



Sermon 07/23/2017

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Psalm 120:1 - 7

Well it's a great delight for me to be back with you. It's a privilege for me every time I get an opportunity to see you, to worship with you. I've had the privilege of spending time with your pastor this week at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is working with one of our Doctor of Ministry cohorts in preaching and he is doing just an excellent job and we are pleased to have him. As you know your pastor is working on his Ph.D. in preaching. And so we're delighted to get to use him in the area where he specializes. Your pastor got some really good news here just recently. I don't know if he told you this or shared this with you. He got some great news. He's very excited. We have a brand new student at Southwestern Seminary in the school of preaching. His name is Dr. Jerry Vines. Dr. Vines just started his Ph.D. or will be starting his Ph.D. in preaching this fall. We may be using some of his textbooks as he studies preaching in the school of preaching. But your pastor is very excited. Dr. Jerry Vines is 80 years old. What that means is your pastor is no longer the oldest student in our school of preaching. So he's very excited about that.

Heard just recently some statistics, they've been common for the last several years. The average life-span in the United States is 78 years; 78 years. That's 28,470 days. And if you factor in leap years, that's about 28,500 days. Now let's suppose you had a pad of sticky notes, 28,500 high, and every one of these sticky notes represented one day of your life. And every day you'd fill up that sticky note with everything that you did during the day. But after that day is over it's gone and you have one fewer days. Now you and I don't know how much time that we have, but here's what we know. We know that the amount of time that we have is limited and every day that I don't use my life to the glory of the Lord is a wasted day. And I don't have an unlimited supply. What we discover is we're on a journey of faith. We're on a journey of faith to wherever the Lord might be taking us. However long that journey might last, we're on a journey of faith. Literally all of us are on a journey. I don't know where you are in your life today. You may be starting a new chapter in your life. Maybe you're starting a journey that is college. Maybe you're starting a journey that's marriage or family or maybe you're starting a journey in retirement or being a grand-parent. But all of us at some point in the journey have an opportunity to live our lives for the glory of the Lord.

When I was a little boy my family, at least once a year, would take one big family trip. And because we spent many of my growing up years in Wisconsin almost all of our journeys involved travel trips from Wisconsin usually to Texas where my grand-parents were and so my mother was responsible for entertainment. Two of us boys in the back seat easily distracted and certainly needing many things to keep our attention. So my mother would pack what she called a goodie bag. Now this was before cell phones or video games or those, you know, personal movie screens that you have in cars now. No all we had were just books. We had a few games and Mad Libs, if you remember those, and things that we could do to occupy our attention. But here was the trick that my mother discovered. You don't unpack everything in the goodie bag on the first day of the journey. Otherwise it loses some of its interest if we exhaust all of the things in the goodie bag on the day 1.

Well this morning I want to look at the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 120 as he begins a journey of faith. If you have a study Bible that has subtitles, right under the number of the Psalm your Bible probably indicates Psalm 120 as a Song of Ascents. In fact there are 15 from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. They're all, they all contain the same subtitle; Songs of the Ascent. Most Bible scholars believe that these were the songs that the children of Israel used to sing on their way to Jerusalem. And they would go to Jerusalem three times a year for the great pilgrimage festivals. And most Bible scholars believed that these are the songs that they would sing all along the way. They're written, in some sense, sequentially and so when you finish Psalm 120 with a wonder, bewilderment, Psalm 121 begins; I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help. And you work your way through those 15 steps on the journey of faith. The title probably comes from Ezra in Ezra chapter 7, verse 9. Ezra, the Bible says, was making his way from Babylon back to Jerusalem, but as you find in scripture, any time you go to Jerusalem you go up to Jerusalem. It literally and figuratively involves ascending into the presence of the Lord. And so we see that term in the book of Ezra. He was ascending to Jerusalem and that's what you see here in the journey of the Songs of Ascent.

I want to begin this morning on what is the first journey of the children of Israel. This is day one. Look in your copy of God's word in Psalm 120 beginning in verse 1. Listen as the Psalmist writes.

¹In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. ²Lord rescue me from lying lips and a deceitful tongue. ³What will he give you and what will be done to you, you deceitful tongue? ⁴Warrior sharp arrows, with burning coals. ⁵What misery that I've stayed in Meshech, and I have lived among the tents of Kedar! ⁶I've dwelled too long with those who hate peace. ⁷I'm for peace, but when I speak, they're for war.

