

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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by  
William D. Barrick, Th.D.  
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary



## Psalm 120 — Homesick in a Hostile World

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 120

- As Psalm 119 closes, the psalmist is like a lost sheep (v. 176). In Psalm 120 the psalmist is like a sheep among wolves (vv. 3–7).
- When we tire of this lying and hostile world in which we live, we long for the fellowship of worship. Thus, Psalm 120 is a fitting start for the pilgrim's journey.
- The Psalms of Ascents (Pss 120–134) are also considered part of the “Great Hallel” (Pss 120–136).
- Pilgrims to the three annual festivals in Jerusalem might have sung these psalms as they ascended to Jerusalem and the Temple (cp. 2 Kgs 23:2; Neh 12:37; Pss 42:4; 122:1–2; 132:7).
  - ✓ These feasts were the Feast of Passover (Unleavened Bread, 14 Nisan), Pentecost (Weeks/First Fruits, 6 Sivan), and Booths (Ingathering, 15 Tishri). See Exodus 23:14–17 and Deuteronomy 16:16.
- These Psalms of Ascents form five triads:

|                             | I  | II  | III  | IV  | V   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Trouble – Problem</b>    | Psalm 120<br>Anonymous   | Psalm 123<br>Anonymous  | Psalm 126<br>Anonymous<br><b>Zion</b>  | Psalm 129<br>Anonymous<br><u>Israel</u><br><b>Zion</b><br><b>Blessing</b> | Psalm 132<br>Anonymous<br><b>Zion</b><br><b>Blessing</b>                        |
| <b>Trust – Power</b>        | Psalm 121<br>Anonymous<br><u>Israel</u>  | Psalm 124<br><b>David</b><br><u>Israel</u>                          | <b>Psalm 127</b><br><b>Solomon</b><br><b>Blessing</b>                                  | Psalm 130<br>Anonymous<br><u>Israel</u>                                   | Psalm 133<br><b>David</b><br><b>Zion</b><br><b>Blessing</b>                     |
| <b>Triumph – Protection</b> | Psalm 122<br><b>David</b><br><u>Israel</u><br>Jerusalem<br>“house of the LORD” | Psalm 125<br>Anonymous<br><u>Israel</u><br>Jerusalem<br><b>Zion</b> | Psalm 128<br>Anonymous<br><u>Israel</u><br>Jerusalem<br><b>Zion</b><br><b>Blessing</b> | Psalm 131<br><b>David</b><br><u>Israel</u>                                | Psalm 134<br>Anonymous<br><b>Zion</b><br>“house of the LORD”<br><b>Blessing</b> |

## 2.0 Reading Psalm 120 (NAU)

**120:1** A Song of Ascents.

In my trouble I cried to the LORD,  
And He answered me.

**120:2** Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips,  
From a deceitful tongue.

**120:3** What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you,  
You deceitful tongue?

**120:4** Sharp arrows of the warrior,  
With the *burning* coals of the broom tree.

**120:5** Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,  
For I dwelling among the tents of Kedar!

**120:6** Too long has my soul had its dwelling  
With those who hate peace.

**120:7** I am for peace, but when I speak,  
They are for war.

## 3.0 Understanding Psalm 120

### 3.1 Outline

- I. The Reality of the Psalmist's Prayers (vv. 1–4)
- II. The Reality of the Psalmist's Problems (vv. 5–7)



### 3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “In my trouble”
  - “Trouble” refers to distress or pressure. The psalmist is a pressured pilgrim.
  - ✓ The actual wording of this verse stresses the trouble in the first half and then the two actions come like staccato drumbeats (only two words in the Hebrew) in the second half of the verse:

To the LORD in my trouble —  
I called and He answered me.
  - ✓ With emphasis the verse begins with “To the LORD.” The psalmist turns to God, not to flesh and blood. See Psalms 50:15; 81:7; 86:7.
  - The psalmist identifies his troubles in verses 2–4.
- **v. 2** “Deliver”
  - The Hebrew verb conveys the concept of snatching out of harm’s way, a timely rescue.
  - Its form stresses the fact that the psalmist is making a fervent plea.
- **v. 2** “lying lips . . . deceitful tongue”
  - Compare Psalms 52:2–3; 64:3.

