

# Summer of Psalms: Psalms 120 and 12

## Digging Deeper: a study for individual or groups

We live in an age of tribalism, and of the politics of identity. Tribes are defined in many different ways, but commonly along the lines of gender, orientation and race. Speaking rights are tribally assigned: if you are not a member of my tribe, already in fundamental agreement with me, you are not to speak, and I sure don't need to listen to you.

1. What are you “not allowed” to speak about to others?
2. Who's your “tribe”?

For Christians, any talk of “tribe” is fraught with difficulty. This is because God requires of us to take up our cross every day, enacting the “death” of ourselves in relation to every worldly claim on us, including tribal identity. We don't belong any more to tribes defined by family, or by gender, or orientation, or ethnicity. We belong to the “tribe” of those who follow Jesus, putting their trust in Him alone.

It was always this way. This is Jesus, who left the ultimate insider role of Eternal Son to become an outsider on earth. Who accepted Syro-Phoenician women and dishonest tax collectors, welcoming them into the kingdom of God, while fighting endlessly with the insiders, both Pharisee and Sadducee, which left him and his followers outside. Where he lived as an unmarried rabbi, a Galilean Jewish eldest son decidedly off reservation, and with a take on the law no rabbinical tribe would countenance.

And this was Paul, the most successful and influential witness to Jesus ever: an ultimate Jewish insider who ends up persecuted by his people, sent instead to the unacceptable Gentiles, the ultimate outsiders, to bring them into the kingdom of God. He was no Gentile - indeed, his history of opposition, and his Jewish ethnicity, would have counted against him as “belonging” to those he spoke to. But nor was he any longer a Jew, having forfeited belonging in that tribe by virtue of his radical gospel. An outsider in every sphere, Paul was nonetheless sent to those with whom he had least affiliation; *that's* worth pondering. In today's society, Paul would have been “cancelled” everywhere he went.

God's plan is to call us “outside” our worldly identity. To put it provocatively, He “pre-cancels” us, so that any further cancellation is beside the point. Our identity now secured in fellowship with Him in the family of believers, He can then send us back into the world - to any tribe! - able to speak as He leads, filled (crucially) with His love.

3. In what ways do you stand “outside” your worldly identity?
4. In what ways do you struggle to escape the pull of tribal identity?
5. What is it like for you to be “inside” the family of those who belong to Jesus?

The move outward, away from belonging in the world, is enacted at the outset of the Book of Ascents, a dog-eared songbook tucked inside the Book of Psalms proper. The most famous psalm in it is Psalm 121 – “I lift my eyes to the hills!” – a psalm which draws us eagerly forward on the road of pilgrimage. But the first psalm, the one that gets us on the road, is not famous at all. Read it: Psalm 120.

6. What do you think this psalmist might have experienced from others (v.2)?

Consider what the psalmist expresses in his hurt and fear (vv.3-4): a strong desire for retribution. Following the structure of the vow his accuser made to certify his false witness (“what shall be done / and what more shall be done”), he imagines flaming, long-burning arrows flung into the city of his accuser, burning it to the ground!

7. What is it like to read such hot-blooded prayers?
8. Why do you think they appear so often in the inspired Book of Psalms?

This may be a good reminder that the Lord is able to hear *whatever* is in us. We learn from the psalmists that God requires us to be truthful in prayer, but doesn’t need us to be polite.

9. What hot-blooded prayer do you hold back for fear of offending God?

Stepping from anger to sadness, the psalmist describes how all this has left him: as someone who no longer belongs (v.5). It is as if he were living at the ends of the earth among people whose speech he doesn’t understand (Meshech), or camping uneasily with a nomadic warrior tribe (Kedar). He knows he is an alien, and it seems to him that he is trying to speak for peace (“I [am] shalom” it says in v.6, literally), while others around him are labouring to break everything.

