

Truth and Peace

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Date: 04 September 2005

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[0 : 0 0] Hi, it's my first Sunday backroom holiday and I'd like to thank the Rector for inviting me to preach on a very uplifting, cheery, summer-based psalm today. In my distress, I cry to the Lord.

We're coming to the end of this series that we've had on the Psalms of the Ascents. And that's been a series that we've entitled, The Prayers for the Pilgrim People of God.

And as we come to the end of this series, we're going back to the beginning. We're going back to the beginning of that series of psalms. The 15 psalms of the ascent culminate in the wonderful and majestic Psalm 134, in the temple courts of God with praise.

The people of God gather together just as we are today in the presence of the living God. Come bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord.

But here we are at Psalm 120, in the first of the psalms of the ascent. We begin our journey, not in an atmosphere of praise, but in one of distress.

[1 : 0 5] Not with the joy of praising God together in the temple, but alone amongst godless and sinful people. The location of this psalm is far away from the comfort and joy and closeness of the temple courts and praise.

We see verse 1, that the mood is distressed. And verse 2, the writer is surrounded by liars and deceivers. The location is physically far away, far apart, amongst heathen, godless, and warlike people.

Verse 5, Mesek and the tents of Kadar. Mesek is to the far north of Israel, almost as far as the steppes of Russia. The tents of Kadar are to the southeast, where Israel's Arab and nomadic neighbors dwell.

See, the writer is putting himself in a hard place, not close to Jerusalem and the temple and the people of God, but far away. Not in the place where it is easy, but in the place where it is hard.

It is not easy in this place to praise God. It is not a place where he feels close to God. It is not a place where he can rest in the fellowship of the people of God. He is alone.

[2 : 1 9] There is a note of powerlessness in the face of a sinful situation. Oh Lord, deliver me from lying lips. And it is in that situation that we ask ourselves, How does the man of God pray?

How does the man or woman or child of God pray and react in a situation of isolation in which sin seems to abound?

How do you pray? You know, it's glorious, isn't it, that we've gathered here together in this wonderful company to praise God together and read his word and gather around his table.

It's a glorious thing. This is a foretaste of heaven. We're experiencing a little bit of Psalm 134 as we gather together here. We've also got to go out. We have to live our lives.

And at various times, and a lot of the time, we live our lives in Psalm 120, surrounded by sin, surrounded by lies and deceit. How do you pray? Not just when it's easy, but when it's hard.

- [3 : 23] Well, if you look at the Psalm, I want to look very quickly at this. There's three things I want you to see. First of all, he prays. Secondly, he perspectives. Sorry, I know it's bad English, but it keeps it sort of the same.
- He perspectives. And third, he perseveres. Let's look at this together. First of all, in my distress, he prays. I cry to the Lord, verse 1, that he may answer me.
- Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. This is a very real human experience. The writer is deep in it here. He is alone.
- He is surrounded on every side by sin. The emotion is raw. He's in distress. This is about living as a man or a woman of God when surrounded by sin.
- When the victim of sin, lying and deceit he talks about. He's amongst people who are lying about him, slandering him. This is real stuff, isn't it? This is human sin, human discord.
- [4 : 25] And I think the first thing you want to notice here is the first thing he does is he prays. It's very simple. He prays. He turns the situation over to God.
- But he's in moments of crisis and difficult, sticky moments. Those can be the most trying moments to pray. The moments when prayer seems to depart, when it becomes the most difficult.
- I've often experienced that when I sat in the middle of a 747 going through turbulence over the Atlantic. You know, and suddenly a panic takes in and you just want to have a drink or something like that. You know, it's hard to pray. It's hard to pray when you're assailed on every side by sin.
- We've experienced some perplexing moments as a church and more may come. What are we going to do? Do we panic? Do we take matters into our own hands? When you look here, the first thing we need to do is pray.
- You might resonate with the mood of this writer yourself in your own life, perhaps in the past. Maybe situations that will arise in the future. It's terrible, isn't it, the way human sin and human discord brings out the worst in people, in companies, in organizations, friends or families at school.
- [5 : 38] Whenever human beings together, it's come together. It's often the risk of human discord, human beings turning against one another. You may be in a situation or have been where people are lying about you, speaking and believing half-truths, deceiving you.
- See, and the problem with that kind of thing is it's so slippery. How do you defend yourself against people who are willfully sinning against you? It feels so slippery and powerlessness. It can be so frustrating.
- I had a friend who went through a very much unwanted and unhappy divorce, and the things she found so difficult to deal with were the lies and half-truths that were spoken about her just for the sake of winning.
- And having to deal with that felt so degrading. And, you know, she had just powerlessness to do anything about it. And these situations happen in our lives.
- And I think, you know, we need to see here that there is no guarantee that being a Christian, being a person of God, is going to shield you from problems and from human sin.
- [6 : 41] And so the first thing the writer of the psalm does is he turns the situation over to God in prayer. I cry to the Lord that he may answer me. Deliver me, O Lord.
- See, he's surrounded by sin and trouble. And in the middle of it he looks up, as Bruce Heinemars said at the beginning, way up. And he looks up for help.
- And the point here is that God is a God who intervenes in human situations. That he is a God who cares about his people and protects them.

