

“PREACH IT, TEACH IT”

The Long Journey Home: Psalm 120

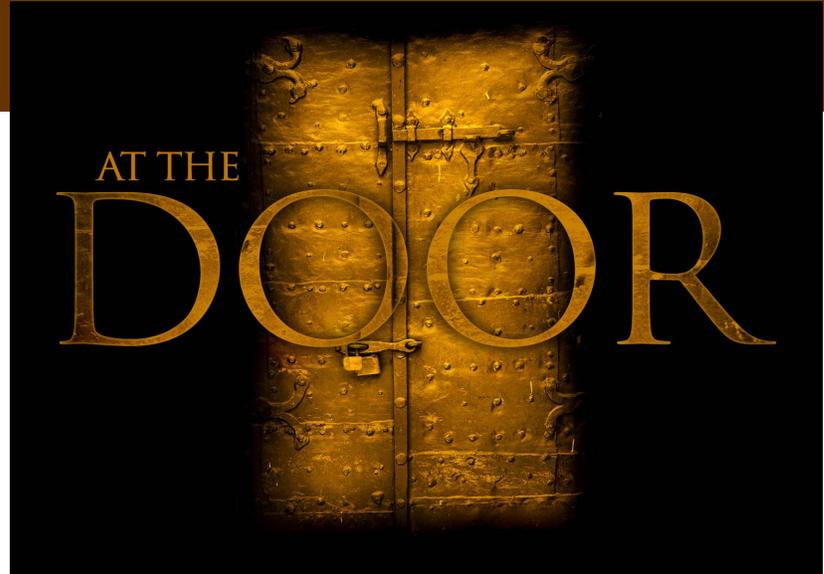
“PREACH IT, TEACH
IT”
DEVOTIONAL ON
RELATIONATIONAL
BIBLE STUDY

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Psalm 120
2 Timothy 3:16-17
John 8:44; 14:3
Proverbs 1:7
Romans 7
Ephesians 2:12
Genesis 10:2
Ezekiel 32:35
Matthew 6:21
Isaiah 14:7

PRAYER FOCUS

Dear Jesus,
“Help me long to draw closer to
you. Show me how much you
want to fellowship with me every
day, and teach me to respond to
Your love.”
Amen.



HOW SHOULD I APPROACH A BIBLE PASSAGE?

Many Bible students approach scripture study on a purely rational level. Of course, a Bible passage must be handled with great care, taking into consideration the background information, accurately identified words, people and places, and the context of the passage. Paul instructed young pastor Timothy to remember that God’s Word is not just another book:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV

Paul is teaching his “son in the Lord” that the Bible was not God-breathed to simply make us smart, but to make us holy and well-prepared for kingdom ministry. Bible teachers routinely list these following questions as a set of guidelines in examining scripture:

- What doctrines and truth are taught in this passage?
- What changes do I need to make in my thinking in order to bring it in line with what the scriptures teach?
- What is the central truth of the passage?
- What are the principles to be learned?
- Are there examples to be followed?
- Are there sins for me to avoid?
- Are there commands for me to obey?
- Are there promises to claim or prayers I should pray?

The aforementioned queries are essential to solid Biblical interpretation. However, notice that every question deals with issues of one's beliefs and behaviors. A thorough study of scripture should go beyond beliefs and behaviors to explore heart-issues as well. Dr. David Ferguson, founder of Intimate Life Ministries (<http://www.greatcommandment.net>) proposes another set of questions that should be considered in our examination of God's Word.

- What does this passage reveal about God's heart? (Not every passage is about us, sometimes it is about God. The more mysterious and intriguing it is, the more likely it is about God and not us.)
- How do the events of the passage affect the emotions and feelings of every participant in the story or passage?
- Did any hurts occur as a result? How can they be addressed?
- What could have happened to remove aloneness? Prevent the hurt? Heal the hurt?
- What was it about this passage or story that makes God or Jesus more attractive to you?
- How do I respond to God and others based on what I see is going on in God's heart?
- What does it do to your heart when you realize that God wants you to know His heart? Does it sadden you? Gladden you? Humble you? Intrigue you? Make you experience anger or compassion?

Carefully compare the two sets of questions. Do you see the difference in the approach? Both sets of questions are important, but too often our study does not lead us into an intimate relationship with God and others. Too often we only *learn* about the passage instead of *experiencing* it.

In this devotional study, we are going to examine a little-known psalm. Psalm 120 is the first in the set of fourteen psalms of ascents. These psalms were purported to be spoken as Jewish pilgrims ascended the steps going up to the Temple mount in Jerusalem. However, many theologians believe that these psalms of ascents represent stages in our journey to spiritual maturity. We will examine the passage utilizing the first set of questions, and then we will go further to explore the answers to the second set of questions. But before we begin our study, take some time to read Psalm 120 several times.

