

Psalm 120

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Date: 15 May 2011

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[0 : 00] You could turn in your Bibles to Psalm 120. Psalm 120.

What are we to do when people attack us with words? Most of us have been victims of words, harmful words, and sadly, a lot of us in this room have probably been victim to harmful words from others in this room.

But no doubt from many, many other people in the world as well. What do we do when we get attacked with words? When we get called a name? There are so many ways that we can be hurt. When we have someone publicize something embarrassing about ourselves. We get gossiped about. We get criticized. Now sometimes these are just criticisms.

Sometimes they're partly just criticisms. Sometimes they're completely unjust. We get, many of us get beaten down with negativity and judgment from people over and over again.

[1 : 18] What do we do in these situations? Is it possible to have peace within these situations? Well, to start trying to answer that question, let's think for a moment about what peace is.

Try to take it out of the abstract realm and have it make sense to us. What is peace? There are a lot of ways to look at it. One way would be, think about how you feel when you hear two people sing off-key from each other.

That's not peace. It grates on us, on most of us probably. There's discord when two notes just clash in our ears. That's not peace.

However, conversely, think about when you hear two people harmonize. Two people sing notes in harmony. Perfect blend. That might be a good picture of peace.

Harmony. Think about it in our relationships. Harmony with God. Harmony with people, with our neighbors, like David talked about this morning.

[2 : 25] Harmony within the entire world, among the creatures as well as humans. That picture of harmony, global harmony, would be a good picture of ultimate peace.

When all the notes of existence are singing together in harmony, in harmony with their creator. I think that captures something about what peace is all about.

Now, the songs of ascent, Psalms 120, which we're going to look at, through 134, there's a block of psalms that are all called, all put together and called songs of ascent.

Those are all pictures of various experiences. Some are pictures of peace. Some are pictures of discord.

Some blend the two. They jump back and forth between peace and discord. Well, Psalm 120 initiates that, I guess you could call it a hymn book if you want, this group of psalms, initiates it with a picture of turmoil, a picture of disharmony, no peace.

[3 : 31] So, as we turn to the psalm, think about that question. Is it possible to have peace in a situation like what the psalmist describes, when words fly like arrows, when we get burned by words?

Now, Psalm 120 is broken up into three stanzas, as you'll note, verses 1 and 2, 3 to 4, and then 5 to 7, which makes for a good three-point sermon. It's nice when the text does it for you.

So, we're going to look at those three stanzas, those three sections. In the first one, I think what we see is a distressed call. In the second one, I think we receive a comforting answer to that call.

And in the third stanza, verses 5 to 7, well, I've titled it, A Frustrating Craving. And we'll get to that in a few moments. So first, let's look at the distressed call.

See what's going on with the psalmist. So first, let's look at the distress. What's actually happening? And then after that, we'll look at what he calls out. What is he actually going through?

[4 : 44] Well, he says, I call on the Lord in my distress. And he answers me, Save me, O Lord, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. Now, I didn't plan on having a text and a sermon that

worked so well with what David preached this morning.

But in God's providence, that's worked out. So hopefully this will work out, maybe flesh out some of the things that he talked about this morning. Because it's about lying lips, deceitful tongues that attack somebody, attack the psalmist.

But are these things really that bad? Think about it. Are words really that bad? You've heard the phrase, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Is that actually true? The biblical picture of words is that they're incredibly creative. They're incredibly powerful and incredibly destructive when used wrongly.

For instance, Psalm 52. I'll give a few examples of how the Bible, the Psalms in particular, talk about words. Psalm 52, verse 2.

[5 : 50] Your tongue plots destruction like a sharp razor. You worker of deceit. A sharp razor. Psalm 64, verse 4.

They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows. Or Proverbs 16, 27. A scoundrel plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire.

James captures it well in his letter in James 3, 6. The tongue also is like a fire. A world of evil among the parts of the body.

It corrupts the whole person. Sets the whole course of his life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. In light of how the Bible thinks about words, sticks and stones may break my bones.

That's true, but will words actually never hurt? Spurgeon, Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher in the 1800s, he captures this really well. Lips are soft, he says, but when they are lying lips, they suck away the life of character and are as murderous as razors.

[7 : 03] The tongue is more destructive than fires. Its scandals spread with greater rapidity. They consume that which other fires cannot touch and they are less easily quenched.

Now some of you might recognize this kind of damage that words can bring. Some of you might recognize it because you have been perpetrators of this type of damage on other people.

