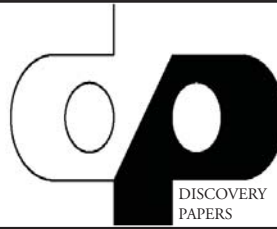


PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

SERIES: ASCEND



Catalog No. 20130602
Psalm 120
1st Message
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June 2, 2013

When I was growing up no one in my family made much music. No one played an instrument or sang in a choir. There was one exception to our non-musicality, however—the summer vacation family car trip. In the days before iPads and other personal entertainment devices my father would attempt to distract his four children by getting us to sing songs like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” or “O Susanna” to keep us under control. And I learned a simple lesson: travel and music go together.

We have just finished a sermon series, a grand nine-month tour through the whole Bible. This message begins another sermonic expedition—though on a much smaller scale. And on the journey this summer there will be songs. We will be studying Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascents. This collection of psalms was used by Israelite pilgrims who would ‘go up to Jerusalem’ three times each year to worship. The travelers who were drawing near to God would be brought together as a community by singing and praying these texts.

And we are going to borrow the pilgrim imagery, spending the summer seeking the presence of God together and giving attention to these ancient songs. The lyrics include joy, danger, wistfulness, and surprise as we shall see. But the journey begins with a cry for help, Psalm 120:1, “I call on the Lord in my distress and he answers me.”

The distress in view here is of a particular type. It is not due to illness, bondage, or poverty; not family pressures or old age; not storms or floods; not impending death or economic insecurity. The cry of distress at the beginning of this collection stems from an ethical crisis. There are two moral dangers in particular, lies and violence/war. “Save me, O LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. . . . Woe to me. . . . I have lived among those who hate peace.” Lets look at these concerns in the context of the whole psalm and consider why the journey begins with this cry for help.

Psalm 120:

**¹I call on the LORD in my distress
and he answers me.
²Save me, O LORD,
from lying lips**

and from deceitful tongues.

**³What will he do to you
and what more besides,
O, deceitful tongue?
⁴He will punish you with a warrior’s sharp arrows,
with the burning coals of the broom tree.
⁵Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech,
that I live among the tents of Kedar.
⁶Too long I have lived
among those who hate peace.
⁷I am a man of peace.
but when I speak, they are for war.**

The journey toward God begins with stepping away from the ways of the world, away ‘from lying lips and from deceitful tongues.’ The sad story of human sin began when Adam and Eve were seduced by a lie that doomed us all to die. Lies have been a scourge and a plague, devouring men and women ever since.

And we participate. We denounce lies and yet become liars ourselves. There’s a story about a little girl in Sunday school who was learning the Ten Commandments and was asked a question about bearing false witness. She thought for a while, and then said, “A lie is an abomination to God and a very present help in time of trouble.” Her insight strikes home, doesn’t it?

What are some ways in which lies do their destructive work? Observe first the occasions when a particular, hurtful lie is applied directly to us; when we are lied to or are lied about.

It is not uncommon to hear news stories of young people who kill themselves because they have been abusively slandered online and feel that nothing can undo their humiliation. Lies in the workplace can destroy a career.

It is also devastating when we are lied to, especially by people we care about. Consider the son who discovers that the father he admired and emulated turns out to be a fraud. Or the husband who discovers that his wife’s words of love have long been a lie.

Carole King was given a lifetime achievement award for song writing recently. When asked about which of her songs is the favorite of her fans she said that one stands well above the others: *You've Got a Friend*. "Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall; all you got to do is call and I'll be there." We all long to have deep friendships with folks we can count on. It is devastating when such 'friends' prove false.

Particular lies spread one kind of pain, but the scourge of 'lying lips' grows larger. Despair expands in an environment where manipulators are admired and the honest person is always a chump; in a culture where wearing masks is a measure of sophistication and a seared conscience is a sign of maturity. When truth is sacrificed everything is for sale and it is impossible to know the value of anything.

You've probably seen the commercials for one of the phone services in which a guy in a suit sits on the floor talking to children. He'll ask a question like: What's better; big or small? What's better; more or less? What's better; doing two things at once or only one thing? What's better; fast or slow? And, sadly, the kids know the 'correct' answer. Kids in kindergarten can tell you what is admired in the world they live in: the biggest, the fastest, the most. Multi-taskers are heroes. But the questions themselves are deceptive. It is not possible to know what is best without knowing what is being assessed. Do we value human experience and choose a phone service using the same measurement?

There are better questions to ask children (and adults). Which is better for our souls: high status or godly character? To look good or be good? Whom should we serve: God or money?

