



These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 1 February 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT – PART 1, THE LORD MY DELIVERER

Psalm 120

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!

1. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

Although the meaning of the title, Songs of Ascent, to this series of fifteen Psalms is uncertain, there is broad agreement among scholars that these Psalms would have been sung by Jewish pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for 'ascent' is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe the act of 'going up' to the Temple,

Psalm 24:3

**Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?**

b. Why would believers make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem?

i. To observe the festivals

Believers would travel to Jerusalem to observe the three main festivals:

- Feast of Unleavened Bread (in the spring)
- Feast of Weeks (in the early summer)
- Feast of Tabernacles (in the autumn)[1](#)

ii. To worship at the Temple

The Temple was the geographical centre of the worship of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant (containing the Law) was kept in the Temple, the priests would minister in the Temple, the people would come to pray, worship and offer sacrifices in the Temple. More importantly, God promised David and Solomon, of the Temple, 'My Name shall be there' (1 Kings 8:29). The Temple represented the deeper truth that God is with his people.

The Temple was also a foreshadowing of the great promise; that God would *dwell* with his people in a way which is fulfilled in Christ and will be fully realized with Christ's return and the consummation of the kingdom.

iii. Because of all that Jerusalem represented

Jerusalem was a significant city both politically and in terms of Israel's covenant relationship with God:

- Jerusalem was the capital city of Israel;
- Jerusalem was the city of King David;
- Jerusalem was considered to be a city established by God

c. Heading to Jerusalem was an act of drawing closer to God

This journey to Jerusalem is more than a religious observance, it was an act of drawing close to the place where God had set his name and the place where the worship of God was located.

2. EXILE AND LAMENT

a. 'In my distress...'

Psalm 120 and the Songs of Ascent begin with lament, the Psalmist is in distress:

Psalm 120:1a

In my distress I called to the LORD

This is interesting. Remember, the great movement of this collection of Psalms is directed towards the Temple. The Psalmist will finish with a call to worship:

Psalm 134:1

Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord

What then is the cause of the Psalmist's distress?

b. The cause of the Psalmist's distress

Three root causes of the Psalmist's distress:

i. His location

The Psalmist is a stranger in a strange land:

Psalm 120:5

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

Meshech was far to the north of Israel (near the Black Sea) and Kedar was to the far east (in Arabia). Both locations are symbolic and are representative of a situation where a believer in the living God is situated far from home.

Why is the location of the Psalmist important? The implication is that the Psalmist finds himself in a culture opposed to God and, indeed, the people of God. This leads us to the second cause of the Psalmist's distress.

ii. His situation

The Psalmist's location is such that he is living among unbelievers who are opposed to the living God. The Psalmist's situation reflects this, he prays:

Psalm 120:2

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

He is living among a people who are not simply passively opposed to the living God and the people of God, but are actively engaged in a campaign of slander, gossip, criticism and malicious lies.

iii. There is anticipation

Psalm 120:6

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

Although the opposition has, thus far, been verbal, the Psalmist is aware that these opponents hate peace.

Think about what it means to 'hate peace'. This is something beyond a personality clash and even beyond a serious disagreement. When people 'hate peace' they have arrived at a state whereby they actually relish and enjoy conflict, disagreements and arguments. You may have come across people like this; that person who seems to be forever stirring up trouble, spreading gossip, encouraging resentment and bitterness. Try and imagine this on a level where it infects an entire community.

The Psalmist is, therefore, in real danger that things might escalate to a point whereby his very life is in danger.

We see also that the Psalmist lives in a radically different way to those around him.

Psalm 120:7

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

'It is very easy to be corrupted by a corrupt world.'² The temptation to repay evil with evil is great. The Psalmist is in a situation in which he is facing persecution and his response is to not only remain a person of peace, but to actively pursue peace even when opposed with the threat of violence, 'when I speak, they are for war!'

As Christians, we are called to live in a way which demonstrates and speaks of peace so that the Prince of Peace might be glorified.