Now, here is our writer. He's a very long way away from the temple. And he's a long way away from the fellowship of believers. And yet this God is able to enter into the problem and rescue him.

You see, he prays. He turns the situation over to God. And you see, as Christians, we have even so much more than he had. You see, if you have turned your life to Christ, you have a relationship with God.

[7 : 43] And he has placed his spirit in your heart. You are sealed forever. If you are a Christian, then the power of God is at work in you. You belong to him. You're his man.

You're his woman. You're his child. And so you can turn the situations of your life over to him. You can trust him with the hard points of your life as well as the good times.

You can hand over to him the whirlwinds as much as the wonderful times. So pray. Pray. I find, as I say in my own life, the moments of stress and crisis that can be the hardest thing to do.

To slow it down. To get my eyes up. And pray. But it's the best thing you can do. Because he is the God who intervenes and cares for his people.

So he prays. But the second thing that follows from the first is he perspectives. Now I know that's terrible English. I apologize right away. But I hope you get my point. Because having prayed, he looks at this situation from a different perspective.

[8 : 49] And we've prayed in verse 1 and 2. But look now in verse 3 and 4 how the perspective changes. Because whereas sin appeared to have the upper hand, he now begins to look at the situation differently.

He says this, 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 of the broom tree.

I see his prayer has turned the situation over to God that he might deal with it in his way. And now that's given the writer this confidence. Because now he knows God's mind in the situation.

And he knows that God is going to punish sin. He knows that those who are lying and deceiving will be dealt with by God. And are going to come under judgment.

And so instead of having to answer back to the liars and deceivers all around him. He focuses on God and gets a much better answer. You see the answer in verse 3 and 4 is that the liar, powerful though he seems, wounding though his weapons are, is going to be destroyed with far more powerful weapons than lies.

[9 : 59] God's arrows of truth and coals of judgment. The commentators tell us that the broom tree of verse 4 burns very well and yields excellent coals.

So you see we're talking about judgment here. God is going to bring them to judgment. He's not going to let sin have the last word. Sin is not going to triumph in the end.

It's interesting there's a theme here that runs through the Bible. God detests liars and deceit and people who practice it will be punished like Psalm 64. They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows.

They shoot from ambush at the innocent man. But God will shoot them with arrows. Suddenly they will be struck down. He will turn their own tongues against them. See it's hard isn't it to be a Christian, to be a person of God.

When you see sin all around you triumphing and abounding. It's perplexing and we say why God? Why is this happening? Why are you allowing this to happen? You see here this prayer doesn't remove him right away from the situation.

[11 : 04] He's not transported immediately out of this difficult situation and into Psalm 134 where everything's glorious and wonderful and praise. No, this is Psalm 120.

And things are hard and difficult, but they are not hopeless. Because this is God's man. Because he has not despaired of God.

And now he gets this change of perspective knowing how God operates. He knows that God is going to bring these liars and deceivers to judgment. He knows.

He has this perspective. And you see you only get that knowledge. You can only get that perspective by turning to God and turning to his word. See God has revealed himself to us in his word above all in Jesus.

And that means that we can know who God is. We can understand how he operates. And we can trust in him to keep his word. We know from the Bible that God intervenes in human history.

[12 : 04] We know that God intervenes in human lives. We know that he punishes sin and saves through Jesus. And you see that changes the perspective with which we live out our lives.

And with which we ride out trouble. Because as Christians, you know, there is nothing wrong with being perplexed when sin abounds. There is nothing wrong with being perplexed when sin appears to surround us.

When our lives go into a whirlwind. It is upsetting when that happens. And it is real. It is real stuff that happens in our lives. You see, if you are in Christ.

If you have put your faith in him. Then you know that the power of God has already been brought to bear in your life. That power that has brought you from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Has worked in you. You know that in Christ, God is strong to save. You know this. You know that he is the sovereign. And so like the writer of this psalm, in your own situation.

[13 : 11] Or in our situation as a church. We need to pray with the perspective that Christ brings. The Bible tells us about God. The Bible is refreshingly and wonderfully.

Not about you and me, really. The Bible is all about God. God revealing himself to the human race. Telling us about who he is. Telling us about his plan to save us through the Savior who he sent.

See, I think a lot of people suffer in their lives with undue anxiety and distress. Because you don't know who this God is. Because you haven't studied his word.

See, if you don't study his word, you're not really going to know his nature and character. You're not going to know the way he operates. What he expects. So what terrible distress is ours by riding through our lives and the difficulty of our lives, not knowing who he is.

That's why he's given us his word. But you see, if you immerse yourself in his word, and meditate on it, and study it day in and day out, you get to know God through his word.

[14 : 16] See, then what you're going to be able to do is relate the situations of your life in the here and now to the reality of who God is. See, it's not about us getting God's attention on us.

It's about focusing our attention on him. And then we see the reality of who he is. And you get the perspective. So he prays.

He perspectives. And finally, and as I'm going to close, he perseveres. I'm not quite sure persevere is the right word, but it was a P, so I'm sticking with it. Now, the psalm does not end on a happy note.

