

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Things to think about on your way to Church

Psalm 120

We're going to meet the God who hears our cry

[Please note: The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

The title of this new series of talks on Truth for Today is 'Things to think about on your way to Church.' So, the questions begging to be asked are: "What do you think about on your way to church? Did I turn the oven on? I hope the speaker doesn't speak too long. I am not in a fit state of mind to be in church today. I am still thinking about what I did last night or what I am doing in the afternoon. I have concerns at work right now which is taking over my mind." Maybe you're thinking that you just can't be bothered going today. Or are we heading along with settled hearts and minds after spending time quietly with the Lord in the morning? Are we ready to take part, or ready for God to speak to us through His servant and His word in the power of the Spirit? It's a real challenge to us all. But if we go believing that Jesus is amongst us, we should be prepared, and eager to be there. Matthew 18 v. 20, the Lord said:

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.

If we go believing this verse, we will surely have a different attitude each time we go to church. To prepare for church I suggest that we get before the Lord quietly in confession, and worship.

Our talk today is from Psalm 120 - 'We're going to meet the God who hears our cry.' Psalm 120 is the first of fifteen Psalms (120-134) which are called the Psalms or Songs of Ascents. It is likely that these Psalms were sung by pilgrims on the way from their Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem, or that they were sung by worshippers from all parts of Israel as they went up to Jerusalem for the great festivals, (Deuteronomy 16 v. 16). Over the next few weeks, you can hear how the Israelites prepared their hearts each time they travelled to Jerusalem. We do not know the authors of many of these Psalms, although we do believe that David wrote many of the Psalms. However, this doesn't really matter as we believe that it's God's word which has been revealed to us through His servants.

The Pilgrimage

The Israelites in Exodus 23 vv. 14-17 were told to appear before the Lord three times a year during major feasts. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Harvest, and The Feast of Ingathering. These feasts were not merely religious duties but were also times of communal gathering, celebration, and remembrance of God's providence and deliverance. Jerusalem was always the destination of the pilgrimage because it was where the Temple was, which was God's dwelling place amongst the people. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not only a physical journey but also a spiritual one. It symbolised a return to God, a renewal of covenantal relationship, and an opportunity for repentance and worship. This demonstrated their obedience and devotion to God. In Luke 2 vv. 41-42, we read of Jesus's family going to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover,

Jesus was only twelve years old at the time. If we can stop and picture this for a moment; lines and lines of families walking sometimes for many days on the way to Jerusalem. They would chat, worship, sing, and pray along the way. All the time they travelled they would consider their position before God; they would bemoan and confess their failures. They would remember God's faithfulness, deliverance, His mercy, and His love. Some would go with their hearts down and come home with a spring in their step. So, it's with the Songs of Ascents in mind that we look at Psalm 120 and see what God wants to say to us today as we head down to the church. Let's read Psalm 120 (NKJV) together.

Reading - Psalm 120

In my distress I cried to the LORD, and He heard me. Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue. What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals of the broom tree! Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

Message

As we have said the Songs of Ascents were sung by the people as they made the pilgrim journey to Jerusalem. These were songs of desire, and hope. It is likely that Jesus would have sung these songs on His many journeys to Jerusalem.

Verses 1-2: The Prayer for Deliverance

Verse 1

In my distress I cried to the LORD, and He heard me.

Distress is a strong word, indicating affliction and anguish. We can identify with the children of Israel as we sometimes find ourselves distressed. When we are distressed what do we do? Do we work through it ourselves or do we get on our knees and cry to the Lord. How often this is a knee jerk reaction. Should we not always be crying to the Lord, whether for good or for bad! Yes, we should! I know because I experience this in my own life. Maybe you are always before the Lord, but it does intensify our prayers when we are in distress. We read in Luke 22 v. 44 of the Lord Himself 'being in agony [praying] more earnestly.' The wonderful thing is that no matter when we cry to the Lord, He hears our prayers. His ears are always open, He sympathises with us in our distress, He comforts us, but He does not always remove the distress, so we can continue to rely upon and trust Him more. The children of Israel's distress was caused by association with their hostile neighbours, also those who were in exile. The Psalmist's soul is weary, he longs for peace and rest.

Verse 2

Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue.

'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me,' well not strictly true; it hurts when people say things about us, especially if they're not true. Here the Psalmist (possibly David) was reflecting on those who wanted to ruin him. They told lies to him and told lies about him. Some would tell lies to flatter David, while others would slander him when he was not there. David was a great king, but he had to be careful who he trusted. He needed men who were honest and faithful around him. It is tiring when you hear from others what people have been saying about you. They are all nice to your face, but they are deceitful when they speak about you to others. The deceit could be caused by many things, maybe jealousy, or because of your faith. Let's

remember that the most dangerous lies come from the devil. We keep falling into the trap and believing the self-defeating lies that come from Satan, 'the accuser,' Revelation 12 v. 10. And do you overcome the accuser and silence him? Revelation 12 v. 11 says:

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.

Push back! Testify to Satan the accuser. Tell him what the blood of Jesus Christ has done on your behalf. Remind him that 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,' Romans 8 v. 1. Instead of defining yourself by the hurtful things said to you or about you, begin to declare what Christ has done for you. If you are in Christ, you are not in sin. If you have been forgiven, you are no longer guilty. The Psalmist prayed to be delivered, and the Lord graciously heard his cry.

So, in preparation to go to church on a Sunday or any other day of the week, it is good to ask the Lord to deliver you from any distress in your life that can be caused by others or by your own failures and sin. This will allow us to be ready to meet our Saviour as we gather with others of like mind to worship.