- The repetition of “deceitful tongue” in both verses 2 and 3 sets up a stair step parallelism characteristic of some of the Psalms of Ascents.
- **v. 2** “What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you”
  - This statement is similar to an oath formula.
    - ✓ “May God do so to you, and more also, . . .” (1 Sam 3:17; 14:44; 2 Sam 3:9; 2 Kgs 6:31).
    - ✓ Such a formula expresses the certainty that God will bring retribution.
  - It is the Lord Himself who must deliver His people from deceitful and lying persons who seek their harm. Even though silence might seem like a passive solution, sometimes it does no good to respond — leave the answer to God.
- **v. 4** “*burning* coals of the broom tree”
  - The broom tree’s roots produce the finest charcoal, producing a hot fire that retains heat for a long time.
  - Deceitful liars will become victims of their own lies.
    - ✓ “The evil tongue is a sharp sword (lvii. 5), a pointed arrow (Jer. ix. 7[8]), and it is like a fire kindled of hell (Jas. iii. 6). The punishment, too, corresponds to this its nature and conduct (lxiv. 4).” — Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., trans. by Francis Bolton, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (reprint; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 3:270.
- **v. 5** “Meshech . . . Kedar”
  - Meshech was a warlike people residing between the Black and Caspian Seas northeast of Israel (Gen 10:2; Ezek 38:2).
  - Kedar was a belligerent tribe in northern Arabia (Gen 25:13-14; Isa 21:17).
  - Both peoples were looked upon as hostile barbarians.
  - The psalmist lives amongst a pagan and hostile people.
- **v. 5** “sojourn . . . dwell”
  - “Sojourn” speaks of dwelling temporarily.
  - “Dwell” refers to a more permanent residency.
- **vv. 5, 6** “dwell . . . dwelling”
  - Both words are from the same Hebrew root and set up yet another stair step parallelism.
- **v. 6** “those who hate peace”
  - “Peace” in both verses 6 and 7 sets up the final stair step parallelism in this psalm.
    - ✓ Compare “peace” in Psalms 122:6–8; 125:5; 128:6.

- **v. 7** “I am *for* peace”
  - Literally, “I peace” — compare Psalm 109:4 (lit., “I prayer”).
  - “The godly have nothing in common with the wicked. The godly speak words of peace, whereas the ungodly sow discord and adversity (cf. Gal 5:19 – 21; James 3:14 – 15). Only the Lord can intervene in this situation.” — Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:771.
  - The psalmist’s desire for peace forms a fitting introduction to the following psalms in which peace is a major feature.
- **v. 7** “war”
  - This psalm begins with “trouble” (middle of v. 1) and its final word is “war” (v. 7).
  - Compare Psalm 55:21.

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 120

##### “I Cried to God in My Distress”

(Tunes: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or “Doxology”)



**1** I cried to God in my distress,  
And by the Lord my prayer was heard;  
O save me, Lord, from lying lips  
And from the false, deceitful word.

**2** What woe for falsehood can atone,  
Or punish the deceitful tongue,  
The tongue whose speech consumes like fire,  
Whose words like deadly shafts are flung?

**3** Alas for me, whose lot is cast  
With those who find their joy in strife!  
With those who hate the paths of peace  
I long have dwelt and spent my life.

**4** In thought and act I am for peace,  
Peace I pursue and ever seek;  
But those about me are for strife,  
Though I in love and kindness speak.

— Author unknown (paraphrase of Psalm 120)

##### “This World Is Not My Home”

**1** This world is not my home, I’m just  
passing through;  
My treasures are laid up somewhere  
beyond the blue.  
The angels beckon me from Heaven’s open  
door  
And I can’t feel at home in this world  
anymore.

**Refrain:**  
O Lord, you know I have no friend like you.  
If Heaven’s not my home, then Lord what will I  
do?  
The angels beckon me from Heaven’s open door  
And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.

**2** They’re all expecting me and that’s one  
thing I know;  
My Savior pardoned me and now I onward  
go.  
I know He’ll take me through though I am  
weak and poor  
And I can’t feel at home in this world  
anymore.

**3** Just up in Glory Land we’ll live eternally;  
The Saints on every hand are shouting victory.  
Their song of sweetest praise drifts back from  
Heaven’s shore  
And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.

— J. R. Baxter, Jr., 1946

### 5.0 **Praying Psalm 120**

- Lord, preserve me from those who attack me with their words. [vv. 2–3]
- Father, I leave retribution in Your hands. [vv. 3–4]
- Protect me and keep me faithful in a hostile world. [vv. 5–6]
- Make me a man/woman of peace. [v. 7]
- 



### 6.0 **Applying Psalm 120**

- Like the pilgrim psalmist, our first act should be prayer.
- As pilgrims in this world, we ought to be characterized by peace. — Romans 12:18

Rescue me from the lies of advertisers who claim to know what I need and what I desire, from the lies of entertainers who promise a cheap way to joy, from the lies of politicians who pretend to instruct me in power and morality, from the lies of psychologists who offer to shape my behavior and my morals so that I will live long, happily, and successfully, from the lies of religionists who “heal the wounds of this people lightly,” from the lies of moralists who pretend to promote me to the office of captain of my fate, from the lies of pastors who “leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” (Mk. 7:8). Rescue me from the person who tells me of life and omits Christ, who is wise in the ways of the world and ignores the movement of the Spirit.

The lies are impeccably factual. They contain no errors. There are no distortions of falsified data. But they are lies all the same because they claim to tell us who we are and omit everything about our origin in God and our destiny in God. They talk about the world without telling us that God made it. They tell us about our bodies without telling us that they are temples of the Holy Spirit. They instruct us in love without telling us about the God who loves us and gave himself for us.

— Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*  
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 23