

August 25/26, 2001

The Battle for the Truth

Psalm 120

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In 1899 four newspaper reporters from Denver, Colorado set out to tear down the Great Wall of China. They almost succeeded. Literally. The four met by chance on a Saturday night in a Denver railway depot. Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis, Hal Wilshire. They represented the four Denver papers: the *Post*, the *Times*, the *Republican* and the *Rocky Mountain News*. Each had been sent by his respective newspaper to dig up a story – any story – for the Sunday editions; so the reporters were in the railroad station, hoping to snag a visiting celebrity should one happen to arrive that evening by train.

None arrived that evening, by train or otherwise. The reporters started commiserating. For them, no news was bad news; all were facing empty-handed return trips to their city desks.

Al declared he was going to make up a story and hand it in. The other three laughed. Someone suggested they all walk over to the Oxford Hotel and have a beer. They did.

Jack said he liked Al's idea about faking a story. Why didn't each of them fake a story and get off the hook? John said Jack was thinking too small. Four half-baked fakes didn't cut it. What they needed was one real whopper they could all use. Another round of beers.

A phony domestic story would be too easy to check on, so they began discussing foreign angles that would be difficult to verify... China was distant enough, it was agreed. They would write about China.

John leaned forward, gesturing dramatically in the dim light of the bar room. Try *this* one on, he said: Group of American engineers, stopping over in Denver en route to China. The Chinese government is making plans to demolish the Great Wall; our engineers are bidding on the job.

Harold was skeptical. Why would the Chinese want to destroy the Great Wall of China? John thought for a moment. They're tearing down the ancient boundary to symbolize international goodwill, to welcome foreign trade! Another round of beers.

By 11:00 p.m. the four reporters had worked out the details of their preposterous story. After leaving the Oxford Bar, they would go over to the Windsor Hotel. They would sign four fictitious names to the hotel register. They would instruct the desk clerk to tell anyone who asked that four New Yorkers had arrived that evening, had been interviewed by reporters, had left early the next morning for California.

The Denver newspapers carried the story. All four of them. Front page. In fact, the *Times* headline that Sunday read: GREAT CHINESE WALL DOOMED! PEKING SEEKS WORLD TRADE!

Of course, the story was a phony, a ludicrous fabrication concocted by four capricious newsmen in a hotel bar. But their story was taken seriously, was picked up and expanded by newspapers in the Eastern U.S. and then by newspapers abroad.

When the Chinese themselves learned that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to tear down their national monument, most were indignant; some were enraged. Particularly incensed were the members of a secret society, a volatile group of Chinese patriots who were already wary of the foreign intervention. They, inspired by the story, exploded, rampaged against the foreign embassies in Peking, and slaughtered hundreds of missionaries.

In two months, twelve thousand troops from six countries joined forces, invaded China with the purpose of protecting their own countrymen. The bloodshed which followed, sparked by a journalistic hoax invented in a bar room in Denver, became known to every high school history student ... as the Boxer Rebellion.

-Paul Aurandt, ed., *More of Paul Harvey's the Rest of the Story*

It was just a harmless lie. It was just a hoax. But that hoax caused hundreds of missionaries and thousands of soldiers their lives. When we were kids we used to say, "Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us." But we know that is false. We know that words have the power to heal and they have the power to destroy.

James says that the tongue is like a flame—it sets a whole forest on fire. He says the tongue is like a small rudder that steers an entire ship. He also says the tongue is like a poisonous snake that bites and injects its venom into its victim.

You know, it's sobering to think that if somebody wanted to they could tell a lie about you, and if enough people believed, they could destroy your reputation. They could destroy your career. They could cause unrepairable damage, and there's really not much you could do to solve that.

Several years ago I read a newspaper article about five 5th-graders who didn't really like their 5th-grade teacher. So they got together and decided to make up a lie that this teacher had sexually molested them, and people believed them. People believed them and parents were outraged. Soon the teacher lost his job and charges were filed. It wasn't until the district attorney was deep into his investigation that the story started to unravel. Finally, these five kids admitted they had made the whole thing up—the teacher had never touched them. The teacher and his family had to pack up their bags, move to another town and start their lives over.

