

The sacred practice of repentance (from a world that lies)

Psalm 120

By pastor Ken Keyte

21st August 2016

1

Psalm 120 *Psalm of Ascents*

I'm in trouble. I cry to God,
desperate for an answer:
"Deliver me from the liars, God!
They smile so sweetly but lie through their teeth"
Do you know what's next, can you see what's coming,
all you barefaced liars?
Pointed arrows and burning coals will be your reward.
I'm doomed to live in Meshech,
cursed with a home in Kedar.
My whole life lived camping among
quarreling neighbours.
I'm all for peace, but the minute I tell them so,
they go to war! *The Message*

You've been listening to Psalm 120 put to the music of *Ari Lesser*, here's how *Eugene Peterson* paraphrases this psalm in the *Message Bible*.

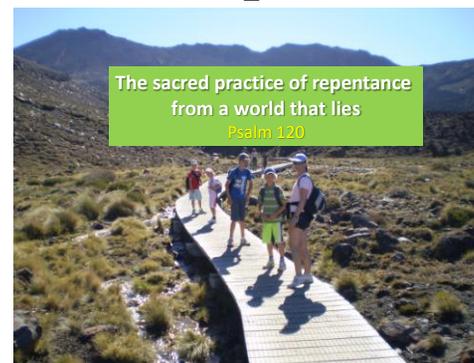
*I'm in trouble. I cry to God,
desperate for an answer:
"Deliver me from the liars, God!
They smile so sweetly but lie through their teeth"
Do you know what's next, can you see what's coming, all you
barefaced liars?
Pointed arrows and burning coals will be your reward.
I'm doomed to live in Meshech,
cursed with a home in Kedar.
My whole life lived camping among quarreling neighbours.
I'm all for peace, but the minute I tell them so, they go to war!*

If you've ever read Psalm 120 before,
I wonder if you've noticed that it's called a *Psalm of Ascent*?
But not only this psalm, *all of the 15 psalms* from 120 to 134 are
Psalms of Ascent.

Tradition has it that these 15 psalms were most likely *sung in sequence*, by *faithful Hebrew pilgrims* who *three times a year* went up to *Jerusalem* to the great *worship festivals*.
Passover (in the spring); *Pentecost* (in early summer);
and the *Feast of Tabernacles* (in the autumn).

One of the *striking things* about their *journey* is that Jerusalem was the *highest city in Palestine* meaning that the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was always *up hill!*
The journey was an *ascent*.

2



When I think of a *family pilgrimage of ascent*, I think of this one, our family made several years ago over the *Tongariro crossing*.

But a *better example* of a *faithful Hebrew family* making the journey of ascent is found in the *gospel of Luke* where it says how every year *Mary and Joseph* made the journey from their home in *Nazareth*, to *Jerusalem* for the *Feast of Passover*, according to their custom.
So at the age of 12, *Jesus* made this pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his family.

Now when *our family* goes on a long journey in the car, the first thing our teenagers do is *pull out their cell phones*, *put on their earphones*, and *listen to their music* to pass the time.

But *what did they do to pass the time* back then, as they travelled the long uphill journey to Jerusalem *on foot*?

They sang!

These 15 songs of Ascent was their *playlist* they sang to! Which means Jesus probably sang *this song* as he *pilgrimage*d from Nazareth to Jerusalem with his Mum & Dad.

Mark 10:32 tells us that Jesus (now as an adult) *also* made the *sacred pilgrimage* to Jerusalem, with his *disciples*. With *astonishment and fear* they set out with Jesus *leading the way*, so he *took the twelve aside* and told them what was going to happen to him. At Jerusalem, he would be *betrayed, condemned to death, mocked, beaten and killed*, but *three days later would rise!*

You see the *ascent to Jerusalem* was not only *literal*, it was also a *metaphor*. It was as if the trip to Jerusalem *acted out a life lived upward toward God*, advancing from *one level of maturity to another*.

The Apostle Paul described this sacred journey as *pressing on toward the goal for which God beckons me heavenward- in Christ Jesus* (Phil 3:14).

This *sacred pilgrimmage of growing* to become like Jesus- is the journey of "*discipleship*."

Eugene Peterson describes it as "*A long Obedience in the Same Direction*" He's written a *best-selling book* by that title- which I'm going to be using as a *helpful commentary* on the *15 Psalms of Ascent*, (which we'll be looking at over the coming Sundays).

So filled with the *excitement, uncertainty, and expectation* of setting off on the *sacred journey* toward our *heavenward goal* *What will sustain us and enable us to keep pressing on?*

That's where each of the 15 Psalms of Ascent can help us! Because *each one of them describes one of 15 sacred practices* that help us *grow in our upward journey toward God*.

Sacred practices fan into flame what God wants to *grow and develop in you and me!*

2a

The *sacred practice* that Psalm 120 sings about is the *sacred practice of repentance from a world that lies!*

Distressed by a world that lies

3



What *starts the pilgrim off* on their *sacred pilgrimage* is a *state of distress!*

The *first two lines* of the psalm describe how he is *distressed by lying lips and a deceitful tongue*.

