

# Psalms & Psalm 120

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Littlebourne - 1st May 2022 - Psalm 120

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## Introduction to Psalms

- Perhaps no book of the Bible so popular.
- The longest book, in terms of number of chapters
- The smallest chapter and the longest chapters of the Bible are in the Psalms. Psalm 119 is longer than 30 other entire books of the Bible.
- The most quoted Old Testament Book in the New Testament. Psalm 110:1 the most quoted verse.  
97 of the 150 Psalms are quoted in the New Testament.

## Psalms are Musical

- Israel's Song book. Like our blue SoF books, but compiled for Israel's worship.
- The hebrew name is tehillim - meaning 'praise', or 'to make a jubilant sound'
- The name 'Psalms' is from a greek word meaning 'the plucking of strings'.
- Set to music - the Psalms are designed to be sung.
- We don't have the tunes, but we have the words. Music is servant to the word.

## Why is Christianity musical?

Why is it that Christianity is a religion that is so in love with music? No meeting of Christians is complete without some musical element, particularly sung worship.

Contrast this with other religions - think of the music you get in Buddhism for instance, which consists mostly of repetitive chanting. What about Islam, where the more serious and hard-line the religion gets, the more suspicious it is of music, to the extent that it is banned in Islamic countries.

What accounts for this? I think it's something about our conception of God that leads us to sing and others to drone - it's because God is Trinity, because God is diversity of persons, unity of nature, that God is three complementary persons, united, that we enjoy music so much. God is harmony - our favourite music tends to be that which most reflects God, music that has several parts in harmony with each other.

Now if your conception of God is that he is eternally 'one', an atomic God, an eternal monotony, then you will chafe against music the more like that God you become. A serious Buddhist tries to eliminate distinctions, leading to monotonous 'music'. But the more we become Christ-like, the more we enjoy worshipping Him with music.

Our God is not eternally monotonous, he is an eternal harmony. He creates out of love, to bring us into His beauty and harmony. We are musical, because we are made in His image. His Son is the firstborn of many brothers, these brothers being welcomed into harmony with Him.

Hebrews 2:12 (quoting Psalm 22:22!) tells us about Jesus:

*"I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise."*

Our eternal purpose is to be lead by Jesus in praise of God - no wonder we so like music and no wonder Christianity in particular has this love of music that penetrates all that we do.

## Origins of the Psalms

- Most books of the Bible have one human author, some, like Proverbs have several. The Psalms has at least 7 named authors.
- Who wrote them? David (73), Asaph (10) and others. Even Moses (Psalm 90). Many Psalms are anonymous.
- A 1000 year project
  - Earliest, Psalm 90, written by Moses, around 1400BC
  - The majority composed around 1000BC, the reign of King David
  - Latest, Psalm 126, around 430BC
- Compiled over 700 years.
  - 5 Books, sequentially compiled.
  - that mirror the books of the Pentateuch
    - Book 1, Genesis, lots of content about creation, sin and redemption

- Book 2, Exodus, focussing on Israel's ruin and redemption
- Book 3, Leviticus, lots about the Temple and holiness
- Book 4, Numbers, with Psalms about the wilderness and longings for the promised land. It has the recurring theme of God's kingdom.
- Book 5, Deuteronomy, focusing on God's law, just as Deuteronomy focuses on the second giving of the law to the Israelites.

## Content

- A book of great contrasts - from epic highs to deepest depths, from longest chapter to shortest. Every emotion is covered, every situation can be spoken to.

Spurgeon says:

*Whenever you look into David's Psalms, you will somewhere or other see yourself. You never get into a corner, but you find David in that corner. It think that I was never so low that I could not find that David was lower; and I never climbed so high that I could not find that David was up above me.*

- A host of types of Psalms
  - Thanksgiving
  - Praise
  - Kingship - Psalms about David's throne, God's throne, Messianic psalms
  - Trust
  - Salvation
  - Wisdom or Didactic
  - Imprecatory
 

Maybe those most jarring.

Psalms that call on God to show His wrath against His enemies, show His justice and righteousness.

All but two of the imprecatory psalms are authored by David, Israel's king and protector - he calls upon God for protection and justice.
  - Lament
 

Over 60 of the Psalms are laments. The author of the Psalm opens their heart honestly to God. Their sadness, hurt, pain, fear, even anger is brought to God. Most of these lament psalms end in a turn to God with confidence in His help.

## What is a song of ascents?

The Psalms we're looking at all have this title: 'A Song of Ascents'.

3/4 of the Psalms have these titles at the top, that denote various things. Some tell us the author, some musical instructions, some tell us the circumstances of the writing of the Psalm.

We don't know exactly what 'A Song of Ascents' or a 'Song of Degrees' denotes. There are a few theories:

- Some have theorised that it's related to a musical theme or pattern, an ascending of some musical sort.
- Some think that these 15 Psalms are for the 15 steps up from the lower court to the upper court in the temple, that the levites would sing these Psalms, one per step, as they ascended.
- Some say, and this is the most popular view, that these are songs used for pilgrimage - as people would 'ascend' to Jerusalem and the Temple (remember the temple was built on a hilltop).

Four of these Psalms are authored by David, one by Solomon, the rest are anonymous. They're all very short.

We find these Psalms in Book 5, compiled most probably in the post-exile days of Ezra. As mentioned, Book 5 has a strong focus on the sufficiency of God's word.

There's a bit of a progression - Psalm 120 begins with one far from God's people, at the end we have Psalms 133 and 134 - 'How good for brothers to dwell in unity' and 'come bless the Lord in the house of the Lord'.

