

Ps. 120: Shining as a Light in a Dark Place

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As I was considering what I should share with you, I thought that I would do a series which I had never done before and which would help us all grow in our appreciation of the role which the Scriptures play in guiding us, both in times of uncertainty and in times of great joy and triumph. So for the next few times I come to share with you, I will be speaking from that section of the Psalms which is called the Psalms of Ascent. They occur immediately after that massively long Psalm 119 and there are fifteen of them (Psalm 120-134).

There are several explanations of why they are called the Psalms of Ascent and the two I found most feasible are as follows. Hebrew poetry does not use a rhyme scheme where the final word of a line rhymes with the final word of either the line before it or the line following it. Instead it pairs ideas together, either because they reflect a similar thought or because they stand out in opposition to each other. So one explanation of the name: Psalms of Ascent is that these Psalms represent a series of paired ideas that lift the reader's or the listener's mind from the things of this world until they can consider the things of the world to come.

Related to this idea, the Talmud (the Jewish commentary on the Bible and on traditional laws) says that there were fifteen steps in the second temple from the base of the holy place to the entrance of the most holy place. As part of the worship service, the priests would go up the first step, turn and sing the first song of Ascents and continue up the stairs, stopping at each one to turn and sing another Psalm of Ascent until they reached the top stair.

Perhaps, since the High Priest was the only one allowed to go into the Holy of Holies once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the priests wanted the people to know that even though He was inaccessible, He was still prepared to bless the people if they turned their hearts towards Him and blessed Him, no matter what was going on in their lives. In other words, perhaps these songs were given as Psalms of Ascent to teach us the discipline of worship so that our relationship with G-d did not depend on the circumstances of our lives, but was centred on who He is and on His promises, both for this life and for the one which is to come.

I prefer the Talmudic explanation that the Psalms of Ascent were given to teach us that praise is a spiritual discipline which should depend on our understanding of who G-d is and what He does, and not on the uncertain circumstances of our lives.

Four of the Psalms come from David and one of them comes from Solomon. The rest are anonymous, but likely come from the period of time during of the Babylonian exile, both when the House of Israel was in exile and when the captives were allowed to come home. According to the Talmud, once the collection was put together, once the exiles returned, the Psalms of Ascent were used as part of the worship service in the second temple.

So we are dealing with a very old collection of songs (Psalms are meant to be sung) and while we no longer have the original melodies, as believers, we are still able to appreciate the joyful discipline of praise and worship, which still applies for believers today.

No matter what stage of life we are in and no matter what is going on in our lives, we are called to maintain the discipline of praise. So that even when we feel that G-d is far away and the safety of His home in glory is not yet accessible for us, we can still lift our hearts and rise above

the hopes and fears of all the years and rest in our assurance that He will never leave us or forsake us. Once we realize that He is always in control, even when our lives are out of control (terrorist bombings, natural disasters, the falling value of the loonie and Britain voting to leave the European Union), we are no longer afraid and we no longer feel alone or abandoned – even if there is no immediate improvement in our situation.

The whole collection of the Psalms has also been called the Torah of the heart. This means that while the Torah (the five books of Moses) has been called the Law of G-d for the mind, this special collection of songs and laments, which is also divided into five books, has been called the Law of G-d for the heart.

According to the Bible, it is not just what we think that matters, how we feel is also important – not in order for us to always feel good, but for us to always work through how we are feeling, so that our hearts and our minds are at peace with G-d, no matter what is going on in our lives.

Well, let's look at the first of these Psalms of Ascent and take our first step out of the situations of our lives, as we move towards the safety of His presence and His promises.

Psalm 120: A Song of Degrees (Ascents)

In my distress, I cry unto the L-RD and He answers me. L-RD deliver my soul from lying lips and a deceitful tongue. What shall it give you and what return do you get with a lying tongue? A warriors sharp arrows and the glowing coals of the broom tree? Woe is me that I have to sojourn in Meshech and dwell among the tents of Kedar. My soul has dwelt long enough among those who hate peace. I am for peace, but as soon as I speak, they are for war.

In the period just before the exile, Babylon replaced Assyria as the dominant power in the Middle East and the king of Judah came under the control of this world power. Three kings ruled in quick succession and the last one swore to make the king of Babylon his covenant overlord and promised not to rebel against him. There was still a lot of political turmoil in the region and Egypt promised to help Judah throw off the yoke of Babylon and regain her independence. Instead of being faithful to the oath which he swore, the last king of Judah rebelled and after the Babylonians defeated the Egyptian army, they laid siege to Jerusalem.

