yeah, I want the Lord. I want my life to change. So it's a challenge there tonight.

Let's turn particularly now to Psalm 120. This is the start of the psalmist's journey. He's a long way to go.

And that journey won't be easy all the way. This psalm is not necessarily many people's favorite psalm. It's a bit gloomy in some ways.

It begins in verse 1 with the psalmist's distress. In my distress, he says, in my distress, I call to the Lord. But maybe, in this gloom, in this distress, maybe that's the reality of how you feel tonight. Or you know what it's like to have been there in the gloom, in the distress, in the misery, in the depression. And realistically, you know whether you've been there or not, one day you could be there.

[14:07] Because life isn't easy. While we're in this world, the devil throws his fiery arrows at us and there will be hardships and there will be difficulties and the problems will come.

So it's a very relevant psalm to take note of. It's part of life. Being distressed, having these problems, being this journey. But it's only one psalm in this series.

This series, which Spurgeon calls a Psalter, within a Psalter. Within this series, as we've seen, it's progressed within these psalms. And so hopefully, as we look together at Psalm 120, it's just a staging post along our pilgrimage.

We don't want to remain far from God in our distress and call for deliverance. We want to be on that journey tonight. And as I've looked at this psalm, I have to admit, I've not found it an easy psalm to break down into headings.

But I'm going to settle tonight for three headings which Gerald Crispin uses in his Bible Panorama book. And it's this. In verse 1, there is distress. In verses 2 to 4, there's deliverance.

[15:21] But in verses 5 to 7, it speaks about dwelling. Distress, deliverance, and dwelling. Let's think then, firstly, of distress.

Verse 1 begins with the writer in distress. Why? Because he is surrounded by ungodly enemies. We too today are surrounded by ungodliness.

When I'm the odd one out at work, at school, at college, in my family, in my neighborhood, where can I turn? Because in all distress, no one wants to feel alone.

Loneliness is a terrible thing. There are many people tonight for various reasons of suffering real loneliness. That's a very lonely thing to be left out, to be ostracized.

But isn't that increasingly the reality of the modern age for Christians? But in fact, others have felt what we might be feeling tonight.

[16:24] Others have felt this throughout history. Wouldn't it be lovely to be living in the midst of revival? But we're not. We pray it will happen.

But maybe tonight you are feeling the psalmist's distress. Despair, like distress. It can be a horrible thing. I guess we can only understand this to the degree that we've been there in some way.

Maybe you've been through that terrible despair and depression and mental illness, whatever. And the Lord understands and it's good to take comfort in that.

Now the psalmist is in distress. But let me ask you a question. Look at verse 1. And let me ask you this question. Does the psalmist fall into uncontrollable despair?

Does he fall into uncontrollable despair? And the answer is a resounding no. He does not fall into uncontrollable despair. Why not? Because he said in my distress two things.

[17:38] I call to the Lord and not just that I call to the Lord but that the Lord answered me.

Wouldn't it be a terrible thing if we were to call to God again and again and again and he never answered?

As if God just hears what you say and he turns his back on you and he doesn't want to know you.

But our God is not like that. I call to the Lord and he answered me.

I want you to notice something about the grammar here because it's past tense. It doesn't say I call to the Lord. It says I called. Past tense I call to the Lord. He says I've had distress before and I called to the one who could help me and he did help me and he did answer me.

When I called on the Lord he answered me. And we can take confidence in that because what God has done before he can do it and he will do it again.

So the past work of God can be a great comfort to us. Even in my deepest distress in my deepest anxiety regarding maybe this life or maybe concerns for eternity he heard me when I called and he answered me.

[18:57] Fear not I am with you oh be not dismayed for I am your God and will still give you aid. I'll strengthen you help you and cause you to stand upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.

One of the verses from How Firm a Foundation I'm going to sing that at the end this evening. So it's what God's done in the past has great encouragement for us. History is a great teacher.

Whether it's world history or whether it's just personal history what God's done before he can do it again. The truth is this God's answers of the past are our assurance for the future.

The Victorian and Edwardian Baptist preacher Alexander McLaren in relation to this ongoing issue of God's ongoing provision wrote this. He says this he will not weary of bestowing nor will former gifts exhaust his stores.

Men say I've given so often I can give no more. God says I have given therefore I will give. What God's done in the past is our confidence for today and our confidence for the future.

[20:14] I call to the Lord. Where did he call to? He says I called to the Lord. It's no good crying to our fellow men. Yes friends can help us but even friends can let us down.

Maybe accidentally maybe sadly sometimes deliberately those who are not our friends can act treacherously. but Jesus will never let us down.

Even if it seems for the moment that things aren't going because we liked God has a bigger picture. God has a bigger plan. God has a plan that will bring him glory. And what happens to us within the will of God is all part of bringing God glory.

He will says I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. It's our God tonight and he wants to help us with his glory. Let's continue that hymn. When through the deep waters I call you to go the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow for I will be with you in troubles to bless and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie my grace all sufficiency shall be your supply the flame shall not hurt you. I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

[21:35] The soul that on Jesus has learned for repose I will not I will not desert to its foes that so though all hell shall endeavor to shake I never no never no never forsake.