Through gossip, for instance, sowing seeds that are almost impossible to undo. Seeds of negativity towards somebody else in the mind of another. Cutting somebody down, perhaps your child or your spouse, your employee.

So some of you might know the pain of words from being the fire, the archer of the arrows. But others of you, probably most of you in this room, will know the pain of a razor, of a burn, because you've been burned.

You've been cut by words. That's the psalmist's experience right here. His distress. What does he do?

[8 : 11] What does he call? What does he call out? Does he call out back at the perpetrator? Does he bite back? Lash back with his tongue? Insult the person back?

Start gossiping about that person to others about that person who's just insulted him? Is that what the psalmist does? Now, most of you have probably experienced this as well.

When you do lash back or start gossiping about somebody who has hurt you, well, it really just turns you into a whetstone. It sharpens the arrows that they then send back to you.

Or it adds fuel to the fire. It doesn't help. It makes things worse, usually. Well, the psalmist says, I call to the Lord in my distress.

It's actually the very first words of the psalm is, to the Lord. A very heavy emphasis on the Lord is the one that I talk to when I am attacked by words.

[9 : 13] And what he says is found in verse 2. You see, verse 1 says, I call to the Lord in my distress and he answers me. Verse 2 gives the content of the call out.

Verses 3 to 4 will actually give the content of the answer, I think. But what does he say? What does he actually call out? Save me, O Lord, from lying lips. Save me.

That's a great translation. It's sort of, literally, the words that the psalmist uses are, snatch me out of this. Pluck me out. Snatch me away.

He's crying out to be taken out of the situation where arrows of words are flying and flames are being kindled under him. Take me out of this, Lord. In some ways, this is quite similar to what Paul cries out in 2 Corinthians 12.

You'll probably recall that Paul, it wasn't necessarily words that were attacking him, but he was experiencing something very painful that he calls a thorn in his flesh and he says, I plead with the Lord.

[10:17] I plead with him three times. Take this away from me. The psalmist says that after he calls to the Lord, he does get an answer.

Paul also got an answer. When he says, please take this away from me, Lord, he got an answer. His answer was, no. My grace is sufficient for you.

He didn't actually, the Lord didn't actually take Paul's problem or difficulty away, but he sustained him with grace in the situation. And that's, I think, what we're going to see in this psalm as well. The Lord does answer him. Let's turn to that answer now. Verses three to four. A comforting answer. So let's look first at what the answer is and then we'll look at how exactly that's comforting to the psalmist.

The answer is verse three to four. What will he do to you and what more besides, O deceitful tongue? He, meaning God, he will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree.

[11:28] Now I think that's the psalmist's answer that he received from the Lord. It fits the pattern of these first two stanzas. But what kind of answer is that?

It's about justice. That's certain. Remember what words are like. They're arrows. They're a fire.

That's the way so many psalms describe words, deceitful words.

And what does he say right here is that God will give you an arrow. He will give you flames. In other words, God will punish you and he'll make the punishment fit the crime.

Now this is captured really well, more fully in Psalm 64. It's the same idea. Psalm 64, I'll read to you verses three to seven. Again there, David is being attacked by words and he says this, they aim their words like deadly arrows and shoot from ambush at the innocent man.

But, God will shoot them with arrows. He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin. So God's answer to this pain-filled cry is that he will turn their harmful words against them.

[12:46] That he'll right the wrongs. Those who are hurting you and your loved ones will actually be held accountable by God. Now, that's the answer that the psalmist receives but how exactly is that comforting?

It's about God's justice but is that comforting? Particularly for Christians. This is something that many of you probably have already asked in your mind.

Are Christians supposed to be comforted? by words like that. That knowing that our troublers will be troubled by God. Is that something a Christian is supposed to think?

Some might say that's just an Old Testament theme. An eye for an eye for example. But that has absolutely no place in a Christian's worldview. Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians however.

2 Thessalonians chapter 1. And I want you to turn with me to this one so that we all see it with our own eyes. 2 Thessalonians chapter 1.

[13:55] I'll read verse 6. It's on page 1189 in the Pew Bibles if you have those. 2 Thessalonians 1.6. Paul says to the Christian church, God is just.

He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you as well as give relief to you who are troubled. Well, that's in the New Testament.

And this is something that Paul offers to people who are being troubled. And he offers it to them as comfort. God is just. And he will trouble those who are troubling you. It's all summarized by Paul under the category of justice.

God is just. That is something that Christians are supposed to delight in. That God is just. We want sins to be dealt with. We want injustices to be answered.

We don't actually want a God who will look at injustice, look at abuse, and not do anything about it. Just sweep it under the carpet and not deal with it. We don't want a God like that.