Cut off from any help, Jerusalem was eventually captured and along with the holy temple, the entire city was burned to the ground and its population was taken in captivity for seventy years. This Psalm reflects some of the sadness felt by those who disagreed with the king's decision to go back on his solemn oath and rebel, but before the lament, the Psalm begins with both a mournful cry unto the L-rd and a gracious answer.

We are not told specifically what answer was given to the Psalmist by the L-rd, but under the circumstances, while his whole world was crumbling, the Psalmist is assured that G-d is still his true sovereign L-rd and as believers, we are never truly lost or abandoned. The anchor for our souls and the rock which cannot be moved remains our L-rd and as long as we are in contact with Him and as long as we are crying out to Him, He will never leave us nor forsake us and we can survive all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, safe under the shelter of the wings of the Almighty.

The Psalmist moves on to ask a rhetorical question about the dubious reward which awaits those who use lying lips and resort to a deceitful tongue – they reap what they sow and experience the warrior’s sharp arrow and the hot burning coals which are tossed over the walls at them. In other words the beleaguered defenders of rebellious Jerusalem are reaping what they have sown. They lied and now their city is going to be destroyed and they are going to be taken into captivity. It is a kind of an "I told you so" Psalm.

The Jewish exiles were scattered throughout the Babylonian empire, from the shores of Turkey on the Black Sea (Meshech) to the tents of the wandering Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula (Kedar). Now both of these territories were outside the direct control of Babylon and it may mean that some either fled to these areas to escape captivity, or that they wandered aimlessly until they eventually ended up in these areas far from the Promised Land.

The Psalmist returns to his original predicament when Judah decides to rebel and says that he has dwelt long enough among those who hate peace. Under Babylon, Judah had peace and could have dwelt in safety and regained some of the lost prosperity which long years of war had deprived the people of. The Psalmist does not want war and realizes that it will bring great suffering and lead the people into captivity in distant lands, but no one listens to him.

When he speaks for peace, the majority are for war and the nation is overrun and taken into captivity, including the Psalmist. He has to share the fate of the fools who broke their word and who fought for an unrighteous cause and he turns his distress into a kind of song of warning and of comfort.

There is no advantage to a deceitful tongue or to lying lips. They will only bring about destruction and captivity. And sometimes even when you speak the truth clearly and forcefully, you will not be listened to and your voice will be drowned out by those who are determined to fight, even though peace is the better option.

From the sad loneliness of exile, the innocent soul cries out to the L-rd and discovers three things. First of all the people got what they wanted, but it was a war they could not win and which destroyed the nation and the temple. Secondly, sometimes the folly of those among whom we live may also negatively impact us, even though we are innocent and tried to work for peace. Finally, through it all, as long as we do not lose our connection to G-d, in the long run and according to the bigger picture, nothing is really wrong with the picture, because walking with G-d is always the answer in all the circumstances of our lives, be they ever so good or ever so bad.

What can we learn from this Psalm? First of all, as long as you remain in contact with G-d and acknowledge His sovereignty, you are in good spiritual shape and can endure whatever the foolishness of life throws at you. Secondly, we may have to share the fate of those whose foolishness has brought suffering upon us, our families and even our nation and we do not have to like where we are or what is happening in our lives in order to walk with the L-rd and shine as a light in a dark place. Worship remains our constant duty and privilege.

Here I think of those dissenting Christians who lived under the Nazis and spent the war in concentration camps, even though they tried to warn the people about Hitler. I also think of the Christians with Jewish blood, whose faith in Jesus did not spare them from the same fate as their brethren. From the lion’s den and from the fiery furnace, as long as we direct our cries to

the L-rd and do not lose sight of Him in all the troubles we are facing, in the long run our lives and our hearts and our generations will come through intact. The worst thing that could happen is that we would be killed, but as long as we do not let anything kill our faith, we can still take refuge under the shadow of the Almighty, even if we hate being where we are and are disgusted with what is happening in our lives.

The most important thing in our lives remains our relationship with the L-rd. It is not always a guarantee that things will work out well or that those among us will make good choices and not negatively impact our lives by their foolishness. It is a guarantee that we will always be sheltered in the storm, even if we are not sheltered from the storm and also that when we vent to the L-rd, we are not sinning, but are telling Him the truth which the foolish people in our lives refuse to listen to. And whether or not they ever come around to the truth, we will never abandon it because our calling is to remain a light and shine in dark places and never let the darkness put out our light.

It is always good to worship the L-rd, even when our lives crumble and things go from bad to worse, with no end in sight. Heaven is the only end we should always keep in sight and as long as our cries get our anger and disappointment off our chests without losing sight of our final destination, things are looking up. We can always ascend into the presence of the L-rd and should always do so, in good times and in bad times.

Shalom.