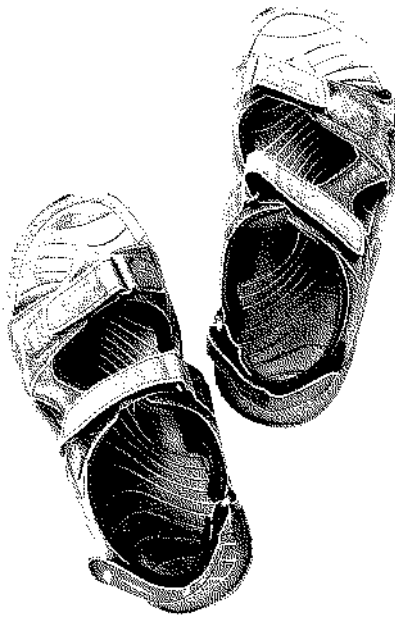


# *People on a Journey*



**Studies on the Psalms of Ascents  
(Psalm 120–134)**

**Church of the Servant • Fall 2011**

## Introduction to the Psalms of Ascents

The Psalms of Ascents (Psalm 120-134) have existed as a pilgrim psalter for the Judeo-Christian faith for over two millennia. [They are a unique collection of psalms—shorter than average with a distinctive ‘folky-ness’—that were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they traveled up to Jerusalem for the great feasts.]

Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina was awarded a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (funded in part by the Lilly Endowment) in May 2009. They spent a year immersing themselves in a spiritual pilgrimage, taking all of their signposts from the Psalms of Ascents with the help of cultural translators: linguists, musicians, visual

artists and pastors. Their goal was to recapture the relevance and power of the psalms in shaping and forming their faith in modern life.

Bruce Benedict, one of the ministers at Christ the King and primary writer of the material for their pilgrimage, has generously agreed to allow Church of the Servant to use these materials with slight adjustments as needed. We are grateful for rich, carefully compiled studies and reflections and for this opportunity for Church of the Servant to be enriched by their work. If you would like to see everything they developed for the Psalms of Ascents, go to their website: [www.cardiphonia.org](http://www.cardiphonia.org)

## The Story of the Psalms of Ascents

### Joy in the Sojourn

Folk singer Michael Card wrote a song titled “Joy in the Journey.” In the song, Card describes the life of a follower of Christ as a journey—from their earthly home to their heavenly home. At one point in the song he sings:

To all who have been born of the Spirit  
And who share incarnation with him;  
Who belong to eternity, stranded in time,  
And weary of struggling with sin.

### Weariness on the Sojourn

In those few words, Card captures the reality of life for those who are true followers of Jesus. Though we were created to live in an eternal, perfect world, we are living in a temporary, broken world. One result is we become weary in our struggle with sin: sin’s curse on this world, sin in others, and sin in our own lives.

When we feel that weariness, God’s people often turn to God in worship. As we worship, God’s people are reminded of God’s hatred of sin, Jesus’ victory over sin, and the overcoming power the Holy Spirit gives us in our struggle with sin and its present effects.

### The Ancient Sojourn

In Ancient Israel, God’s temple in Jerusalem represented the center of worship for God’s people. They would travel to Jerusalem at set times throughout the year to worship God there. They used those times—centered around liturgical feasts—to remember God’s work in the past, renew their commitment to him, and respond to his work with thanksgiving and obedience.

As they journeyed from their homes to Jerusalem, they became weary of struggling with sin, for they experienced the reality of sin. They experienced the reality of sin’s curse on the broken world (the journey was hard and dangerous). They experienced the reality of sin in others (those who worship other gods hated them). They experienced the reality of sin in their own lives (struggles with fear, pride, and self-doubt).

They longed to get to Jerusalem, to worship God in his temple. They didn’t however, just wait to get to the temple to worship God. They worshiped God along the way. They found joy as they journeyed—even as they struggled with sin.

One of the ways they worshiped God was through song.

The Songs or Psalms of Ascents were some of the songs they sang on their journey.