Jesus said,

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God

The Apostle Paul writes,

Romans 12:17-19

17Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

e. The Psalmist's situation mirrors our own situation

i. We are aliens and strangers in the world (NIV)

John 15:18-20

18"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the

world. That is why the world hates you. 20Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

John 17:13-17

13But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

ii. We are called to live like aliens and strangers in the world

1 Peter 2:11-12

11Beloved, 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 John 2:15-16

15Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16For all that is in the world— the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.

iii. We are called to *think* like aliens and strangers in the world

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3. THE LORD MY DELIVERER

a. How then should we deal with distress?

Psalms 120:1

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

Biblically, there are two ways of dealing with difficulty opposition and distress (the ungodly response and the godly response).

i. We can repay evil with evil

We can become angry and allow this anger to develop into bitterness, bitterness into wrath and then wrath into malice. When this happens we quickly become the kind of person who 'hates peace'.

Ephesians 4:26-32

26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and give no opportunity to the devil. 28Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 29Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

ii. Call upon the Lord

The Psalmist is faced with difficult circumstances and vicious opposition and he is understandably and rightly distressed. Feeling distressed, upset and even angry is not necessarily sinful. We need to guard our response to these emotions to ensure that we do not fall into sin; 'Be angry and do not sin (Ephesians 4:26).

How then does the Psalmist respond to criticism, gossip and opposition:

Psalm 120:1

In my distress I called to the LORD

The Psalmist calls to the Lord and his prayer is specific, he asks for deliverance:

Psalm 120:1-2

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

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

The Psalmist prays for deliverance: God save me, deliver me from this situation...

...and the Lord answers him.

b. God answers

Psalm 120:3-4

**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!**

The Psalmist understands something profound about the destructive and even self-destructive potential of an untamed tongue. In the New Testament, James addresses this directly using similar imagery to the Psalmist,

James 3:5-6

5So 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! 6And 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.

James' point is that the influence and potential of the tongue is disproportionate to its size in relation to the rest of the body. Although the tongue is small its effects are great. One small spark can start a devastating forest fire (think of California and the forest fires that ran amok throughout the summer!); so too, the tongue can work huge damage with just a few small words. But where is this destruction wrought? '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.' James' point is this, if you are a gossip, a critic and malicious slanderer, you do great damage, perhaps to others, but firstly to yourself.

You may have witnessed this yourself. A gossip attracts a crowd by spreading salacious but malicious rumours. Overtime the crowd begins to wonder, if this gossip is so quick to tell other peoples secrets, perhaps they cannot be trusted. As the crowd hear malicious story after story they perhaps begin to wonder what is said about them when they are not present. Quickly they find themselves alone, becoming increasingly bitter. The tongue has stained the entire body, people believe them to be unpleasant, untrustworthy. The tongue has set on fire the entire course of life, where they had friends, now they are alone, where they had influence, now they have none.

The point the Psalmist seems to be making is this, a life in which peace is considered hateful reaps its own punishment: a life of unrest, little security and constant strife with enemies at every turn. A life of malicious (even careless) talk results in an alienation of community, friends and loved ones.

The Psalmist implies more than this, however, for there is a '*he*' implied in verse 3. The NIV captures the meaning more clearly:

Psalm 120:3-4

**3What will he do to you,
and what more besides,
O deceitful tongue?
He will punish you
with a warrior's sharp arrows,
with burning coals of the broom tree.**

Who then, is the he? The Psalmist understands that God is just and that he is active in creation ensuring that wickedness does not go unpunished and that justice prevails. What will God do to you? He will punish you with the very means you used to torment others.

4. APPLICATION

i. God uses difficulty, opposition and distress to draw us closer to him and make us more like him

C.H. Spurgeon wrote of this Psalm and the Psalmist's distress, 'Does not some good come out of a vile falsehood when it drives us to our knees and to our God?'^{[3](#)}

ii. Heaven is our home and rescue is coming

Philippians 3:17-21

**20But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior,
the Lord Jesus Christ,21who will transform our lowly body to be
like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to
subject all things to himself.**

We too are in exile, we too are heading towards, not Jerusalem, but the New Jerusalem... The great promise is that on that day there will be no temple for God will dwell on earth with men.

iii. We are, therefore, called to live in the world, but live radically different from the world. We are called to lives that resemble, please and glorify King Jesus.

¹ D.G. Barker, "The Lord Watches Over You": A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121' in *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 152, p. 164

² D.M. Williams, *The Preacher's Commentary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1989), p. 387

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1997), p. 1276