The reality is there is great power in our words, and there is great destructive power in the lie. In the last several years we've observed in our culture that there is no longer a high value on truth among our nation's leaders. Rather than valuing truth, what many of them value is whatever they need to say in order to promote their agenda...in order to get ahead. No longer is truth a value. What's valued today is what's called the Spin Doctor, which is a clever title for a liar.

We see this in the medical world. We just saw it in the past few weeks, when a pharmacist was arrested for passing out diluted cancer medication. While these cancer patients were fighting for one more day of life, little did they know that their medication was doing them no good, because the pharmacist had diluted it down just to make more money.

We see it in the world of education, as revisionists are rewriting history in order to promote some political agenda. And we certainly see it in churches, as the truth is watered down to appeal to the consumer. That is what the New Testament calls "tickling people's ears."

This weekend marks the kick-off of fall sports. Right now, across our country, there are hundreds of thousands of high school students, college students, and professional athletes who are absolutely convinced that if they succeed this year in sports it will make them happy. It will fill that empty void inside them. That's a lie. It won't work.

This weekend there will be hundreds of thousands of people who will buy a powerball ticket for their shot at this two hundred and whatever million dollars. And an overwhelming majority of those people believe that if they were to win it would make them happy. That's a lie.

There are people who have all kinds of crazy ideas about their self-image and their self-esteem and what gives life meaning and purpose and what they should really live for. They are confused because they've been lied to. They've been deceived. It started all the way back in the beginning, in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve were in a place called Paradise—perfect environment, perfect relationship with God and each other. The enemy revealed that his mode of operation is the lie—deceit. He convinced Adam and Eve of something that wasn't true, in order to get them to rebel against God, and they were kicked out of Paradise.

In John 8, Jesus said that Satan is a liar. In fact, He said he's the father of lies—everything that comes out of his mouth is a lie. We're also told in the New Testament that Satan is the god of this age. If you put those two things together, then what we would know is that the god of this age is a liar. So we live in a culture of lies. Every day we are bombarded with things that aren't true—through the media, from the people at work, through our peers, through advertisers. We live in a culture of lies.

And this isn't just something that happens “out there.” Some of you here this morning are suffering devastating effects because your spouse lied to you. Your spouse deceived you, and you're trying to put the pieces back together. Some of you are dealing with a teenager who's going down a very dangerous path. One of the most difficult parts of this is that the teenager just keeps lying. Your teenager doesn't tell you the truth, and it's destroying your family. Some of you are dealing with it at work. You're in an environment where the truth is not being told. It's an environment of lies and deception, and you live with the effect of that everyday.

We, as the people of God, are called to stand for truth. If we don't stand for truth, nobody will. If we're going to stand for truth, then we need to understand that we are at war. We are at war with the god of this age. We are in a battle for truth. And that's the heartbeat of Psalm 120. The psalmist lives in a culture of lies, and he's feeling the pressure of that. Out of that, he writes the words of Psalm 120.

We don't know who wrote Psalm 120. You will notice right under the number is an inscription that says, “A Song of Ascents.” In fact, you notice that inscription under every psalm from 120 to 134. What that means, we don't know. There are lots of different theories and guesses and ideas, and I would guess that one of those is probably correct. But I don't know which one is correct, and it doesn't really affect our interpretation.

The psalmist opens up in verse 1: “In my trouble I cried to the LORD.” That word *trouble* is an interesting word. It's a Hebrew word that means to be restricted—to be bound. It means to be in bondage. The psalmist will go on and describe his trouble specifically as “lying lips and a deceitful tongue.” He will go on to say that it's because he lives in a culture of deceit and lies. So he is saying that deceitfulness and liars lead us to bondage—restriction. That's how he's defining his trouble.

We live in what's called a postmodern culture, and one of the foundation stones of postmodernism is that there are no absolute truths. People want to believe that, because they think it leads to freedom. They think that a rejection of absolutes leads to freedom. But the psalmist is saying just the opposite. Lies and deceit lead to bondage. That's why Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

“In my trouble I cried to the LORD.” The psalmist has nowhere else to turn. He feels the pressure of living in a culture of lies. He doesn't want to be deceived. There's nowhere else to turn, so he turns to the One who is the truth. It's not just that God tells the truth. It's that God *is* the truth. And so he cries out to God.

