

People of Peace Among Peoples of War

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- [0 : 01] Heavenly Father, we come as your people, as the people who make up the beachhead in this hostile world.
- And people who are kingdom outposts in this land of exile. We long for you.
- We long for our homecoming. We come as we are once again because it's in the forgiveness and peace we have in Jesus that we have a taste of home.
- Amen. So cleanse us again, Lord, this evening. Recalibrate us again.
- Align ourselves to your kingdom priorities and purposes. Remind us of the voice of our Lord, our King, Jesus.
- [1 : 34] Speak to us from your word. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray.
- Amen. Let's turn to Psalm 120. Psalm 120.
- Read it out loud for us. A Song of Ascents. In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.
- What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? O warriors' sharp arrows with glowing coals of the broom tree.
- Woe to me that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar. Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.
- [2 : 56] I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war. So we just finished an epic journey through Psalm 119.
- And right on the heels of that poem about God's word, we start another beautiful collection, probably the most famous collection in the Psalter, called the Songs of Ascent.
- The Hebrew, no one really knows what that means precisely. There are several kind of viable, plausible options. The word ascent is a translation of a Hebrew word that sometimes means stairs or steps.
- And it refers to some kind of upward movement. So our first option is that it's based on the early Jewish rabbinical tradition, because Ezekiel chapter 40, verse 26, describes seven steps up toward the temple.
- And then Ezekiel 40, same chapter, a few verses later in verse 31, it describes another eight steps leading up to the temple. So if you add them up, it's 15 steps. There's 15 psalms in this collection.
- [4 : 08] So some of the Jewish scholars think that these are psalms that they recited as they ascended to the temple at each step. So that's one option. It's suggestive, but I think it's a little too creative of a hypothetical reconstruction to be true, since scripture never says anywhere that there were 15 steps.
- It's like two sets you added up. And then a second explanation is that a song of a sense, it refers to a poetic technique or device. It's a kind of a terraced structure, almost like a staircase effect.

So where every stanza is tightly tied together thematically, and each stanza provides kind of the footing for the next. So it does, as you're reading each of the psalms in this, it has that kind of an ascending staircase effect.

I do think that has something to do with this title, the collection, but I don't think that's the primary meaning, because whenever a superscription of a psalm uses the word song to describe it, like a song of something, it indicates the psalm's theme, and not its poetic technique or style or type.

So for example, Psalm 30 says, a song of at the dedication of the temples. That's the content, what the psalm has to do with. Or it says in Psalm 45, a song of love.

[5 : 28] Or Psalm 92, a song for the Sabbath. So following that pattern, when it says songs of ascent, a song of ascent, I think it has to do with the theme, the content of the substance of the psalm and not to its style or form.

And so that brings us to the third option. And I think my favorite option is that in Ezra chapter 7, verse 9, Ezra's return from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem, back to Jerusalem, is described using the same word, ascent.

It says, And this fits the consistent theme of all the psalms in this collection, because they all have expressed some kind of longing for Jerusalem and for Mount Zion.

It's the dwelling place of God. And because of the fact that the temple was on a mountain, and also because, for theological reasons, in scripture, you never go down to Jerusalem.

You always go up to Jerusalem. You always go up to the temple. You never go down to Jerusalem. And because God is above, we are below. And in order to come to God, we need to start from a place of humility and lowliness and weakness.

[6 : 42] And so because of that, I think that's probably the primary meaning of this collection, Songs of Ascent. Psalmists are describing that longing and ascent to God's dwelling place.

And in order to reflect that substance, I think they used a poetic style that also ascends. So I think it's probably the last combination of the last two meanings.

So I'm really looking forward to going through the collection. With that aside, let's go right into the psalm, verses 1 to 4.

It first describes praying for God's deliverance. And then in verses 5 to 7, it describes longing for God's dwelling place. And really the main point of this psalm is that as people of peace among peoples of war, we are to live as exiles longing for God's deliverance and dwelling place.

So first, let's talk about praying for God's deliverance and then we'll talk about longing for God's dwelling place. It says in verse 1, In my distress I called to the Lord and He answered me.

[7 : 50] So that first verse has two parts. First, the psalmist's prayer, In my distress I called to the Lord. And then the Lord's answer and He answered me. And then verses 2 to 4 unpack these two parts of verse 1.

So let's, first we find out more about the psalmist's distress in verse 2. Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. So it seems like the psalmist has been a victim of some kind of malicious slander.

Maybe his enemies. And second, we find out about how exactly the Lord answered him during his prayer in verses 2 to 3. So this echoes the phrase deceitful tongue from verse 2.