Verses 3-4: Punishment for the False Tongue

What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals of the broom tree!

The Psalmist moves his thoughts to what God will do with those who torment him with false tongues. This sort of language is used in other passages by Israel. They often challenge God as to what He was going to do with their accusers. Psalm 52 vv. 2-4 likens a false tongue to a sharp razor and v. 5 goes on to explain God's judgement on the deceitful. Psalm 57 v. 4 likens their tongue to a sharp sword. Proverbs 26 vv. 18-19 likens the deceitful one to 'a madman, who throws firebrands, arrows and death.' The coals of the broom tree are an interesting thought. The broom tree or (juniper tree) is regarded by the Bedouin Arabs as the best wood-fuel. It burns into charcoal and is renowned for its long retention of heat. It would seem to indicate that the judgement will be swift and sure, but the effect of it will burn for a long time. There is surely a warning for us today. The tongue is a dangerous member of our body. We can hurt people quite severely by what we say. The Bible warns us many times to guard our lips. The Lord was well known for the gracious words that came from His lips. O that we would be the same. 1 Peter 3 v. 10:

For he who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit.

Verses 5-6: The Weariness of Endurance

Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace.

An Israelite away from Jerusalem regarded himself as an exile away from home, a stranger in a strange land. Many pilgrims lived a long way from Jerusalem, and the visits there was like a 'home coming.' Many Jews today still would call Jerusalem their home. Meshech was far from the land of Israel and Kedar was a place associated with nomadic tribes in the lands surrounding Israel. These places were so far away from each other geographically that it would speak to us of a general term for hostile people, among whom he lived. Meshech was a son of Japeth (Genesis 10 v. 2), whose descendants occupied the mountainous region between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Kedar was the second son of Ishmael (Genesis 25 v. 13), and his name denoted the

Bedouin Arabs (see Song of Solomon 1 v. 5). Both were barbarous and treacherous races. The Psalmist was using these people as a picture of the people around where he lived.

The Psalmist recognised that he was living amongst the ungodly and that he was distant spiritually from Israel and its people. Is this our situation? Week by week we immerse ourselves in work, family, and other things that are perfectly legitimate. Are we getting involved with things that are against God's word. We take criticism from colleagues and friends. We don't read our Bible and pray every day therefore we leave ourselves open for attack and failure. All in all, when it comes time for us to head out to church, where are our thoughts? We cannot switch our Christianity off and on. We go with a sense of guilt because we have been too far away from the presence of the Lord during the week. This makes us lethargic, ashamed about going out to church and meeting our friends. However, by not going out, it's the worst thing you can do. Please don't get out of the habit of going to church, even though you don't 'feel like it' sometimes.

In verse 6 we have the second mention of 'my soul' in this short Psalm, the first one is in verse 2. Firstly, the Psalmist cries 'Deliver my soul', then he acknowledges 'my soul has dwelt too long with the one who hates peace.' You can almost hear him sigh. He has come to his senses. Psalm 62 v. 5:

'My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him.'
Psalm 121 v. 7: 'The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.'

Verse 7: The Desire of Peace

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

The Psalmist longed for God's peace, His shalom. Shalom is a Hebrew word that means peace (completeness, wholeness, well-being, and harmony). It is often used by Jews today as a greeting. The Psalmist was a man of peace himself. He pleaded with the people who tormented him for peace, but they were hostile against him and only wanted war. Jesus himself was a Man of peace, Colossians 1 v. 20:

Having made peace through the blood of His cross.

The Psalmist at least was going to have a rest from the hostile people around him as he travelled to Jerusalem with people of like mind. Again, this underlines the need for each one of us to seek Christian company and have good Christian friends. We all need encouragement!

So, we have learnt a little about the first Song of Ascent, one of the songs that the Israelites would sing on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year as commanded by God. We have challenged our hearts as to what we think about on the way to church each week. We have identified that living in communion with God and by spending time in His presence in reading the Bible and praying, puts us in a good place to go to meet our Lord. We have recognised the need for us to examine our hearts, repent from our sins to a God who is faithful and just to forgive us. You can be assured that God will always hear our cry.

I want to leave you with a personal illustration of what we think about on your way to Church. My Grandpa after his conversion as a young adult devoted himself to the Lord. He loved the Lord, his family, and the people of God. He was an evangelist really. He never stopped speaking to others about His Lord and their need of salvation. He was always in his Bible, reading and underlining the text, and he was always telling us what he had been reading that morning. My Grandpa had reasonable health and lived until he was seventy-nine. My grandparents lived a short walk to the local assembly, which they attended regularly. One Monday night my grandparents left home to walk down to the prayer meeting, my Granny told me later that Grandpa had whistled all the walk

down that night. The meeting started and I was a few pews in front of them, when I heard a strange gentle noise, I turned round. It had come from my Grandpa; the Lord had suddenly taken him home to be with Himself in heaven. I am sure if my Grandpa had the choice of somewhere to die it would have been in the local assembly meeting. I have often wondered if my Grandpa had an idea that the Lord would take him that night. I don't know, but after speaking to my Granny later she said he was even more eager than normal to get down to the meeting, and there was a real joy in his heart as he whistled all the way down. It was as if he knew he wasn't just going to be with his Lord, but he was going to be with Him in person, in heaven, and at last see His face.

May you desire to walk closer to the Lord.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Things to think about on your way to Church, 'Psalm 120 - We're going to meet the God who hears our cry'. Talk number T1452.

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