One way to think of that: Imagine this morning that I had 10 treasure maps. The treasure would be a life of joy and satisfaction and happiness—a life of meaning and purpose. That's the treasure. One of these treasure maps is legitimate, and if you were to follow it, it would lead you to the treasure. The other nine maps are forgeries. The other nine are fake

and they will only lead to a dead end—despair. Suppose I gave you the option of just winging it—flipping a coin, picking one out of the ten maps and dedicating your life to that, in the end hoping to pick the right one.

Or I give you a different option. You could meet with the very person who buried the treasure, who made the map, and who is very willing to tell you which of those maps is the right map. Which would you choose? Why would you risk your whole life on just winging it and hoping you hit it right, when you had an option of talking to the one who would guarantee you which map is the right map?

That's what this psalmist is saying. God has laid out the truth, which is the treasure map. The psalmist knows there's only one person he can turn to, and that is to God. "In my trouble I cried to the LORD, and He answered me. Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue."

That word "deliver" is a very graphic term which was used to describe snatching prey out of the mouth of a wild animal. So imagine a lion that has a rabbit and is just ready to consume that rabbit when somebody reaches in and snatches the rabbit away right before it's consumed. That's this Hebrew word: to deliver or to save. The psalmist feels like he is that prey and he is in the mouth of the lion, about to be consumed. He cries out to God to reach down and to deliver him—to snatch him out of the mouth of the lion before it's too late. And he defines the lion as "lying lips and a deceitful tongue."

In verse 3 he turns his attention to the liars themselves and he asks them a question: "What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?" He's bringing them altogether as one. The question could be translated, "What does this profit you?" That's really the question he's asking of the liars. There's only one reason anybody ever lies, and that's somehow to be benefited from that lie—either trying to cover up something or trying to lie in order to gain something. We lie to somehow benefit ourselves. So the psalmist is asking the question, "Let's think about that—what does it benefit you? What does it profit you?"

The reality is that lying works. It does. You back me into a corner and I can lie my way out of it. If I have to tell a lie in order to close this business deal, I can make that work. But it only works for a season—the benefit is pretty short-lived. One lie leads to another lie...which leads to another lie...and the benefit is short-lived.

A couple months ago I read a quote that has stuck in my head ever since. The writer said, "When you lie you make your trouble part of your future. When you tell the truth you make your trouble part of the past." That's pretty good. *When you lie you make your trouble part of your future; when you tell the truth you make your trouble part of your past.*

The psalmist is asking the question, "What does it benefit you?" And then in verse 4, he says this is what you're going to get: "Sharp arrows of the warrior, with the burning coals of the broom tree." Those are images of judgment. He doesn't just say arrows—they're going to be sharp arrows. And they aren't sharp arrows in the hands of a novice. They're sharp arrows in the hands of a warrior. In other words, the imagery is that this sharp arrow won't miss its mark.

“...with the burning coals of a broom tree.” Now, what in the world is a broom tree? Well, it’s not a tree made out of brooms. It was a type of tree which had wood that was ideal for burning coals. In fact, it was the best of the best. The coals of a broom tree were the hottest and the longest-burning coals that anyone knew of. So the psalmist asks the question, “What will it benefit you?” And in the end he says what you’re going to get is the sharp arrow of the warrior and these burning coals. Both of these images are very graphic pictures of judgment.

Because the psalmist knows that to be true, he doesn’t want to go down that path. He doesn’t want anything to do with that. But he feels like he’s in the mouth of the lion, about to be consumed, and so he says (v5): “Woe is me.” That’s a phrase which means, “I’m miserable.” It’s often used at funerals. He says, “I am miserable for I sojourn in Meschech, for I dwell among the tents of Kedar!” Meschech was a culture that was way up to the northeast, on the Black Sea, what we call Asia Minor. Kedar was far to the east in the Arabian desert. They were two cultures that were very far away from each other. So there’s no way that the psalmist could have been in both places, and probably he wasn’t in either place.