### Context for the Songs

The Psalms of Ascents are just one small part of the larger book of Psalms. Many people know the Psalms. They are one of the most quoted portions of the Bible. They are also one of the most loved portions of the Bible.

One reason is that the Psalms are full of emotions like joy and sorrow, fear and comfort, loss and restoration. In fact the Psalms are so full of emotional cries, John Calvin called the Psalms “an anatomy of all parts of the soul. For there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”

The emotional affirmation often found in reading the Psalms is one of the reasons individual Psalms are so often quoted and so well loved. Whatever you are feeling, you can find that emotion in one of the Psalms.

But the book was never meant to only provide emotional affirmation. They do that, but they also do so much more. Each emotional expression in the psalms is not only a place for self-centered reflection, it is also a place for God-centered reflection. Psalms like the Psalms of Ascents are helpful for our journey through life because they are a collection of poems, prayers, and hymns that help us understand things about who God is in the midst of our emotions.

### The Challenge of the Songs

Emotions are a helpful way to engage with the Psalms, for they are one place we find a natural connection with what is written. To move beyond an emotional connection—to get to who God is in the midst of these emotions—is often difficult. For the Psalms are poems, written long ago by people living in a time and place that has little in common with us.

### A Strategy for Approaching the Psalms

In order to engage with the Psalms, you must have a strategy for reading them. One suggested strategy is to

resist, recognize, and remember as you read the psalms.

*First*, resist the urge to arrive at a quick, easy solution. Allow yourself to be emotionally drawn into the poem in a way that you might not be drawn into prose. Read each Psalm slowly. Discover and dwell on the rich images in the Psalm; the images are often what the poet uses to convey meaning.

*Second*, recognize that the Psalms were written for use in communal and private worship. They were songs God’s people used to intimately and honestly express their love for God. They were songs God used to deepen his people’s love for him. Therefore, as you read, pray, or even sing Psalms in worship, you use them as God’s people have used them ever since they were written. So, though they are ancient, they always have had a very contemporary purpose: to worship the God of the universe.

*Third*, remember those who have read this book. The Psalms were written in Ancient Israel for Ancient Israel. Each Psalm must be first read in light of that context. Sometimes that is easy; other times that is impossible to do without help. A good study Bible (like *The ESV Study Bible*, [www.esvstudybible.org](http://www.esvstudybible.org)) is often helpful in bridging the chronological and cultural gap.

It isn’t just important to remember that Ancient Israelites read these Psalms; it’s also important to remember that Jesus Christ read these Psalms. Jesus quoted the Psalms during his time on earth. Jesus prayed the Psalms during his time on earth. Jesus sang the Psalms during his time on earth. Even more, Jesus *lived* the Psalms during his time on earth.

As you read the Psalms of Ascents, consider how they might be read, prayed, and sung *by Jesus*. Consider how you can read, pray, and sing the Psalms *to Jesus*. Consider how you can read, pray and sing the Psalms *about Jesus*.

The Psalms can inform and shape your worship. They can help you understand who God is and how God desires you relate to him through Jesus.

## Psalm 120

**September 11, 2011**

### Deliver Me, O Lord

*A Song of Ascents.*

- 1 In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.
- 2 Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.
- 3 What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?
- 4 A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!
- 5 Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
- 6 Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.
- 7 I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war!

## Repentance: I am for Peace

### ENGAGE (15-20 minutes)

To enter into the story line of the psalms of ascents we must be willing to take two things for granted: we that we are all on a spiritual journey that is indistinguishable personal and corporate, and our life stories have shared both joy and distress. As each group begins this Fall take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their present state, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read the Psalm out loud.

