

SUPPLICATION
Psalm 120
May 10, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Introduction:

This morning we begin a summer series in the fifteen Psalms (120-134) which all have the title, “**A Song of Ascents.**” Without getting into great detail as to the various interpretations concerning what these titles mean, the most likely and widely held belief, and the one with which I agree, is that “**ascents**” refers to the journey made by pilgrims as they went up to the annual festivals observed in Jerusalem as commanded in the Old Testament when God gave the Mosaic law (Ex. 23:14-16; Deut. 16:16). Deuteronomy 16 records three annual feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (or Passover); the Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost); and the Feast of Tabernacles. For our purposes, it is not important to know what these feasts were about, only that they were required to be attended and observed in a particular place — wherever the temple was located. So a pilgrimage was required for each feast. You had to “go up” or “ascend” to Jerusalem to participate in the festivals. Therefore many scholars refer to the topographical elevation of those who from just about any point on the map would have to ascend upward to reach Jerusalem, which was built on Mount Zion 2,700 feet above sea level.

So as we begin our journey through these Psalms today, we note that for us they mark, as they did for the people of God of old, a pilgrimage, a journey. It is a journey that is marked by progress, not instant holiness. It is a difficult journey, not one of ease or the comforts of the world. It is, however, a prosperous journey as it leads to deep communion with God. In other words, as the very titles suggest, our journey of faith in Christ should be one that is upward, progressive, much like that of Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. So we see that these Psalms, which were written by individuals and over time gathered into this songbook, were sung by these on their way to Jerusalem. The psalmist, as we see this morning, initially finds himself in the wilderness, thirsting for God. As we work our way through we see the movement from self and the trials of this world to God’s mercy and grace, longing to be with Him and His people. It is a journey that describes the Christian life, a life that should be marked by growth, i.e., sanctification and discipleship.

In his commentary on these Psalms (and unfortunately our society), *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Eugene Petersen compares this pilgrimage of the faith to our current religious climate:

It is not difficult in such a world (as ours) to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes in the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.¹

Read Psalm 120

¹ Eugene H. Petersen, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 12.

Supplication is one of several words in the Bible referring to prayer. However, although supplication is prayer, it must have some specific meaning to itself. According to the word usage of supplication, it refers to a bending down and indicates a bowing or kneeling in submission. 1 Kings 8, which has one of the lengthier prayers recorded in the Old Testament and contains the word “supplication” 11 times, 1 Kings 8:54 states, “When Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven.” It is not so much the posture of King Solomon that is important, but what his posture demonstrated. To supplicate is to ask for humbly and earnestly. It refers most to the *attitude* of our prayer and many times is used in connection with crying out to God (1 Kings 8:28; 2 Chronicles 6:19; Psalm 28:2; 30:8; 31:22; 142:1; Hebrews 5:7). Consider Psalm 142:1, which states, ¹ “I cry aloud with my voice to the LORD; I make supplication with my voice to the LORD. ² I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him.” The word is also used with the idea of weeping in three (3) passages (Jeremiah 3:21; 31:9; Hosea 12:4).²

Supplication, therefore, is the attitude or spirit of prayer. We bend down to God and cry out to Him for an answer. We submit to His will and to His authority. We earnestly seek His help. In this way, we make supplication to God in our prayers. This is what we find from the psalmist in Psalm 120. Quite frankly, this is not a psalm to read to uplift you. It is a gloomy psalm; a cheerless psalm; a downbeat psalm. This is where the journey, “**The Songs of Ascents,**” begins. There are times when we are down in the dumps. This is one of those times for the psalmist. *It is in just such times that the child of God should cry out to God in supplication.* And this the psalmist does. However, as we will see, in crying out we must trust God and persevere through such down times.

1. A cry of distress (v. 1)

“**In my trouble I cried to the LORD, and He answered me.**” John Bunyan reminds us in *Pilgrim’s Progress* that the way to the Celestial City takes us through the Slough of Despond. We are never promised to be isolated from a world that is against God and His people. There are times when we as believers will get discouraged. The important thing is to recognize your distress and then go to the only One who can help you.

