



GRACE CHURCH

In My Distress, I Called

Psalm 120:1-7

Grace Church | June 4, 2023

Songs have the unique ability to connect experience and emotion in such a relatable way. Maybe some of you have already made a playlist, just to get into the spirit of summer! One of my seminary professors, when he made the drive from KY to TX for vacation, would listen ONLY to Texas country the entire 13-hour drive. He was headed home, and needed to get into the TX spirit on the way there! But for us, it may seem strange that THIS song, Psalm 120, is our first song of the summer. Wouldn't we want to sing light-hearted songs, blasted in the car, windows rolled down, with an iced coffee in the cupholder? These lyrics don't seem very fitting for a road trip!! The sadness of these verses may not sit well with us because, simply put, they don't make us feel happy. Would this song make it onto your summer road trip playlist? Onto any playlist?

This week marks the beginning of our summer series preaching the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120–134. These 15 psalms were likely sung after Israel's exile and return from foreign nations. Although many had returned to Jerusalem to live as God's people together, many more still lived in other foreign lands. So, Israelites would sing these 15 songs of ascent on their pilgrimage to Israel, both figuratively and literally "ascending/going up" to the presence of the Lord. Remember, temple worship is still central to the experience of God's people, so traveling to Israel was not a light-hearted summer road trip! They needed to go there, because they needed to be close to God and his people. And because of this, Psalm 120 DID make its way onto *their* travel playlist. Why?

The Psalms may sometimes sound strange to our ears because our experiences and emotions do not always mirror what the psalmist is describing or feeling. But the more we engage with them, we just might begin to see that God has actually given them *TO* us so that as we experience life, we have words that match our experience and emotions! After all, we have little trouble finding meaning in many of the songs we sing today! The excitement and energy of the chorus, "Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours!" hits our emotions way harder than just reading an academic paper on the joy of affection. And when we sing together in worship, like we sang this morning, simply stating our gratitude to Jesus hits our emotions just a bit less than when we sing with one loud voice, "Jesus, thank you." Just like the songs we sing, the biblical Psalms bring us to an even higher emotional plane; they help us to match the right words to the right emotions when we can't easily make the connection ourselves.

So given the purpose of the Psalms, we should see now that it is *pretty significant* that God gives us Psalm 120, matching THESE PARTICULAR words with THESE PARTICULAR emotions. God makes

THIS song the first on the “Album of Ascents”. Its first lyrics do not begin with praise, or with thanksgiving, but with the words in **verse 1**, “In my distress, I called to the Lord”. Why? Because it is appropriate, and sometimes even necessary to approach God in sadness. The biblical word for this type of Godly sadness is called lament.

Lament is God’s gift to his people to point a finger at, make sense of, and emotionally process what is wrong in the world (there’s even a whole book in the Bible on it). One commentator says it well, that the laments of Scripture teach us that, “all experiences of disorder are a proper subject of discourse with God. There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart” with God.¹ This is true even for you, kids. You can process any and every one of your emotions with God. Nothing is out of bounds.

So why this first song? Because, in our corporate ascending to God this morning, it is right and necessary to acknowledge that *living in our broken, sinful world is distressing and exhausting*. So, with God’s help, let’s understand the lyrics of our first song of the summer, and how they become our own. First, we’ll make sense of what specifically the psalmist laments. Then, we will contemplate the relevance of these words for us. And lastly, we will consider how we should respond.

The Psalmist’s Lament: A Stranger in a Deceptive and Violent Land

In the very first words of the psalm, the psalmist cries out to God. And he cries out for this reason: he is a stranger in a deceptive and violent land. **Verse 5** also clues us into this fact. The author is in a foreign place, not in his homeland of Israel, where God’s temple and people are. Mesech and Kedar are two different nations that are to the far north and south of Israel. So, through poetic imagery here, the psalmist uses these two nations, being far away from Israel, to represent all the surrounding nations who do not know or love God. As far as the north is from the south, so is the psalmist far from the presence of God. And because of it, he cries out to God: “Rescue me! I want to go home!!” The psalmist’s homeland, where God dwells, SEEMS and IS far, far away from where he currently is. He is abroad and afraid.

He gives another reason for his distress in **verse 2**. It is not just that the psalmist is far from God, but he is also surrounded by constant reminders of it, because of lying lips and deceitful tongues around him. Every mouth he sees, every person that he talks to, spews out false and dishonest words like sewage into a swamp. There is no integrity or honor, only lies. What could be further from a love of God?

If we know anything about the chapter before this, we see a picture of someone who truly does loves God and his word. It is surely no accident that Psalm 120 is placed right after Psalm 119. The uprightness of one who loves God in 119 versus the types of people described in Psalm 120 could not be more opposite. It’s like water and oil. The one who knows God rejoices in truth and hates

¹ *How to Read the Psalms*, 126.

falsehood. But where our psalmist is, in the foreign lands of Mesech and Kedar, falsehood and lies are all that he hears.

