

Psalm 120 | “Dwelling in a Hostile Land”
Preached on November 10, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Psalm 120. *[pauseeee]*

In the movie, “The Wizard of Oz”, after clicking her heels together, Dorothy repeats, “There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home.” *[pause]*

Do you ever feel that way—that there’s no place like home? *[pause]*

For most of us, home is our safe space.

It’s a place of comfort, peace, and calm away from the chaos of the world. *[pause]*

There’s a certain security we feel being in our own home. *[pause]*

We may have experienced a crazy day at the workplace, or while we were out and about somewhere, but usually when we get home, it’s a sigh of relief. *[pauseeee]*

Just recently on vacation, my daughter kept asking, “When are we going back to Clearfield?”

She longed for home, especially the comforts of her own bed, and wanted the security that she felt in a familiar place. *[pauseeee]*

There are various other reasons why home is like this, but one reason is because of *who* is there...

Your spouse may be there, maybe your children—it’s family that makes the difference. *[pause]*

Well in the psalm we will be looking at this morning, it’s like the psalmist is longing for home. *[pause]*

He’s a pilgrim in a far away, hostile land, and he’s looking and longing to be at home in Jerusalem with God’s people, and most importantly, with God in His Temple. *[pause]*

You see, this psalm begins what is called the “songs of ascents”. *[pause]*

They are the psalms in the psalter from Psalm 120 through 134...

And for the next few months, we are going to be working through each psalm, seeing what it has for us. *[pauseeee]*

Most scholars believe that the songs of ascents are the songs that faithful Israelites would sing as they went up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. *[pause]*

Three times a year, the people were to go to Jerusalem for these feasts¹...

¹ See Deuteronomy 16:16.

And because Jerusalem sat on a hill, going to Jerusalem was always seen as “ascending”, no matter what direction you approached. *[pause]*

That’s why these are “songs of ascents”, for they were ascending to Jerusalem to worship and sacrifice with God’s people in the presence of God. *[pauseeee]*

What’s interesting is also the way that the songs of ascents are structured. *[pause]*

Psalm 120 begins the songs from a far away land, and as you go through psalm after psalm, it’s like they get closer to the Temple, and then by the end, it’s like they stand in the Temple and look out. *[pausee]*

So here we are in Psalm 120, and the psalmist is dwelling in a hostile land, far away from Jerusalem, but he looks and longs to be in the place of peace and security. *[pause]*

It’s a fitting way to begin the songs of ascents, for it’s like the beginning of their journey starts far away in a place of hostility, and looks to Jerusalem with longing.

And it’s like he’s thinking, “There’s no place like home.” *[pause]*

Listen for what I’m talking about as I READ the psalm. *[READ]*

As we put ourselves in the sandals of this psalm-writing pilgrim, we can see that...

I. We can feel distress in a hostile world.

At the beginning of 2024 on the social media site called ‘X’ (formerly known as Twitter)...

“The account for Elmo, the red Muppet from Sesame Street, asked what seemed to be a simple, innocuous question...

‘Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?’ *[pause]*

In thousands of responses, social media users let Elmo know that no, they were not doing too [good]. *[pause]*

Users began pouring out their hearts to Elmo...

‘I’m tired, Elmo,’ said one user. *[pause]*

‘The world is burning around us, Elmo,’ said another. *[pause]*

‘Elmo I’m depressed and broke,’ [another] wrote.’² *[pauseeee]*

The responses of those people show us that many people are distressed living in this world. *[pause]*

² <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2024/march/people-express-deep-despair-to-elmo.html>.

There is a common distress that comes upon everyone, who lives in a fallen world, but Scripture also shows that there's an additional level of distress that comes from being one of God's people, who lives in a hostile world. *[pause]*

Jesus told us that the world would hate us,³ and that in this world we would have tribulation.⁴
[pause]

It's that distress that the psalmist is especially feeling here, for in verse 1 he says, "In my distress I called to the Lord." *[pause]*

He then goes on to talk about facing lying lips, deceitful tongues, and being in a place that is all about war, and not peace. *[pause]*

The hostile land around him caused him great distress.