- What do you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in the psalm?
- Jot down the first things that come to mind: When you are in distress what is your first action/reaction? Are you surprised by some of these?
- The psalmist is interested in pursuing peace—against the conflict of their living situation.
  - How do we both personally and corporately seek the peace (shalom) of our family, workplace, neighborhood and city (Jeremiah 29:7)?
- What does the Gospel teach us about peace? Read Ephesians 2:12-21 (Matthew 5:9-12).
  - How does the Ephesians passage relate to Psalm 120?
  - Have you ever been a stranger and alien where you lived? How does this relate both spiritually and geographically?
- Why is it challenging to believe, like the author of Psalm 120 states, that knowing and worshipping God is the ultimate answer to the problem of conflict?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- Trust in God (partly through remembering past acts of deliverance) is the foundation for future acts of faith—in prayer and worship.
- Spend some time in prayer for each other, for areas of conflict in your lives, for conflict in the world, and thankfulness for the peace of Christ.

## Psalm 121

September 18, 2011

### My Help Comes from the Lord

*A Song of Ascents.*

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
- 8 The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

## Providence: Help from the Maker of Heaven & Earth

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their journey (past, present, and future). Groups form unity and social cohesion slowly over time as trust is built. Doing this small bit every week will reap rich rewards.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Psalm 121 out loud.

- What do you find most challenging, helpful or troubling in Psalm 121?

Psalm 121 begins with a simple human question—*where does my help come from?* A question that is both physical and emotional—I lift up my eyes to the hills.

- What are the common troubles of your life? (*The steep, slippery paths and noonday suns.*)
- When you are in trouble where does your physical body, your heart, turn to?
- Who or what in your life reminds you in a daily sense that your “*help comes from the Lord*”?

Verses 3-8 uses a type of poetic device called “parallelism” where the second line reinforces the first like a growing crescendo. This is done to give emphasis to the main point. In this psalm we know that the main point is God’s ‘keeping’ love of us. The grand crescendo comes in verse 8.

This is driven home in the repetition of the word “keep” 6x. Whatever the threat may be, God keeps his covenant people safe, in a personal and collective sense.

- What are your ‘mantras’ when you are in deep trouble? Are they soaked in scripture?

Psalm 121 shares some similar themes to Psalm 23.

- How is God pictured as both a Shepherd and King in these two psalms? (One who protects from physical elements and *evil*, as well as **leads** to *safety, pleasant pastures, and peaceful relations*)

### Gospel Connections:

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells a story about a man traveling along this hilly path out of Jerusalem, a man engaged in the normal travels of life and business who runs into sorrows and trouble (Read Like 10:25-37). Psalm 121 reminds us that the promise is not the absence of suffering but the promise of real protection. Jesus uses this story to teach us how he expects us to be agents of his Name in this world to show mercy, guidance, and protection while knowing ultimately it is only Christ that can provide eternal ‘keeping’ (John 10:27-30).

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

This psalm strives to give each of us confidence in the daily provision of God in our lives. Spend some time praying through the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, interspersing prayers for the needs in your small group.

## Psalm 122

**September 25, 2011**

### Let Us Go to the House of the Lord

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

- 1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
- 2 Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!
- 3 Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together,  
4 to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
- 5 There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you!
- 7 Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"
- 8 For my brothers and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"
- 9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

## Worship: The Peace of Jerusalem

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their journey (past, present, and future). Groups form unity and social cohesion slowly over time as trust is built. Doing this small bit every week will reap rich rewards.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 122 out loud.

- What do you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in Psalm 122?

**The Gates of Jerusalem**—the gates of a city wall in the ancient world were the hub of culture and news. To arrive between them was to be safe from the outside world and nestled into the heart of your own familiar culture and world view.

- What are the places in our own cultural life that function as the gates of Jerusalem (your home, coffee shops, etc.)?

**The Tribes**—Here we are given an allusion to the 12 tribes of Israel. Israel isn't present in its fullness unless the 12 tribes are gathered together in Jerusalem, the earthly heaven. This is a picture of the whole family present, for the worship of God that is God of the WHOLE world.

- Does the NT give any directions for what worship should look like socially (see Galatians. 3:25-29)?

**The Thrones of David**—Here again we meditate on the role of the King for the Israelites. This is a symbol of God's justice and fair rule. With godly justice comes peace and prosperity (see 1 Timothy 2).

