

AM Psalms 120-122 Alienation, Assurance and Arrival

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Psalms, Psalm 120. A Song of Ascent.

! 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? Are 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.

I am for peace. I am for peace. But when I speak, they are for war. I lift up my eyes to the hills.

[1 : 24] From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He will not let your fruit be moved.

He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper.

The Lord is your shade in your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil.

He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. From this time forth and forevermore.

I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

[2 : 33] Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together. To which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel.

To give thanks to the name of the Lord. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May they be secure who love you. Peace be within your walls. And security within your towers. For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, Peace be within you.

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. Amen. And may God bless to us that reading from his word.

And to his name be the praise. Shall we come? Please turn with me in your Bibles to the three Psalms we read earlier.

[3 : 47] Psalms 120 to 122. The block of Psalms from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, they are known as songs of ascents or songs of degrees.

Scholars think that these particular Psalms were regularly sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to attend one of the great festivals.

These Psalms explore what it means to be a pilgrim.

A pilgrim is someone who is on a journey. A pilgrim is someone who is heading for a destination.

The people of Israel were well aware what it was like to be pilgrims.

After all, after they escaped from slavery in the land of Egypt, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before they finally entered the promised land of Canaan.

[5 : 17] Even after they occupied the land, they regularly went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple.

They were being reminded that they were still, in a sense, pilgrims. The land flowing with milk and honey was not their ultimate home.

As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, believing Israelites longed for a better country, a heavenly one. They looked for a city with foundations whose builder and maker was God.

Just like them, Christians too are pilgrims. We are on a journey from this world to the next. In the words of the old song, this world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. Here in this world, we are resident aliens at best.

[6 : 31] Our citizenship is in heaven. Heaven is our real home. That's where we are heading. So like the Israelites, we need to take on board the reality of life as pilgrims.

We too need encouragement for the journey. So this morning, I'd like to look with you at the first three songs of Ascent, Psalms 120 to 122, to see what we can learn from them about the life of pilgrimage.

My title is Alienation, Assurance, and Arrival. I think it was the Bible scholar Alec Motier who pointed out that the 15 songs of Ascent could usefully be looked at in groups of three.

So we are looking this morning at the first group of three, starting with Psalm 120. Let's look then at Psalm 120 under the heading Alienation.

Clearly, the psalmist is in distress. He begins with the words, In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me.

[8 : 11] This seems to be a reference to occasions in the past when he has been similarly distressed. On these occasions, he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord answered his prayer.

He draws encouragement from such experiences to bring what is now distressing him before the Lord in prayer.

In verse 2, he gives a clue as to what the problem is. Deliver me, O Lord, he writes, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.

It seems the psalmist feels that he is the target of untrue and malicious comments. He feels got at. The people he lives among make him feel unwelcome.

Far from being his friends, they are his enemies. They are having a go at him. This feeling of alienation, of not feeling welcome, not feeling at home, is reinforced in the final three verses of the psalm.

[9 : 35] Woe to me, he writes in verse 5, woe to me that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar. Now here we have something of a problem.

Because Meshech was on the south eastern edge of the Black Sea. But Kedar was nowhere near there.

It was in the Arabian desert. There is no way that the psalmist could have been living in both places at once. It seems likely that he is using what we call poetic license.

He wants to make the point that he is living in an alien environment, a hostile environment, where he does not feel at home.

He does not feel he belongs. And note how he describes himself. He says, I sojourn in Meshech.

[10 : 43] He is only a sojourner in Meshech. He hasn't put down deep roots. He hasn't settled there. And similarly, he says that he dwells among the tents of Kedar.

He's a tent dweller. He doesn't have a permanent home. He leads a nomadic existence.

Perhaps this psalm was written by an exile who was finding it hard to live away from the land of Israel in a Gentile environment.

In verses 5 and 6, he complains that the people he lives among hate peace. He wants to live peacefully with them, but that's not what they want.

Instead, they are for war. They are his enemies. They are out to make life difficult for him. And the antagonism they feel towards him is reflected in the untrue and unkind things they say about him.

[12 : 04] So the psalmist cries out to the Lord for deliverance. He knows that those who slander and deceive will ultimately fall under God's judgment.

What shall be given to you and what more shall be done to you you deceitful tongue he asks in verse 3. And the answer comes in verse 4.

A warrior's sharp arrows with glowing coals of the broom tree. The sharp arrows and glowing coals are emblems of God's judgment.

Apparently, the wood of the broom tree produces excellent charcoal which makes a hot fire and retains its heat for a long time.

But in the meantime, the psalmist's enemies are getting away with it. They're making life difficult for him and he prays to the Lord to do something about it.