That is exactly what the psalmist does. He knew that God has a perfect record of faithfulness in times such as these. He recalls what had happened so often in the past when he was in distress. He always called upon the Lord, and the Lord always answered him. His present cry of distress was grounded in what God had not only promised but demonstrated in his past calamities. Therefore, his confidence and trust was in God to once again either deliver him or get him through this present circumstance.

So, the God who is faithful to either to deliver us or sustain us was known well by the psalmist. He is one who had an intimate relationship with God because of times just like this. He understood what Peter would later write was the purpose of these trials, to prove one’s faith (1 Pet. 1:6). This particular psalm may have come from David. We’re not sure, but it seems to fit with his experience when he was forced into exile with the Philistines while fleeing King Saul. David often faced situations such as this – and he cried out to God. In his agony, he came.

We would do well to admit that at times we simply are not as honest with ourselves as the psalmist. When someone asks us how we are doing, we say, “Fine.” Sometimes, maybe often, that is not really the case. Some of you have answered me in that way, and sometimes I have

² <http://www.learnthebible.org/supplication.html>, accessed 05/06/2009.

looked at you and said, “Don’t be so convincing.” I could tell by your demeanor that all was not well. Be honest. There are times when we just want to be alone, shut down because we think no one understands or cares. Here is David, a man who was often deeply distressed. He was honest. Charles Haddon Spurgeon once wrote to his congregation,

The furnace still glows around me. Since I last preached to you I’ve been brought very low. My flesh has been tortured with pain, my spirit has been prostrate with depression. I am a potter’s vessel when it is utterly broken—useless and laid aside. Nights of watching and days of weeping have been mine.

Don’t be surprised if you find yourself in this condition. And when you do, there is somebody that’s been there before.

2. A cry for deliverance (v. 2)

“Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.” Here the psalmist takes up his present situation. He trusts that having been heard in the past, his cry will not be ignored in this present calamity, a calamity that he now reveals as slander. If this be David, even though his life is in danger because of Saul, his concern here is his name. His reputation and emotional welfare were being threatened by the lies and deceit of others. He was in the midst of an all out character assassination by ungodly people who sought to destroy him.

That is the way of slander. Unable to find true crimes, false accusations would have to do. If the **“lying lips”** failed to carry out their purposes, then **“a deceitful tongue”** tries to ensnare, to lead him into a trap and draw something that they might be able to accuse. Remember the scribes and Pharisees? Over and over again we see them either bring false accusations against Christ or ask questions in hopes of trapping Him. That is what the psalmist faced here, and we might at times in our lives as well. Sometimes the truth hurts, when others are right about some attitude or action in our life. But it is devastating when we are slandered, when we are innocent but everyone is led to believe otherwise because of **“lying lips”** and **“a deceitful tongue.”**

In these times, what do we do? We cry out to God, **“Deliver my soul.”** Spurgeon wrote, “In our distress, we do not need to hesitate to cry to the Lord. Silence to man and prayer to God are the best cures for this slander.”³

Jeremiah 31:13 – I will turn their mourning into joy and will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow.

Psalms 30:11 – You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness.

3. A cry of declaration (vv. 3-4)

“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.” This cry is not toward his accusers directly, as if he is writing directly to them, but in the context of his supplication. He is rehearsing the fate that awaited those who slandered him. If in fact this is one of David’s psalms, his spirit of prayer becomes a prophetic declaration of severe punishment on the slanderers. The form in which he utters the prediction is that of a familiar oath or curse: “May God do so to you and more also” (Ruth 1:17; 1 Sam. 3:17; 1 Kgs. 2:23). This echoes David’s prophetic curses in other of his psalms (12, 35, 52, 59, 64, 140, 141). His declaration

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1,276.

serves as a warning as well as a reassurance to his own mind that it would be worse for them than for him. In an effort to console himself we hear him, as it were, preaching to himself both the truth of his deliverance and the destruction of his enemies.