Then further on he writes how he feels *doomed to dwell in the far away town of Meshech* in southern Russia (which is about *as far away from Jerusalem* as anyone could've imagined back then), and he feels *fated to live among the tents of Kedar*, (who were a wandering tribe of barbaric Bedouins). The *strange* and *the hostile* is what these *two place names* represent.

The *pilgrim of psalm 120* has *come to the distressing realisation that*. "*I live in the midst of liars, strangers, and gangsters, this world is not my home and I want out of it!*"

And *that's the nudge that gets him going*, which is the *same kind of nudge that gets us going* as we also come to the *distressing realisation* that *we live in a world that lies!* *The world is not as it has been represented to us!*

See if you recognise these *lies of the world*:

- *Human beings are basically nice and good.*
- *Everyone is born equal and innocent and self sufficient.*
- *The world is a pleasant harmless place.*
- *We are all born free.*
- *But if not, then it's someone's fault and we can correct it with a little more intelligence, effort, or time.*

The *big fat lie* of the world that *sums all these lies up*: is that *everything is OK and if not we can sort it all out in the end!*

How we can *keep on believing this* after so many centuries of evidence to the *contrary* is hard to comprehend.

Take for instance the *Olympic Games*.

The *ideals of the Olympic Games* are expressed by the *Olympic creed*, that says:

'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.'

If that were *really true*, then how come, an *athlete just pipped on the line* for fourth place is so *upset*?

And *how come*, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on getting a nation's best athletes to the *peak of their performance* so they can *win an Olympic gold medal*?

If that were *really true* then *why is the medal count so important that it's featured on the news*?

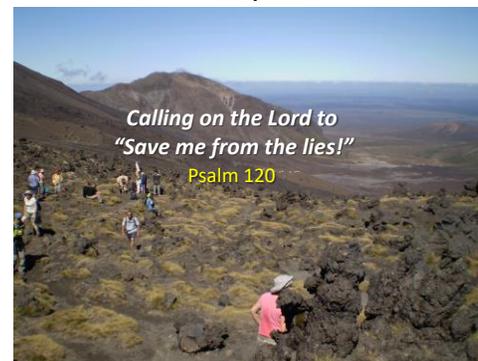
And if that were really so, then why have athletes like *Ben Johnson, Lance Armstrong*, and allegedly *most of the Russian Olympic team* taken *performance enhancing drugs* so they could be *faster, higher, stronger* as the *Olympic motto* goes?

While the *Olympic creed* is a *nice ideal*, in actual fact *it's a lie!* Just like *all the other lies of the world*, that *fool us into thinking everything's OK*, or *can be worked out in the end!*

What starts *pilgrims like you and me* on the *sacred pilgrimage towards God's home* is the *distressing realisation* that we live in a world that *constantly lies!*

Calling on the Lord to "save me from the lies!"

4



Calling on the Lord to *"save me from the lies!"* is what *breaks the spell* of being *enchanted* by a world that *lies*, so the pilgrim can *break free* from the *hold* these lies have had, to *begin* the journey toward God.

"I call on the Lord and he answers me, save me O Lord from lying lips and from deceitful tongue" is the pilgrim's cry for help at the start of the psalm.

Eugene Peterson has written a prayer that goes like this:

*"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 behaviour and my morals so that I will live long, happily and successfully,
from the lies of moralists who pretend to promote me to the office of captain of my fate,
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."*

What's so *believable* about these lies, is that they are *impeccably factual*, containing *no errors*, or *distortions*, or *falsified data*, but they are *lies just the same!*

That's because they claim to tell us *who we are* but *omit everything about how our origin and destiny are to be found in God!*

They talk about the world *without telling us that God made it!*

They tell us about our bodies *without telling us that our bodies 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!*

But when we utter the cry: *"God save me from the lies!"* our *perspective* changes as God begins *exposing the deceit behind each lie*, through the *truth that sets us free!*

You see, the *truth about me*, is that *God made me and loves me!*

The *truth about you* is that *God made you and loves you!*

The *truth about anyone we meet*, is that *God made them and loves them, therefore they are our neighbour!*

The truth about the world is that *God rules over it and provides for it!*

The truth about *what 's wrong with the world* is that *you and me and our neighbour, have sinned by refusing to let God be for us, and over us, and in us!*

The truth about how this world has and will be saved, is that *Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross for our sins and raised from the tomb for our salvation, so that we may participate in a new life, by believing in Jesus, accepting his truth and mercy, responding to his love, and following his commands!*

I've found it *really interesting* listening to *the interviews of the many different athletes* after competing in their event at the Rio Olympics:

5



My *favourite interview* was of *South African athlete, Wayde Van Niekerk* **5a** who won the *400m gold medal in an amazing world record time*, here's what he said when they asked him about his race:

"I'm really first of all very thankful and grateful that the Lord's blessed me with this talent that I have today and the opportunity that I had last night to go out there and showcase the talents that he's given me,

I'd love to give you a story but every time I think back to last night, the only thing I can think of is how grateful I am for the way the Lord has blessed me and I'm so, so grateful for it...

this is way beyond just my own journey, this is our journey, my family and friends and my coach" (who happens to be a 70 year old grandma!)

