



## WHEN YOUR WORK MATES ANTAGONISE YOU PSALM 120

Have you ever experienced something like this?

*“John worked in a mining engineer’s office in a large open cut coal mine. One day he was given the job to draw up plans on how to mine an awkwardly placed section of coal. He did his measurements, performed his calculations, came up with a strategy and drew up the plans. But when the work was done, it was done wrongly, which cost the mine thousands of dollars in both upfront costs and lost production.*

*John’s manager blamed John. John blamed the surveyors for pegging out things wrong. The surveyors in turn accused John that he made bad plans. They showed John’s manager the plans. When John saw the plans, he could tell they had been altered, but since he had given the surveyors his original plans to use, he could not prove his innocence. Despite his comment, ‘anyone with half a brain would know that that’s the wrong way to mine this section’, the surveyors insisted that he’d done the plans wrong, and John’s manager believed them. John knew the surveyors were lying but there was nothing he could do about it.*

*So John was severely reprimanded for the mistake.*

*From that point onwards, John constantly argued with the surveyors over plans. The arguments took up his manager’s time as well, so got him off-side. It seemed to John that the surveyors were out ‘to get him’ and to demean him, and were trying everything possible to do it. It seemed they wanted him off the mine site. Despite his best efforts to talk nicely to them and do things for them, he never got a reciprocal response from them and so John began to hate work. It was like being in a battle zone – the surveyors had declared war on him.*

*Eventually John gave up and went to another mine.”*

My apologies to any surveyors that are part of the OOTP forum! I could’ve chosen one of a number of aspects of a mining operation! My story was inspired by a situation that occurred on a mine I worked at in South Africa, but otherwise is totally fictitious.

As I’ve talked with the Christian miners in the Hunter Region, it is apparent that difficulties often occur between people on the mines. This is nothing unusual – any work environment will have its moments – office, factory floor, service shop, etc. Even people (like me) in full time Christian ministry can tell stories about difficulties between fellow-workers. However, as some of you will be aware, there are some mines that seem to have a reputation for being difficult places in which to work – not the conditions, but rather the people all seem hard to get on with. Richard Fortune, who started OOTP, can tell of such places; and some of the others in the Hunter have also told of such places or worked at such places.

For those of you reading this, some of you may think or feel that your work place is awful and your work-mates anything but ‘mates’! What can you do about this? Probably little. Things may even be made worse because your work mates know that you are a Christian, and so rag you for it and like to point out where you fail. I guess mines are also not places where feelings can be expressed – it is a tough business and requires tough people. You probably know this. But what is ‘toughness’? People who ‘can take it on the chin’ and not cry? Or is it the ability to stick with something (e.g. your work mates!), no matter your feelings? It is traditional for Aussie men to ‘not cry’, but the funny thing is, the Bible encourages us ‘to cry’! Read some of



the Psalms – they are written by men, and these men show that they did cry! Look at Psalms 142 and 143, and 120 for some examples. Read Jeremiah's 'dummy spit' about his job as a prophet in Jeremiah 20.

To look at just Ps 120, there are some things in this psalm that encourage us to express our emotions to God. The psalm was written because the author had had trouble and prayed to God (v.1). Some translations put v.1 into the present tense (which makes it relevant for us), but the Hebrew is in the past tense. The prayer was simple: 'deliver me from liars' (v.2). Note how the language describes what does the lying, rather than on the person. This is typical language in the Bible. The rest of the psalm, vv.3-7, is all emotion. Vv.3-4, in a question-and-answer format, shows the pain of being lied to: 'the warrior's sharp arrows' represent the immediate pain felt because of the lies, and 'burning coals' represents the long term, deep seated anger and pain because of the results of being lied to. Vv.5-7 bring out the pain of what the lies represent: constant animosity. The place names, 'Meshech' and 'Teman' represent foreigners – and warlike foreigners at that – far and near. The despair of the situation is reflected in v.6; and v.7 brings out the despair even more: the author has tried to make peace, but his antagonists have refused to do so (v.7). Note also the 'woe is me!' of v.5: a cry of despair. In summary, the author imagines the situation as though he is at war with foreigners.

The point of vv.3-7 is to show that the author of Ps 120 felt helpless about the situation in which he was. That's why in v.2 he prayed to be delivered from the liars. Looking at the psalm as a whole, vv.3-5 make up the majority of the psalm. This should alert us that the psalm was written, not so much to say 'I prayed for God to help me, and He did', but to express how he felt in his situation before God helped him. This then allows other Israelites to share in the emotion and 'cry' to God about their difficult situations too.

And we should do the same. When life is tough, or our work mates give us a rough time, not only do we ask God for help, but also express our feelings to God. Counsellors and psychologists tell us that we need to talk about our feelings. Well, the author of Psalm 120 teaches this by example! 'Toughness' is not bottling up our feelings. 'Toughness' is sticking it out, doing the best we can (see v.7 – the author attempted to make peace, an Old Testament equivalent of 'loving our enemies'), and 'crying' as it were to God. Obviously we pray for God to intervene when people make life tough for us. But think why we pray for God's help in the first place: is it not because we can't do anything about what is happening, or what we've tried has failed?

I hope your work situation is not the place where people are constantly antagonistic to you or others. I can well imagine that you'd not want to turn up to work! But what I do want to encourage you to do is to tell God how you're feeling about it, as well as asking God for help or intervention. Ultimately, it is us living for the Lord Jesus that will bring peace to such places (e.g. we refuse to antagonise others; we refuse to 'get even'). But it may involve a lot of heartache on our part. If this is your situation, read Psalm 120 and use it to tell God how you're feeling, even as you pray for God's help or wisdom in the situation.

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