- Do you find rest in his rule that gives you freedom to rejoice in his blessings?"
- How do you struggle to rest in the rule of God in your life and the world?

### Gospel Connections:

The prayer in verses 6-9 is both encouraging and challenging. It recognizes that this is a conversation for the family and that there will be those that pray against the peace of God's home. Jesus, himself, struggles with this very reality as he prepares for his triumphal entry (read Luke 19:28-47).

- How does this story both inspire us and give us fear? Why is God's house so important to Jesus? How we think about God's 'house' in our world?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- What do you think of the definition of shalom, or peace? Reflect on Eugene Peterson's comments: "*Shalom*, 'peace' is one of the richest words in the Bible. You can no more define it by looking up its meaning in the dictionary that you can define a person by his or her social security number. It gathers all aspects of wholeness that result from God's will being completed in us. It is the work of God that, when complete, releases streams of living water in us and pulsates

with eternal life. Every time Jesus healed, forgave or called someone, we have a demonstration of *shalom*” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, page 56-57).

- How does this expand our idea of how we should pray for peace for ourselves, our enemies, the church, and the natural world (Romans 8)?

## Psalm 123

**October 2, 2011**

### Our Eyes Look to the Lord Our God

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in  
the heavens!

2 Behold, as the eyes of  
servants look to the hand of  
their master, as the eyes of  
a maidservant to the hand  
of her mistress, so our eyes  
look to the Lord our God,  
till he has mercy upon us.

3 Have mercy upon us, O  
Lord, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than  
enough of contempt.

4 Our soul has had more  
than enough of the scorn of  
those who are at ease, of the  
contempt of the proud.

## Service: The King of Grace

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their journey (past, present, and future). Groups form unity and social cohesion slowly over time as trust is built. Doing this small bit every week will reap rich rewards.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 123 out loud.

- What do you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in Psalm 123?
- When we are troubled, our posture speaks volumes to our belief and trust in God. What is central to the repetition of eyes in verses 1-2? Why would the psalmist keep his eyes focused on God until he provides mercy?
- Read John 9 (with our eyes of faith we see God). Think about how often Jesus heals the eyes, both physical and spiritual in the Gospels.

### Gospel Connections:

Read Luke 23:34-43. Jesus experiences scorn and contempt from all sides. Discuss the various perspectives and their implications. Just like the cruel cross becomes the sign of our victory, the servant-hearted nature of Christianity becomes not a sign of weakness but of power.

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

This psalm gives us bold permission to cry out to God for mercy—both for ourselves and others.

- What does this psalm teach us about how to approach God in prayer (posture, position, expectations, relationship to God)?

## Psalm 124

**October 9, 2011**

### Our Help Is in the Name of the Lord

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

1 If it had not been the  
Lord who was on our side—  
let Israel now say—  
2 if it had not been the  
Lord who was on our side  
when people rose up  
against us,  
3 then they would have  
swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was  
kindled against us;  
4 then the flood would  
have swept us away, the  
torrent would have gone  
over us;  
5 then over us would have  
gone the raging waters.

6 Blessed be the Lord,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth!  
7 We have escaped like a  
bird from the snare of the  
fowlers; the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped!

8 Our help is in the name  
of the Lord, who made  
heaven and earth.

## Help: Our Help is in the Name of the Lord

### ENGAGE (5-10 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their journey (past, present, and future). Groups form unity and social cohesion slowly over time as trust is built. Doing this small bit every week will reap rich rewards.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 124 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful or troubling in Psalm 124?

For some background on the faith of God's people under duress read Exodus 14:10-31. The image and metaphor of water was a symbol of chaos and destruction in ancient cultures. To control the waters and weather was a symbol of ultimate power. That God would lead his people through the waters was proof of his ultimate power and love for his people. Cf. Psalm 29:10, Jonah 2:3.

- What are the images and metaphors of chaos and destruction in our day?
- What are some other stories in scripture that use water as a situation for both God's judgment and deliverance?

Blessed by the Lord—we have escaped!

