

PSALM 120

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 120

A Song of degrees.

This psalm, and the fourteen following, are called “songs of degrees”, or “ascents”^{f1714}; for what reason it is not easy to say. Some think it refers to the music of them, and that this is the name of the tune to which they were set; or the first word of a song according to which they were sung, as Aben Ezra; or that they were sung with an higher voice, or an ascending note, as Saadiah Gaon. Others are of opinion that the title of them respects the ascent of persons or places, at what time and where they were sung; either when the Israelites went up to Jerusalem, at the three solemn yearly feasts; or when the Jews came up from Babylon, mention being made in some of these psalms of their being in Babylon, and of their return from their captivity there; and so the inscription of the Syriac version is,

“the first song of ascent; the people detained in Babylon pray to be delivered.”

But the common opinion of the Jews, and which is embraced by many Christians^{f1715}, and is mentioned by Jarchi, Saadiah Gaon, Kimchi, and Ben Melech, is, that these are the songs sung by the Levites, on the fifteen steps, by which they went up from the court of the women to the court of the Israelites, or came down them; and on each step sung one of these psalms^{f1716}. Though it may be they are so called because of their excellency; a song of degrees being an “excellent”^{f1717} song, as an excellent man is called a man of high degree, (^{<3377>}1 Chronicles 17:17); these being excellent ones for the matter of them, their manner of composure, and the brevity of them. It is generally thought this psalm was composed by David, on account of Doeg the Edomite, because of its likeness in some things with the fifty second psalm: and certain it is that the psalmist had been in some great distress, and at a distance from his own country and the house of God, and dwelt among wicked men when he wrote it; so that it is very probable it was composed during his exile through the persecution of Saul.

Ver. 1. *In my distress I cried unto the Lord*, etc.] Being at a distance from his own country, or, however, from the house of God; persecuted by men, under the lash of their tongues; reproached, abused, and belied by them: in this his case and circumstances, he betook himself by prayer to the Lord, and importuned help and deliverance of him, knowing that none could help him as he; (see ^{<91806>}Psalm 18:6);

and he heard me; answered him, and delivered him. The petition he put up follows, which shows his case, and his particular distress.

Ver. 2. *Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips, [and] from a deceitful tongue.*] Not from such lips, and such a tongue of his own, which David abhorred; though every good man desires to be kept from speaking lies and deceit; nor from the company of those who have such lips and tongues, which he was determined should not dwell with him; but from the malignity of them, from being hurt in his character and reputation by them; God can restrain them, and prevent the ill influence of them when he pleases, (^{<49810>}Psalm 31:20 ^{<25417>}Isaiah 54:17). Such were the lips and tongues of Doeg the Edomite, (^{<46510>}Psalm 52:2-4), and of Saul's courtiers, who insinuated to him that David sought his hurt, (^{<92041>}1 Samuel 24:9); and of the Scribes and Pharisees, that flattered Christ to his face, and reproached him to the people; and of Judas, that betrayed him with "Hail, master", (^{<41850>}Matthew 26:49); and of the false witnesses suborned against him; and of false teachers, deceitful workers, that lie in wait to deceive, and, by their good words and fair speeches, do deceive the hearts of the simple; and of antichrist and his followers, who, as they are given up to believe a lie, speak lies in hypocrisy; and of Satan the father of lies, and who is the old serpent, the devil, that deceives the whole world: and to be delivered from the bad effects of such lips and tongues is very desirable.

Ver. 3. *What shall be given unto thee?* etc.] Or, "what shall [it] give unto thee?"^{f1718} That is, what shall the deceitful tongue give unto thee, O my soul? or to thee, to anyone that hears and reads this psalm? It is capable of giving thee a deal of trouble, of doing thee a deal of mischief; and of injuring thy character, and hurting thy peace and comfort, if permitted;

or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue? or, "what shall the false tongue add unto thee?"^{f1719} it shall increase thy sorrows and distress: or rather, what gain, profit, and advantage, shall the deceitful tongue get to itself by its lies and deceit? none at all; it may do harm to others, but gets no good to itself; (see ^{<23815>}Isaiah 28:15,17); Or, "what shall he (God) give

unto thee?"^{f1720} or, "what shall he add unto thee, thou false tongue?" so Jarchi. What punishment will not he inflict upon thee, who hates lying lips? what plagues will not he add unto thee, who knows all the deceit that is in thee, and spoken by thee? The answer is as follows:

Ver. 4. *Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.*] Some think these words describe lying lips, and a false tongue; which are like arrows, sharp ones, sent out from a bow drawn with a mighty hand, which come with great force, suddenly and swiftly, and do much mischief; (see ^{<BHD>}Psalm 11:2 57:4 64:4); and to "coals of juniper", very distressing and tormenting; the tongue being a fire, set on fire of hell, and sets on fire the course of nature; and throws out devouring words, which consume like fire, (^{<SAB>}James 3:6 ^{<KSD>}Psalm 52:4). But rather the punishment of an evil tongue from the Lord is intended, whose sore judgments are often compared to arrows, (^{<KSD>}Deuteronomy 32:23,42 ^{<BFB>}Ezekiel 5:16 ^{<BOD>}Psalm 7:13); because they come from above, and bring swift and sudden destruction with them; and are very sharp in the hearts of his enemies; are very severe and cutting, and come with power irresistible, being the arrows of the Almighty, (^{<KOD>}Job 6:4); (see ^{<BOD>}Jeremiah 50:9); and these may be compared to "coals of juniper", which are very vehement and strong, and very lasting and durable. Jerom^{f1721} and Isidore^{f1722} say they will last a whole year; and the Midrash on the place reports of two men, who had prepared food with them, and at the end of a year returned and found them burning, and warmed their feet at them. These fitly express the lake of fire and brimstone, the portion of liars; whose fire is very strong, and flames devouring, being kindled by the breath of the Lord of hosts, like a stream of brimstone: and the fire of hell is everlasting; its burnings are everlasting burnings; a worm that dieth not, a fire that is not quenched; the smoke of the torments of which ascend for ever and ever, (^{<BOD>}Isaiah 30:23 33:14 66:24 ^{<BOD>}Revelation 14:11 21:8). The Targum speaks of these arrows as lightnings from above, and of the coals of juniper as kindled in hell below; and they are interpreted of hell in the Talmud^{f1723}.

Ver. 5. *Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech,* etc.] Mesech was a son of Japheth, (^{<BOD>}Genesis 10:2); whose posterity are thought by some to be the Muscovites^{f1724} and Scythians, a barbarous sort of people: Mesech is frequently mentioned with Tubal and his brother, and with Gog and Magog, (^{<BOD>}Ezekiel 38:2,3 39:1); the Targum here calls them Asiatics. Rather the Cappadocians, according to Josephus^{f1725}; and Strabo^{f1726} makes mention of a city of theirs, called Mazaca: and the rather, since they are

mentioned with the Kedarenes, or Arabian Scenites, and were nearer to the land of Judea than the former;

[*that*] *I dwell in the tents of Kedar*; Kedar was a son of Ishmael, (⁴²⁵³Genesis 25:13); whose posterity were Arabians, as the Targum here renders it; and Suidas^{f1727} says, they dwelt not far from Babylon, when he wrote; they lived a pastoral life, and dwelt in tents: Pliny^{f1728} makes mention of Arabs, called Cedrei; and also of Scenite Arabs, from the tents they dwelt in, which they could remove from place to place for the sake of pasturage. And among these David dwelt, when in the wilderness of Paran, (⁴²⁵¹1 Samuel 25:1); though some think David never dwelt among any of those people, but among such who were like unto them for ignorance, idolatry, and barbarity. Some render the words, “woe is me, that I sojourn so long, dwelling as in the tents of Kedar”^{f1729}; as when he was among the Philistines and Moabites; nay, even he may compare his own people to those, many of whom it was as disagreeable dwelling with as with these: and we find Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, speaking of them in their times in like manner, and making the same complaints, (²³⁶⁵Isaiah 6:5 ³⁴⁹²Jeremiah 9:2 ³⁴⁹⁶Ezekiel 2:6). And very grieving and distressing it is to good men to have their abode among wicked men; as well as it is infectious and dangerous: to hear their profane and blasphemous talk, to see their wicked and filthy actions, and to observe their abominable conversation, is very vexatious, and gives great uneasiness, as it did to righteous Lot, (⁴⁰⁰²2 Peter 2:7,8). The first clause is rendered by the Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, and all the Oriental versions, “woe is me, that my sojourning is prolonged”; to which the next words agree, (³⁵⁰⁶Psalms 120:6).

Ver. 6. *My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace.*] The God of peace, against whom their carnal minds are enmity itself; Christ, the Prince of peace, the Man, the Peace, who has made peace by the blood of his cross, whom the world hates; the sons of peace, the quiet in the land, against whom the wicked devise evil things; the Gospel of peace, which the natural man abhors as foolishness; the way of peace, pardon, and salvation by Christ, which carnal men know not, and do not approve of; and the ordinances of the Gospel, which are paths of peace. In short, some are of such restless, quarrelsome, and contentious spirits, that they hate peace with any; are like the troubled sea, that cannot rest; and cannot sleep, unless they do mischief to their fellow creatures: it is very uncomfortable living, especially living long with such. The Targum is,

“my soul hath long dwelt with Edom, hating peace;”

that is, with the Romans or Christians, who are intended; for the Jews understand this psalm of their present captivity.

Ver. 7. *I [am for] peace*, etc.] Amos wholly peace; a man of peace, as Aben Ezra; of a peaceable disposition, devoted to peace; love it, seek and pursue it, as every good man does, who is called to it, and in whose heart it rules: such follow peace with all men, and the things which make for it; and, as much as in them lies, endeavour to live peaceably with all;

but when I speak, they [are] for war; make a motion for peace, and propose the terms of it, they declare against it, and for war: or when he spoke of the things of God, and of his experience of them, of the word of God, and of the truths of it, and of what he believed, (~~130~~ Psalm 116:10); and especially when he gave good counsel and advice to them, and reproved them for their sins, they could not bear it; but hated him for it, and proclaimed war against him; and could not behave peaceably to him in any degree, but became his avowed, sworn, and implacable enemies. The Targum is,

“when I prayed;”

either prayed to God, that they did not like; or prayed for peace with them, that they would not grant; but became more embittered against him.