The Psalm hovers between the tension of the confidence in God's past provision and the distress of his current crisis. As you make your way through the Psalm there is a vast chasm of undisclosed time between verse 1 and verse 2. Verse 1 is past tense. The Psalmist is relaying something that happened to him in my past. In my distress I cried out to the Lord. It's a great testimony of faith. Certainly an example for all of us to follow. This Psalmist says, "In my distress I cried out to the Lord." Now the Bible doesn't tell us what that occasion of distress was. And immediately all of us can relate. You've had times of distress in your life. There may be occasions right now where you're facing something that is a distressful kind of circumstance

and you need to follow the example of the Psalmist. In my distress I cried out to the Lord and you answered me. There's the great testimony of faith that God stepped in in the moment of the crisis of the Psalmist; in my distress I cried out to the Lord and you answered me. We see those same words in the book of Jonah, chapter 2, verse 2. As Jonah made his brief sojourn in the belly of the fish and he was remembering those circumstances and he used those exact same words; in my distress I cried out to the Lord and he answered me. But isn't that the promise of scripture? You remember that God said in Jeremiah chapter 33, verse 3; call to me and I will answer you. Show you great and mighty things that you don't know. That's the promise that God made. And hear the Psalmist clinging to the promise of the Lord; I cried out to the Lord and the Lord answered me. But that was the past. And as you leave verse 1 and you enter into the presence of the Psalmist in verse 2, now we find the Psalmist in a distressful circumstance again.

Following the same pattern, the Psalmist returns to the presence of the Lord and he calls out, "Lord rescue me!" He's pleading with the Lord to rescue him from whatever crisis he now faces in verse 2. The victory of yesterday has gone and today I'm facing a new crisis. God rescue me and rescue me again. It's not clear exactly how affected the Psalmist is by the sin he describes in verse 2. Because notice what he's asking the Lord to rescue him from. Lord rescue me from lying lips and a deceitful tongue. Now it's not clear if the Psalmist is saying, "Lord rescue me from everyone else's lies and deceit. God I need you to rescue me from their lies, from their deception." Or if the Psalmist is saying, "God rescue me from lies and deceit." It might be that the Psalmist is suggesting that I'm being influenced by my culture. More than I'm influencing my culture. It might be that the Psalmist is saying, "God I've decried the sins of everyone else and now, Lord, I need you to rescue me. Rescue me from the lies. Rescue me from the deceit." The Psalmist cries out. And then in verse 3 he asks what is a rhetorical question personifying the lies and the deceit. What will he, that's God, what will he give you and what will he do to you, you deceitful tongue. Well he very quickly answers his own question there in verse 4 and you see a series of images, three very clear, intense images, there in verse 3, verse 4 rather.

4A warriors sharp arrows with burning charcoal.

Not just any soldier, but a warrior. Not just any arrow, but a sharp arrow. Not just any arrow, but a sharp arrow dipped in burning charcoal. So the precision of a warrior, the sharpness of a sharpened arrow burning with hot coals and the Psalmist says, "That's what God does to those who practice deceit." God judges sin. The Psalmist perhaps pointing to himself or certainly to those who are involved in this kind of deceit. This is what happens. God takes sin very seriously. What will happen to you when you practice deceit? The Psalmist tells us God judge sin.

Now all that is sort of the foundation for the message that begins in verse 5. We begin to see some of the tension of the Psalmists' current circumstances here in verse 5. He begins by saying, "What misery". Some translations say "Who am I. What misery that I have stayed in Meshech and I dwell in Kadar." Meshech, the name of the grandson of Noah, was a location far to the Northeast of Jerusalem. It is in the area of what we consider modern day Russia. It was a great distance away from Jerusalem. You see Meshech mentioned in Ezekiel chapter 39 as God is holding them accountable for their turning away from him; their arrogance. We don't need God. That's Meshech. Kadar as far to the Southeast as Meshech was to the Northeast. We hear of

Kadar in Isaiah chapter 21 as the prophet holds them accountable before God for their cruelty, for their arrogant pride, and when you put these two places together you see locations that are far from Jerusalem and a people who are far from the Lord. The Psalmist says, "I have stayed there too long." I've been too long with the people who love what I hate and hate what I love. I've stayed too long too far from the presence of the Lord and maybe here's where you and I begin to relate to the words of the Psalms because had there been times in your life when you awakened to the realization "I've allowed myself to be too far from the Lord." But you notice the Psalmist personifies it there. I've stayed too long. It's my own fault I've allowed myself to be too long, too far, from the presence of the Lord. You begin to see the problem that the Psalmist is identifying. Their impacting me more than I'm impacting them. They're drawing me away from the presence of the Lord rather than me drawing them to him. Woe is me.