Because of his distress, the author's cries spill over from pleas for rescue, to direct interrogation of these liars in **verses 3-4**. "What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you?" His frustration is clear here, as he reminds them (and himself) that he serves a just God, who will not let lies or tricks go unjudged. "A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree" to be exact. These two pieces of imagery – sharp arrows and burning coals – are used extensively in the Psalms to signify God's judgment of the wicked. Ps 64 is an example of one: The author knows that although evil men "aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless...", God will actually "shoot his arrow at them" (v. 3) and they will be "brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them."(v. 7). Judgment for the wicked tongue.

The imagery of burning coals, too, is consistent with God's judgment. Like a scalding hot shower in July, the burning judgment of God will come to those who speak lies and deception, like in Psalm 140: "Let burning coals fall upon [the wicked]! Let them be cast into fire, into miry pits, no more to rise!" (v. 10). This is Godly and rightful comeuppance. Those who speak lies will reap their due reward: arrows to the chest, and scorching hot coals on their heads.

It's not just the lies that torment the author, but even more than this, he is exhausted by the *violence* around him, in **verses 5-7**. "Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace!" Why does he moan with exhaustion? Because no matter how many times he raises the white flag of compromise, those around him keep the wheel spinning to sharpen their swords. No matter how often the author speaks peace, his neighbors wrap their knuckles, ready for a fight. They are contentious and merciless. They would rather charge head on into conflict than compromise. So, the psalmist's recognition of judgment for the wicked in these verses is a part of how God "answers" him in **verse 1**. But even still, he feels distressed and drained.

Let's turn back to our question from the beginning: Would this song make its way onto your summer road trip playlist? Is this our song to sing? Do our experiences and emotions match up with these words? Perhaps the answer is no, we think, because the Christian has too much to hope for to be this distressed! These words are far too hopeless and graceless for us to sing, aren't they? We are Christians, for goodness' sake! Why does the psalmist feel so free to air his grievances about the evil around him?

Maybe this illustration will help. There was a man named Franz Jaggerstatter, who lived in Austria as a farmer his whole life (maybe you have seen the 2019 movie *A Hidden Life*). Nothing noticeably special about him. He was a devout Catholic Christian who loved his family and faithfully served his community. But as the Nazi party rose to power in Germany, Franz began to feel less and less at home. He laments the wicked and senseless violence of his country, writing one early essay: "Can I defend my homeland when we simply invade other lands, are not guilty for doing so, and rob and murder in these lands?... I can never and shall never believe that we Catholics must make ourselves

available to do the work of the most evil and dangerous anti-Christian power that has ever existed.”² When he was drafted to military service to fight for Hitler, he refused to fight, was imprisoned, and after a few months, was executed, as a conscientious objector. More senseless violence.

Franz, this small-town farmer from Austria, was surrounded by war and deception, where wrong slowly became right, and deception and violence was the most valuable cultural currency. And like his response, and the response of the psalmist in our passage, we cannot shut our eyes or our mouths from the tragic consequences of sin in our world today. When we look out into the world, when we read the news, when we observe the state of things HERE and NOW, the world of Psalm 120 actually looks and feels EXACTLY like our own! And like any Jewish pilgrim, making their way to Jerusalem, traveling through God-hating and sin-filled lands, we too are strangers in a deceptive and violent world.

The Christian’s Lament: Strangers in a Deceptive and Violent World

This is how the words of Psalm 120 become our own, when we share not only its words, but also its emotions. The main emotions of the psalm, the distress of **verse 1** and the exhaustion of **verse 6** are not only fitting, but NECESSARY Christian reactions to the world.

We know the truth of God, but the world doesn’t and is instead filled with lies, gossip, and deception. Ever since sin entered the world, untruth and pursuit of selfish gain has been rampant in the world. We saw it first in the Garden of Eden, all throughout the stories of the Bible, in Nazi-era Germany, all the way until today. God has set a people aside for his own possession because, otherwise, no one would choose righteousness – not even us. But now as followers of Jesus, forgiven and redeemed by God from our own wickedness, is it not a great *comfort* to now be led and taught by God in his ways of righteousness and holiness and love and truth? We have begun to see the beauty of God as more precious and valuable above anything and everything in this world! But the world does not see God in this way.

Church, lies and deception are everywhere! Do you worry that trustworthiness and honesty in your job might actually get you fired? Are you tired of always being the buzzkill when you don’t laugh at your friends’ condescending and mean-spirited jokes? Friends, I have to say, for me, nothing exhausts me more than gossip. When details are shared about a person’s life that has no business being talked about, and the whole purpose of bringing it up is to put them down, it makes me want to zip their mouth shut as fast as I can and twist my ears into my head.

The sinful world we live in is not where we want to be! To know the faithfulness, reliability, and grace of Christ, has such a softening and winsome effect on our hearts. He knits our hearts together to love one another, to put others first just as He has graciously done with us. How much

² *Letters and Writings from Prison*, 190.

more potent than, like the smell of death, are the lies of a wicked and selfish culture around us? Yes, Jesus is coming again, and when he does it will be so relieving, but only because we will be freed from the anxiety of lies and corruption that just doesn't seem to let up. One day, deception will be gone forever! But for now, it abounds. Do you hear it? Do you feel it?