Wayde contined: *"They all play a huge role in where I am today and in the person I am today, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to share this moment with them (Wayde had brought them all out to the Olympics with the prize money from an award he won last year!)...."*

Then he went on to say, *"I had no strategy [for the race] I just said God take over, ...I just believe in God and let his will be done in my life, ... that last 100m is a miracle, when I look back at my race I went "wow" is that me pulling away from the rest of the field... I wrote in a post last night, "Jesus did it because I certainly couldn't have done what I did last night, I've had so many challenges these past five days [with a back strain and a hamstring tweak] and I give the Lord full credit for everything I achieved last night."*

I think *Wayde Van Niekerk* is a *great example*, of an athlete who has *called on the Lord to save him from the lies* that so easily go to a *successful athletes head*, (or any successful person for that matter!), when they start *believing the lie* that they're *better than everybody else* because they did *on their own!*

What *breaks the spell that enchants us* into believing this lie, is when God answers our cry to *"save me from the lies!"* by *exposing the deceit, with his truth!*

Like the pilgrim of psalm 120, God *will break the spell that enchants us* with a world of lies, when we call on the Lord to *"save me from the lies!"*

Speaking up for peace when others want war

6



And at *this point* we're *ready to take our first step* away from the world that lies *toward the God of truth.*

We call the *"No"* we say to the *world's lies* and the *"yes"* we say to *God's truth* - *"repentance."*

Repentance is *always the first step* in the Christian life. *"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"*, Jesus preached.

Repentance is *not an emotion*, it's *not even feeling sorry for your sins*. Repentance is a *decision.*

It is deciding that *you've been wrong about thinking you could manage your own life and be your own god.*

It is deciding that *you've been wrong in thinking that you have, or can get, the strength, education and training to make it on your own.*

It is deciding that *you've been told a pack of lies about yourself and your neighbour's and your world.*

And it is deciding that *God in Jesus Christ is telling you the truth!*

Repentance is a realisation that *what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts.*

Repentance is a decision *to follow Christ and become his pilgrim in the path of peace.*

Which *the pilgrim* of Psalm 120 put *like this*:

⁶ Too long have I lived among those who hate peace.

⁷ I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

Acting and speaking *peacefully in the midst of a conflict* is an example of *repentance from the violent ways of the world and stepping out toward the peaceful practices of God.*

There are *other forms* of repentance too.

I've long been a fan of Olympic 1500m silver medalist, *Nick Willis.* (I used to *run against his older brother* when we lived in Wellington).

7



Back in March I was *surprised to read on my Facebook feed* an article about how *Nick Willis* had *broken his silence* about his *pornography addiction!*

A proud Christian, Nick Willis says, *"It wasn't until I realised the effect it had on others, especially my wife that I committed to change."*

Willis marked the milestone of having gone two-and-a-half years *porn free*, by posting on Facebook that his addiction to

pornography, which had started as a teen, had been a *"rollercoaster ride of shame and justification"*.

"I was exposed to magazines and videos at a young age and the objectification of the women on these media forms became an outlet for me to gain some form of intimacy that I severely lacked."

It took him years to figure out that what he regarded as *"sexy and appealing"* was a *false reality.*

"My understanding of how to form real relationships with the opposite sex had been hijacked."

"Porn makes you think you are having sexual needs met. But really, they are hollow and leave you feeling empty and lonelier than before."

"Basically, pornography is a very unnatural (and very temporary) solution that people use to satisfy a natural desire because pornography will not and cannot love you back."

Getting this topic out of his secret life into the open, and talking, about it has made the biggest impact in breaking the cycle, for Nick Willis.

The key to an addict's recovery is learning new ways of behaving.

"The old patterns will always be there, but the more a person practices the new behaviour it will trump the old addictive responses."

Willis warned, *"Don't believe the lie that pornography is a natural and OK thing for men to participate in. It will affect everything in your life, especially your ability to experience true intimacy."*

"My eyes have now become truly open to the lies of pornography, that it is a completely fake distortion of sex and women. It is not sexy nor appealing. I am no longer duped by a false reality."

(Nick will be competing in the Olympic 1500m final in a few hours time!)

What Nick Willis is describing here,
as an example of the *sacred practice of repentance*.

8



Do you see that *repentance from a world that lies to you*,
is *not a just a once only event* we do when we *first decide to follow Jesus*?

Repentance is an *ongoing sacred practice we keep on doing* as
God reveals to us *his truth* so we can *keep on stepping away from*
the world's lies and *press on towards God*.

Have *you* become so *distressed* by a world that *lies to you*,
that you're *ready to call on the Lord to save you from them*?

Are you ready to *begin the sacred pilgrimage toward the truth that*
Jesus reveals to you, the *truth that sets you free*?

We're going to pause for a moment to *re-listen to psalm 120*,

- then in *silence* we'll have an opportunity to *allow the Holy Spirit to expose the lies* we've become enchanted by,
- and to *cry out to God to "save me from them"*,

- and to *allow the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth about how Jesus wants you to live*.