



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 120

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Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *A Song of Ascents*
- This is the first of a series of 15 Psalms each with the same title, *A Song of Ascents*
- Some call them the Psalms of the going up, or the steps or the degrees
- The reason for this collection and arrangement is not known
- Many different explanations have been given for these ascents; or degrees or steps Psalms
- Some think they were sung on the fifteen steps or stairs, by which they went up from the outward court of the temple to the inner



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- Some think that there were fifteen steps by which the priests ascended into the temple, on each of which they sang one of these fifteen Psalms
- Others think that they were Psalms for the people of God as they made the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem and the temple at the three appointed feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles)
- This group think that these Psalms of longing, and hope, are appropriate for the pilgrims' use as they go up to worship
- And some speculate that they are called so because of their greatness, as the Song of Solomon, so the Psalms of the Ascent, are the most distinct and great Psalms of the highest degree



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- Some think it refers to their music, and that this is the name of the tune to which they were set
- Or the musical instruments they were sung to
- Or that as the word may be applied to elevation in general; they signify the elevation of voice
- Yet some think they were sung on the return from the Babylon captivity, as the people were going up to Jerusalem
- And some look at the spiritual meaning saying they are called Psalms of Ascent because the Psalms themselves have an upward motion



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- They begin with the believer crying out to God in trouble far away from Jerusalem, and they end with believers offering up praise to God in His temple courts
- The author of these fifteen Psalms is not known
- However, four of them are ascribed to David, and one to Solomon
- The rest are not known but they have been attributed to Ezra, to Haggai, to Zechariah, and to Malachi
- Some think that Psalm 120 is supposed to have been written by David upon occasion of Doeg's accusing him and the priests to Saul; the psalmist complains of being driven out of the congregation of the Lord and forced to be among cruel people



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- St. Augustine says, “the title, ‘A song of degrees.’ Degrees are either of ascent or of descent. But degrees, as they are used in this Psalm, are of ascending...There are therefore both those who ascend and those who descend on that ladder. Who are they that ascend? They who progress towards the understanding of things spiritual. Who are they that descend? They who, although, as far as men may, they enjoy the comprehension of things spiritual: nevertheless, descend unto the infants, to say to them such things as they can receive, so that, after being nourished with milk, they may become fitted and strong enough to take spiritual meat.”



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- St. John Chrysostom says, “Steps! Why are they so called? In a historical sense, because they tell of the return from Babylon and mention the captivity there; in a spiritual sense, because they give guidance to the way of virtue, as some interpret them. The way that leads there, is like steps, gradually guiding men ... Others, claim there is reference in this to the ladder of Jacob ... but on the captivity, how were they freed from captivity? By their desire for Jerusalem ... if we are not possessed by the love of heavenly things ... we shall never succeed in taking possession of our homeland.”



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Psalm Outline

- The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2
- The Destiny of the Deceitful Tongue 120:3-4
- The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- *In my distress I cried to the Lord, And He heard me, What a powerful statement of assurance*
- His cry to the Lord was heard!
- He had no other resource; he could not prevent the effects of his *distress*, and all that he could do was to commit the case to the Lord
- The psalmist calls to mind past answers to prayer as an encouragement to prayer in his present *distress*
- The people of God often find themselves in *distress*
- But they have a refuge in their distress; they can do as the psalmist did when he *cried to the Lord*

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- They can share the psalmist's testimony, *and He heard me*
- *In my distress*, The Savior, being in agony, prayed more earnestly, Luke 22:24
- It is of little use to appeal to other men on time of *distress*
- The psalmist cries of the issue and remembers God's faithfulness in the past and knows assuredly He will be faithful in the present
- *He heard me*, God does not always answer us in the way we think we need, or even we always would like, but He always answers the way the most perfect, loving, heavenly Father would answer

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- St. Jerome says, “Our inner man, in his distress has put his foot on the first step of the ladder. Compared to the fifteen steps, what would be my benefit of standing on the first step? Although forsaking the things of this world, I have not yet reached the top of the ladder; I therefore am committed not to feel secure. With every step I ascend, I should pray for further help from God.”
- The psalmist described the nature of his distress – evil words spoken against him from *lying lips* and *a deceitful tongue*
- His problem is a common one; in this case, liars and slanderers are trying to hurt his reputation, turn people against him, diminish his power, and obstruct his plans