See the reality of the Christian life is the Christian life is not all I'm H-A-P-P-Y another song I'm H-A-P-P-Y it's not like that. We don't teach if we're true to the Bible the health and wealth gospel. Some people might quote to you Mark chapter 10 in verses 29 and 30 says this Jesus said truly I say to you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands in the age to come eternal life.

Doesn't that sound great? Those of you who are students of the Bible will notice I've missed two words out there. What it actually says you receive all these things it says with persecutions. See it sounds too good to be true doesn't it? The Lord does bless he does provide for us we have no right to demand that of him sometimes the going will be tough.

[23 : 00] Jesus himself in the garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest and his trial and his crucifixion came as close to despair as possible he could do but without sinning.

We have no right to think that we're entitled to better than our Lord himself experienced. But the good thing in all this though is this as we may face distress the Lord has been there before he understands he's been tempted in every way in every way as we are yet without sin.

The glorious son of God came from heaven came to this world and went to the cross and people say God doesn't care and if God reveals himself I'd follow him.

if someone came back from the dead I'd follow him people took this rot because they don't accept and don't realise God's done all this God's left the glory of heaven what a great place heaven will be that moment will come when you and I as the people of God will be there in glory and we'll find it's probably even better than we could ever understand from the descriptions in human words in the scriptures.

We go through trials but the Lord understands. There is distress but secondly in verses verses 3 verses 2 to 4 verses 2 to 4 we read of deliverance deliverance deliver me O Lord the psalmist begins in verse 2 deliver me he's confident the Lord's help in the past the psalmist is now able to confidently call on the Lord for deliverance but the problem he faces is that of the tongue deliver me from lying lips deliver me from a deceitful tongue not his own tongue but that of his enemies let's be honest slander negative comments about us do hurt all sticks and stones will break my bones may well be true it's true but lies will never hurt me it's probably less true for many of us hurtful comments don't roll off like water off a duck's back they hurt us they hurt us hard and so it's from this that the psalmist calls for deliverance there's no wonder the bible has so much to say about the tongue in the

[25 : 47] NIV bible the word tongue is used 21 times ESV because of the translation words they've used it's used 19 times the English word for example Psalm is it Psalm sorry Proverbs sorry it's used that number of times in Proverbs and in Proverbs chapter 12 and verse 18 it says this there is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts but the tongue of the wise brings healing or 26 and verse 28 a lying tongue hates its victims and a flattering mouth works ruin so we see the tongue can do good but it can do harm and in James there's much to say about the tongue so for example in James chapter 3 verses 5 and 6 so also the tongue is a small member yet it boasts of great things how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire and the tongue is a fire a world of unrighteousness the tongue is set among our members staining the whole body setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell awful work the tongue can do so it's no good crying to our fellow men

I'll say what I said a few moments ago yes friends can help us but even they can let us down deliberately or accidentally and those who are not our friends can act treacherously so more a person thinks they are upsetting you the more they'll continue to taunt you children are good at doing that aren't they if a child knows how another child can be hurt they'll continue to nigger at them and nagger at them and hurt them with all their comments you know we can do it as adults all the times that we can be hurtful perhaps to our husband or wife to remember our family to work colleagues to somebody else we can be hurtful in the way we speak to people we know how to get at somebody we know how to make them hurt and we come away and sometimes we feel good about it and say I gave them what for is that ever a way a Christian should speak no we may gloss over this this hurt in Merseyside where I come from we used to say are you talking to me or chewing a brick was sort of meant are you being rude to me or not it was really to do with unkind words because we know unkind words do hurt think before you open your big mouth let me say that

again me think before I open my big mouth we're all guilty of us aren't we we say things we wish we'd never said perhaps before we say it we should stop and think you know when you send an email now you can actually send your email so that it has so many seconds delay before it actually sends so you type in email and you hate you you're a horrible person hit the send button you think oh I wish I'd not done that and you realise you've got so many seconds delay if you set your computer to do that there'd be many people in work situations who sent horrible emails to the boss who wish they'd never done it wouldn't it be good if our mouths had a bit of a delay on them so from when we think and open our mouth there's a delay before the words get out do you know that's sometimes in radio programs and phone-ins where there's a delay in the program going out a few seconds delay so if someone says something on air which shouldn't be said the producer can pull the plug on it can stop that bit going out it'd be good if we had delays on our mouths deliver me oh Lord from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue but then the psalmist shifts from his prayer to God to speak to the false tongue of those who cause him distress what shall be given to you what more shall be done for you you deceitful tongue the psalmist says what shall be given to you the false tongue is like a sharp razor

Psalm 54 verse 2 says it's like a sharp sword to Psalm 57 in verse 5 and now the sharp arrows of judgment will come against the psalmist in verse 4 there will be arrows shot against them with the glowing coals of the broom tree the roots of the broom tree would burn long they wouldn't just be put out easy they wouldn't just fire to continue probably for days smoldering and burning away sometimes tongues can be like that when harsh words are said they can burn long and they can hurt long but so too can God's revenge this is not a situation anyone should want to get into in any conflict with God guess who's going to win God's going to win of course