He felt anguish as he faced trouble and adversity. *[pauseeee]*

As Christians, we can feel the distress of living in a hostile world. *[pauseeee]*

This psalm shows us that it is *not ungodly* to feel distressed in life from living in a hostile world...

It's actually normal to feel these things. *[pauseeeee]*

Recently I was reading some of the writings of Augustine, the well-known Christian writer, who lived back around the time of the 4th century.⁵ *[pause]*

He talks about how it was seen as unspiritual back then if you cried over the death of a Christian loved one, so when his mother died, he wouldn't cry in front of others.

Rather, he held it in and held it in, until eventually it all burst out as he laid in his bed one morning. *[pause]*

That's not how we are to be!

We are not to be emotionless stoics, who act like nothing is happening to us.

Rather, we do have emotions and experiences that we feel deep down. *[pause]*

Do not feel ashamed that you feel distress at times because of the hostile world around you, for even Jesus told us that we would have tribulation. *[pause]*

He was showing us that there would be hardship, and with hardship comes natural feelings of distress.

³ A reference to John 15:19.

⁴ A reference to John 16:33.

⁵ Specifically, I was reading Augustine's *Confessions*.

Even Jesus faced distress as he was about to endure the cross.⁶ *[pause]*

Distress is simply the pain and suffering that comes along with hard situations.

So yes, we feel distress in our world.

It's not always easy being a Christian, for people are against God and His people. *[pause]*

We look around us, and we see a hostile world that is against us...

They hate some of our beliefs, they speak against our values, and we are mocked regularly.

That can be distressing, for no one enjoys experiencing those things. *[pausee]*

There seems to be no love for Christians and their beliefs, but we are disregarded, put down, and treated with contempt. *[pause]*

Realize that this is nothing new, for even the psalmist felt distress in a hostile world. *[pausee]*

He felt distress and wanted deliverance.

Specifically, he felt *the distress of being among lying lips*. *[pause]*

He says, "Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue." *[pauseeee]*

In one sense, we live in a world full of lies. *[pause]*

It feels sometimes like deception abounds everywhere: in every crack and crevice, and around every corner. *[pause]*

Our politicians lie, and do not bat an eye.

Our newspapers and media outlets deceive by leaving out information or mischaracterizing something. *[pause]*

Friends and family members lie about something, and we don't feel like we can trust them anymore. *[pause]*

It is truly distressing to live in a world full of lies, for it leads you to not always know what is true and what is false. *[pauseeee]*

Now we don't know exactly what the psalmist was facing, but most likely there were people spreading lies about him.

There could have even been some false accusations made against him. *[pause]*

That can be distressing, can't it? *[pause]*

⁶ See Matthew 26:38–39.

When people spread lies about you, it really hurts. *[pause]*

When you know the truth, but people just keep talking about what's not true about you, it's like an arrow to the heart. *[pause]*

We think, "How could they say that about me?"

We think, "That's not true! Don't you want to know the truth?" *[pauseeee]*

Before I came here to be the pastor, I worked as the head custodian at a community college. *[pause]*

When I was first hired, there were some people who didn't like that a new, young person would be over them.

And as a result, there were a couple people who intentionally spread lies about me to others so that they would get them to not like me. *[pause]*

That was distressing! *[pause]*

It was hurtful, and I was in anguish over it.

I just wanted people to know the truth about me, and not to just keep believing the lies. *[pauseeee]*

Maybe you have experienced lies being spread about you...

Isn't it so distressing? *[pause]*

It can be very hard to experience.

That's like what the psalmist was feeling—no wonder he was distressed. *[pause]*

It causes us to want *deliverance*.

