



Psalm 120 - Prayer for Deliverance from Slanderers

A Song of Ascents.

Introduction

Psalm 120 is the first of the fifteen 'Songs of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134). This diverse group includes individual and corporate laments, songs of confidence, thanksgiving hymns, a song celebrating Zion, wisdom psalms, a royal psalm, and a psalm for a liturgical occasion. Some traditional Jewish interpreters have suggested that these were songs sung on the steps as the same word can mean this, for example: <<*You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it*>> (Exodus 20:26). This would either be in parts of the temple or up from a spring in Jerusalem. Others have taken them as geared toward returning to Jerusalem from exile: <<*Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem*>> (Ezra 1:3). Many favour these as songs for the people of God as they made the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem and the temple at the three appointed feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). Since Jerusalem was on a higher elevation than the surrounding landscape a person always goes up to the city or, indeed, up to the temple once in the city.

First Chronicles 13:6 uses this phrase to describe the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem: to bring up from there the ark of God the Lord. According to Spurgeon (and many others), the word translated as ascents shares the same root with 'to bring up' in 1 Chronicles 13:6. The same root word is used in the same context in 1 Chronicles 15:15.

None of these makes good sense of David's authorship of Psalms 122, 124, 131, and 134. In fact Adam Clarke wrote, "The author of these fifteen Psalms is not known; and most probably they were not the work of one person. They have been attributed to David, to Solomon, to Ezra, to Haggai, to Zechariah, and to Malachi,

without any positive evidence. They are, however, excellent in their kind, and written with much elegance; containing strong and nervous sentiments of the most exalted piety, expressed with great felicity of language in a few words.” It is probably enough to take them simply as suited to the ‘ascent’ to Jerusalem for worship: <<*So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt’>> (1 Kings 12:28), <<To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord>> (Psalm 122:4), and: <<Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year by year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths>> (Zechariah 14:16), even if they were not originally composed for that purpose.*

Psalm 120 is an individual lament, sung by someone living away from Israel; his distress concerns the way that deceitful people are stirring up war, while the psalmist prefers peace. It is possible that the psalm originated during the exile, when God told his dispersed people to seek the welfare or peace, Hebrew shalom, of the city to which they were sent: <<*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare>> (Jeremiah 29:7). Because the Gentile lands of Meshech and Kedar are so far apart, some have suggested that ‘I’ in this psalm is the Jewish people personified, but this is unnecessary. Worship in Jerusalem, both for the singer and for the Gentiles, is the remedy for this violence: <<Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more>> (Isaiah 2:3-4).*

Psalm 120:1-2 - I Called to the Lord, and He Answered Me.

The psalm opens by remembering: there have been times of distress in the past, and each time the singer called to the Lord, he answered him with rescue. This now provides encouragement to pray, and v.2 explains the specific cause of distress: people with lying lips and a deceitful tongue.

- 1 In my distress I cry to the Lord,
that he may answer me:
- 2 ‘Deliver me, O Lord,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.’

Psalm 120:1-2

In my distress I cry to the Lord. The people of God often find themselves in distress. They have a refuge in their distress; they can do as the psalmist did when he cried to the Lord. They can share the singer's testimony, and he may answer me. The word-pair cry answered expresses the prayer situation well: the believer calls out and expects God to answer; this confirmed elsewhere in Psalms 3:4, 4:1, 17:6, 20:9, 27:7, 86:7, 91:15, 99:6, 102:2, 118:5, 119:145 and 138:3; Isaiah 58:9 and 65:24; Jeremiah 33:3 and Zechariah 13:9.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "It is of little use to appeal to our fellows on the matter of slander, for the more we stir in it the more it spreads; it is of no avail to appeal to the honour of the slanderers, for they have none, and the most piteous demands for justice will only increase their malignity and encourage them to fresh insult."

That he may answer me is often translated as 'he heard me.' It is sung in a positive way for the singer expects God to provide the answer to the persecuted singer's predicament.

Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips. The psalmist described the nature of his distress – evil words spoken against him from lying lips and a deceitful tongue. There was some comfort in this cry, knowing that the evil that was spoken against the singer was not true. It was spoken with lying lips and with a deceitful tongue. The lies the soul needs deliverance from are not only the lies said about an individual, but also the lies said to them: lies about God, lies about the church, lies about the individual, lies about life, identity, purpose, and happiness. From these lies, the psalmist cries, "deliver my soul, O Lord."