[15:05] That's not justice. So this is Christian comfort. It is as if in your moment of hurt, think about those moments when you have been hurt by words.

In those moments, and in those moments that will come when we each will get hurt again by words, in those moments hear God saying to us, you have been wronged, you have been hurt, you have been attacked, words have been slicing into you, beating you down, burning you.

Don't worry. I am just. I will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. I will punish them with the warrior's sharp arrows, with the burning coals from a broom tree.

Now that might still not satisfy many of you. Because how exactly does this answer of God giving back just retribution on those who hurt us, how exactly does that fit with love your enemies?

Do good to those who persecute you. Forgive their debts. How exactly do these fit together? Love your enemies. I'm going to break the answer up into three parts.

[16 : 26] The answer to that question, think first for a moment about our responsibility in these situations, then think about God's responsibility in these situations of pain.

And then I'll give you one third thing to keep in mind about God's justice. So how does a Christian love their enemies and yet be comforted by words of this type of justice?

What are our responsibilities when we're hurt? Well, first from this psalm, long for justice. Want God to silence abusers.

Want God to stop gossipers. Desire that he would publicize lies as lies. So crave justice in those moments.

Long for it. At the same time, forgive your debtors. Forgive the person who's doing this to you. Simultaneously with wanting God to be just.

[17 : 25] Forgive your debtors. Don't hold their sin against them. That's often the language of the Bible of forgiveness is let go. Don't hold it against them. Release it.

At the same time, love your enemy as they are attacking you with their words. Love them, meaning do good to them. I know this is a challenge. Love your enemies while longing for justice and forgiving your debtors and know that God will right this.

The just God is our refuge when we are hurt. Those are our responsibilities. They're complex. They're certainly challenging. Those are ours.

What is God's responsibility when people are lying or hurting you with words? And think also about the times when you hurt others with words. God's responsibilities will ask the question, in this psalm, verses 3 to 4, who is shooting the arrows or lighting the fire of the broom tree.

It's not us. It's not the psalmist who is doing this, seeking his own revenge, his own retribution, his own justice. It's not him doing this. It's God. This is God's responsibility.

[18 : 41] Read Romans 12. I'll go ahead and turn to it and read it for you. Romans 12, verses 18 to 21. Romans 12, 18 to 21.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends. Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath.

For it is written, it is mine to avenge, says the Lord. I will repay. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink. And in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. That's quite ironic. It's God's responsibility to see that justice is done, not ours.

Our responsibility is to do good to those even who are hurting us. Now the third thought in this answer of how do Christians deal with passages like this that seem to be craving the downfall of their enemies.

[19 : 53] We looked at our responsibilities, we looked at God's responsibilities. The last thing to keep in mind is God's justice. He can give justice in a few different ways.

He can punish the perpetrator for their sins, which is what we see happening in this psalm, or what we see prayed for in this psalm. He can do that, and that is good, and that is just.

He can also, however, punish Jesus for that perpetrator's sins. That's what Jesus came to do, was to take the justice, the punishment for perpetrator's sins.

And that is just. God can punish his son, his willing son, for their sins and convert their heart so that they stop doing this stuff. And that's God's justice as well.

So keep in mind these two ways. God is just. He will deal with their sin. Either punish them for it, or punish his willing son and save them.

[20 : 59] And that is just. God did the latter for you. I'm trusting most of you, I'm sure that most of you are Christians, and that's exactly what God did for you.

He took your punishment. The arrows and the fire that were in your direction because of your words, your actions, your thoughts. Jesus took those arrows and that fire.

So to bring this part, this comforting answer to a close, and then I'll bring up one more thing. The last section. Delight in God's justice.

Jesus. However it happens, especially the justice of Calvary, because that's where Jesus was pierced for his enemies, including us.

All the while, you remember, being mocked and abused by deceitful words. Crave God's justice, especially of Calvary. But it's up to God to decide how, when, and where, to exact justice on those

who hurt people.

[22 : 12] He will decide rightly, we should take comfort in that fact. That's the comforting answer. So we've seen verses 1 and 2, the call, the distressed call.

We've seen in verses 3 to 4, the comforting answer. Verses 5 to 7, I've called a frustrating craving. It's hard to know exactly how to summarize that last stanza.

But what we see in that stanza is that distress is not the only emotion the psalmist is experiencing. He says, verses 5 to 7, Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar. Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace, but when I speak, they are for war. Do you sense the frustration? He's frustrated by his situation, and that comes after he has received this answer for his call.