- Circle the key words you glean from the psalm. What are they? Underline the places listed. Do you know where they are or what they represent? (beliefs and behaviors)
- Do you observe any commands from God in this passage? Are there any sins to be avoided or promises to be claimed? (beliefs and behaviors)
- How does this passage make you feel upon your first reading? How do you believe the psalmist is feeling? Can you identify with his hurting and frustration? (relational)
- How would God be feeling for the psalmist? Would He be grieved? In what ways? (relational)

Notice questions one and two. You can probably make a few initial observations, but I imagine those inquiries would be very difficult to answer if you have not studied the historical and cultural information about the psalm. The second two questions are much more subjective. When you initially study a passage, those first impressions are significant. So let's begin to unpack Psalm 120.

Hezekiah probably penned this psalm. King Hezekiah was on his last leg when he begged God to heal him. God answered his prayer and gave him fifteen more years of life. What an insurance policy...except for year fifteen! Psalm 120, classified as a psalm of lament, is also a pithy plea for help. The poet is a prisoner of the decaying world system. He is using very emotional and powerful words to describe his pathetic condition.

This psalm's poetry crams an enormous amount of emotional pain and jaded cynicism into a few, pointed word pictures. Our jaundiced skeptic hates where he lives and who he has become. He has believed lies and has been punished with warrior's arrows and fires from burning broom trees.

The poet's homes in "Meshech" and "Kedar" are unfamiliar terms that mystify us. *Where* are these places and *why* does he hate to live there?

Meshech is first mentioned in Genesis 10:2. Mr. Meshech was descended from Noah and migrated to present-day Russia near the Caspian sea. For generations, Meshech's fierce warriors were famous and feared for their military prowess and power. Might made right. Meshech barbarians bullied their way all over Eastern Europe, southern Asia and Siberia. In the last days, Meshech's great, great, great, great grandson will march down to Jerusalem to squash the Jews like a bug. Their commander-in-chief is dubbed "the Prince of Magog." Ezekiel prophesied in Ezekiel 32:26 that troops from Meshech would march south to Jerusalem to rout the Jews from their homeland. Some scholars believe the "Prince of Magog," will be the anti-Christ, a descendant of Meshech. Meshech's power-hungry modus operandi was and still is a dead-end street. Psalm 120 tells us that a controlling intimidator is seduced by Satan, and is fighting against the irresistible force of God's kingdom forces.

Kedar is a descendant of Ishmael, Abraham's son born of Hagar—Sarah's handmaid. Ishmael's tribe, citizens of the Arab nations, have been warring against the Jews for centuries. The clan of Kedar settled south of Israel, near the Arabian peninsula. The Bedouin traders from Kedar always knew how to make a buck. They were the stockbrokers of the Middle East! Kedarian entrepreneurs were legendary for their conniving shenanigans. Some of their con-artists would run rough-shod over naïve neighbors with shady wheeling and dealing. Some Kedarian Arabs are still shrewd businessmen. Their slogan is: "you give us cash, and we'll give you gas!" How will the spirit of Kedar ruin our lives? We know that Paul reminds us in I Timothy 6:10 that the love of money is the root of all evil. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:21 clarifies the insidious trap of money-grubbing: "...where a man's treasure is, there his heart will be also." NIV God and gold are rival masters. Money also sucks the fun out of life. For the materialist, there is never enough cash. The love of money is a killer, an ulcer-maker, and a destroyer of relationships...not to mention an idol we can worship instead of God. Kedar-dwellers prided themselves upon their intellectual prowess as well. Kedar's arrogant citizens only experienced misery and disappointment in their search for intellectual superiority. You see, in a world system of self-reliance and perfectionism, Satan will drive us to misery and despair as we step onto the relentless hamster wheel of a godless life.

The psalmist finally realized that the world system is anti-God. Materialism, clout and humanism no longer deceive him. He has faced the fact that the forces that influence—even consume him—are a destructive, dead-end street. Lies of Kedar mislead people to believe that money and worldly philosophy elevate man to a Utopian existence. Instead, having to live in these disparate worlds will stretch us to the breaking point. Straddling the fence has one drawback—it hurts in the middle. Neither place will bring the writer the peace and contentment that he would have had residing in his Holy City hometown.

Hezekiah, purported author of this psalm, might have been cynical like his predecessor King Solomon. When you are at the top of the heap, you have all the power, money and women you want. Some world leaders become so drunk with power that they become megalomaniacs, dictators and murderers. That's the world system's insidious deception. It is the very spirit of Satan himself in Isaiah 14:7: "I will exalt my throne above the stars." NIV Satan takes God's blessings that were given to strengthen and sustain man and spoils them by tainting them with his wicked motives and agendas. Victimized by his schemes like the psalmist, we could end up in a place we thought we would never go, to become people we never thought we'd be. We become "aliens."

