

Sticks and Stones

A Sermon on Psalm 120

by Rev. J. Scott Lindsay

Theme:	Being slandered by others on account of one's faith is painful and isolating, but God will balance the books on the matter.
Subject:	speech, slander, gossip, injustice, Christian conduct or behaviour
Doing?:	Expressing the pain and hardship of being a servant of God in a rebellious and hostile environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a small country town there were four churches: Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Uniting. The four ministers of those churches belonged to the local Minister's Fraternal and each Wednesday afternoon they would meet at some quiet place for lunch, and then spend some time encouraging one another. Well, one day they all decided they were going to be really honest with each other and share some of their personal struggles and temptations – in confidence – so that they might pray for one another.

Well, the first one to speak up was the Baptist minister who confessed that he had cheated on his tax return the year before – he had claimed some expenses that were not totally legitimate. And they all said they would pray for him. The Anglican minister was next. He confessed to having a real problem with his temper and said that often, when he was really angry, he would swear and speak quite abusively about other people. And they all said they would pray for him. Well, the Presbyterian minister was next, and he confessed that he had been down to the race tracks a few times in a nearby city and had lost a considerable amount of money gambling. And they all said they would pray for him.

Finally, they got around to the Uniting Church minister. And he looked back at them, and he scratched his head. And he said, "Well, really, I don't have any great confession to make. If anything, I am a bit of gossip sometimes."

Now that's a funny story, but only because it's a made-up story. The sad reality is that gossip and slander are things which are not at all funny, and in fact are potentially some of the most hurtful and dangerous things that people can do to one another.

Today we'll be looking at Psalm 120, and focusing on the matter of slander and gossip both inside and outside the church. Before we look at the passage before us, I need to make a few brief comments about the particular collection of Psalms that we will be looking at in this series – Psalms 120-134 – which together are referred to as the “Songs of Ascents.” After some initial brief comments, we'll look at the Psalm itself.

II. BACKGROUND – THE SONGS OF ASCENT

- A. The particular collection or set of Psalms we are looking at has been designated “Psalms of Ascents” or “Songs of Ascents.” This title comes from the Bible itself. If you look at the title to each Psalm in this section and then at the subscription, you will see the words “A Song of Ascents.” This description is unique to these fifteen Psalms, giving the distinct impression that they are a collection within the book of Psalms. Again, looking at a modern hymnal helps us to think about this a bit. Within our modern hymnals are various collections. For example, there are collections of hymns about Jesus as the King, others about God's holiness, and still others centering on Christmas themes. In the same way, the “Songs of Ascents” would seem to be a collection, which sets you on the path of discovering the principle of collection. That is, what is the reason these fifteen psalms are grouped together? What is it that they have in common? What is a song of ascent?
- B. Well, without rehearsing all the various discussions that have taken place over the years, the most likely and widely held belief is that “ascents” refers to the journeys made by pilgrims as they went up to the annual festivals observed in Jerusalem and commanded in the Old Testament (Deut. 16:16).

Deuteronomy 16 records three annual feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover); the Feast of Weeks; and the Feast of Tabernacles. Now for our purposes, it's not important that you know what these feasts were about, only that they were required to be attended and observed in a particular place — where the temple was located. So, a pilgrimage was required for each feast, a journey. You had to “go up” or “ascend” to Jerusalem to participate in the festivals.

Now, the language of “going up” appears in other places in the Old Testament (Ps. 24:3 and Isa. 2:3), and in Isaiah 30:29 there is an explicit connection between going up to a holy festival and the singing of songs:

“And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel [picturesque language for Jerusalem].”

There were songs which were sung in conjunction with the different festivals or events on the annual calendar, much as the church today has certain collections of songs which we sing at particular times of the year — most notably Easter and Christmas.

To give another example, it’s like when you’re away on a camp or retreat sitting around the fire and someone pulls out a guitar and starts to sing. There are certain songs that seem to get sung on those occasions more than others. It’s all part of the way we remember and celebrate these events. In a similar fashion, many scholars feel that these songs were sung as part of the journey to Jerusalem. As they “ascended the mountain of the Lord,” on their way to the temple, these songs marked the various stages of the journey. They echoed the concerns of the heart as the travelers reflected on the life behind them and the path before them. In other words, they were road songs.

