

May 5, 2013 by Steve Brandon



Far From God

Psalm 120

1. Seeking Deliverance (verses 1-4)

2. Seeking Peace (verses 5-7)

Let's all sing a little song. It's a song that most all of us know.

"As the deer panteth for the water,
So my soul longeth after thee."

This short chorus comes from Psalm 42:1. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). We sing this verse often as a praise chorus. And it's only right that we should do so. But, I often think that we miss the original thrust of this verse.

As you read the rest of Psalm 42, you discover that the Psalmist was far from God. But, he was longing for God. He was like the deer, who was running through the woods, and away from its predators. Soon, after running and walking through the woods, he's thirsty. But, he's deep in the forest, far away from the flowing streams and longing for a drink.

That's the picture of Psalm 42. As the deer in the woods, away from the water brooks, is thirsty and longing for a drink. So is the Psalmist in the humdrum of life -- away from God, facing the ridicule of his enemies, longing for God and longing to be with the people of God in the assembly.

Listen to verses 2-4.

Psalm 42:2-4

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

The Psalm is a picture of a worshiper who longs for God but is currently distant from God. He is distant from the people of God. He longs to be with the crowd worshipping. But, alas, he is far off.

This is a similar picture that we find in our text today -- Psalm 120. The Psalmist is far from God. The Psalmist is far from the blessing of God. The Psalmist is far from the people of God. You can sense his longing to be with God.

Psalm 120 is one of the Songs of Ascents. These are the Psalms that the Israelites would sing as they would travel up to Jerusalem to worship as they were required to do three times each year. In some way or another, these Psalms have a vision to help worshipers prepare their hearts to worship the Lord. My heart is that we would learn from them and that our hearts would be equally prepared to worship the Lord each week as we come to Him.

Last week, we looked at Psalm 122. It was, "THE Song of Ascents", which spoke about how glad David was when summoned to the house of the LORD. This week, we find ourselves in Psalm 120. We find the Psalmist "Far from God." Let's read our text:

Psalm 120

In my trouble I cried to the Lord,
And He answered me.
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips,
From a deceitful tongue.
What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you,
You deceitful tongue?
Sharp arrows of the warrior,
With the burning coals of the broom tree.
Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,
For I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace.

I am for peace, but when I speak,
They are for war.

First thing we see in this Psalm is that the Psalmist is in trouble. This is clear in verse 1, ...

Psalm 120:1
In my trouble I cried to the Lord,
And He answered me.

We see the nature of his trouble in verse 2, ...

Psalm 120:2
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips,
From a deceitful tongue.

He was in trouble from verbal attacks that have come upon him. Apparently, there were those who were telling lies about him. There were those who were deceitful about him. There is no way of knowing who these people were that were saying these things. There is no way of knowing what they were saying. There is no superscription. And there is no author given to this Psalm.

All we can say is that lies were being told about him. In some way, people were seeking to tear him down with falsehoods. And he was feeling the pain. If you have ever felt the sting of lies against you, you know the pain. You are misunderstood by others. Your reputation is damaged. People begin to deal with you as if the rumors were true. You can easily understand why the Psalmist prays that God would deliver him out of his troubles.

This is my first point, ...
1. Seeking Deliverance (verses 1-4)

The Psalmist desperately wants out. He wants rescued from the lies being told about him.

Notice that he wasn't being physically assaulted by others. Nor was he in danger of death. He wasn't facing the violence of others. Nor was he in sickness or in weakness. He was troubled by what others were saying about him.

Proverbs 18:21 says that "death and life are in the power of the tongue." Words can build you up. Words can tear you down.

The words of the righteous are "a fountain of life" (Prov. 10:11). They are to be valued like "choice silver" (Prov. 10:20). They are sweet like honeycomb (Prov. 16:24). But, "with his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor" (Prov. 11:9). The words of the wicked are "violence" (Prov. 10:11). "His mouth calls for blows" (Prov. 18:6). Proverbs 15:4 says, "A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit." And the Psalmist was being crushed by perverse words.

The well-known saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me", simply is not true! I have seen people crushed by words spoken to them. I have seen people in tears because of words spoken to them. I have seen people recall words spoken years before that were never forgotten, because they were so hurtful. Proverbs 26:28 is true: "A lying tongue hates those it crushes."