I've long appreciated the writing of Eugene Peterson. His book, *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* is an excellent read about our journey of faith. Maybe you heard Eugene Peterson made news twice last week. The first time was when he came out and suggested that he is now questioning his view on traditional marriage. As you can imagine that brought all kinds of response from both sides of the equation. Those who favor homosexual marriage spoke very quickly praise of the courage of Eugene Peterson and then those who favor traditional marriage, especially in the Christian community spoke against that and rebuked that as against the word of God. And the second time we heard from Peterson last week, he issued what was a very brief, not entirely clear, retraction. I finished the end of last week and concluded I don't really know where Eugene Peterson stands on the issue of traditional marriage but I can say to you with certainty the Bible is very clear. The problem comes when you and I get to the point where we're more influenced by the world around us than we are influencing the world. And we find ourselves too far from the presence of the Lord when we begin to be affected more than we are impacting the culture. The Psalmist says, "Woe is me." I've lived too long, too far, from the Lord. I've dwelled too long, verse 6 says, with those who hate peace. I'm for peace. You hear the tension of the text in verse 7, the Psalmist says, "I'm for peace!" Now this is not one of those simple minded pageant kinds of answers; I'm for world peace. No, this is the Psalmist saying, "I'm for the kind of peace that only comes from a relationship with God. I'm for the kind of peace that only comes from God." This is what Jesus talked about in John chapter 14. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Psalmist says, "I'm for peace, but when I stand up to speak for peace, they are for war." And immediately the Psalmist reminds us that the message of our faith is counter-cultural. When we stand to speak boldly for the faith that we profess, we encounter a world who doesn't love what we love. We realize that we speak a different message. We speak with a different tongue. We speak to people who don't follow the truth that we profess. The Psalmist says, "Woe is me. I'm for peace but when I speak peace, they're for war." And when you come to the end of verse 7, you hear that word, war, is very similar in the context of the word that he uses in verse 1 that he described as distress. So you come full circle from verse 1 to verse 7 and you discover that the Psalmist is in a very similar place. I'm in a battle again. I live among a people who hate what I love and love what I hate.

The unresolved tension of the text is that the Psalm ends right there. We like happy endings. We'd like to know the end of the story. We'd like there to be some kind of resolution and you get to the end of verse 7 and you're left wondering what happened to the Psalmist's distress.

What happened when he cried out to the Lord? How did God rescue him again? But the Psalmist leaves that tension unanswered. “I’m in a battle again. Woe is me.” Here the Psalmist saying words very similar to the words that Isaiah said in Isaiah chapter 6. You remember what Isaiah said, “Woe is me. I am undone. I’m a man of unclean lips and I live among a people who have unclean lips.” And that’s what the Psalmist is saying here. “Woe is me. I live among a people who are unclean and I myself am being affected. Woe is me. I’ve lived too long, too far, from the Lord.” Begin to see the two dangers that the Psalmist is describing. The first is the danger of becoming complacent in my convictions. I stand for truth but they don’t stand for truth. I speak for truth but all I hear in return are lying lips and it’s so easy in the presence of dissenting voices for my voice to grow silent. It’s so easy in the midst of a sinful culture for me to get involved in their sin. It’s so easy to become complacent about our complacency. To be sure I must be convicted about my complacency, but I must never become complacent about my convictions. There must never be a time when I stop standing for the truth that I believe in the word of God. There must never be a time when I stop speaking what I believe to be the truth. It’s the danger of growing complacent in my convictions.