* ILLUS: Lloyd-Jones, “Preach the gospel to yourself” in *Spiritual Depressions*

4. A cry of despair (vv. 5-7)

Keeping in mind the idea that these were road songs, and judging from what the writer says in verses 5-7, it would seem that, at the very least, these are the words of one who lives among people who do not share his faith. His neighbors look upon these journeys to Jerusalem with scorn, maybe even amusement. And so, as the faithful traveler heads off toward Jerusalem for the umpteenth time he notices the stares, and hears the whispers, feels the mockery as slanderous and deceitful things are uttered about him and his family, about his faith. It’s quite possible that this slander is coming not only from the unbelieving neighbors, but also from believing neighbors — those who claim to be fellow worshipers of God, but who feel threatened by his devotion and faithfulness. Because they feel threatened, they slander him, they accuse him of false piety or hypocrisy or something — anything to discredit genuine faith. He is surrounded by people who do not care about God or God’s ways.

This is what the psalmist is referring to when he speaks about his “**sojourn in Meshech**” and “**dwelling among the tents of Kedar.**” Around the time that this was written, “**Meshech**” and “**Kedar**” were the upper and lower ends of the map. To speak of living in these places was the writer’s way of saying what it felt like for him. He was saying that when he was slandered and maligned, he felt totally out of place, like he was somewhere he didn’t belong, as if he lived among strangers in the remotest parts of the world.

Derek Thomas points out two things concerning the cause of this man’s despair.⁴ His distress came from those who slandered him, but his despair came first from the fact that he lived in a fallen world, a world that was against him and hostile to him. He was for peace, they were for war and he dwelt among them. He lived in a fallen world hostile to God. But a second cause of his despair is because he is absent from the house of God. He was not with the people of God. Wherever he was, he wasn’t in Jerusalem. He wasn’t in the temple. He was not seeing those typical sacrifices of the Old Testament which were pointing to Christ. He was not under any means of grace.

Isaiah 6:5 – “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

Conclusion

1. A warning against slander.

2. Be honest with God about the condition of your soul.

God already knows the condition of your soul! To be honest with Him is to admit to yourself and to Him that your soul is troubled. Yet, what do we often do? We often try to press on in our own strength, depending on ourselves or, if we want to appear spiritual, our past victories, with no thought of crying out to God. Why? PRIDE! We do not want to appear

⁴ http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/Psalms%20of%20Ascent/psalm_120.htm, accessed 05/08/2009.

somehow less than we really are. It is not unspiritual to be distressed. It is unspiritual to remain in bondage to the distress and give pride a foothold.

3. Pray that God would show Himself through your trial.

We opened our time of worship this morning with the popular praise hymn, “Shout to the Lord.” While most of you probably know the hymn, you might not know as much about the hymn writer, Darlene Zschech. Her path to Christ was wrought with peril and strife. At the age of thirteen her parents went through a bitter divorce. Shortly after Zschech became consumed with the self-esteem lie of the world to which many a young person succumbs. Concerned how others viewed her, she was bulimic for six years. Then after coming to faith in Christ and marrying, she and her husband struggled financially, broke with two daughters to support—and then a miscarriage.

My comfort my Shelter
Tower of refuge and strength
Let every breath all that I am
Never cease to worship You

Nothing compares to the promise
I have in You

4. Patiently endure the insults of your enemies.

1 Peter 2:11-12 – ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as *aliens and strangers* (“pilgrims”—isn’t that interesting?) to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. ¹² Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles (Meshech and Kedar), so that in the thing in which they *slander you as evildoers*, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God in the day of visitation.

God calls us to be his people in the society in which we live. He wants us to be living testimonies of his love and mercy toward sinners because through our lives he calls others to himself. Our conduct and confession, then, ought never to be stumbling blocks for our unbelieving neighbors.⁵

1 Peter 2:19-25 – ¹⁹ For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God. ²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker, *NTC: 1 Peter*, 96.

May we follow our example, the Lord Jesus, who “offered up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears” (Hebrews 5:7).

5. Understand the importance of gathering together with the people of God!