

Psalm 120

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[0 : 00] Again, our scripture reading today comes from the book of Psalms, Psalm 120. Please stand for the reading of God's word. 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?

A warrior's sharp arrows with glowing coals from the broom tree. Woe to me that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kadar. Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen. Well, good morning.

Welcome to Christ Church Chicago. We're glad you're here with us today. Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, as we now turn our attention to your word, we pray that your spirit would speak.

[1 : 18] For we need your comfort, your peace, and your rest. In Christ's name I pray. Amen. Growing up, if you wanted to listen to music, your options were rather limited.

Spotify didn't exist. iTunes hadn't yet been invented. What we had was the radio. And in Chicago, on the AM dial, WLS was about the only one that played pop music.

That said, it wasn't all that easy to hear your favorite song either. You didn't dial it up on digital or any other way. You waited until the station decided to play your tune.

It would appear, and you'd listen, and it would be gone for the next couple of hours. I suppose that's what made albums best of all.

Albums, for those of you who are not aware, preceded the digital age. Albums preceded the CDs. Albums preceded the eight-track tape that I got in the mid-60s with Arlo Guthrie's Alice's Restaurant or Johnny Cash and all of his black and white glory.

[2 : 37] Albums preceded all of these things. Let me just say a word about the album. An album was cut on vinyl.

Actually, when they recorded it, the needle would take what was the clear and plain vinyl and cut a groove, which then captured the sound.

In other words, it laid down its own track. And thus, we have tracks today. Great albums might have as many as 15 tracks.

You could put a whole album on two sides. You'd spin it on the turntable, and we would sing as we go. I mentioned that by way of introduction to say welcome to our fall series in the scripture.

I want to introduce you to 15 weeks of singing as we go. 15 tracks, actually, that are on one of the great albums of all time.

[3 : 43] You may be familiar that the Psalms as a whole collect 150 songs in its playlist. But within the playlist of the Psalms, there are smaller collections set off by themselves.

And Psalm 120 is the first of 15 tracks that were comprised to live together. Take a look, Psalm 120. The title's there. A Song of Ascents. You'll see that title as you glance down the page over Psalm 121 and 2 and 3, all the way until you hit Psalm 134.

15 songs in a row, 15 tracks within the Psalter, go by the name on the album cover, Ascents.

Songs of Ascents. Now, what does this mean? What album have we pulled forth? It's an interesting word, Ascents.

[4 : 57] You might be more familiar with it in a verb form, something you ascend. But here, it's in a noun form, and it's plural at that.

It's songs of the ascents, songs of degrees. And it didn't come with any liner notes to tell you why the writer or the compiler brought them together under that word.

And that's cause for a lot of thoughts. Let me give you three possibilities on why the album we're holding is titled Ascents.

Pitch, Place, and Pilgrimage. Calvin actually thought the notation Ascents meant nothing more than something for the choir director to look at to indicate that this song was to be sung at an elevated key.

It was a song of ascents. The Mishnah, which writers commentate their own thoughts on the Old Testament, has a moment where they attribute this album not to pitch, but to place.

[6 : 13] And I quote, 15 steps led up from within the court of the Israelites, corresponding to the 15 songs of ascents in the Psalms, and upon them, the Levites used to sing.

In other words, as I gaze from my vantage point across the street to the stairs that we will ascend into our new auditorium one day, so too in the court of the Israelites, there were stairs leading up, 15 in number.

And it's almost as though this was a collection, given this commentator's thoughts. It was a particular hymn book within the Book of Hymns that the Levites would sing upon those 15 stairs. Pitch, Place, and Pilgrimage. Pilgrimage. You know, there's a reference in one of the songs we're going to sing in a couple of weeks about returning to the promised land by way of pilgrimage. There's a reference in Exodus 34, which speaks about three feasts that the people of God would go up to annually. In fact, in that moment in Exodus 34, you see the verb of what you have here as a noun, that you are going to go up, you are going to ascend.

[7 : 34] Three times a year. And perhaps these songs were songs for the journey. Regardless, what you have and what I have in store for the coming 15 weeks is a collection of 15 songs that capture God's people singing as they go.

I want to sit on that for a moment. Singing as they go. It's interesting that the Israelites and then the Christian church that comes forth from these words has always been and always will be a people of song.

It doesn't mean that all of you are gifted to sing well, but it means well that all of you sing. And when God's people gather together, they are singing as they go.

My grandfather was a missionary many, many decades ago, and he was in the jungles of what you would have just thought of as the islands of Sumatra today.

And he had a song he would sing, both going out as he left his family and coming in where they would hear him return. And it was a simple song that basically sounded like, we're on the homeward trail.