But who is the one that's addressing the slander here? It's a little ambiguous. Is it the psalmist or is it God who is saying this to the people of deceitful tongue?

So verse 2 is a curse formula that's well attested throughout scripture. So for example, Eli says to Samuel in 1 Samuel 3, verse 17, What was it that God told you?

[9 : 03] Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you. So another example of that is when Jonathan is promising to David that he will for sure let him know if his father Saul is bent on killing him.

And he swears this way in 1 Samuel 20, verse 13, The Lord do so to Jonathan and more also if I do not disclose it to you and send you away that you may go in safety.

So that's kind of the formula. May God do so to me and more if I don't do such and such. Or may God do so to me and more if what I've said is false. And so it's kind of like how a modern person might say, I swear to you on my life that this is true.

That standard curse formula invokes God to punish the false, I guess, swearer and add even more to his punishment. So in light of that background, it seems that the subject of verse 3 is God.

It seems that the slanderer swore that he is telling the truth about the psalmist. He's saying, you know, May God do so to me and more if this psalmist is not this, you know, crook or whatever.

[10 : 20] And he invoked a curse upon himself. But he wasn't telling the truth. He was lying. And so God is now answering the slanderer according to the curse that he brought upon himself.

What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? And God answers the question himself in verse 4. A warrior's sharp arrows with glowing coals of the broom tree.

And then in verse 5, the psalmist laments that he's a soldier and are dwelling in Meshech and among the tents of Kedar. And that he mentions that these people hate peace.

And that even when the psalmist speaks of peace, they are for war. So Meshech and Kedar are actually quite far from each other geographically. So it's not physically possible for the psalmist to be dwelling in both places at the same time.

So he's not being literal but figurative. He's using these Gentile cities symbolically to represent a place of his exile. And interestingly, both Meshech and Kedar are famous for their military power and in particular for their archers.

[11 : 29] So in Isaiah chapter 21, verses 16 to 17, God promises to bring the glory of Kedar to an end, assuring his people that, quote, the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few.

And then similarly in Ezekiel chapter 39, verses 1 to 3, God declares that he will oppose Meshech and drive them out and says this, I will strike your bow from your left hand and will make your arrows drop out of your right hand.

So this context kind of fleshes out what's going on in verse 4. So an unbelieving and hostile people have slandered the psalmist, shooting deadly arrows of slander, deceit, aimed at him.

But God, the divine warrior, has promised that he will answer in kind with a warrior's sharp arrows with glowing coals of the broom tree. The roots and stems of this broom tree were used in ancient days as charcoal because it burned for a while and retained heat for a while.

So it was the ideal weapon of choice for setting things on fire in war. And Psalm 64 is actually a helpful comparison because it describes the wicked in verses 3 to 4 as those who wet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from the ambush at the blameless, shooting at him suddenly and without fear.

[12 : 49] But then later in that same Psalm 64 verse 7, it says, But God shoots his arrow at them. They are wounded suddenly. So I think that's basically what's going on here.

God will give the slanderers a taste of their own medicine. The divine warrior will intervene and rain down his sharp arrows and burning coals on the archers of Meshech and Kedar. And so that's God's answer to the psalmist, prayer for God's deliverance.

And then in verses 5 to 7, we see the psalmist longing for God's dwelling place. Given the hostility and persecution that he experiences, the psalmist longs to be at home with God.

He laments, If you seek to love God, with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength, if you seek his peace in your life and in the world, then you know this unfulfilled longing, living in this world as an exile, as a sojourner.

And like the Israelite exiles longing for Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God, we long for the dwelling place of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. And so 1 Peter 2, verses 11 to 12 says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

[14 : 24] 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. So our situation is similar, even though we live in the fulfilled new covenant era.

The people of this world still speak against us. They still aim their deadly arrows at us. But we are nevertheless to honor God by conducting ourselves honorably and giving them no grounds for their slander.

And as Jesus said to His disciples in John 16, 32 to 33, Behold, the hour is coming. Indeed, it has come when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.

Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world.

In the world we still have tribulation. In the world we still have war. In the world we still have lying lips piercing us. And in the world we still have sin, our sinful flesh to deal with.

[15 : 28] But in Christ we have peace, because He has overcome the world through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And so we were once separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, the strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But then now in Christ Jesus, who once were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace. This is Ephesians 2, 11-16. Who has made us both one, and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

It's in Christ that this war among Jews, between Jews and Gentiles, that's in view here in this Psalm 120, is brought to an end.

It's in Christ that Gentiles and Jews are reconciled, and it's in Christ that we are reconciled to God, because Christ Himself is our peace. And as people of peace among peoples of war, we are to live as exiles longing for God's deliverance and dwelling place.