[13 : 13] this psalm reflects a mood of alienation. I think we as Christians can identify with the sense of alienation the psalmist felt.

We wrestle with the unholy trinity of the world, the flesh and the devil. we live in a fallen world. A world that's organized in its opposition to God. That doesn't mean that the world is as bad as it might be.

There's much in the world that is good. But there's an underlying opposition to God. There's a bias to sin. And society around us tries very hard to squeeze us into its own mold.

There is real pressure to conform to its standards and mindset. It's challenging to live as a Christian with any degree of consistency.

[14 : 34] Not only that, the world as we know it is under judgment. God's final judgment is yet to come. And we live in a day of grace when the Lord reaches out to a lost humanity in mercy.

But the effects of sin mar our lives. We have to cope with frustration and disappointment. With sickness, bereavement and death.

All these things make our world seem at times an alien environment. We also have to cope with our own sinful nature.

If we're Christians our nature is being renewed and we should be growing in holiness. but we remain sinners until the day we die.

Daily we have to confront the down drag of our own sinful nature. And the Bible tells us that we have a sworn enemy in the devil.

[15 : 52] The Apostle Peter describes him as prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. The devil is an intelligent adversary.

He's a master tactician. He knows all about us and he is a master at getting us at our weak point. We need to put on the whole armour of God in order to stand against his schemes. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the cosmic powers over this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

For all these reasons Christians feel a sense of alienation in this present world.

We may feel misunderstood. We may feel misrepresented. We may feel that we are the target of hostile opposition just as the psalmist did.

[17 : 18] And so like him we cry out to the Lord for help. That's alienation.

But when we move into Psalm 121 we find not alienation but assurance. the psalm begins on a note of vulnerability.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? As I suggested earlier this psalm may well reflect the experience of traveling through the Judean hill country on the way to Jerusalem.

As the writer looked at the hills as they stretched in front of him he wondered how well he would cope with the rigors of the journey.

Would he reach Jerusalem safely? The terrain was rough the climbing was arduous the heat could be exhausting.

[18 : 43] and there was the additional pressure of the possibility of attack by robbers and bandits.

For the psalmist the hills weren't beautiful scenery as such. No he saw them in terms of threat and danger.

Would he cope with the pressures of the journey? Would he reach his destination in one piece? That's why he needed help. And where was that help to come from?

He answers his own question in the ringing words of verse 2. My help he writes comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

It's as if asking the question jolts him into focusing not on the hills but on the Lord. And in the remainder of the psalm the focus remains firmly on the Lord.

[19 : 53] The I am who I am as the psalmist is reminded who he is and what he's like.

I would like to highlight three things in particular. First in verse 2 the Lord is the creator the one who made heaven and earth.

The psalmist viewed the hills with fear and foreboding because dangers lurked there. But it was his God who had made the hills in the first place.

That meant that his power had no limits. Surely nothing was too hard for him. And in the same way whatever issues we may have we may commit them with confidence to a God like that.

In the words of the old hymn God who made the earth the air the sky the sea who gave all things their birth he cares for me.

[21 : 18] The Lord is the creator. Secondly in verses 3 and 4 the Lord is the keeper of Israel. Note how many times in this psalm the word keep crops up.

The Lord is your keeper. Behold he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. God created all things but in a special sense he was the God of Israel. He was the God of the Exodus the God who had rescued his people from slavery and who had brought them into the land of Canaan.

On the way through the wilderness he had entered into covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He had done so much for them and on that basis the psalmist was sure that the Lord would continue to look after them because he was committed to his people.

He was never off duty. He never lost people's files down the back of his filing cabinet. He was never caught unawares.

[22 : 46] No one and nothing could take him by surprise. Remember the incident that's recorded in 1 Kings chapter 18.

There the prophet Elijah had a contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When the prophets of Baal called out to their god to set fire to their sacrifices nothing happened.

Elijah taunted them. He said cry aloud for he is a god. Either he is musing or he is relieving himself or he is on a journey or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.

But Elijah knew that none of these things was true of his god. He was never unavailable. And when in due course he called on god to demonstrate his reality by setting fire to the sacrifice which he had prepared fire fell and the sacrifice was burned up.

In a world of change and turmoil we too need the assurance that the lord never goes off duty and never loses focus.

[24 : 17] In all things he is at work for the good of those who love him. Nothing comes into our lives or experience except with his knowledge and by his permission.

He knows us through and through and watches over us constantly. the lord is the creator the lord is the keeper of Israel.

Thirdly in verses 5 and 6 the lord is described as his people's companion and protector. The lord is your keeper the lord is your shade on your right hand the sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

the lord is with his people. He knows what we need just when we need it.