Finally, the worst accomplishment of the lying tongue is persuading us to join in the deception. It's not just advertisers and celebrities and media and politicians who demean the culture with lies. Too often the church is no different from any other group with stuff to sell, or dark deeds to cover up. Notice verse 3, "What will he do to you? And what more besides, oh deceitful tongue?" The psalmist addresses a deceitful tongue that is not fixed in place. It could be found in any mouth, including his own.

Verses 3 and 4 describes the ways God intervenes, "O, deceitful tongue? He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with the burning coals of the broom tree."

The sharp arrow is a figure that's used elsewhere in Scripture for the lie itself; the penetrating, hurtful, stabbing lie. And we read, 'He will punish you, liar, with the sharp arrow that you use to inflict pain.' The stabbing weapon

will be turned on you. James says that evil speech can set a landscape on fire (James 3:5-6) and in Psalm 120:4 we see that the arsonist is burned in his own blaze. Lies create their own consequences.

Before we move on to verse 5, we should recall the cry for help with which this psalm began. We can observe the wickedness of lies and make note of their consequences but we cannot save ourselves from the world's deceptions or our own. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Only God can save us.

The last three verses of this psalm move on from lies to speak of their frequent companion: violence and war. "I have lived among those who hate peace. . . . they are for war."

As an aside, we should note that questions of war and peace can be complicated. Psalm 120 is not concerned with issues of legitimate national defense or the role of police and judges and the punishment of wrongdoers. The author of this text is decrying a devilish delight in violence for its own sake.

Recall what Jesus said about the devil. "He was a murderer from the beginning. When he lies, he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The devil is by nature a destroyer, a murderer. His native language is deception and his passion is to hurt, to defraud, to humiliate, and to ruin.

Meshech and Kedar represent Satan's kind of society—one that is ruthless, bloodthirsty, and cold. The psalmist realizes that he is in danger of not only having such places as his habitation, but of becoming 'at home' there. Apart from God's intervention, our desires and choices will be shaped by the people we live among. How does this process of heart hardening occur?

We might be warned by the story of Lot. Lot began his life's journey in the company of his uncle, Abram. He heard God's word spoken to the patriarch and learned from both Abram's faith and his failures as they lived together in the land of promise. As both men prospered, their flocks became so large they could no longer inhabit the same territory so they decided to part ways. Lot was given first choice of where to locate and he chose 'the well-watered' Jordan valley with this result: "Abram lived in the land of Canaan while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom" (Genesis 13:12). Like the pilgrim in Psalm 120, Lot placed himself in the proximity of a violent society hoping to prosper

without losing his faith. In Genesis 14, there is a story of raid and rescue that includes this observation: “They also carried off Abram’s nephew Lot and his possessions since he was living in Sodom” (Genesis 14:12). Lot had given up life as a sojourner with ‘tents near Sodom.’ At this point he had become an inhabitant of a relentlessly cruel and violent city.

Some time later we discover: “Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city” (Genesis 19:1). This is a phrase which designates Lot as a man of status—someone who was admired in a city of cutthroats. And in the destruction that will soon be visited on Sodom, Lot loses everything (including his wife), barely escaping with his life. Seeing him in the city gates we realize that, at this point, Lot had almost nothing in common with Abram and was little different from his wretched neighbors. Lot’s downfall occurred incrementally, compromise made in stages, so that he could fool himself.

Returning to our text, we again observe the pilgrim—“Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar.” But unlike Lot he is aware of his predicament and cries to God for help, beginning a pilgrimage toward Jerusalem.

With Psalm 120 in mind I want to read a New Testament passage that also contains a journey metaphor. Having been warned by Lot’s fate we can be encouraged by the apostle Paul. Philippians 3:7-14:

But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . Not that I have already obtained all this or already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it; but one thing do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

We conclude with three observations of this text in Philippians. First, there is a cost to the journey. We cannot ‘arrive at the goal’ without giving up this world’s pleasures and pay-offs. Determining the ‘gains I now consider loss’

is a process of making both big life altering decisions and smaller ones that present themselves every day. The process involves personal discipline and the likelihood of ridicule.

Second, part way is not enough. ‘I haven’t arrived yet.’ Cleaning up a bit, making some new friends, changing a few bad habits may feel like good progress—often it is. But we have been called to obtain a glorious prize, something much greater than a bit of personal reformation.

And last, Paul is determined to press on. Christ has ‘taken hold of him.’ Pleasing the Lord and finishing the journey are worth every difficulty along the way.

So we leave Meshech and Kedar and begin a journey together. May the songs we sing lead us to life.