## Psalm 120

*A song of ascents.*

*1 I call on the Lord in my distress,  
and he answers me.*

*2 Save me, Lord,  
from lying lips  
and from deceitful tongues.*

*3 What will he do to you,  
and what more besides,  
you deceitful tongue?*

*4 He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows,  
with burning coals of the broom bush.*

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

*6 Too long have I lived  
among those who hate peace.*

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

Let's start by thinking about who wrote this. There's a tradition that this was written by David, when Deog went to Saul about him and the priests. There are similarities to Psalm 52, which is titled as being about this occasion. The truth is, we don't know exactly who wrote this, but we have clues about the circumstances.

This is someone who is faithful to God - one who brings his distress to God and is answered. This is someone that is dwelling amongst bad people. Meshech and Kedar are both places very far from Israel, places inhabited by pagans. These are also two places very far from each other - Meshech is in Asia Minor, Kedar in Arabia, so it's not clear that the writer was necessarily geographically far from Israel, or that he was in these particular places, but that he was far from his people either literally or in feeling - he was surrounded by those that are not in communion with God. He's surrounded by those that lie, that deceive.

## v1-2

*1 I call on the Lord in my distress,  
and he answers me.*

*2 Save me, Lord,  
from lying lips  
and from deceitful tongues.*

This author brings his lament to God. He calls upon God to save him from lying lips, from deceitful tongues, and God answers him.

This is a familiar theme in the Psalms. For example Psalm 18 (verse 6), David says:

*6 In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.*

How does God answer?

v3-4

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

The fate of a deceitful tongue. It says what will 'he' do to the deceitful tongue - this is what will God do to those that live by lies. God's punishment pierces even from a distance - those that distance themselves from God's law can't escape his justice. The broom tree, or other translations say Juniper, burns hot and for a long time - this is not fleeting punishment, but lasting.

v5-7

*5 Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek,  
that I live among the tents of Kedar!  
6 Too long have I lived  
among those who hate peace.  
7 I am for peace;  
but when I speak, they are for war.*

Woe is me, says the psalmist, because he is forced to live among those that are not like him. If our author was David, we know he didn't live anywhere near Mesech or Kedar - but he did dwell among some bad people at times. Our author is using this language to describe the sort of environment he is in, rather than the exact location. Other translations say that he 'sojourns in Mesech', he is like a stranger in a foreign land, anxious for home - too long has he been in this state.

The last verse says 'I am for peace'. Other translations render it more closely just 'I am peace' or simply 'I peace'. I think the implication is more than just being *for* peace, but actually working towards peace - giving peace more than lip-service.

But when he speaks, they are for war - those on whom our psalmist lives amongst are against peace, even when peace is spoken of. They are unrepentant.

Just like Christ - He spoke for peace, for good and in response, they crucified Him. Remember as we looked at Christ's willingness to go to the cross, of His prayers in the garden of Gethsemane, that he, to paraphrase the last verse of Romans 12, did not overcome evil with evil, but overcame evil with good.

We started with distress at deception, now we have reached war. What started maybe small has escalated - it's well said that in war, truth is the first casualty, and often it's lies that lead to war. Deception leads to quarrels.

## What should we do?

What then does this Psalm tell us about how we live today?

Let's look at how we should act when we face the deceit of others. What if we are in the position of this writer - lonely, slandered?

## Pray

First, we should pray - verse 1:

*I call on the Lord in my distress,  
and he answers me.*

Other translations render it 'I cried to the Lord'. The Hebrew, and I'm no expert, apparently can be rendered in the past or the present tense - the writer had called upon God before, he calls upon God now too. He was answered then, he is confident he will be answered now.

## Trust God

Second, we should remember that Christ is our saviour. We should trust in Him to deliver us from our enemies and we should trust that His justice will be done. Verses 3-4 tell us what awaits those who practice deceit.

Our society today typically doesn't believe in divine judgement. The usual view about what happens after death is either nothing at all, or some vague paradisaical heaven. Judgement for sin, God's righteous anger at sin, is lost. We see today many cases where earthly justice is sought in ways it might not have been in the past - for example justice for the sins of your ancestors, justice for an offhand comment said many decades ago.

We all have a desire for justice, we all want to believe that when all is said and done, good will prevail. A world devoid of divine justice ends up being one where earthly justice is demanded, and demanded strongly. But for the Christian, we understand that in the end God's righteous justice will be satisfied - all will be made right and good, no sin will be unpunished.

For the Christian, the knowledge that God is righteous and just gives us the ability to be steadfast when we are slandered and lied about. We can leave the matter with the Lord and trust Him to work. God's sharp arrows don't miss.

## **Endure, patiently**

Third, we should endure patiently. Verse 5-7 tell us that our writer sought peace, spoke peace, but this was not met in kind. We should take Jesus' example as He was confronted with many enemies - He had ample power to meet their threats with His own, but He chose graciousness and gentleness even to the end.

Matthew 5:11-12:

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

## **Do not be deceitful ourselves**

Lastly, we should not be deceitful ourselves, for harsh judgement awaits the deceitful tongue. Scripture makes clear that lying is not a good thing. Proverbs 12:22 says:

*Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,  
But those who act faithfully are His delight.*

How do we battle lies - how do we avoid lies and speak the truth ourselves? We find this ability in becoming more Christ-like - Jesus is the truth embodied - he is 'the way, **the truth** and the life'.

It's in becoming more like Him, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that we will be able to speak truth, both with the moral conviction to do so, but also the courage to tell the truth even when it isn't easy.

Satan is the father of lies, Jesus the embodiment of truth. Satan is a powerful deceiver, but more powerful is our defender, Jesus Christ. Our only sure defence against Satan's lies is Jesus, the truth. Indeed all truth is found in Him.