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- Though there is no indication that this Psalm was written by David, one could easily picture him in these situations
- As, when King Saul lies about David's loyalty and sends the entire army out to kill him
- Or when David's son Absalom slanders his father in order to undermine loyalty to the current king and gain the throne for himself
- There was some comfort in this cry, knowing that the evil that was spoken against him *was not true*
- It was spoken with *lying lips* and with a *deceitful tongue*

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- *lying lips; deceitful tongue*, Such were the lips and tongues of the Scribes and Pharisees, that praised Jesus Christ in His presence, and reproached Him to the people
- And of Judas, who betrayed Him while offering “*Greetings, Rabbi! And kissed Him*”, (Matthew 26:49)
- *lying lips; deceitful tongue* of the false witnesses against Him
- And of false teachers who deceive the hearts of the simple
- And of Satan the father of lies, who deceives the whole world
- According to St. Athanasius, many souls are destroyed by the deceitful tongues of the heretics

The Psalmist Calls on the Lord for Deliverance 120:1-2



- And according to St. Augustine, as the real adversary to the believer who starts to ascend the ladder of spiritual change and growth, is not a man, but the ancient poisonous serpent; he should resort to prayers against the devil
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Observe here that evangelist direction shining out, ‘Pray lest you enter into temptation.’ nothing, after all, dearly beloved, can match this temptation, falling victim to a person of deceit; such a person is worse than a wild animal. The wild animal is what it appears to be, whereas the former often conceal their nature with a veil of sweet logic so that their deceits are difficult to detect and their victim falls into the pit all unknowing.”

The Destiny of the Deceitful Tongue 120:3-4



- The psalmist is addressing the *false tongue*, or rather its owner trying to awaken his conscience, *what shall be done to you*
- He warned those lying lips of their destiny, *what shall be done to you*
- What punishment will God inflict on *you* for false speaking? Or what shall be done unto those who speak falsely?
- A false tongue is likened to a sharp razor, Psalm 52:2; to a sharp sword, Psalm 57:4; to firebrands arrows, Proverbs 26:18-19
- Some interpret this verse as if the psalmist addressing himself saying what shall the deceitful tongue give unto you, O my soul?

The Destiny of the Deceitful Tongue 120:3-4



- It is capable of giving you a deal of trouble, and of injuring your character, and hurting your peace and comfort, only if permitted
- Then the psalmist answers his own questions
- They had cast out lies like dangerous missiles, and now the *sharp arrows* of judgment would come against them
- God shall punish them with extreme severity
- Some think these words describe *false tongues*; which are like sharp arrows, sent out from a bow drawn with a mighty hand, which come with great force, suddenly and swiftly, and do much harm; Psalm 11:2

The Destiny of the Deceitful Tongue 120:3-4



- But rather the punishment of an evil tongue from the Lord is intended, whose sever judgments are often compared to arrows, Deuteronomy 32:23
- The deceitful has shot his arrows of slander or false accusation at the innocent, but a mightier than him, God Himself, will pierce him with the arrows of His judgement
- *coals of the broom tree*, they burn very fiercely, and retain their heat for a long time
- The psalmist may possibly express it in these words, to show, the appropriateness of the punishment to the sin
- God shall bring His arrows and coals kindled by the fire of His wrath upon them

The Destiny of the Deceitful Tongue 120:3-4



- According to St. Augustine the *Sharp arrows* are the words of God and the glowing *coals of the broom tree* are comparable to many sinners who return to God
- He says, “Thou men wonder, and say, I knew that man, how addicted he was to drinking, what a lawbreaker, what a lover of the circus, or of the amphitheater, what a cheat: now how he serves God, how innocent he has become! Wonder not; he is a live coal.”
- The Word of God turn the sinners into fiery coals glowing with divine love, that the water of sin could not quench

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- The psalmist in these last three verses laments that he is compelled to live among neighbors who are hostile and cruel
- He was forced to live among wicked people, who were, upon many accounts, troublesome to him
- *Meshech* was a son of Japheth, Genesis 10:2
- *Mesech* is frequently mentioned with Tubal and his brother, and with Gog and Magog, “*Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal, and prophesy against him.*” (Ezekiel 38:2)
- *Meshech* was a distant place, far from the land of Israel (Ezekiel 27:13,32:26,39:1)

