

PSALM 120

A Song of Ascents

¹ In my distress I cry to the LORD,
that God may answer me:

² 'Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.'

³ What shall be given to you?
And what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?

⁴ A warrior's sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!

⁵ Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech,
that I must live among the tents of Kedar.

⁶ Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.

⁷ I am for peace;
but when I speak,
they are for war.

This psalm has a heading which identifies it as: a "song of ascents". This suggests the psalm was written to be sung as pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem and the temple (which are on a hill) during any of the three main feasts and festivals of the Hebrew people - Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (Those who participated in the Exodus study will recognize these festivals as having been established as the people made their way out of slavery to the promised land).

The content of the song, however, also suggests the people singing may have also experienced forced exile from their land, which is akin to being enslaved once again. "Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshach, that I must live among the tents of Kedar." Meshech and Kedar are places far to the east of Jerusalem, within Babylonian and Persian territory. To feel "Woe" is to feel great sorrow and distress. The psalm is not only a song, but also a prayer for deliverance. Is the song of ascent a prayer for deliverance from exile, a deliverance that will be felt only when the psalmist can make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the temple once again?

At a very deep level, then, this psalm invites us to touch those places in us where we may feel physically, emotionally and spiritually in exile, far from a state of being we may call home, far from a place of being where we feel safe to be who we are.

The psalmist is also negotiating some angry and hateful feelings. The lack of safety they are naming has to do with people speaking deceitfully about them in a context where the psalmist feels powerless to defend themselves. The deliverance they are praying for is from “lying lips” and a “deceitful tongue”. The prayer is for burning arrows to pierce the perpetrator/oppressor! Wow! That’s pretty hateful!

But let’s ponder this for a moment. When something treacherous and unjust is done to us, how may we react? To ignore it is only an option if it doesn’t touch us where it really hurts. That’s an emotional luxury many of us do not have in many cases. Or else, we can internalize the harm so that it eats away at us till we are numb, paralyzed, emotionally hardened or have just given up. For those enslaved or abused, this is what perpetrators and oppressors hope for, namely, to turn you into a thing they can use and abuse at will without any resistance emotional or otherwise left in you. But anger is an alternative reaction that declares: I am alive! This is wrong what you are doing! I refuse to accept it or be okay with it! Anger is a God-given emotion. God is often depicted as angry, even wrathful. Why? Because God cares. God is not emotionally detached from the hurt and harm perpetrated against God’s own beautiful creation and each and every creature within it. How can God be love and not care?

The question, however, is where anger will lead. Hate, bitterness and resentment may pass through us at times, but if they are not expunged, they will fester and destroy our hearts from within. They will turn our caring and compassion into stony indifference, emotional hard-heartedness or plain hate. Unless our anger is named, offered up and prayed through, it cannot turn into constructive action toward justice. It cannot serve love.

So then, this psalm, composed in highly personal language, is an invitation for collective therapy on the journey to healing for the people. It invites the reader to touch those places where anger and hate live, to name them and sing them openly, and to begin or continue to exorcize them from our being by so naming them. This psalm invites honest prayer in the middle of the rage, rather than waiting to pray when we’ve finally dealt with the rage in some hoped for tomorrow, or have suppressed it so deeply we fail to notice the ways our hearts have become stonier emotionally, unable to feel vibrantly. We need to start praying well before that happens.

I don’t know about you, but this psalm definitely touches places deep within me. Thank you, dear psalmist, for your courageous honesty and compassion for your people, naming the rage before it eats you up. But thank you, also, for being alive and not giving in to despair, allowing the anger to remind you that you matter.

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for this psalm and many others. Through them you call us to ourselves as your children in spirit and in truth. You don’t want to connect with us only after we have our act together. You want to connect with us in all the vulnerability of our being. You

want to connect with us in the very times we feel emotionally messy and conflicted, down and out or bitter and hard. You want to connect with us when we feel empty and burnt out, or caught in the very middle of the itch of an addiction we are desperate to scratch... Soothe us within, O God, with your peace like a warm blanket and the calm of trust in your love greater than all our failures to be as we would like... Even as “they” may be for “war” with us, may we continue to find our way “for peace.” Amen.