Rather, he’s talking in terms of a metaphor or imagery. He’s talking about two very pagan cultures that were characterized by lies and deceit. That was the method of operation—that’s the way the culture was. He’s using those as images of the culture in which he lives. But he makes it very clear that he doesn’t want to be part of that. That’s why he says, “I’m a sojourner.” That word means a pilgrim, a traveler, an alien. It’s a way of saying, “I don’t belong here. I don’t fit in. I’m just an alien; I’m a sojourner; I’m passing through. I’m passing through a culture of deceit and lies, and I feel like it’s going to consume me.”

When he says he dwells in tents, it’s another way of saying, “I haven’t built my house here. All I live in is a tent, because my home is somewhere else.” But like all of us feel from time to time, he is just feeling the weight of standing for God and standing for truth in a culture of lies and deceit. And it wears him down.

Verse 6: “Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.” The psalmist wants to live in a place of peace, and the only way he can get there is through the truth. Because lies and deceit always lead to conflict; they always lead to war. The psalmist says, “What I want to experience is peace, but I can’t. Because whenever I speak truth, they want war. It’s a battle. It’s a fight.”

The psalmist paints a really graphic picture in this psalm. He paints a picture of this war, where he’s trying to stand for truth against these barbaric cultures characterized by lies and deceit. He says, “I feel like I’m in the mouth of the lion and he’s about to consume me.” He’s calling out to God to reach down and to snatch him out of the mouth of the prey and deliver him.

One of the things that we need to understand is that if we are going to be the people of God, we are at war. This life is not meant to be a playground—it’s meant to be a battleground. We are at war with the god of this age, who’s doing everything he can to spread his lies and deception and destroy people’s lives. Our calling—our mission—is to declare the truth. If you’re thinking that you can live out your Christian faith by just quietly assimilating into the culture, you are sadly mistaken. It cannot be done. We are at war.

The question is: Do you believe that? You answered that question this week by the amount of time you spent in this book—the Bible. When the psalmist cried out to God, and God answered him, God also answered that prayer for us in a much greater way. Because we have something the psalmist didn't have. We have the finished revelation of God. We have the book of truth. We have the lamp that lights our way. We have the treasure map. We have far more than the psalmist had.

How motivated are we to know the truth? A lot of it depends upon how much you believe you are under attack from the liar and deceiver. I'll guarantee you that this past week hundreds of lies came your way. Through the media, through advertisers, and through your peers, you were bombarded. And there's no question that those lies do take their toll. The only way to stand against them is to know the truth.

There is no way you could possibly learn all the lies of the culture. There are just too many—they're rapid fire. But you don't need to learn the lies. You just need to learn the truth. When you know the truth, the lies become evident. So, how much time did you spend this week "arming yourselves" for battle? How much time did you spend following the treasure map, so that you don't get led astray and end up spending your life in despair?

There's probably someone here this morning who's bought into the lie of our culture: that all roads lead to heaven—that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something. I'm telling you that is a lie. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me." (John 14:6) You say, "Boy, that's pretty intolerant." No, it's the truth.

I'm sure some of you are convinced that as long as you are a good person—that you're as good as your neighbor and you measure up—there's a pretty good chance you're going to go to heaven. You need to understand that is a lie. It's a lie, because the Bible is very clear about that. Only those who are willing to confess their sin and trust Jesus' death on the cross as payment for sin receive eternal life and will spend forever with God in heaven. In a crowd this size, there have got to be people who have bought into the lies of the culture. Maybe, in your heart of hearts, you actually believe, *If I just had this car...if I just could afford this house...if I just had this job...if I just had this title...if I just had this partner...if I just had a different partner... I would be happy.*

That's a lie. It is—it's just a lie. Everything you need to be happy, to have a life of joy and satisfaction, is offered you from God. He is all you need. But the culture bombards us with lies that tell us otherwise. They are false treasure maps that just lead to a dead end.

We are at war. We are at war with a culture of deceit—with the god of this age—and we need to do battle for the truth. "For you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."