We are not just threatened but trapped! And, from our total helplessness we are delivered by God's hand. Take a moment and see if your group can rewrite the images of verses 6 and 7 that would apply to our lives.

- Why do you think this psalm was included in the collection of the "Psalms of Ascent"? How is this psalm helpful to a traveling pilgrim?

### Gospel Connections:

Read Luke 8:22-25 and Romans 8:31-39

- From the last couple weeks make a mental list of things you considered against you. Even if they are small, how do they relate to ultimates?

Jesus, caught in the ultimate trap of the cross and death is rescued from death and ultimately rescues us from death.

- From reading Romans 8:36 it almost seems like we should expect intense trials and persecution. Do you agree? Is that how you understand the Christian life?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- 1) Remember past deliverance,
- 2) Respond with thanksgiving and praise, and
- 3) Recommit a life of constant repentance and meditation on Christ.



## Psalm 125

**October 16, 2011**

### The Lord Surrounds His People

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.  
 2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.  
 3 For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.  
 4 Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts!  
 5 But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers!  
 Peace be upon Israel!

## Security: Like Mount Zion

**ENGAGE** (10-15 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their spiritual journey (past, present, and future).

**REFLECTION & STUDY** (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 125 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in the sermon on Psalm 125?
- Psalm 125 describes the people of God as mount Zion. Why does the psalmist do that? What is so special about Mount Zion?

Verse 2 says that the Lord surrounds his people like the mountains surround Jerusalem, not just now but for forever. “O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee.

- Why is the phrase “both now and forevermore” used so often in the Psalms? How does this speak not only to the ancient readers but also to us?

Verse 3 speaks of “the scepter of wickedness.” This was wickedness that flowed from a kingly ruler to touch all aspects of life. The OT speaks both of a scepter of wickedness and of righteousness.

Read Hebrews 1:8 (quoting Psalm 45).

- How does Jesus become a king? Why does he get to rule from his Father’s throne?
- In what ways are you actively identifying and experiencing the wickedness of the world? Are there any areas of your own life right now where you are ruling with wickedness’?

Verses 4 and 5 are a call from the faithful psalmist to God to care for the good. It reminds us of Jesus’ call in John 16 that asks God to love the ones that he loves.

### Gospel Connections:

Read John 16:25-33.

- How does Psalm 125:4 connect to Jesus’ words in 16:27?

Ultimately we know that God is good to us only because of Christ’s faithfulness. We are led not away with evildoers but before the throne of God. Only Jesus is truly good; only Jesus is supremely upright in heart. Only in Jesus ‘blood and righteousness’ do we have peace (Phil 4:7) that passes all understanding, a peace that stands “from this time forth and forevermore.”

**PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION** (10-15 minutes)

Psalm 125 ends with a call for peace for the whole community. Think of people, events or circumstances in your life and ask God to bring peace.

Let’s continue to reflect on the pattern of prayer we used last week.

- Remembering past deliverance,
- Responding with thanksgiving and praise,
- Recommitting to constant repentance and meditation on Christ

## Psalm 126

**October 23, 2011**

### Restore Our Fortunes, O Lord

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb!

5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

6 He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

## Joy: Restore Us

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Takes some time at the beginning of each meeting this Fall to allow someone to share their spiritual journey (past, present and future).

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 126 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in Psalm 126?

Verses 1-2 are a song and promise of restoration. Ultimately the redemption of the world is based on the reality of deliverance in the past.

- Is this a part of your spiritual diet? Do you regularly remember and recount the past deliverances of God? How do we participate in this on Sunday mornings?

Verse 2b recounts how the joy was so complete that even the nations were witnesses to God's greatness.

- How is the joy of Christ's birth and resurrection proclaimed before the nations?

Verse 4 gives us the prayer of God's people. It is a prayer for a quick and vibrant restoration.

Yet, verses 5-6 gives us two images of renewal: the first is a sheer gift of heaven, like rain to the arid streams of the Negeb; the second is slow and arduous—sowing tears that will in its time and season reap the sheaves of joy.