We also know the peace of God, but the world doesn't and instead is filled with violation, corruption, and destruction. The violence in our culture is truly rampant, is it not? The mere presence of any type of sexual violence in our culture today is a sickening reality. The violation and corruption of someone else's body for sexual pleasure, the twistedness and sickness of such actions, it is stomach-churning. And the abuses of political and economic power, too, often leave such destructive results, even while it is so often being quickly swept under the rug and hidden away. It's sobering, too, how easily violence has become entertainment in our culture! So easily entertained!!! Video games, TV shows and movies, even joking about violence. Even humor as awful as, "If this thing doesn't happen, I'm going to kill you"...

And our familiarity with violence makes tragedies like mass shootings commonplace. Just this last week was the one-year anniversary of the Uvalde mass shooting. In just the last year, at least three significant shootings at schools.³ Oh, friends, I am tired of kids being killed with guns. Will schools, or malls, or any other public spaces ever be safe enough? Oh, and I am equally tired of kids being murdered in the womb, day in and day-out. I don't personally have a comprehensive plan for addressing these issues this morning, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't break our hearts. Evil and violence seems to always be around every corner, crouching like a predator, waiting to snatch up the innocent. Oh, my God, the violence of our world is so draining to be around.

Given all of this, God's judgment of such wickedness is assuring. For the liar and war-monger, the swift justice of God from **verses 3-4** is coming. Whether you have observed or actually felt the awful sting of injustice in your life, God's answer is coming. He does see the injustice of wickedness and, for those who have not repented and believed in him, sharp and burning justice is coming for them. And we will see more of God's specific comforts in next week's psalm, Psalm 121. Still, I know this all sounds bleak and sad. That's because it is, church. But like we said at the very beginning, this psalm is a help to us NOT JUST BY making us sorrowful about the state of things. But even more, church, it pushes us to the only option we have left: to cry out to God in hope.

Respond: Cry Out To God in Hope

By acknowledging these mournful realities, we see that the experiences and emotions of Psalm 120 are ones that are not foreign to us, but actually quite familiar. We are indeed strangers in this sin-filled world, and we *need* God's hope. And we can now more easily see why God gives us the gift of lament, because he actually is our hope. Why cry out to someone who can do NOTHING to help us?? In this difficulty, we are not left alone. Surrounded, yes, but not overcome. Heartbroken, yes, but not completely shattered. Exhausted, yes, but not hopeless.

³ Uvalde – 19, Nashville – 3, Michigan State – 4

God himself is our hope, church, not just by promising to save us, but by sympathizing with our sorrows. Jesus Christ, the intercessor and protector of our very souls, works in us by his Spirit, so that his groanings become our groanings, and his laments become our laments. It is not un-Christian to lament the tragedies of sin, because Christ himself did and still does! His response to death was not emotional distancing, but weeping. His reaction to the oppression of wicked men was not apathy, but harsh and righteous judgment. He so lovingly makes himself a comfort to the downcast and weary, not by putting a band-aid over our emotions, but by acknowledging the realities of our world. And then he died to secure a full and final rescue for us. What did he say in the parable we read earlier? "Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7). His righteous rule is coming!

In this life, we are strangers journeying to our final home, that is revealed when Christ comes again and establishes a New Heaven and New Earth where true righteousness lives. And his appearing will be such a wonderful comfort, because *deception* and *violence*, among the many other tragedies that plague us, will be destroyed and will never return. Death, gone. Violence, gone. Selfish deception, gone. Violations and corruptions, gone. The great evil enemy with his schemes, Satan himself, gone. And our own sinful flesh that so easily entangles us, gone.

With this in mind, church, the cries of Psalm 120 can become our own because we know what awaits us in the end, and we can acknowledge with hopeful sadness that we do not yet have it! With the full assurance of our rescue and the judgment of the wicked, we cry out with a loud voice now, "Lord Jesus, come quickly!" Maybe the idea of lament is foreign or uncomfortable to you. If so, perhaps how God is calling you to respond this morning in is this way: Lean into lament, so that you will see his grace as the only option you have left. Lament now because it makes the reality of salvation become that much sweeter. And if you especially feel the emotional impact our world's sorrows, do not simply cry out; cry out in hope. Do not despair. God hears you, and his salvation is coming soon. You are not without hope.

In his final letters from prison, Franz Jaggerstatter wrote often about the assurance of eternal life. In reality, this was his only hope in the end. Imprisoned, stripped of dignity, and removed from his family, it was the hope of salvation that he clung to in his last days. In his final letter, written to his wife, he chose to comfort her with these words:

Do not be overly concerned about earthly things. The Lord indeed knows what we need as long as we are pilgrims in this world... In the next life we need suffer no longer. And the greater the suffering here, the greater joy there... Do not forget me in your prayers. Keep the commandments, and we shall see each other again soon in heaven!⁴

Church, let us embrace this first song of the summer together, knowing this: Living in this sinful world is distressing and exhausting, so we lament in hope, because God hears us, and deliverance is coming soon. Our sufferings will soon turn into joy. Until then, as pilgrims on this journey together, let us cry out in hope.

⁴ *Letters and Writings from Prison*, 128-130.