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- *Kedar* mentioned in Genesis 25:13 as the second son of Ishmael
- *Kedar*, was one of the wild tribes which roamed through the Arabian desert, Isaiah 42:11; Isaiah 60:7; Jeremiah 49:28
- Obviously, the psalmist cannot mean to describe himself as actually living among peoples so remote from one another, but applies these typical names of cruel tribes to his own neighbors
- To dwell among slanderers was like dwelling among barbarians
- *Meshech* and *Kedar* are two sorts of people, often mentioned in Scripture, and regarded amongst the heathen nations

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- They are to be understood here only metaphorically, as the ungodly Israelites are called Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaiah 1:10, and Amorites and Hittithes, Ezekiel 16:3,45
- According to St. John Chrysostom *the tents* refers to a temporary dwelling which is the present life
- He says, “The one who is a stranger here will be a citizen up there.”
- St. Augustine explains, “It has departed far from You: my pilgrimage has become a far one. I have not yet reached that country, where I shall live with no wicked person; I have not yet reached that company of Angels, where I shall not fear offences.”

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- St. Augustine says, “Kedar’, as I may recall, is interpreted in Hebrew to mean (darkness) ... Abraham had two sons, mentioned by the apostle Paul (Galatians 4:22) to refer to two kinds of eras ... ‘Ishmael’ was in darkness, whereas ‘Isaac’ was in light. Those, in the church, who seek the earthly happiness, belongs to Ishmael; Namely, those who belonging to Isaac dwell among those who belong to Ishmael, The former seek to ascend, and the later seek to apply pressure on them to descend. The former intend to fly up to God; while the later do their best to pluck the feathers off their wings.”

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- Those that the psalmist dwelt with were such as not only hated him, but hated peace
- He suffered living among the ungodly who hates God's *peace*
- His enemies, who had lying lips, hated God's *peace*
- The God of peace, against whom their carnal minds are enmity itself; is Christ, the Prince of peace who has made peace by the blood of His cross, whom the world hates
- Some people are of such restless, difficult, aggressive and challenging spirits, that they hate peace with anyone
- They are like the troubled sea, that cannot rest; and cannot sleep, unless they do harm to their fellow men

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- He calls them *haters of peace*, because they willfully, and with deliberate malice, set themselves to make war upon the good and pure
- St. Augustine says, “Lest you should understand bodily wandering, he has said that the soul wandered. The body wanders in places, the soul wanders in its affections.”
- According to St. John Chrysostom, he says, *too long* not because of the number of years, but because of the difficulty of the situation
- Even if had it been short, it would have seemed long to those in tribulation

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- *I am for peace*, The psalmist loved and longed for God's *peace*; he desires to live in peace and strive to do so
- He is devoted to peace; love it, seek and pursue it, as every good man does
- He does nothing to provoke a dispute and would do anything which would be right to calm others
- The psalmist sought to speak words of peace and goodness
- Yet every time he did, the response was hostile, characteristic of those who *are for war*
- The more they were up *for war* the more they find him leaning to peace; such were Christ's enemies

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- St. John Chrysostom says, “That is why the Holy Book commands us to live like lambs among wolves (Matthew 10:16) ... This or that could be wicked and corrupt; Yet you have the authority to overcome them. ... Who could be meeker than a lamb? And who could be more fierce than a wolf? Yet, the former overcomes the later; as it was shown in the case of the apostles. Nothing is of more authority than compassion; nor stronger than longsuffering ... ‘When I speak to them they attack me for no reason’. In the proper time I give a testimony of love; And in proper time I utter words of compassion ... Nevertheless, although neither this nor that had any impact on them, On my side, I kept presenting proofs of virtue.”

The Psalmist Laments his Dwelling with the Ungodly 120:5-7



- St. Augustine says, “Who are they who hate peace? They who tear apart unity. For had they not hated peace, they would have abode in unity ... For if they love peace, they love Christ.”
- The Psalm ends as with a long-drawn lament
- It reverses the usual order of similar Psalms, in which the description of need preceded the prayer for deliverance
- This makes Psalm 120 a fitting start to the Songs of Ascents
- As the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem began, the psalmist was mindful of the weariness endured living apart from the supportive community of God’s people



Discussion

- What occasion prompted the writing Psalms 120–134?
- What is the context of this Psalm?
- What challenges are the psalmist facing? What causes his distress? What emotions are filling his heart as he thinks about these situations?
- How does he expect God to answer when he calls to Him in his distress?



Discussion

- Where are Mesech and Kedar?
- What kinds of ungodly behaviors grieve his heart?
- What is the problem with deception?
- What does a peacemaker look like? What does a peace breaker look like