It ends with division and discord. But having prayed and perspective, there is a sense here in which the writer stands his ground and finds out who he really is as a man of God in this most difficult situation.

He says, verse 5, I have to say, I was hoping for a happier ending here, something a little more upbeat to send you away with.

[15 : 27] I wanted to find some warmth, but we're going to have to find that in a later psalm. We'll wait until Psalm 134. And yet, there is a note of powerful strength here, and it is the strength of a man of God, a man who has prayed and gotten God's perspective.

See, he's prayed. He's turned the situation over. He's gotten God's perspective on the situation. And now he's able to see himself and see what does it mean to be a man or a woman or a child of God, even in this hostile situation, even far away from the temple and the fellowship of believers.

He sees what it means for him to be a man of God, pilgriming through a world of lies. And you see, two things in that. One is that he does not compromise, but also he does not hate.

See, look, he doesn't compromise. Notice if you look through the passage, he's very aware of his difference from everybody else. He's very aware that he doesn't belong. He's an alien amongst these people. And woe it is me that I sojourn in Mesek, that I dwell amongst the tents of Kadar.

You know, too long I've lived amongst these people. I'm different. He sees that he can't compromise. And that is the position of God's people always and at every time.

[16 : 45] We live in a world that does not acknowledge Christ and obey him. You may be the only light in a dark place, whether it be at work or school or in your family.

And he sees God's people. We can't bend over and compromise with darkness. When people speak lies about us, what do we do?

Do we compromise? Do we bow down? Put our heads below the parapet? No. We stand. We persevere. I am for peace. See, he's a man of God.

I am for peace. They are for war. But nor does he hate either. He doesn't resort to gnashing his teeth to them and hating them. Just look at the strength of the identity in verse 7.

I am for peace. See, that is saying, I am God's man. I am God's woman. I am a child of God.

[17 : 42] And see, how does God establish peace in the world? That's his reign that comes over the world. And ultimately, he establishes peace with human beings at the cross of Jesus. And we stand.

We are people of peace. We do not compromise. And we don't hate. Now, you see, we're not at Psalm 134 yet. Our writer here is still located amongst heathen and warlike people, far from the comfort of the temple courts and the praise of God.

And yet, even in that situation, he walks this line. And you see, we need to do that too. We need to walk the line between compromise and hostility.

In his first epistle, Peter, the apostle writes this, Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God in the day he visits us. See, we walk a line.

[18 : 47] We live in this world. We are not of it. We are aliens. We are strangers. And yet, we do not adopt a hostile stance against it.

You know, we're going to be sending all our children back to school on Tuesday. I hear sighs of relief all around. I'm very excited about that. My children are in grade one and in kindergarten. I'm very excited.

They're both in French immersion. Allow me to digress and brag for a moment. They're in French immersion. We've been finding that my wife is German. She's taught them German. And between reading them the French, the German, and keeping some English going, our story time every night takes an hour and a half.

But anyways, I digress. I'm very excited for them about that. I'm really excited about them embarking upon this educational process and all the things they're going to learn and do and grow. It's so exciting.

And yet, you know, I'm anxious for them. I'm anxious for my children because they are going out into a world that doesn't love or obey Jesus the way we do here.

[19 : 49] They are going to experience moments where it is not okay to love Jesus as it is here. Where loving Sunday school may mark them out as different.

You know, my children come home from Sunday school. I want to plug Sunday school because they love Sunday school here. And they get so much out of it. And we go home. We're talking over lunch about all the things they've learned. They can't get enough about it.

I love that. They're developing a wonderful faith in Jesus Christ through Sunday school. But I wonder what happens Monday morning at show and tell when they say, Hey, we learned about Joshua. Have we prepared them to go out into the world and be Christian?

Are your children ready to be Christian? Not just here, but there, where it is hard. Are you prepared to be light in a dark place?

Whether it be in your family, or in your friendships, or in your place of work. See, we mustn't lull ourselves into a highly warm, fuzzy, experiential kind of Christianity that goes from one warm experience to another, that keeps us in a nice fog of happy feelings, and a warm embrace of lovely fellowship, but which closes us off from the reality of the world.

[21 : 08] Because, as wonderful as it is to gather here together and have a foretaste of heaven, we live in a world that is Psalm 120.

And it is a hostile place. And we're never going to fully belong. And we're never going to be like everybody else. See, we've got to persevere. We've got to be the man, the woman of God.

You see, the Psalms of the Ascent begin where we live, and end where we're going to be. One day, all who follow Jesus will gather in His presence and around His throne, and worship Him.

One day, we will all live out, Psalm 130, and lift up our hands in the presence of the Lord, and bless the Lord. But right now, we're in Psalm 120.

But that is no matter. For the glory of being Christian, the joy of knowing Jesus, is knowing that His is the power to save, and that ultimately no sin can harm you.

[22 : 10] It is the joy of knowing that in whatever situation you may find yourself, in whatever struggle, whatever strife, you can raise your voice with the psalmist and cry out, I lift my eyes to the hills.

From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who has made heaven and earth.