We want the lies to no longer have life among people, we want the falsehood to fade away, and we want the deception to die off. *[pauseeee]*

So as individual Christians, people can spread lies about us, but we also face lies about us as a group, that is, as the church globally. *[pauseeee]*

Because of our beliefs, sometimes the world says that we are hateful people. *[pause]*

They claim that we are unloving because we simply adhere to God's Word, but it doesn't go over well in our society. *[pause]*

Know that even in the earliest years of the church, the world made false accusations against it. *[pause]*

In the 2nd century, there's a document that describes a conversation between a Christian and a pagan, and the conversation is really interesting. *[pause]*

The pagan claims that he has either heard or thinks that Christians are cannibals, atheists, self-righteous, captive to novelty, and even partakers in gross immorality.⁷ *[pause]*

The church has always been mischaracterized, and deceitful tongues have spread lies far and wide about it. *[pauseeee]*

There are also the general lies of the culture that throws the truth out the window. *[pause]*

They lie about what marriage is, what gender is, what love is, what truth is, who God is, and who we are.

Truly we dwell among lying lips and deceitful tongues! *[pauseeee]*

All of this can be distressing!

And when the truth is abandoned, anything and everything goes. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever felt distressed about the lies and deception around you?

Know that that's what the psalmist felt. *[pause]*

It's not ungodly to feel distress over lies, and if we didn't feel anything over them, there'd be something wrong. *[pause]*

We are people of the truth, who serve and follow the God, who is truth, so of course, we should be against lies in any form or shape they take.

And Proverbs says that "lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,"⁸ so lies better do something in us. *[pause]*

Now I'll get to how we should respond to lying lips in a little bit, but let's look at what else is distressing to the psalmist...

The psalmist felt *the distress of being among peace-haters*. *[pause]*

In verse 5, he says, "Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!" *[pause]*

What the psalmist is doing here is he is expressing his great distress in being in a remote region. *[pause]*

⁷ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>.

⁸ Proverbs 12:22.

Meshech refers to a place in modern day Turkey, and dwelling among the tents of Kedar means living among nomads in the Arabian Desert area. *[pause]*

Since these two places were far away from each other, naming these two places is probably the psalmist's way of emphasizing that he *feels* like he's in a remote, foreign place...

Basically, he's not at home.

Rather, he's a sojourner in a foreign, hostile place, and it's like he can't take it anymore.

He can't help but cry, "Woe to me." *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever been away from your home for a while, things weren't going well, and you just felt like you couldn't take it anymore?

You just longed for and wished for the comforts of your home. *[pause]*

That's a little like the writer here—he just wants to be home, and no longer among those who are against God. *[pauseeee]*

In a way, this world is not our true home, and we long for our true home.

Paul says in Philippians that "our citizenship is in heaven,"⁹ and Peter talks in such a way as to make the point that we are temporary residents in this world.¹⁰ *[pause]*

Away from Heaven, we are living far from home, and it can be distressing at times.

The trials and struggles of life here in this fallen world can make us feel like saying, "Woe to me." *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever felt homesick for Heaven? *[pause]*

The longer you live as a Christian in this world, the more you will feel this homesickness for Heaven, and it's because we belong there. *[pause]*

One song I heard goes like this, "How can I be so homesick for a place I've never been? My eyes have never seen it, but I know that it exists.

Something in my soul says, 'There's a better place than this.'

I'm a stranger in my own skin 'cause there's Eden in my bones. If home is where the heart is, then this world is not my home."¹¹ *[pauseeee]*

Now it's not just that the psalmist is dwelling in a foreign land that makes him distressed.

⁹ Philippians 3:20.

¹⁰ See 1 Peter 1:17.

¹¹ "Not My Home" by Luke Bower.

It's also in the fact that he's in a *peace-hating*, foreign place. *[pause]*

He says in verses 6–7, “Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!” *[pause]*

The writer wants peace.

He doesn't want fighting, he doesn't want animosity, nor hostility in any way.