Out on the hills the psalmist needed the assurance that he need not fear the dangers of day or night.

[25 : 37] This psalm concludes with repeated emphases on the lord's keeping power. The lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life.

The lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever more. So having begun the psalm looking at the hills the psalmist ends with the confidence with the assurance that the lord will protect him from all ultimate harm and will be with him wherever he is both now and forever.

In the face of the alienation which psalm 120 highlights this psalm points the believer to the assurance we have that the lord is with us.

The god who created everything that exists is more than able to sort out our lives. Nothing is too hard for him.

Not only is he the creator he is the redeemer. He has redeemed us from the slavery of sin and made us his own through the death of his son the lord Jesus Christ having done so much for us having gone to such lengths to save us he will finish the job.

[27 : 20] In the words of the apostle Paul he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things and he is our companion and protector he is our shade at our right hand he protects us from dangers real and imaginary he knows what we need as Christians we too can share the psalmist assurance that in the midst of difficulties we have security in the Lord alienation assurance and finally in psalm 122 we have arrival the psalm begins

I was glad when they said to me let us go to the house of the Lord our feet have been standing within your gates oh Jerusalem the psalmist recalls the joy he felt when he was invited to go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage and now that he has finally arrived in the holy city his keen sense of anticipation has been fulfilled it reminds me of the first time I visited Israel our plane was late in arriving at Tel Aviv and it was after midnight when our coach reached our hotel in Jerusalem it was too late for us to meet together in the hotel and so before we got off the coach the leader of the

party stood at the front and read this

Psalm 122 before leading us in a short prayer it was a memorable start to our visit we too had arrived in the city of the great king our feet were just about standing within the gates of Jerusalem for the Psalmist Jerusalem is a place which speaks of the unity of God's people he suggests that the very layout of the city speaks of unity it is built as a city that is bound firmly together ancient Jerusalem wasn't particularly large and during a festival it would feel incredibly cosy as pilgrims from all 12 tribes from all over

Israel and beyond would converge on the city the layout of the city spoke of unity but the pilgrims were also united in the worship of the one true God they were meeting to worship him as he had ordained to give thanks to his name and there was another reason for this sense of unity and that was that they all owed allegiance to one king they all owed allegiance to the Davidic king who resided in Jerusalem remember how God promised King David that he would establish a dynasty which would reign forever in the words of one commentator the tribes in

Jerusalem the tribes are not an aggregation but a congregation bound together by the given unity of the one city the one revealed truth and the one throne the tribes are a congregation bound together by the given unity of the one city the one revealed truth and the one throne in the last verses of the psalm the psalmist urges his fellow worshippers to pray for the peace of Jerusalem verse 6 pray for the peace of Jerusalem may they be secure who love you peace be within your walls and security within your towers for my brothers and companions sake I will say peace be within you for the sake of the house of the

[32 : 53] Lord our God I will seek your good the psalmist calls for prayer that Jerusalem may enjoy peace and prosperity so that it may continue to be the center of God's worship and the home of God's King that's what the psalm meant at its most basic level for the psalmist and his fellow pilgrims if psalm 120 speaks of alienation and psalm 121 speaks of security in the Lord this psalm expresses the joy of arriving in Jerusalem and of celebrating the privileges of being the people of God worshipping the one God and living under the protection of one

King for our part as Christians we can understand the psalm in the light of New Testament teaching when we read and sing this psalm we can focus not so much on the earthly Jerusalem although we should continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem as in what Jerusalem foreshadowed Jerusalem pointed forward to the church a worldwide people of God who would be under the rule of God's King and under the government of God's good law there is a sense in which each local church should be a place of supernatural peace and harmony in the midst of a hostile world more than that Jerusalem pointed forward to the new Jerusalem where all God's people will join together in giving thanks to the Lord in praising the triune God in the new Jerusalem the eternal kingdom which was inaugurated by great David's greater son the Lord Jesus Christ will be consummated and our closing hymn puts it like this the king there in his beauty without a veil is seen it were a well spent journey though seven deaths lay between the lamb with his fair army doth on Mount Zion stand and glory glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land if you are a Christian how are you finding the life of pilgrimage!

perhaps you are very aware of the challenge of living as a Christian in a hostile world you share something of the sense of alienation which Psalm 120 highlights if so you need the assurance of Psalm 121 that the Lord is with his people that he is their keeper that he watches over them every moment of every day and you need to keep in view the prospect held out in Psalm 122 of arrival in the new Jerusalem where all God's people will be together forever in unbroken peace and if you're not a

[37 : 23] Christian then to share in these privileges you need to put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ he still welcomes all who will come to him he says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest shall we pray who