The inhabitants of this pagan society were duped by idolatry. Of course, as Christians, we recognize the insidious pitfalls of error—Islam, Hare Krishna, witchcraft. Such spiritual opiates poison their disciples with intimidation, legalism and sorcery. Such lies are deadly to the human spirit. But most of us are more subtly deceived like Kedarians when we fabricate a self-styled faith. We like the Christian label and the trappings of spirituality, but shun obedience to God's ways. Instead of living our lives according to His Word, we selectively choose only the parts of the Bible we like and we discard the hard passages. We want a religion of convenience. Jesus said "if ye love me, keep my commandments." (Jn 14:3) If we could rewrite that verse according to our natural inclinations, we might say "If you like me a lot, *follow my suggestions, if you are so inclined.*"

Loose sexual mores are an example of self-styled religion gone awry. Many idolatrous religions practiced sexual immorality with temple prostitutes and decadent orgies. Satan stole something pure and sweet, the marriage bed, and made it naughty and nasty. Father-God tried to shield His little Jews from the seedy sexual practices of their lusty pagan neighbors. Sex was created to be wonderful. Satan wants to make it awful. This is the epitome of self-styled religion. It takes God's best and makes it man's worst nightmare.

- Who were the Meshechites? Do oppression and prejudice still exist today? In what forms? Have you ever “walked all over someone else to get your own way? Have you ever belittled someone else to make yourself look better? When? Confess those sins to God. (rational/behavioral model)
- What did you learn about Kedar? What were their sins and how can we avoid them? Have you been guilty of materialism, intellectual arrogance, or idolatry? How can you avoid those pitfalls? (rational/behavioral model)
- What emotions was the psalmist experiencing in these verses? Have you ever felt that way? If you had the opportunity to comfort and encourage the psalmist, what would you say? (relational model)
- How do you think God felt as he saw the miserable psalmist? Was He grieved, disappointed, merciful, forgiving? (relational model)

MISERY PERSONIFIED-HOPE DISCOVERED

The tongue is taken to task in verse four. Every person is occasionally seduced and victimized by Kedar's and Meshech's lies that promote materialism, manipulation, and godless humanistic philosophy. The unregenerate man is a puppet of Satan, living in the crushing grasp of the Destroyer. Naughty tongues are the lies and deception Satan speaks through his servants. Jesus lambasted the Pharisees with scathing derision in John 8:44:

“You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in Him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” NIV

Why is the tongue tried and convicted? The terrible tongue in verse four was pierced by trickery and untruth. James reported that the tongue is a fire fanned to flame by a smutty soul. God warned that damage control was necessary to prevent a rotting life. The New Testament author purported that life and death are in the power of the tongue. God does not give us a tonsil warning. Apparently, they don't cause us any trouble! If they do, we extract them. Some of us need a “tonguectomy.” In verse 4b, the poet revealed God's judgment comes on one who is captivated and compromised by world-system propaganda and wicked words. *Warrior's arrows* pierced his heart. *Fires from the broom tree* tormented his life. Juniper trees that dot the desert burn hot and long. The penalty for the God-rejecting lifestyle is either sudden and deadly or long and torturous. Christian martyrs were flame-broiled by their captors because burning at the stake was a horrific way to go. The firepits of hell are hot. Nobody wants to be barbecued in a broom-tree fire—especially for eternity! The blazing picture of judgment in verse four paints the miserable portrait of a godless life awaiting the fires of hell. The arrows of the warrior are swift and sure. They skewer you in seconds. The psalmist warns not mess around with God. It's time to leave Meshech and Kedar.

These potent poetic stanzas speak of the surety of God’s judgment. Often a person leaves Meshech and Kedar in a crisis— in a foxhole, in a hospital room, or at a graveside. Solomon wrote that the “fear of the Lord” is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 1:7). Only occasionally will a person come to God when he is doing well—free from the problems of life. Desperation and self-loathing are often the key motivations that cause man to call upon God. The phrase “woe is me” is an archaic phrase. A person with “woes” has really, really, really bad luck. The “woes” of God’s judgment in revelation will be the final, climactic expressions of God’s wrath. Jesus zinged arrows of fury in his “woes” spoken to the malicious Pharisees. The psalmist taught “Don’t mess with God. You don’t want to hang around for His woes!” No sheltering place exists where misdeeds have no consequence. As an emotional expression of pain, “woe” also denoted intense suffering and mental depression. When the Psalmist made the anguished cry “woe is me,” he was at his wit’s end.