I’ve listened to a lot of music in my life — I still do. I’ve followed certain artists through the years, and what I’ve noticed is that everybody has at least one road song. Many have several “road songs.” My own personal opinion is that the “road songs” are often the best thing they ever do. Jackson Browne had a song called “The Road” — which is one of his best. Carole King sang “So Far Away.” And there were others — really deep, soul-searching stuff. As the song played you could almost picture someone sitting on a bus, staring out the window, and thinking about life.

And somewhere in the midst of that, a song was born. A song about things going on at home with family or friends. A song about things that happened along the way. A song about where they were going and sometimes, why they were going. It was just the stuff of life. And I think that’s why those songs move so many people.

These Psalms are road songs. They are concerned with the “stuff” of everyday living — what’s happening back home, what’s happening on the way, what

you look forward to when you get there. With that brief explanation in mind, let's have a look at Psalm 120.

III. FIRST MOVE

The first thing you notice when you read this text is that the writer is in distress. He is upset because he has been the victim of lies, deceit and deceitfulness. He has been slandered and maligned by others. And it hurts.

- A. Keeping in mind the idea that these were road songs, and judging from what the writer says in verses 5-7, it would seem that, at the very least, these are the words of one who lives among people who do not share his faith. His neighbours look upon these journeys to Jerusalem with scorn, maybe even amusement. And so, as the faithful traveler heads off toward Jerusalem for the umpteenth time he notices the stares, and hears the whispers, feels the mockery as slanderous and deceitful things are uttered about him and his family, about his faith. It's quite possible that this slander is coming not only from the unbelieving neighbours, but also from believing neighbours — those who claim to be fellow worshipers of God, but who feel threatened by his devotion and faithfulness. Because they feel threatened, they slander him, they accuse him of false piety or hypocrisy or something — anything to discredit genuine faith.
- B. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to understand what the psalmist is talking about here. I think most people have, at one time or another, been falsely accused. Most of you will know what it feels like to discover that people have been speaking badly about you, and doing so behind your back — sometimes not very far behind your back.
- C. So, the psalmist is obviously distressed, hurt and angered by all of this. His devotion to God, evidenced by these journeys to Jerusalem, has set him apart among his peers. He is a marked man. He is surrounded by people who do not care about God or God's ways. It is a very isolating sort of experience. It can be very lonely at times.

This is what the psalmist is referring to when he speaks about “dwelling in Meshech” and “living among the tents of Kedar.” You see, around the time that this was written, “Meshech” and “Kedar” were the upper and lower ends of the map. To speak of living in these places was the writer's way of saying what it felt like for him. He was saying that when he was slandered and

maligned, he felt totally out of place, like he was somewhere he didn't belong, as if he lived among strangers in the remotest parts of the world — Meshech, Kedar, Siberia, the South Pole.

- D. That's what it feels like for the psalmist — very isolated. And what makes the situation even more difficult is the frustration the psalmist feels toward the person who is engaging in the slander. "What will he do to you, and what more besides, O deceitful tongue?" he asks. You see, the psalmist, as hurt as he is, cannot respond in kind. He cannot return slander for slander. To do that he would have to climb into the gutter with his accuser. He has no recourse.

That's one of the frustrating things about slander and gossip. They are the weapons of a coward because: 1) they are often used anonymously — you can't actually put your finger on the source of the slander; and 2) when they are aimed at a person of integrity then the chance of return fire is not very likely. The slanderer and gossip fights with weapons that people with integrity — like the psalmist here — will not touch. And so the psalmist is left feeling vulnerable and even defenseless.

- E. Yet, even though the psalmist will not strike back, he is comforted by the knowledge that he has a defender — God — who will balance the books and make sure that justice is done in the end: "He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree."

As one commentator has pointed out, Psalm 64:1-7 is another passage which deals with a similar topic. In that passage the words of the slanderer are compared to "sharp arrows" which are turned back upon the slanderer by God. In other words, the slanderer is the victim of his own attack, his words are used against him. And there may be a bit of the same sort of idea in these verses. Whatever the case, the point the psalmist is making here is that the injustice that has been suffered has not gone unnoticed by God. And God will defend the faithful one, even when that one cannot and will not defend himself.