This psalm suggests that our own very human response to suffering is the seed that God uses to bring joy. Not sorrow that is kept, but sorrow that is taken out into the fields of life and sown.

- How have you sown the sorrows of your life? Are there sorrows that you need to sow?
- How do we live in the tension of sorrows that haven't reaped joy? How can God and God's people provide comfort in the tension of the not yet of our lives?

### Gospel Connections:

Read John 12:23-26 and Galatians 6:7-10 as two examples of sowing and harvesting in the NT. It seems that a fundamental truth of the Christian life is that death is an integral part of new life.

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

Make a list of the great things that God has done for you this week, this year and in your life—both for you personally and for the church community.

- What seeds are you sowing right now? Are there things you need to give up to the Lord?
- How are you dying to yourself? What are some ways that we die to ourselves daily?

## Psalm 127

**October 30, 2011**

### Unless the Lord Builds the House

*A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.*

1 Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

2 It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.

3 Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.

5 Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

## Work: Unless the Lord Builds the House

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Take some time at the beginning of each meeting to share updates on the week and then have someone share a brief testimony about their spiritual journey (past, present, and future)

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 127 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in Psalm 127?

Psalm 127 is a wisdom psalm, ascribed to Solomon.

- If we read this as a proverb how does it direct us to live?

We all work and sleep, we all desire to do these in safety and peace.

- These are the basic realities of life, but how do we give these realities to God?
- Proverbs teaches that we must diligently work in life, but seek to avoid both greed and restless anxiety.

In Genesis 1-3, we see that God models for us a creator who works (and it was good!), and rests when the work is done. In our sin, both our rest and our work are under the curse.

- How do we think about work and rest in light of the Work of Christ, and his eternal rest?
- His work redeems our work now, see Ephesians 2:1-10 and Phil 1:6
- His work gives us eternal peace with God—a belief in God's Sovereignty in all things (see John 4:34).

Verses 3-5 speak to the blessedness of children, and alludes to the peace and security that adults experience when their children provide peace and security for them in their old age (in response to the work of their parents to raise them in peace and security).

- How do these verses strike you? Discuss the different responses to these verses in your group. How do our different life and family realities influence the joy or pain of embracing God's promises in these verses? How are children great gifts to the wider community?
- How do the promises of common grace (the consistency of God that gives the sun and rain to both the believer and unbeliever) factor into this wisdom?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- How can Jesus' followers be models both in their work and in their rest? How can we encourage one another to work and rest better?
- Pray about aspects of our lives that need adjustments or refocus. Where do we build in vain?
- Ask the Lord to make us more alert to seeing "how the Lord builds."

# Psalm 128 Happiness: The Blessing of Those Who Fear the Lord

**November 6, 2011**

## Blessed Is Everyone Who Feels the Lord

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!  
 2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.  
 3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.  
 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.  
 5 The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!  
 6 May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!

### ENGAGE (15-20 minutes)

Take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 128 out loud.

- What do you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in Psalm 128?

A note from the ESV Study Bible: "Psalm 128. This wisdom psalm expands some of the topics in Psalm 127. Psalm 127 ended with the 'blessed (happy) ... man' (127:5), and Psalm 128 gives a further description of this man's blessedness: in the context of ancient Israel, it consisted of a productive farm, and a faithful wife and children around the table together (see note on Proverbs 10:4). The ending of the psalm shows that neither wisdom nor blessedness is individualistic; both relate to the larger reality of the well-being of God's people."

Two themes worth exploring in this Psalm are:

1. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Scripture says it is the beginning of many things.
2. What does it mean to walk in his ways? How can we both spiritually and physically walk in the way of Jesus?

These themes are both profound ideas found in all parts of scripture.