“...Too long I have lived among those who hate peace,” the poet declared. A life of peace and rest are the longing of every man’s heart. “I am a man of peace, but when I speak, they are for war,” the writer said. Like the Apostle Paul, bemoaning the fact that he was prisoner to his old fallen nature in Romans 7, the psalmist finally recognized that he was incapable of building satisfying relationships with God or man as long as he remained in Meshech and Kedar. These are the birth pangs that bring new life. The poet has finally had enough of his godless living.

- Read James 3:5-9 and compares James’ description of the power of the tongue to the psalmist’s in Psalm 120? How can the tongue be an agent of destruction in our lives? How can it be a bringer of blessing? (belief/behavior model)
- Have you received “warrior-arrow” comments or “broom tree” darts? What kinds of words would be barbs that would injure others? Do they ever start with “you always” or “you never?” List some healing words. (belief/behavior model)
- “Woe” is a powerful word filled with anger and pain. Why did the psalmist feel such deep anguish? How does it make you feel when you see someone in that kind of pain and difficulty? How should you respond to someone in that situation? How would you like someone to respond to you if you felt like that? (relational model)
- Can you imagine how God longed for His child to come to that place of dependence upon Him? How did He feel when His little one finally came to the end of his rope and called out to his Heavenly Father? (relational model)

LIFE LESSONS LEARNED

The pathetic protagonist of Psalm 120 had learned valuable life lessons. He was fed-up from living a lie and he needed to change his life-direction. Like the New Testament’s tale of the prodigal son, the writer wallowed in pig slop and he wanted to go home. Some people spend their whole lives in deception and never see what they are missing. A little child, beaten by an abusive father, will sob when the child protective service worker arrives to remove him from his home. The little boy grieves because he knows nothing better. The pain of abuse is just a regular part of his dysfunctional family life. Until an unbeliever sees the abuse he is enduring at the hand of Satan, he will not be motivated to leave the pig sty. The blows of Apollyon, the pain of Satan’s arrows piercing the back of the God-rejecter or the backslider seem normal until he realizes that there is something better: a life of love and forgiveness, mercy and grace.

The poet learned three things as he turned toward Jerusalem. He faced the truth that he had swallowed a pack of lies. He resolved to act. He is motivated in verse six to move. “Too long” had he been living life his way. He was disgusted by this lousy lifestyle and he wanted out. Finally, the psalmist called upon the Lord for his life. He was ready to head for home (toward the Temple mount).

The analogy of this poetic portrait is crystal-clear. The first step toward God (I call-He answers) is a cry for salvation. Turning from a purposeless, meaningless life without Christ is like coming home from a foreign land. Paul described this turning to God in Ephesians 2:12:

“...remember that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away were brought near through the blood of Christ.” NIV

The writer had discovered that God wanted to fellowship with him. He needed to learn to express his heart to God without hiding. The call of “distress” is the psalmist’s recognition of his hurt, anger, bitterness, and fear (those things inside his emotional cup). He must make the step of faith to bring his hurts honestly to God as his initial step toward salvation.

Such self-disclosure is not man’s work, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Like Adam, we must no longer hide from God. To confess our sin is to agree with God and to hate our God-rejecting ways. That’s the next step of faith toward the Savior. The conscience, described in scripture as *sun oido*, means “to see together with God” the true nature of fallen behavior. This conscience is the interface between the soul and the spirit. Apart from God’s revelation, man cannot truly know himself. A key step in emptying the “cup” of hurt and pain is to discern what is inside the cup.

As we stand at the juncture between heaven and hell, we finally learn that meaningful relationships apart from God are not just shallow and difficult, they are impossible. Moving out of Meshech and Kedar is not enough. We must call on the Lord, the King of Heaven and earth. God alone is able to deliver us, to take us to Jerusalem. The Father of the “prodigal” in all of us stands waiting to welcome us with open arms. When we despise the far country, we yearn for the joy of coming home to God’s love and forgiveness. We recognize our Father’s open door policy, made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus’ blood for our sin. This happy reunion begins a love relationship with God that lasts forever—a homecoming none of us will want to miss!

- Would you take just a moment and consider your first steps toward God? How did you become a Christian, or how did you return to Him after a period of despair and disillusionment? (belief and behavioral model)

- Does a Christian have to experience discomfort and desperation before he can come to Christ? Why or why not? What does the word “repentance” mean to you? As the Holy Spirit to show you any area of your life where you need to confess your sin and repent. (belief and behavior model)

- How does it make you feel to know that God is drawing you to Himself constantly, no matter where you are on your spiritual journey? Picture that moment of salvation when you first met Christ. Ask God to show you Himself as Rescuer, Responder, Savior, Deliverer. Speak to Him or write to Him words of thanks for His love and patience toward you. (relational model)

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