IV. SECOND MOVE

When you look at the New Testament, you will find a number of places which deal with this same or similar subjects. The problem of being slandered and treated unjustly was not just a problem for the people of God in the Old Testament. It was clearly a problem for the people in Jesus day, too.

- A. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Which brings up the other side of the matter — whereas the psalmist pointed out that God would punish the slanderer, Jesus pointed out that God would reward the one who has been slandered.
- B. In Acts 19:8ff, Luke tells us about what happened to Paul when he spoke in the synagogue in Ephesus: “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months” [— and some of you think *my* sermons are long —] “arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way.” “The Way” is Luke’s shorthand for the Christian Church. Clearly, faithful living in the New Testament — “journeying with Jesus,” if I may put it that way — also results in slander against both the people of God and against the gospel.
- C. But for the New Testament writers, the reality of being slandered was not simply something which believers ought to expect or anticipate, but it was also a sin to be avoided, a temptation to be resisted. As we saw earlier, while the psalmist described the reality of being slandered, it is not clear from the text of Psalm 120 as to the source of the slander. Surely, some of it would have originated with unbelievers, but it is equally likely that some of the slander had come from other Jews, from other people who also professed to be believers in God. There is a bit of uncertainty there.

When we get to the New Testament, we see that the writers there are only too aware of the fact that slander can come from believers as well as unbelievers. And as a result, a number of passages deal with this reality:

Titus 3:2: “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all people.”

James 4:11: “Brothers [Christians], do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.”

Ephesians 4:29ff.: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up

according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen . . . Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” One sign of a maturing community of God’s people is the absence of slander and gossip.

In the New Testament, enduring slander is to be expected, and engaging in slander is to be avoided.

- D. And, of course, the most important thing the New Testament says about the matter of slander is “look at Jesus:” In 1 Peter 2:20bff. we read:

“But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him [i.e., slandered him], he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly [as did the psalmist; cf. vv. 3-4]. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

No one was more wrongly accused, more slandered, more despised than Jesus, and there is no better paradigm, no better model, for how we should both view and respond to the evil of slander. He absorbed the slander — like a sponge — and through his death made a way for his accusers to be forgiven by God for their immeasurable injustice against him.

V. THIRD MOVE

Well, Christians today don’t have a temple to attend. We are the temple — both individually and collectively. We don’t have annual feasts and pilgrimages. We have the Lord’s Supper. The many external rituals and signs of God’s people in the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Faithfulness looks a bit different today than it did in the psalmist’s time.

- A. But while the *form* of faithful living may be different today than it was in the Old Testament, the *fact* of faithful living is not different at all. Just as it was for the psalmist, following Christ is also a pilgrimage for us — a journey of discipleship. Eugene Peterson called it “a long obedience in the same direction.” Because faithfulness to God is not normal practice in this world,

those who try to live this way will stand out. A distinctively Christian lifestyle will set you apart from those around you in certain obvious ways. Your manner of living will and should constantly remind the unbelievers in your life of that which, as Romans 1 reminds us, they so desperately try to suppress. Your life will remind them that God is real and they are ignoring him. Unfortunately, people don't appreciate that, which makes *you* a target for slander.

- B. The source of the slander will not only be unbelievers. As the New Testament points out, your own brothers and sisters in Christ are also quite capable of slander and gossip. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which can be that they feel threatened by your devotion to God. Coupled with that, some will slander you because they desire to direct attention away from their own shortcomings. What better way to do this than by throwing a bit of dirt on somebody else? It's the skunk principle — you spray everybody else, and suddenly you smell really good.
- C. So the question is, "How are we, as God's people today, going to respond to slander?"
 1. Firstly, we need to acknowledge the fact that there is a certain sense in which it is unavoidable, and so we should not be too surprised or disheartened when we see it happening to us or around us. As long as there are people who are faithful to God as well as those who couldn't care less, slander will be a problem. Because the church is full of people like and you and me, slander will continue to rear its ugly head within the church as well. It's part of the journey. It goes with the territory.
 2. A second thing to remember is that we can pray for those that slander us. We can ask God to teach us what it means to love our enemies. We can look at the example of Christ who absorbed the slander and hatred aimed at him and did not slander back. We can avoid the temptation to "fight fire with fire."
 3. Even further, we can be comforted by the thought that God will balance the books one day. He will defend the defenseless.
 4. When we think about what we can actually do about slander and deceitfulness, there are a number of possibilities. Some of these things can be done with those both inside and outside the church. Others