There's easy application here. Be careful of the words that you speak. Choose them wisely. You can crush others with your words. You can also give life with your words. You can build up! You can edify! So, work to be a builder with your words!

Ephesians 4:29 says it well, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." Catch the weight of this: Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth. That's not merely just swear words. It's derogatory words. It's words of complaint. It's words of unjust criticism. It's words of deceit and falsehood. It's words meant to tear down and destroy.

Rather, the call of God upon our lives is to use our mouth and our tongue and our lips to build up and to edify! That's giving words of compliment. That's giving constructive criticism in love. That's giving words of encouragement. That's helping people with your mouth. It's like our Fighter Verse from last week, "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10b). There should be a sort of one-up-man-ship in showing honor and edifying one another.

Do you realize that your words can be the means of giving grace to others. Oh, may we all be a people who give grace with the words of our mouth.

But the Psalmist here was in no such situation. He wasn't being built up by those around him. Rather, he was being torn down. The words that were spoken by His enemies were coming upon Him.

Being one of the Songs of Ascents, I do believe that the Psalmist longed to be in a place where he would not be so verbally abused. The Psalmist longed to be among the people of God, giving praise to God, rather than be far from the people of God and torn down by such hurtful words. In verse 3, he asks the question, ...

Psalm 120:3

What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you,
You deceitful tongue?

It is difficult to know why this question is asked. This is poetry. Perhaps an exact answer will elude us. But, I believe that the best way to take this verse is as an appeal to God to do something about these deceivers that he is facing.

At the end of verse 2, we see the words, "deceitful tongue." That's the same words at the end of verse 3, "deceitful tongue." The Psalmist is still talking about the same thing. Verse 2 is his cry for deliverance. Verse 3 is his cry for vengeance against those saying such things.

I believe that verse 3 is a prayer to the Lord, "Lord, what will You do to those casting their deceptions my way?" The point here is that he's not taking matters into his own hands. He's not pursuing and going after the liars and the slanderers himself. Rather, he's waiting upon the Lord to deal with them.

The great principle comes in Romans 12:19, "'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay' says the Lord." Though I am far from God; though I am far from the people of God, I'll trust the Lord to deal with these people. Furthermore, I believe that verse 4 is a recommendation.

Psalm 120:4
Sharp arrows of the warrior,
With the burning coals of the broom tree.

Again, verse 4 is very poetic. It gives us two word pictures without any sort of explanation as to why the Psalmist mentions them.

We easily understand the first word picture: sharp arrows. We have seen enough arrows. Perhaps you have even shot a bow and arrow in your life. You know that it will penetrate a target and can kill.

The second picture is a bit more difficult: burning coals of the broom tree? What is a broom tree? What are the burning coals?

The broom tree is a desert plant that stands some 15 feet tall. When you burn the roots of this tree, they burn with a hot fire. The embers last a long time. The roots of this tree are still used today by Arabs for coal.

So, how are we to understand these phrases? I'm not entirely sure, but I think that the best way is to understand them as the Psalmist crying to God with a recommendation of how He can pour out His vengeance upon these people.

We see some similar language in Psalm 64. Psalm 64:3 speaks of the enemies who "have sharpened their tongue like a sword" and who have "aimed bitter speech as their arrow." This is the same picture that we have here: sharp arrows describing the deep hurt of words. Later, the Psalmist describes God's vengeance upon these people, "But God will shoot at them with an arrow;" (Ps. 64:7).

Like Proverbs 26:27, "He who digs a pit will fall into it, And he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him." In this case, "He who aims bitter speech like an arrow will be pierced by the same"

As Spurgeon says, "Swift, sure, and sharp shall be the judgment. Their words were as arrows, and so shall their punishment be. God will see to it that their punishment shall be comparable to an arrow keen in itself, and driven home with all the force with which a mighty man shoots it from his bow of steel." ^[1] Spurgeon goes on to describe the burning coals, "The slanderer shall feel woes comparable to coals of juniper, which are quick in flaming, fierce in blazing and long in burning. He shall feel sharp arrows and sharper fires. Awful doom!" ^[2]

At this point, it would be good to return to verse 1.

Psalm 120:1
In my trouble I cried to the Lord,
And He answered me.