1. *Fear of the Lord*—Read Deuteronomy 8 as background to Psalm 128 and think about covenant language.
  - Psalm 25:14, 33:18, 34:9-11, 47:2, 103:13; Acts 9:31; Rev. 15:4
  - The 'fear of the Lord' is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of praise, the beginning of a life lived to God.
2. *To Walk in His Ways—to Sojourn after God. Read Psalm 1 as a contrast to Psalm 128*
  - Read Deuteronomy 8:6, 26:17; Psalm 1; Psalm 119:1
  - We are called in this psalm to work diligently, love our spouses well, and faithfully train up our children in godliness—to live our lives as God intended. How do we reduce God's intention?.
  - Those who sin and fall under judgment are referred as those who don't "walk in the way of the Lord."
3. *Jesus is the way, the truth, the light—John 14:6; Luke 18:25*
  - How can we talk about fearing Jesus, and walking his way?

The culmination of wisdom is the peace of our church, our city and our world. It is the joy of faith passed down through the ages.

- How are you passing on God's blessing to future generations?

The last verse of Psalm 128 speaks to the peace of Jerusalem.

- What are words that you can use to describe the peace we have in Jesus?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- How does the promise of blessing in Psalm 128 inspire us to both praise and sorrow?
- How does singing and praying the Psalms of Ascents equate to "walking in his ways?" How does worship guide our lives?

### Prayer:

- For our work, that we would know something of the fruit of our labor
- For those whose labor is not justly rewarded
- For those with children, pregnant, without children, spiritual children, children with struggles, etc
- For the fear of God and the wisdom and grace to walk in his ways.
- For those who don't know God, and don't fear him.

# Psalm 129 Perseverance: Often They Assail Me

**November 13, 2011**

## They Have Afflicted Me from My Youth

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”—let Israel now say—  
 2 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.  
 3 The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.”  
 4 The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.  
 5 May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!  
 6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up,  
 7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms,  
 8 nor do those who pass by say, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you!  
 We bless you in the name of the Lord!”

### ENGAGE (15-20 minutes)

Take time each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read aloud Psalm 129.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling with this psalm?

### Part One: Verses 1-4

We are reminded in this psalm that the Psalms of Ascents were sung chiefly as pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the major feasts. Singing this psalm would reignite a deep seated and hearty reminder that even in the face of centuries of persecution—from both within and without, God had preserved his people.

The metaphor of the plow and furrows is picked up in part two with the grass and reaper. These images of the plowed back are seen again in Isaiah and the Songs of the Suffering Servant (read Isaiah 53). As we see Jesus reflected in these we think about the lashing he bore on his own back from enemies within (Pharisees and rulers) and without (Romans) for our sake.

- How are we called to follow in his example? How did the apostles?

### Part Two: verses 5-8

This part begins with a triumphant reminder that God has promised his protection over and his presence within Zion. Using a song about Zion, “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken” mediate on these words:

*Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God:  
 He, whose word cannot be broken, formed thee for his own abode:  
 On the rock of Ages founded, who can shake thy sure repose?  
 With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may'st smile at all thy foes.*

Verse six speaks to the wind blown dirt and seed that would often collect on rooftops and sprout a tenuous crop. Their enemies desire to sow the seeds of destruction in Israel, so they would never amount to much (in contrast to the sowing of the Word of God)! (1 Peter 1:22-25—“the grass withers but the word of the Lord remains forever.”)

In the end we are reminded that no one will ever bless the enemies of God, but God's people will always give their blessing to the Lord. His righteousness and his justice will prevail in the end, even in the midst of peace and persecution,—with the hope that the enemies of God might call out to God in the end.

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

Psalm 129 is a prayer of confidence in God's persistent and perpetual protection. It is both a historical reminder and future prophecy of God's never-ending care.

The Psalm also asks us to talk about the reality of the enemies of God. We were once enemies of God (Romans 5:10), but now we are counted as friends of God. In the Lord's Prayer we pray for God's kingdom come; part of this is God subduing his enemies—making his enemies a footstool for Jesus' feet (Hebrews. 10:13).

Pray for thankfulness that God has delivered us unto his Son. Ask God to redeem those whom you love who are currently his enemies (Matthew 5: 44).