would only be appropriate for Christians to do with one another. Which is which should be fairly obvious.

- a. Firstly, when it comes to slander, gossip, and deceitful speech, *don't do it*. Don't make a habit of dissecting and critiquing other people in your conversations. In fact, you should do just the opposite. Instead of running down people who are not there, you should, as Stephen Covey puts it, "defend the absent". If you have a problem with a person, don't share it with everybody *but* that person. Go to the person and talk to him or her. Don't drag other people into it. Don't try to justify it. *Just stop doing it*.

Does that mean you can't have a discussion or public discourse? No. It just means that the character and the motives of people are not the subject matter. If you want to talk about ideas, thoughts, topics, go right ahead. But leave your personal grudges and grievances out of it. Those matters should be handled one-on-one.

- b. Secondly, not only should you avoid it, but also don't encourage it. Perhaps you have been in conversations with other Christians and have noticed that with some people there seems to be a bit of a pattern of gossip, or of criticizing other people and running them down. Maybe you've been in those kinds of situations and have felt uncomfortable, wondering what you ought to do. Maybe you've felt that you should just be "polite" and not say anything. If so, you were wrong! Even though you may not intend it to be so, your silence is equivalent to approval. So what can you do? Several things:
 - i. You can stop the direction of the conversation, change the subject.
 - ii. What's better, say something like, "I'd rather not talk about so-and-so, if you don't mind," "Perhaps it would be more fair to discuss those things when so-and-so is here to defend herself or himself," or "Obviously this is something that is bothering you. Have you talked with so-and-so about these things?"

- iii. If your attempt at putting a stop to the slander has not been successful, I believe you have a responsibility as a Christian to rebuke your brother or sister with regard to this behaviour. That is, you need to inform him or her, as firmly but lovingly as you can, that what he or she is doing is wrong. You need to show your brother or sister that Scripture (such as Eph. 4 and Tit. 3) condemns this sort of behaviour among Christians.
- iv. Finally, and as a last resort, you can simply leave, walk away. If your actions are rejected, then you can stop the conversation. This in itself is a form of rebuke. That doesn't mean you stop the relationship. It doesn't mean you don't come back later and address the matter. But it does leave the gossip or slanderer with something to think about it, and sends a firm signal that says you will not be a party to the slander.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

- A. Whatever the source, whatever the motivation, slander is destructive. Those that practice it are acting as enemies of the gospel. They are tearing down those for whom Christ has died. As the psalmist has expressed it, the effects of slander are hurtful and isolating for those that endure it. That reality should drive us back to God — we look to God, through his Son Jesus, for the example of how we are to respond to slander. We also look to God as the one who will balance the books, who will turn the sharp arrows of the slanderer upon himself, who will defend the defenseless.
- B. Even further, the pain which the psalmist expressed at being slandered, the same pain to which most of us can relate personally, should motivate us to avoid slandering others. It should also lead us to discourage these sins in our brothers and sisters.

Believe me, this will take some work. I have never been a part of a church where this wasn't a big issue. We all need to think and pray about this. We may find that we need to talk to certain people about things that they have said. We may need to confess and repent of things we have said. We may have to be gracious and forgive those who have slandered us. I know I am asking you to do a hard thing. But we have got to do it. We have to manage relationships better than anybody else. We have to do community like it's never been done before. We are the church, and God has called us to peace and unity. This is not going to

happen overnight, and it's not going to happen by accident. We're going to have to work at it.

Somewhere in the midst of doing it, we — all of us — are going to grow up a little bit, and become more the body of Christ that we're meant to be.

You think about that.