It may be that the deliverance sought in verses 2-4 have already been experienced. It may be that he is referring to some other event in which the LORD was faithful to deliver. We don't know these details. But, what we do know is sufficient enough. He was in trouble. He cried to the Lord. The Lord heard his cry. The Lord answered his cry.

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember Jonah? The LORD called him to cry out against the wickedness of Nineveh. But, Jonah ran away. He ran from the Lord. He refused to obey.

As a result of his rebellion, he found himself drowning in the sea. The LORD used a large fish to rescue him. And from the stomach of the fish, he testified, "I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice." (Jonah 2:2). Jonah was saved from the dangers of the sea and went on to bring God's message to Nineveh.

Do you remember how the people of Nineveh responded? Jonah brought a message of condemnation, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). "The people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). They called on God earnestly and turned from their wicked ways and from the violence which was in their hands (Jonah 3:8). "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh was spared.

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember David? He had been anointed as the next king of Israel by Samuel, the prophet (1 Sam. 16). After killing Goliath, he had obtained quite a following for himself (1 Sam. 18:7). Such matters enraged Saul, the king. On a number of occasions, Saul pursued David, seeking to kill him (1 Sam. 24, 26). But, David testified in Psalm 18:3, "I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, ... And I am saved from my enemies" (Ps. 18:3). David went on to be king of Israel, reigning for 40 years, and paving the way for Israel to be a place of world-wide prominence (1 Kings 10).

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember Hezekiah? He was the king of Israel when Sennacherib, king of Assyria was rising up against them. Rabshekah came as a messenger and sought to stir the people of God against Hezekiah, claiming that none of the other nations could withstand the mighty power of Assyria (2 Kings 18:28-35). At one point, he told the people that Hezekiah was deceiving them and leading them astray (2 Kings 18:32).

But, Hezekiah prayed to the LORD. At the very end of his prayer, he prayed, "Now, O LORD our God, I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God" (2 Kings 19:19). Soon afterwards, Isaiah came to Hezekiah saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib, king of Assyria, I have heard you'" (2 Kings 19:20). "Then, it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose up early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead" (2 Kings 19:35).

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember the people of Israel? They were in the bondage of slavery in Egypt. And "their cry for help ... rose up to God" (Ex. 2:23). "God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them" (Ex. 2:24-25). And so, He raised up Moses, who rescued the people from slavery!

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember Esther and the Jews? Haman had conspired against the Jews, to have them all killed, "both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder" (Esth. 3:13). The all of the Jews in Susa were summoned to fast and seek the LORD for three days (Esth. 4:16). God heard their prayer and turned the tables, that they might destroy their enemies and plunder their spoil on the same day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar (Esth. 9:11-12).

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember those unnamed saints of Psalm 107? We are told of those who "wandered in the wilderness" (Ps. 107:4) and found themselves "hungry and thirsty" (Ps. 107:5). "They cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:6).

Psalm 107 tells of the "prisoners in misery and chains" (Ps. 107:10). When they had nowhere else to turn, "They cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:13). Psalm 107 tells of the foolish souls who were afflicted and drew near to the gates of death (Ps. 107:17, 18). "They cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:19). Psalm 107 tells of the sailors who went down to the sea in ships (Ps. 107:23). When the storm came, "their souls melted away", and they "were at their wits' end" (Ps. 107:26, 27). "They cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:28).

God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble. Do you remember the leper who fell down before the feet of Jesus and said, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean" (Matt. 8:2)? Do you remember the woman who worked her way through the crowd, just so that she could touch the edge of His robe (Matt. 9:21)? Do you remember the Canaanite woman who continued to cry out, "Have mercy on me Lord" (Matt. 15:22)? Do you remember the blind men who cried out, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened" (Matt. 20:33)? The Lord healed them all out of their trouble.

Do you remember when the disciples were on the sea and in the storm? They were fearful of drowning. They cried out to Jesus, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!" (Matt. 8:25). And so Jesus "got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm" (Matt. 8:26).

Do you remember when Peter began to walk on the water to see Jesus? All was well until he looked at the wind. Becoming frightened, Peter began to sink? He cried out, "Lord, save me!" (Matt. 14:30). "Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him" and helped him back into the boat (Matt. 14:31-32).