But there’s another danger that the Psalmist describes. It’s the danger of becoming comfortable in my distance from the Lord. Of waking up one day and realizing how far I’ve come from the presence of the Lord. But as you dig into the Psalm you discover the Psalm has given us some clues. The word of God has given us the answer of “What do I do in my moment of crisis? What do I do when I’m facing those dangers of faith?” And I want you to see what I believe the word of God teaches for us in our journey of faith. Number one: every step of the way I need to trust in him. Every step of the journey of faith I need to trust him. Did you see there in the text, there are actually three tenses that are described here. First is past tense. That’s verse 1. In my distress. That’s the past. In my distress I cried out to the Lord and he answered me. That’s the past. The present begins in verse 2. I’m in distress again. He calls out to the Lord, “God rescue me from this present crisis. God relieve me from this current distress.” But don’t miss the fact that there’s another tense in the text. And that’s the future tense. Because the Psalmist is on a journey. And this is just step one. I don’t yet know all the lessons the Lord will teach me on this journey of faith. I’ve not yet reached the destination, but the Psalmist says I’m on my way home. There’s a place where this journey ends. There is a time when I’ll come to the point of the conclusion of this journey in the very presence of the Lord. I was listening this morning on the Christian radio to the song by Chris Tomlin, Home, I’m going Home, and for the believer in Jesus Christ that is the reality of our faith. That we’re on a journey of faith that ends when you and I stand forever in the presence of the Lord. And there’ll come a day when God will call us home or Christ will return and call us to himself and we will forever be in the presence of the Lord. We’ll be home. That’s why Paul writes in Philippians chapter 3 that our citizenship is in heaven. This is our temporary dwelling place and the Psalmist reminds us I’m on a journey of faith. I’m going home. I’ve not yet arrived at the place where I’m going, the Psalmist says, but every step of the journey I trust him. I know God’s been faithful in my past and I believe God will be faithful again. I trust by hope that God’s leading me to the end of a journey where every step of the way I trust in him. It’s the first lesson we learn from the text.

I want to suggest a second lesson that we learn from the Psalmist. Don’t ever be satisfied with your distance from the Lord. The Psalmist said in Psalm 73; the nearness of God is my good. Have you ever felt distant from the Lord? Has there ever been a time when you just feel separate

from God? You wonder where's God in my present crisis. Can I just say to you, if you're distant today, from the Lord, God's not moved. If you're off track on the journey of faith, it's not that God's led you astray, it's not that God's gotten off the track, it's that you've gotten off track and you need to come back and right relationship with him. Don't ever be satisfied with our distance from the Lord. Don't be satisfied with allowing the culture around us to influence us more than we're influencing our culture. Hear the words of Paul in Romans chapter 12, verse 2; don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Don't allow this world to infect us, to infuse us with its false teaching. Remember walking with God requires our proximity; requires our closeness, being in the presence of the Lord. Do you remember the story in Genesis chapter 5 about a man named Enoch? He was the seventh generation described in the book of Genesis. The Bible says that Enoch lived 365 years. The number is two precise to be a coincidence. 365 years. Certainly corresponding to every day of the year. The Bible says that Enoch walked with God. That was this testament. That's what God said about Enoch. Enoch walked with God. But when you get down to Genesis chapter 5, verse 27 the Bible says Enoch walked with God and he was not because God took him. He was walking with God and at the end of that journey God took him home. Wouldn't it be great when you and I come to the end of the journey that people would look back and say, "He or she walked with God." Every step of the journey, I'm walking closely with him. Don't be satisfied with your distance from the Lord. Get back into a right relationship with him.

Then I want you to know one other lesson that the Psalmist models for us. Don't let anyone talk you out of your testimony of faith. Don't let the fact that the world doesn't follow your teaching dissuade you from standing on truth. Don't let the loud voices of the world who rebuke you. Don't let them shout the truth that you stand up and proclaim. Don't let the fact that they don't follow dissuade you from following. Don't ever be silenced by the voices in opposition. The Psalmist says, "I'm for peace. But as soon as I stand up and speak peace, they're for war." And we're immediately confronted by the fact that we live in a world antagonistic to our message. But you and I can never allow the noise of the world to prevent us from speaking the truth. Psalmist says, "I'm speaking truth." My life is a testimony to the truth of God. I stand in a culture who won't listen, in a culture who doesn't like it, in a culture that's rejecting it, and I'm speaking the truth. I must say no to the sin of the world around me. I must say no to the deceit of the world around me and I must say yes to the truth of God." That's how I live counter-cultural in a world opposed to the message of the gospel. That's how I stay on track in the journey of faith. And maybe today you're reminded by the Spirit of God of your distance from him. You've allowed the noise of the world to silence your profession. You need to come back. I don't know how long this journey of faith is. I don't know how many days are left or how much time God will allow. But I know that the message of scripture is that every day I'm to live for the glory of God until God calls me home. That's the journey. Psalmist reminds us that the beginning of the journey he's always been faithful and I trust him again.

Would you bow together in prayer with me.

Lord wherever we are on our journey of faith may our focus be on Christ. May we with the writer of Hebrews say, "We're running with endurance the race set before us fixing our eyes on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith." May we run with purpose, with passion, as we follow the truth that we find in your word. God I pray we walk closely with you. Don't let

us become complacent in our distance from you. Don't let us become satisfied with the sin that has infected us. God convict us of our distance. Draw us back into a right relationship with you through Jesus Christ. In his name. Amen.