[9 : 06] We're on the homeward trail. Singing as we go. Going home. We're on the homeward trail.

And the family would hear him leave under the voice of song and return in the same manner.

When we buried him in the mountains of Colorado, we left the home in the midst of a blizzard-like snowstorm. And the casket was pulled with 70 or 80 members of his lineage behind him, all the way to the ground, singing that song.

For he had arrived home. The church is a people known for song. How about us?

How about us? My heart's deep desire is that Christ Church Chicago will be known for her great congregational singing.

[10 : 23] That there will be a day when visitors know to arrive early, lest they miss anything the congregation sings.

That the soul of the people will give expression of adoration to our God in the presence of one another.

You know, one of the things the Lord has done for us, and you'll see it when we're on the other side of those doors in a few short months, is our building stands in contrast to what much of the Christian church has done with her structures over the last 20 or 30 years.

Our structure will be built with natural light pervading through 24 windows on its roof, through filtered light of a glorious 56-foot stained glass periphery, under which we stand with six windows, three to the north and three to the south, letting in light.

I can't wait. For the last 25 or 30 years or so, the church has erected structures where the people gather in darkness, where the only light in the room is a spotlight on a speaker or an instrumentalist, where the facial expressions of your fellow worshipers are never seen or known, and the only glimmer in the auditorium is perhaps the Apple watches going off at momentary displays where people understand that there are other people gathered with them.

[12 : 13] And what we are going to do through the very place in which we sit is to be able to look at one another and see them sing.

The church should be known for her great congregational singing.

And I pray that all that we do in preparation for these coming months will grab your heart to be a part of just such a thing. Well, so much for introducing our fall series on these songs of ascents. Let's listen then to the first song, Psalm 120, the opening track. Keep the lyrics before you. It appears in the Bible that I'm holding to have been written by a lyricist who composed three distinct verses.

I know that because the editors have kindly given me some double spacing between one and two, three and four, and then five through seven.

[13 : 31] Three verses set off to one another. I notice, secondly, that the first verse seems to be speaking of something that occurred in the past.

In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me. This vantage point of the past in one and two give way in verse three and four to what he considers will occur to all of his opponents in the future.

Something will happen to them. And yet the third stanza doesn't look back to the past or forward to the future. The writer finds himself fixed in the present in his sojourning, dwelling world.

Almost as though literally in the first stanza, he speaks to God through his song. In the second stanza, he sings to his opponents. And in the third stanza, he either muses to himself or is asking you to enter in to all that he has put down.

The opening line of the song seems to capture the intention of his idea. Here it is. In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

[14 : 52] It almost seems to be the banner over this opening track. It's what he wanted to sing. In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

This word distress, it carries with it the connotation of someone who feels they are caught within very narrow spaces.

This word distress, it carries the idea of someone who feels as though they are cramped and confined and constricted.

This word distress carries with her the notion of someone who experientially is hard pressed. And what he says is, when I felt cramped, when I felt constricted, when I felt there was no place for me to go, when I felt and when you feel you are between a rock and a hard place, then, then between your rock and your hard place, he says, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

Notice the source of his discomfort was not yet known in this song. He hasn't told us yet in the song what it was that made him feel so hard pressed.

[16 : 28] But what he does say is that when he was in distress, the Lord answered him. That word answered is more than merely, I heard a voice.

It's more than the Lord spoke to me. What it really conveys is the sense of the Lord made an appearance on my behalf. In other words, when I spoke to the Lord, he showed up for me. Can I get a witness for anyone here that when we are hard pressed, he arrived. That's what he wants to sing. And so you can already hear the opening line, the opening refrain of the song captures people who feel hard pressed.

And they are listening to someone who says, let me tell you, when I felt like you do, I called to Yahweh and Yahweh showed up for me. What a beautiful opening line.

Let me put it as simply as I can. When hard pressed, it was prayer that worked. I think of those times then when we collectively are bringing our own distress into the congregation, the source of which unknown at this point.

[18 : 02] And yet it can be a song that ministers to so many people going through so many different things. I think of that little chorus.

Hallelujah, oh my soul sing. Hallelujah, oh my soul sing. Hallelujah, oh my soul sing.

Hallelujah, hallelujah. Did he bring you over? He brought me over. Oh my soul sing.

He brought me over. Oh my soul sing. He brought me over. Oh my soul sing.

Hallelujah, hallelujah. You know, I've been thinking about our future. And again, a heart's desire that we be led in music by those who are greatly familiar with the African American experience as they sing gospel songs of remembrance of what God has done for me.

[19 : 33] The simple refrain, In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me. And may it wash over your soul. May it wash over us collectively. May it wash over our city. May we one day bear witness through our sung words the great truths of the gospel. That when we're hard pressed, prayer works. And when I speak to God, he showed his face to me. The source of the distress, at least in this particular song, is now made known. The woe really emerges in every verse.