10. In what ways are those around you “for war”?
11. In what ways are you “for peace” in the ways you speak and act?

Another unfamiliar psalm expresses the breakdown of speech directly: Psalm 12. Finish by reading it out loud as a prayer, owning the promise of the Lord to protect us from violent speech (vv.4-6), and calling on Him to purify our hearts so that we speak with integrity, compelled by love. (For more on this psalm, listen to the message from Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> January 2024.)

## **Going Further: suggestions for putting this into practice**

Consider four invitations to step forward, learning to venture as speakers who are unashamed and empowered by the Lord. Choose one to discuss (if with others) or reflect on (if by yourself), and put it into action over the coming week.

### **Invitation One: practise honesty and openness**

Choose to speak about your feelings and thoughts, rather than act them out. Reject the passive aggression of our culture, in which we “vote with our feet”, and decide to speak, gently and respectfully. This will take practice, and may require you to learn new conversational skills. It will also help your discipleship; for what is brought into the light will be seen more clearly. And at its best, this is a way we help one another grow.

Pray, then, with the psalmist: “See if there is any painful way in me, and lead me in the sure and constant Way!” (Psalm 139:24). And ask the Lord: “As I open up, Lord, show me my heart, and purify my motives!” Check in with the Lord at the end of each day: how did I do?

### **Invitation Two: practise noticing and naming what is good**

Most of us are wired to notice what is wrong, different and threatening; that’s how we learned, early in life, to “make safe”. Culturally, also, we are not given to “talking up” what is good. But remember the Scripture (Philippians 4:8): “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, dwell on these things.” We have a biblical mandate to notice, and to pay close attention to, what is good. And the next step is to name it to others, simply, without flattery or hedging (cf. Psalm 12:2).

Each day pray Philippians 4:8 slowly, and after each clause name in prayer what comes to mind. Afterward, consider: which of these might I name for others? Finally, turn to the Lord and ask, “Teach me to see and to dwell on what is good, Lord! And help me to speak out what I see!”

### **Invitation Three: practise bringing injustice to the notice of those who can help**

It’s all too easy to find reasons *not* to get involved with injustice, when you see it playing out in the lives of others. We are schooled to “mind our own business”, and apt to imagine that others will take up the cause, if we do not. Often, these stories mask an anxiety that we’ll get in over our heads, or simply fail to be helpful.

But the followers of Jesus are not bystanders to injustice. We are advocates, bringing what we see to the attention of those who can bring about real change. This may involve us in speaking, or writing: describing injustice and its effects, and calling for redress. Job's boast should be our own: "I was a father to those in need, and championed the cause of the stranger," (Job 29:16). Above all, it will involve us in prayer: for our God loves justice and is mighty to save!

Each day, read Proverbs 31:8-9 aloud to yourself. "Open your mouth on behalf of those unable to speak, for all the rights of the destitute! Open your mouth, judge in righteousness, and plead the cause of the poor and needy!" Then ask the Lord, "Please open my eyes to injustice today. Guide me by your Spirit to respond as you lead, speaking or writing or in some other way." At the end of the day, review, and pray for God's intervention in a situation of injustice that has stirred you.

#### **Invitation Four: pursuing love, refuse to be disqualified as an outsider**

For us as followers of Jesus, our speaking rights are not determined by whether we are "inside" or "outside" the tribe we're addressing. The criterion for all Christian ethics, and certainly for speaking, is love. This is the message of 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, among other passages. In particular, verse 2 is salutary: "If I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge ... but don't have love, I am nothing." I may think I see things clearly, outsider that I am; but without love, I have no business opening my mouth. Let verses 3-7 guide you in assessing whether you have love for the people you might wish to speak to.

Each day, ask the Lord to fill you with His love. "Pour your love into me this day, for everyone I meet, and for those I read and hear about." Then pray for yourself as Paul prayed for the Philippians. "I pray that my love may overflow more and more with knowledge and depth of insight, so that I may determine what really matters, and so be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ," (Philippians 1:9-10). Then venture into your day, ready to speak as the Lord leads you.