Do you remember the thief on the cross? Along with Jesus, he was being crucified. In his trouble, he cried to the Lord, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42). Sure enough, Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Do you have trouble in your life? Are there pains in your life that you simply can't bear? Are there situations in your life that you have no idea how to solve? Are you feeling the pains of hurtful words?

Then, join the chorus. Cry out to the Lord. God is in the business of answering people who cry out to Him in their trouble.

Perhaps you are here today, but you are far from God. Perhaps you are here in the flesh, but for all intents and purposes, your spirit is far from here. Your heart for God is little. Your heart for sin is great. Then, cry out to the Lord. The promise of the Scripture is clear: "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved". [\[3\]](#)

Believe in Christ. Trust in the forgiveness of sins that He offers. Come into His presence. Seek deliverance. This is what the Psalmist was seeking. This is what the Psalmist found.

Let's turn our attention now to my second point. In verses 1-4, we see the Psalmist Seeking Deliverance (verses 1-4) In verses 5-7, we see the Psalmist ...

2. Seeking Peace (verses 5-7)

Psalm 120:5-7

Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,
For I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace.
I am for peace, but when I speak,
They are for war.

Here we see a picture of the Psalmist, who is far from the people of God. Verse 5 gives us a geographical reference. Meshech was located in central Asia, modern day Turkey. Kedar was located in Arabia, modern day Saudi Arabia. If you know even a little bit about geography, you will recognize that these locations are more than a thousand miles from each other. In the ancient world that was many months of travel from one location to the other. How could the Psalmist dwell in both of these places? Poetry!

In other words, the idea here isn't so much geography as it is ethnicity. Meshech and Kedar are filled with pagan people. One commentator calls these places, "a general term for the heathen". [\[4\]](#) Another commentator says that these names "are used symbolically for a merciless people". [\[5\]](#) John Phillips writes, "The psalmist felt that his enemies were ruthless, like the people of Meshech, and untamed, like the people of Kedar. The Greeks would have called them 'barbarians'; we might call them 'vandals.'" [\[6\]](#)

You don't need to know much about history and geography to discern this. Just look at how verses 6 and 7 read.

Psalm 120:6-7

Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace.
I am for peace, but when I speak,
They are for war.

Regardless of where exactly this was; regardless of what exactly the people were like, the Psalmist felt as an alien in a strange land, far from the dwellings of God.

I mentioned last week how I think that this is the point of Psalm 120. The Songs of Ascents were sung as the people of Israel traveled up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Psalm 120 is the beginning of the travel. The Psalmist finds himself in a far away land, with peoples whose hearts are far away from God! And it only makes him long for the people of God that much more.

And in many ways, we in America can relate. America is very much a "post-Christian" nation. We were founded upon godly principles. But, as the years have progressed, we have drifted.

This is especially true of our generation. We are in the midst of a cultural revolution. What began in the 1960's as the sexual revolution has begun to come to its logical conclusion. Homosexuality and same sex marriage are becoming mainstream. More and more states are allowing same sex marriage. This past week, Rhode Island was added to the list of those states that allow for same sex marriage. That now makes ten states of our union that allow this. [\[7\]](#)

In many ways, the revolution is already over. I believe that the cultural momentum is simply too strong to overturn. It seems as if every week, there is some famous person who comes out of the closet. And all in the media give their unfeigned support.

This past week, it was Jason Collins, a center for the Washington Wizards. He has become the first athlete in one of the four major sports to come out with his homosexual orientation. And right on cue, "Many notable figures, including Magic Johnson, Father James Martin, Kobe Bryant, Nancy Pelosi, Rev. Al Sharpton, and both the Clinton and Obama families offered words of support and encouragement" [\[8\]](#)

To speak against the homosexual agenda of our day and age is to face the wrath of many. The case in point came this week with the coming out of Jason Collins.

Shortly after that announcement, ESPN gathered two of their commentators, LZ Granderson and Chris Broussard to discuss Jason Collins' announcement. These men are friends. These men are as far away as you can be on this issue. LZ Granderson is an openly gay man. Chris Broussard is an outspoken Christian man. These men are friends and have worked together for years. But, they are far apart on their beliefs on this issue.