[20 : 41] And what was distressing him when he wrote it were the words of others. Look at verse two. Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips and deceitful tongue.

You'll find the same idea in the second stanza of verse three. What shall be done to you, O deceitful tongue? You'll find it again in the third verse, verses six and seven.

Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace. But when I speak, they are for war. Words are the source of his woe.

In my distress, I call to the Lord. In other words, now we're learning more about the song.

As I considered this unwelcoming world in which I walk, where words are weaponized, I grew weary and called to the Lord.

[21 : 48] And he sustained me. These words are indications of the writer feeling very unwelcome as a follower of the Lord in this world.

These words are placed in the text as though they are weapons in the hand of a warrior with sharp arrows.

These words then are the particularity of this song. Let me put it to you this way. When the war you are in is one of words, that's when prayer works.

That when words were meant to fly like arrows to mortally wound you, they can be broken mid-flight by prayers offered to the Lord by you.

In a world that weaponizes words, you can find rest by calling upon the Lord. In other words, you don't win by shouting louder.

[22 : 57] You don't win by talking back. You won't find rest through well-reasoned arguments.

For when others are for war, they will not hear a word of peace. But your word before the Father will rise, and his grace and strength upon you will descend, and you will be able again to sing of his love for you.

What do we make of this final stanza, this sojourning in Mechish, this dwelling in the tents of Qadar?

You know, it's interesting here. With our staff, we look very quickly and closely at biblical references to these places.

And Meshech actually appears for the first time back in Genesis 10, along the lineage of Japheth. And they were the peoples that moved to the far coastlands.

[24 : 20] By the time you get to the book of Ezekiel, it is a place in the far north. Qadar appears first in Genesis 25.

They are the offspring of Ishmael. So here you have Japheth and Ishmael's offspring, neither of which are in the direct line of redemption.

And there's this sense that when there's friction in the family, when there are lost, long lost, distant cousins that are at war with one another, that even in that blood line, he goes with all of his problems to the Lord.

But of course, by the time you get to Ezekiel or you get later in the text, even Qadar is now far off to the east in the part of Assyria. So what he is saying here by way of poetry is not that he actually lived in Mechish, but that he actually lived in Qadar as though he had run away all the way up to the north and all the way up to the east.

But he's basically saying by using those places, that's how cramped I felt. That's how hemmed in I was. That's how hard pressed my life is.

[25 : 32] That no matter where I go, to the east or to the west, to the north or to the south, the world I am in has unwelcoming words and I am weary, weary of what to do.

which then comes back to the lesson to be learned. Intercession accomplishes what well-reasoned arguments cannot.

I don't know what place you're in today, but I hope you work your way back up this psalm to the very opening line, that when you are in a state of distress, you would call to the Lord and he would answer.

The question though is, how did God actually, how does he go about answering this? And for the psalmist, prophetically, how is it in the past tense at the opening where it looks back, but yet there's something future, verse three and four, where those who are deceitful are actually going to be judged with sharp arrows and glowing coals from a broom tree.

The broom tree would be like hardwood. It would be like oak. It would be like something that burns long and hot. How is it that those who are enemies of the Lord's people will one day find that judgment?

[26 : 56] Well, it seems to me that it comes again through God's word, that he brings his own divine warrior into the world through his son and his own divine warrior calls out to the Lord in his distress.

Hebrews chapter five, verse seven actually indicates that when Jesus was in his state of turmoil, he cried out to the Lord and the Lord answered him and therefore he becomes a savior that we can then come in through.

It is through the Lord Jesus Christ who endured the hostility of an unwelcoming world that can be the one who lifts your weary soul.

You and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, as Enoch called them. You and I live among grumblers. We walk among malcontents, what he called loud mouth boasters, ungodly sinners who speak against the Lord.

Noah himself was mocked for walking with the Lord. Nehemiah had to withstand the verbal assaults of Sanballat and Tobiah who would hinder him from his work.

[28 : 13] Jesus was actually said, can you not save yourself if you've done so many things for other people? Paul himself had to endure the languished outcries of those against him and so will you.

Words, words are going to fall upon you like waves and it will create a weariness of soul, a crampness of spirit, a hard-pressed nature to life and in that moment when everything in you wants to speak against all of those things that are out there, speak instead to the Lord and he will show for you.

Our Heavenly Father, as we consider this album so worthy of our attention, we pray that this first track, this first song would strengthen us to sing wealth for you.

We think, Lord, of your word and that one little word shall fell him, that we have a word that no earthly powers brought to be and we rest and hope in that.

In Christ's name, Amen.