He desires to be a peace-maker,¹² but he dwells in a peace-hating place. *[pauseeee]*

It's difficult living somewhere that opposes your values. *[pause]*

The psalmist valued peace, sought it, and loved it, but the people around him wanted nothing to do with it. *[pause]*

When you value something and are trying to implement it and see it happen, it can be distressing to just keep being met with antagonism. *[pause]*

He wanted something good!

Peace is a great, good, stabilizing, community-enhancing thing.

And he shows us what we should all be for, we should all say, “I am for peace.” *[pause]*

Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers,”¹³ so peace-loving should characterize our lives. *[pause]*

Romans 12:18 tells us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” *[pauseeee]*

Wherever we are, as much as we can, we should seek to live peaceably with everyone, and the psalmist seems to be wanting to do that himself. *[pause]*

So we shouldn't be out there trying to bring division, nor going to battle with people just for the fun of it.

But we seek reconciliation, yet the truth is that sometimes that reconciliation and peace-making is met with animosity. *[pause]*

There are times where we want there to be peace, but the world around us will only yell, “war!” *[pause]*

That's out of our control.

We can only do what we are called to do—that's what we are responsible for.

¹² A reference to Matthew 5:9.

¹³ Matthew 5:9.

And so as you live in this world, there will be times when you are seeking peace, but the world will not want it. *[pause]*

You will seek to understand them, you will explain your stance in love, but they will be hostile towards you.

Remember that you are not alone in experiencing such a thing, for we find it right here in Psalm 120. *[pauseeee]*

We can feel distress living in a hostile world. *[pause]*

Lies abound, and peace is hated.

And this can bring us great anguish, agony, and ache. *[pause]*

It's not easy, and the psalmist is showing us that it's not easy for a faith-filled follower of the Lord, but the key is *our response*. *[pause]*

How do you respond to the distress of living in a hostile world? *[pause]*

How do you respond to lying lips and deceitful tongues? *[pause]*

What about dwelling in a peace-hating place? *[pauseeee]*

Our tendency is to complain and grumble, and that's it. *[pause]*

For some people, this is all they do...

They just keep saying, "Look at this. Look at that. The world is just getting worse and worse."

Or, "How could they do that?" *[pause]*

Their distress leads them to only constant grumbling—that is not the correct response. *[pauseee]*

Certainly, like the psalmist we can point out the truth of what's going on in our culture, but it shouldn't go to complaining and remain there. *[pauseeee]*

Others respond to how things are going and just throw up their hands in despair...

They say, "It's hopeless! Nothing we do matters or makes a difference, so why even do anything?" *[pause]*

Is despair the right response to distress?

Of course not, our Lord is on the throne! *[pause]*

So what should be our response, according to this psalm?...

II. Call out to the Lord in your distress!

Have you ever called out for help? *[pause]*

When I think about this, I can't help but think of a little child calling out to one of their parents when they are stuck in a tree or can't get out of something. *[pause]*

They call out, "Mom!" or "Dad, help!" *[pause]*

Maybe you think of a co-worker who calls out for help when they somehow get stuck in an unsafe situation at the workplace. *[pause]*

This call is a call of desperation and need.

It's a cry for help when you are faced with a situation that is too big, too hard, too difficult for you to master on your own...

You are in trouble and need deliverance. *[pause]*

That's what the writer of Psalm 120 does—he calls out to the Lord for deliverance.

He recognized his situation, acknowledged his need, and took it to the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes we don't call out to the Lord in prayer as much as we should because we don't see or feel our neediness as much as we should.

Yet if we truly knew that we absolutely *needed* God's help every day, wouldn't we go to Him and call upon Him more? *[pauseeee]*

The psalmist knew that he didn't have the answer in himself, but God did.

And we need to jettison the idea that *we* have the answers, and go to the One who has *all* the answers, for a sense of independence will absolutely kill your prayer life. *[pauseeee]*

What's amazing is that even though the pilgrim was in a foreign land, away from God, he knew that God was present and heard his call. *[pause]*

Do you know that God hears and answers prayer? *[pause]*

Do you know that no matter where you are, He is there? *[pause]*

Do you realize that even living in a hostile world, God is there and ready to listen? *[pauseeeee]*

The writer is saying, "Rescue me! Save me! Snatch me from this, Lord!"