And in fact, the psalm ends abruptly with that note of frustration. The situation's not good despite that answer. He says, Woe to me is feeling of being overwhelmed by a seemingly hopeless situation.

[23 : 30] Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar. What does that mean exactly? Very briefly, Meshech was in the far north above Israel.

It's in what we would call Turkey today, far northwest of Israel. Kedar was in the south below Israel. It's in Arabia, what we would call Arabia today. These are completely opposite directions.

We shouldn't take it literal what he's saying here, that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar. He doesn't live in both of these places simultaneously.

He seems to be doing what the Bible does often, when it uses very, very significant places that were known for something to convey a message. Meshech and Kedar were not only polar extremes from Israel, as if the psalmist is saying, I can go north, I can go south, I can't get away from these lying lips, these people who hate peace, no matter where I go.

But also, Kedar down here and Meshech were known for being very hostile, very violent people. There are a lot of records in the ancient world, not only in the Bible, also out with the Bible, about the violence and the turmoil of these two places in particular.

[24 : 50] They're known for being violent, for hating peace, you could say. In a sense, he is basically just saying, everywhere is hostile, everywhere I turn. And some of you can probably empathize a bit with that experience.

I just want to be their friend. And even if not their friend, I just want to be civil with them. But no matter what I do, it seems like they just want to pick a fight. They won't let me have peace. It's a very frustrating situation to be in, and many of you, I'm sure, have experienced that in life. That was the frustration that he's experiencing.

The situation's not better. Apparently, the hurtful words do not stop, even after he's received the answer from the Lord, that God will bring justice.

The hurtful words don't stop. The psalm ends abruptly and leaves us with this feeling of frustration. It's as if this song is moving on and it hits two discordant notes loudly, bang, and it just lets it reverberate.

[26 : 00] And you feel the discord. So I have two brief points of application from what the psalmist is saying in this third stanza and how he says it.

one is that God, who inspired this song, he inspired it in a way that doesn't sugarcoat reality.

He leaves you feeling the trouble, the frustration, the difficulty. God inspired that. We can deduce that he understands. God knows your frustration in these situations.

Well, in fact, think about it. How much do his creatures lie about him? How much do his creatures constantly use deceitful tongues against God? Say things that are just not true, misrepresent God. God knows the feeling of these types of words. And in fact, Jesus, God's Son, knows as a human also, as well as God.

[27 : 12] He knows as a human the experience of slicing words that shoot like arrows, of words that burn you. He experienced them in an intensity.

So for that point, I could say to you that Jesus can empathize with you in your pain when you experience this. And that would be absolutely true.

Jesus can empathize with you in that pain. But I'm going to flip that around because that's also very significant. When you are experiencing these difficulties, particularly with words, you can finally understand a little bit better what Jesus went through for you.

Jesus took those words so that he would go to the cross, so that he would take your sins and help you be at peace with his Father.

Jesus took that abuse so that you could be at peace with his Father. And in those moments, keep that in mind. The situation might not get better now, but you can empathize better with your Lord.

[28 : 25] There is a true type of peace, a true peace that doesn't come from a changed situation when God lets us remain in this pain.

There's a true peace that comes even in those moments. And this Christ gives us through his Spirit. But we will not experience full peace in this situation.

That was the question we started with. Is it possible to experience peace when we're being attacked by words? And I said, the psalm gives sort of two answers. Yes, there's a true peace that you can.

There is a comforting answer within the situation, but it's not a full peace. This psalm leaves us with a desperation for when the Lord Jesus comes back.

Because that's the only time that true, full peace can actually be had. The psalm should have us crave the Lord Jesus coming back.

[29 : 28] Now we're going to sing the song that comes just after Psalm 120. Psalm 121.

Let me read it to you. It follows on quite well, especially as we contemplate the Lord's presence in these situations. Psalm 121.

So if you go ahead and turn there in the Sing Psalms page, oh I didn't write the right page. Sing Psalms 121. Page 168.

We're going to sing to the tune Truen. Let me read this psalm to you so you can hopefully experience its words even more clearly as we sing it.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where am I to look for my aid? My help comes from the Lord by whom earth and heaven were made. Your foot he will not leave to slide.

[30 : 35] His watch over you he will keep. The Lord over Israel keeps watch and he will not slumber or sleep. The Lord will keep watch over you. Your shade from the heat and the light.

The sun will not harm you by day. The moon will not harm you by night. The Lord will protect you from harm. Your life he will ever defend. He'll guard every step that you take both now and for days without end.

Please stand and praise the Lord. for 1918 to Kazakhstan, to start and,