They had a 13 minute conversation about the reality of gay men in sports. There was a mediator who was directing the conversation. For the first eight minutes of the conversation, they were very much in agreement, speaking about the reality of a gay man in sports, speaking about today's climate in society and how things are set for this to happen, speaking about how supportive the sports community has been, speaking about the question of the locker room.

And then, eight minutes into the conversation, Chris Broussard expressed his own views. He said, ...

"I'm a Christian. I don't agree with homosexuality. I think it's a sin, as I think all sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is.

LZ knows that. He and I have played on basketball teams together for several years. We've gone out, had lunch together, we've had good conversations, good laughs together. He knows where I stand, and I know where he stands. ...

Just like I may tolerate someone whose lifestyle I disagree with, he can tolerate my beliefs. He disagrees with my beliefs and my lifestyle, but true tolerance and acceptance is being able to handle that as mature adults and not criticize each other and call each other names...."

LZ took offense to that, insisting that he, himself, is also a Christian. The mediator asked Chris Broussard to comment on that. And so, he said, ...

"Personally, I don't believe that you can live an openly homosexual lifestyle or an openly premarital sex between heterosexuals, if you're openly living that type of lifestyle, then the Bible says you know them by their fruits, it says that's a sin. If you're openly living in unrepentant sin, whatever it may be, not just homosexuality, adultery, fornication, premarital sex between heterosexuals, whatever it may be, I believe that's walking in open rebellion to God and to Jesus Christ. I would not characterize that person as a Christian because I do not think the Bible would characterize them as a Christian."

And these comments set off a firestorm this past week. Chris Broussard has been called a bigot. He has been called "homophobic." There have been calls to suspend him! Petitions have been signed to have him fired from his job he has held for past decade.

This is where our society is. You cannot speak against homosexuality as sin in our society today without facing the wrath of the media. You cannot speak up against the sin of homosexuality without getting in trouble at work or at school or at any other public institution. I don't care how peaceful you are about these things. I don't care how carefully you try to say them. I don't care how much you try to maintain peace. Your words against the sin of our society will turn into vitriol against you.

We profess to be a tolerant society. And indeed, we are a tolerant society. We are a tolerant society unless you express your views against someone's lifestyle. And then, you will discover that we aren't so tolerant after all. Because, our understanding of tolerance has changed. It used to mean, "I may disagree with you completely, but I will treat you with respect. And I will fight for your freedom to express your views." Today, tolerance means, "you must approve of everything I do."

There's a big difference. It means that we cannot hold to our convictions without others turning against us.

This is the sort of thing that the Psalmist is getting at in verse 7, ...

Psalm 120:7
I am for peace, but when I speak,
They are for war.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves in constant friction with society. Whether that be prayer in schools or hanging the ten commandments in court rooms or displaying nativity scenes on public property or saying "Merry Christmas" during the holidays or saying that abortion is murder or saying that homosexuality is sin. I don't care how carefully you say such things. Our society is moving away from them.

You may be for peace, but they will be for war. At some point, you may well say with the Psalmist, ...

Psalm 120:6
Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace.

The remedy is to be with the people of God who love peace. Isn't that where the Songs of Ascents are headed? They are headed to "Jerusalem," the city of peace! And so also ought the church to be a place of peace. The church ought to be a refuge for the people of God.

I think of the African American church in the south during the days of slavery. When they were given the opportunity to worship in the church, they stayed there for hours! Why? Because it was a place of safety.

When I went to UCLA, we had a prayer and worship gathering on Friday nights. It was a small group of Christians on a large secular campus. Those Friday nights were like our refuge from the worldliness of our environment all week long. So out RVBC be to us! It should be a safe and peaceful place.

We may face the challenges of living in a foreign land throughout the week. Oh, but when we come into the household of God, it all should change! This should be a place of refuge and of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3
Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). And Romans 12:18 instructs, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." May we long for the nearness of God.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 5, 2013 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Treasury of David, Volume 3, part 2, p. 7.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Romans 10:13; Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21

[4] Kidner

[5] Phillips, Exploring the Psalms, Psalms 89-150, p. 421

[6] Ibid.

[7] http://www.nypost.com/p/news/national/rhode_island_to_become_th_state_i04s5eGglj8eDeW1Jw9frN

[8] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/wp/2013/05/03/chris-broussard-and-jason-collins-its-okay-to-be-gay-and-christian/>