He no longer felt like he could take the lies and warmongering around him. *[pause]*

Sometimes we feel that way as we live in our own hostile place. *[pause]*

Maybe it's lies about you being spread.

Maybe it's the lies about Christians, or the lies that are shared which twist the truth in general.
[pause]

The peace-hating atmosphere we live in can do the same in us. [pause]

We desire to be snatched away from these things, for they are distressing.

But the important part is where we put our hope. [pause]

Is your hope in politics?

Is it in yourself?

Is it in some other thing, or is it in God? [pauseeee]

Maybe what God is doing in your hostile place or in your distressing situation is that He is causing you to draw near to Him.

Maybe He's using that circumstance as a wake up call to reveal where your true hope lies.

Is your hope truly in Him? The distress of living in a hostile place will reveal it. [pauseeee]

Like the psalmist, we are to hope in God.

We hope in Him, and express that hope in our prayers to Him. [pauseeee]

We don't mope in despair, nor do we brood over all of our complaints. [pause]

We don't conform to the ways of the world around us.

Nor is the solution to just give up on seeking truth and peace, but we are to give it all up to the Lord. [pause]

Be honest with Him and call upon Him in prayer. [pauseeee]

When faced with distressing, hostile times, do you pray? [pauseeee]

After the psalmist said that he called upon the Lord, He answered him. [pause]

Know this, fellow brother or sister in Christ, the Lord cares and has the power to answer!
[pause]

But what was the answer?

Look at verses 3–4, "What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!" [pause]

The psalmist in a way mocks the deceitful tongues, and confidently shows that they will face judgment. [pause]

The glowing coals of the broom tree point to how the wood from the broom tree made excellent charcoal.

And then link that with the sharp arrows, and the psalmist seems to be saying that the deceitful tongue will face the sharp, flaming arrows of God's judgment. *[pauseeee]*

If you notice, the psalmist didn't try to bring judgment himself upon these people, but he left it in God's hands.

And that parallels perfectly with Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" *[pause]*

God is a just God, and will bring justice for all of those deceitful words spoken.

So rest in the knowledge that He will answer in His time and in His way, but He *will* answer someday all of the lying lips and deceitful tongues spoken against His people. *[pause]*

So beloved, give it to the Lord! *[pause]*

Give the distress you experience, the neediness you feel, and everything else to the Lord. *[pause]*

Call out to Him, knowing that He's got it.

It won't always be in your timing or even in your way, but know that He answers. *[pause]*

You see...

The Lord is the answer to our distress in a hostile world.

Sometimes we feel like the psalmist: distressed from living in a hostile world. *[pause]*

It can be hard to be bombarded with lies, and to dwell in a peace-hating place.

But the answer is not to despair, not to fight back using their methods, nor to grumble and complain—the answer is to bring it all to God in prayer. *[pause]*

Put your hope in Him! *[pauseeeee]*

What did Jesus do when *He* faced hostility?...

1 Peter 2 says that, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued *entrusting himself* to him who judges justly."¹⁴ *[pauseeee]*

He gave it to the Father, and we are to do the same.

And now it's *because of* Jesus that we can live.

¹⁴ 1 Peter 2:23 (italics was added by me).

For the passage goes on to say, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”¹⁵ *[pause]*

Because Jesus lived the perfect life, responded perfectly to the hostile world around him, and then died for us and rose again, so now through Him, we have been healed and can live. *[pause]*

That means that amidst our hostile world...

Amidst living in a world full of lies and peace-hatred, we can rest in our forgiveness, we can rejoice in having eternal life, we can stand upon the truth, and we can have a peace that surpasses all understanding.¹⁶ *[pause]*

No wonder Paul could tell us to, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”¹⁷

¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:24.

¹⁶ A reference to Philippians 4:7.

¹⁷ Romans 12:12.