Psalm 120:3-4 - The Liar Deserves the Warrior's Sharp Arrows.

The psalm now addresses the person who is causing the trouble, the one with the deceitful tongue. Such a person only courts God's judgement, of which the sharp arrows and glowing coals are emblems: <<*If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts*>> (Psalm 7:12-13), <<*On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup*>> (Psalm 11:6), and: <<*Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!*>> (Psalm 140:10).

- ³ What shall be given to you?
And what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?
- ⁴ A warrior's sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!

Psalm 120:3-4

What shall be given to you? The psalmist shifted from his prayer to God to speak to the false tongue of those who caused him distress. He warned those lying lips of their destiny, of what will happen to them.

A warrior's sharp arrows. The false tongue of the singer's enemies would soon know sharp arrows. They had cast out lies like dangerous missiles, and now the sharp arrows of judgement would come against them. In light of the judgement described in these verses, it is worth remembering that a false tongue is likened to a sharp razor in Psalm 52:2, to a sharp sword in Psalm 57:4, and to sharp arrows in Proverbs 25:18.

The wood of the broom tree can be used to make excellent charcoal, which becomes a hot fire and retains its heat for a long time.

Clarke suggested that the picture here is of flaming arrows or fiery darts that Paul referred to in Ephesians 6:16, "Fiery arrows, or arrows wrapped about with inflamed combustibles, were formerly used in sieges to set the places on fire." And Kidner observed, "The liar, wounding though his weapons are, will be destroyed with far more potent shafts than lies: God's arrows of truth and coals of judgement."

Psalm 120:5-7 - Woe to Me that I Dwell among the Warlike.

The psalmist then reflected on the larger situation, i.e. that the people among whom he dwells are Gentiles, who do not have the advantage of the influence of God's word: this is why they hate peace. The ideal Israelite exile is for peace, seeking it for the city in which he is exiled. As a Song of Ascents, this psalm invites the people to suppose that Jerusalem's influence is the ultimate answer to this readiness for war.

⁵ Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech,
that I must live among the tents of Kedar.

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

Psalm 120:5-6

I am an alien means to live as a resident alien, not as a native-born citizen.

Meshech is first found as a son of Japheth in Genesis 10:2 and repeated in 1 Chronicles 1:5. In Ezekiel's time the names signified a geographical region, perhaps peopled by descendants of Meshech. Meshech refers to a people known in Greek literature as the Moschoi, who settled in an area on the southeast edge of the Black Sea, i.e. the north eastern part of modern Turkey. Kedar was a people dwelling in the Arabian desert. Between the eighth and fourth centuries BC they

were the most powerful northern Arabian Bedouin tribe. Since it is unlikely that one person would live in two places so far apart, some have suggested that the psalm's speaker 'I' is a personification of Israel. This is possible, but it is probably simpler to see these two names as summarising the Gentile world into which God's people have been dispersed.

Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. The psalmist ached that he lived among the ungodly, distant from Israel and its people. He longed for God's *shalom*, his peace; his lying lips enemies hated God's *shalom*. This makes Psalm 120 a fitting start to the Songs of Ascents. As the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem began, he was mindful of the weariness endured living apart from the supportive community of God's people. The psalmist needed this trip to Jerusalem at festival time and the larger community of the people of God.

The expression peace, the Hebrew word *shalom*, has a much richer connotation than the English word does, since it conveys, not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil, but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of a right relationship with God, and, as a result, the idea that 'all is well' in one's life. This may be manifested most clearly amid persecution and tribulation. It is a gift given by Jesus to his followers: <<*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid*>> (John 14:27).

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

Psalm 120:7

I am for peace. He loved and longed for God's peace, his *shalom*. Spurgeon added, "Properly, 'I am peace'; desirous of peace, peaceful, forbearing, in fact, peace itself."

But when I speak, they are for war. The psalmist sought to speak words of peace and goodness, to represent and promote those values in his own community. Yet every time he did, the response was hostile, characteristic of those who are for war. At least for a while, he needed better company – and would find it among the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem and who shared in these Songs of Ascents.

The psalmist's attitude was in keeping with the NT: <<*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you*>> (2 Corinthians 13:11), and: <<*Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*>> (Hebrews 12:14). The nations were likened to the prophecy: <<*But you rise up against my people as an enemy; you strip the robe from the peaceful, from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war*>> (Micah 2:8).