Daniel was telling me his son Daniel student at Oxford University was telling me that the tutors there want you to debate they want you to challenge things they want you to have your own ideas and to get into discussion with them but the students will very rarely win against the tutor and you've got to be gracious sometimes as an undergraduate and say this guy's a doctor I better just back down a little bit because at the end of the day you can't win against them and nobody can win against God in an argument and this idea of sharp arrows and burning flames a verse in Ephesians chapter 6 verse 16 comes to mind Paul wrote to the Ephesians in all circumstances take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming dark of the evil one so beware of the tongue the psalmist is seeking deliverance from the power and hurtfulness of the tongue but remember this that the Lord can deliver us from all such snares from all such horrible comments the Lord can deliver us and so when the psalmist calls out he said in my distress

I called to the Lord past tense and so now when he asks for deliverance Lord you've done it before Lord you can do it again distress deliverance and lastly the thought of dwelling dwelling the psalmist is mindful in verses five through to seven of his true spiritual home because that's where he longs to be and his spiritual home is in a sense now in Jerusalem he's on a pilgrimage to get there and so he's woeful of his current situation his current location he longs to be there in Jerusalem on Mount Zion with the people of God let me ask you where do you most long to be do you long to be with the people of God do you look forward to each Sunday service and each midweek meeting when we come together to pray and worship and to learn of God do you think and I'm sorry I'm covering old ground this morning but do you think your attendance at church is optional it's not that the church rule book said you must be here or else it's rather it's strongly encouraged and why because when people love each other they want to be together and if we love our God we want to be with our God do you love God and do you love the people of God then you know what you ought to do do you long do you long not just the psalmist here longer for Jerusalem do you long for heaven there are days when this world becomes just too much for some of us and we just long to be leave this world to be in the presence of God and a psalmist says

[34 : 19] I sojourn in Meshach I dwell among the tents of Kedar there's a here a sense of a temporary residence of sojourning of being on a journey I place my tent here I'm on a journey I'm pilgriming towards Jerusalem I'm over towards heaven this world is not my home I'm just a passing through as the old song says or as one that's no Paul sings I don't feel at home in this world anymore it's a time when you feel like that you wish you could just go tonight and be translated to glory and be there and dwell where your home is we are on a pilgrimage we are not to stay in this world we don't know when we leave and we will come and we will go to heaven glory awaits the child of God if you're not a child of God tonight surely now you must be feeling jealous look at these people around you look at the great things they have got to look forward to in the future to dwell in

the presence of God it's amazing

Meshach is far to the north around the Black Sea of the Balkan areas Kedar was down in Arabia these are two people two places so far apart that in a sense they're to be taken as a general term for the heathen the heathen people right over the north right down in the south wherever they are these are examples of warlike tribes against whom the psalmist sings in verse 20 there's no true home amongst them my home's not in this world I don't feel at home in this world anymore you know the cause of the psalmist spiritual melancholy and depression are both opposition of the world and the allurements of the world the opposition we understand we feel it when we're mocked or criticized for being honest in the workplace for not falsifying data for not lying on the phone I remember I was asked to manage switchboard what job was it many years ago and I took a call and the boss said tell me he wasn't in so I said the boss said he's not in I wasn't going to lie for him because I said you are in I'm not pilfering from our employer I'm not condoning illicit sexual liaisons we feel it it's opposition when we're passed by for promotion because we're Christians because we won't do a certain thing we won't work on a Sunday it's not so much that these other people think you're bad as much as they feel their own guilt and badness in comparison because they don't know Jesus but given that Jesus was mocked and suffered have we the right to expect better the opposition then we understand but then there's the allurements of the world and that may be less obvious the ways of the world the ways of the ungodly can so easily come to taint us so easy to copy them so easy to compromise maybe gradual maybe it's unnoticeable at first it can be a subtle ploy of the devil oh it's alright only a little thing you just go along will you be a witness if you do that you're with your friends and we're led gradually astray into the world had a psalmist thought he could survive far from Jerusalem without regular contact with the people of God could he really stay in Meshach or in Cade no he couldn't he knew where he needed to be dwelling in the presence of God the writer to the Hebrews says we should not forsake meeting one another together the very fact the psalmist is at this moment concerned is a positive sign what can happen is our views can change over time and we can be sucked into the ways of the world and we start to think I'd like to dwell there I'm happy I like the world I don't want to go anywhere else I'm not saying we don't enjoy life of course we enjoy life to our families and so on but this world is not my home I'm just a passing through like the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem I and you are on a pilgrimage tonight so finally then we see the sharp contrast this psalmist is aware of he calls for peace while others are calling for war he wants goodness and wholesome values they want hostility but was Jesus himself not our supreme example in all these things he was a man of peace but the world raised its hostility against him and if they declared war on Christ and continue to do so today will the world not also declare war on us is a servant ever greater than his master and so we're on a pilgrimage this is just a start we could spend if we had the time we could look at it all these other songs of ascent so eventually we are there in the presence of God the end of the pilgrimage life let us then long for the final destination of our pilgrimage the people the people of God now but eternity in heaven you know things can only get better indeed as we look there to heaven remember this the best is yet to be amen a