

PSALMS

Chapter 120

Deliver Me, O LORD

A Song of Ascents.

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. 2 Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. 3 What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? 4 A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree! 5 Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! 6 Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace. 7 I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!

Ps 120–34 Known as the “Psalms of Ascents,” based on their titles. Exact meaning of the title is unknown, but two possibilities are likely. “Ascents” could refer to the 15 steps in the temple between the Court of the Women and the Court of the Israelites. The psalms were perhaps read or sung on the steps during the great festivals. The title could also refer to the religious pilgrimages each year going up to Jerusalem. These psalms would be sung as the worshipers approached Jerusalem’s hills (121:1; 122:1–2). The Psalms of Ascents have no single theme, though they are all short and frequently mention Zion and Jerusalem. (TLSB)

Ps 120 A prayer for deliverance from false accusers. Verse 7 suggests that the speaker is a king, in which case the accusers seek either to discredit him before his people or, more likely, to awaken suspicion concerning him in foreign courts. But if “war” is understood metaphorically, the psalm could be used also by a private individual beset by slanderers. (CSB)

Historic background uncertain; no specific author or setting is given. Perhaps it was written after the exile (587 BC), when enemies oppressed God’s people.

Format: Vv 1–2, the Lord’s deliverance; vv 3–7, a warrior’s wanderings. (TLSB)

120 title *ascents*.† Some have thought that the Hebrew for this word refers to stairs leading to the temple, hence “a song of the stairs,” to be used in the temple liturgy (probably at the Feast of Tabernacles). Most believe it refers to the annual religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem (see 84:5–7; Ex 23:14–17; Dt 16:16; Mic 4:2; Zec 14:16), which brought the worshipers singing to Mount Zion (Isa 30:29)—a view that does not exclude the psalm’s use also in the temple liturgy. This title, found also at the head of Ps 121–134, probably reflects postexilic usage rather than the original purpose of composition and also marks Ps 120–134 as a collection that was taken up as a unit into the final postexilic arrangement of the Psalter. Together with Ps 135–136, it came to be known in Jewish liturgy as the “Great Hallel” (in distinction from the “Egyptian Hallel”; see introduction to Ps 113). The spirit of Ps 84 pervades it (see also Ps 42–43). Whether a thematic (or some other) scheme controls the arrangement of Ps 120–134 is unclear, though it is probably not coincidental that they begin with a prayer that evokes the experience of one far from home and beset by barbarians and end with a call to praise in the sanctuary. (CSB)

The 120th psalm is a psalm of prayer. It laments and cries out against the false teachers who commit murderous crimes, whose false teachings penetrate like a sharp arrow, powerfully shot. They spread themselves out like fire in a juniper bush, which burns easily and well, for it is fat

and thick and susceptible to fire. In the same way people are much, much more susceptible to false teachings (which harmonize well with reason) than to the true teachings, as St. Paul (2 Timothy 4:3) also says about the itching ears. (Reading the Psalms with Luther)

120:1 *distress*. Psalmist appears to have traveled extensively (v 5) under the threat of war (v 7). (TLSB)

He answered me. General statement of God's rescue, as in 18:6. (TLSB)

120:2 *deliver me* – This has the sense of “snatch away” (s.v. Ps. 22:20); in this case the appeal is for deliverance from treacherous people and their false words. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

lying lips ... deceitful tongues. Contrast the truth of God's Word in Ps 119 with the deceitful tongue of the people in Ps 120. The psalmist's enemies speak lies concerning him and call for war. Cf 5:9; 31:18. (TLSB)

The psalmist turns first to the Lord to ask for help against the lying lips of his enemies. (PBC)

120:3–4 Assurance that God will act. (CSB)

120:3 *what more..*. An echo of a common oath formula, thus suggesting the certainty of God's judgment on the enemies. (CSB)

Next the psalmist turns to his enemies to warn them of the punishment that awaits them if they persist in their ways. (PBC)

120:4 *sharp arrows ... glowing coals*. As a weapon, the tongue is a sharp arrow (see Pr 25:18; Jer 9:8; see also 57:4; 64:3) and a searing fire (see Pr 16:27; Jas 3:6), and God's judgment will answer in kind (see 7:11–13; 11:6; 64:7). (CSB)

broom tree. A desert shrub, sometimes large enough to provide shade. (CSB)

Desert shrub, reaching as high as 12 ft. Its wood burns particularly hot and long. The psalmist wishes this enduring heat would descend on the deceitful tongue. (TLSB)

120:5–7 Complaint over prolonged harassment. (CSB)

120:5 *Meshech ... Kedar*. The former was in central Asia Minor, the latter in Arabia. Besieged by slanderers, the psalmist feels as if far from home, surrounded by barbarians. (CSB)

Meshech. Generally identified as a nation or tribe in the far north, perhaps near the Black Sea. *Kedar!* Area south of Damascus in the Syrian desert. Surrounded by slanderers, the psalmist feels as though he is far from home among a heathen people. (TLSB)

These terms represent the whole unbelieving world which was hostile to Israel. (PBC)

120:7 *I am for peace...they are for war* – God's people cannot have peace when they live among God's enemies since their two ways of life are incompatible (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). They can find peace only in their fellowship with the Lord and his people. (PBC)

Psalmist dwells among those who enjoy ravaging others, perhaps reflecting the situation of refugees living among their captors. Aug: “The body wanders in places, the soul wanders in its affections. If you love the earth, you wander from God: if you love God, you rise unto God” (NPNF 1 8:590). (TLSB)

when I speak. Returning to the theme of the tongue and speech, a war of words erupts whenever he speaks. He would counsel peace, but his enemies reflexively know only war. (TLSB)

Ps 120 The tongue is a powerful tool of peace or war. We can use it to call on God for help, but we might be surrounded by others who use the tongue for deceit. God warns us of His approaching judgment on lying lips that are eager for war. However, He also invites us to call on Him for peace and salvation. • O Lord, answer us with Your sure Word and rescue us by its power. Amen. (TLSB)