## Psalm 130

**November 20, 2011**

### My Soul Waits for the Lord

*A Song of Ascents.*

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
- 2 O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!
- 3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?
- 4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.
- 5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
- 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.
- 7 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.
- 8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

## Hope: Out of the Depths

**ENGAGE** (15-20 minutes)

Take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

**REFLECTION & STUDY** (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read aloud Psalm 130.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling about this psalm?

### Part One: verses 1-4

“Out of the Depths” often refers to an image of the chaos of the waters. The waters are featured this way in the story of the flood, in Jonah’s story, Psalm 69:1-2, 14-15 and Psalm 88:6-7.

- Psalm 124 is another psalm of ascents that uses water as an image to speak of the chaos of an enemy attack. An enemy attack is not an experience most of us share. How would we speak of the depths?
- Verses 3-4 speak of the weight of sin, and the conjoined forgiveness and fear of God. Spurgeon said that “none fear the Lord like those who have experienced his forgiving love.” How does God’s forgiveness lead us to fear him?
- Our relationship with God starts at the point of our recognition of our sin, and God’s supreme authority to forgive that sin. How are we doing with 1 John 1:8-2:2?

### Part Two: Verses 5-8

Our life is a constant waiting on God. This Psalm reminds us of the constancy and assurance of God’s promise. Even when life finds us in the deep dark of night, the sunrise is inevitable. Even when life finds us in the place of being ‘a watchmen’—someone who was a lookout for trouble, often an attacking army—when we recognize God as the creator of all things we can experience true hope, God’s covenant love and plentiful redemption.

Psalm 130 begins with the individual’s cry but climaxes with God’s salvation being extended to the whole community. Here we are reminded of God’s promise that from Abraham God would bless a whole nation, and that from the Son of God comes hope for the whole world. God moves us from the depths of sorrow, to the dizzying heights of heavenly jubilation, from the burying weight of sin to the freedom of the gospel of grace!

**PRAYER AND APPLICATION** (10-15 minutes)

- Does your life often feel like a reflection of Psalm 130—from the depths of woe to God’s plentiful redemption? Why is that?
- What does this Psalm teach us about prayer, about how to address God, about what he promises in the midst of waiting?
- Talk about how you wait on the Lord.

## Psalm 131

**November 27, 2011**

### **I Have Calmed and Quieted My Soul**

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

1 O Lord, my heart is not  
lifted up; my eyes are not  
raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with  
things too great and too  
marvelous for me.  
2 But I have calmed  
and quieted my soul, like  
a weaned child with its  
mother; like a weaned child  
is my soul within me.

3 O Israel, hope in the Lord  
from this time forth and  
forevermore.

## *Humility: My Eyes Are Not Raised Too High*

### **ENGAGE** (15-20 minutes)

Take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### **REFLECTION & STUDY** (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 131 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful or troubling in this psalm?
- Charles Spurgeon said, “Psalm 131 is one of the shortest psalms to read but one of the longest to learn.” Why do you think this is so?

### **Part One: verses 1-2**

- This Psalm calls us to fight the sins of pride and presumption, two very adult sins, with the contrasting image of a child’s contentment. Why is that? Some have said that this Psalm is a prelude to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:1-4. Read and reflect on this idea.
- What does Philippians 2:2-9 teach us about Christ’s view of humility and contentment?
- Where do you need to confess sins of arrogance and discontentment?

### **Part Two: verse 3**

- Humility and contentment allow us to see the glory and purpose of God’s community. Where else in life and scripture can we go to learn about the hope of the family we have in Christ?

### **PRAYER AND APPLICATION** (10-15 minutes)

Examine your heart in regard to pride and contentment. Spend some time reflecting on these, sharing, and praying.

- What am I feeling?
- What is causing me to feel this way?
- What does feeling this, in this way, at this time, reveal about my heart?

## Psalm 132

**December 4, 2011**

### The Lord Has Chosen Zion

*A Song of Ascents.*

1 Remember, O Lord,  
in David's favor, all the  
hardships he endured,  
2 how he swore to the Lord  
and vowed to the Mighty  
One of Jacob,  
3 "I will not enter my house  
or get into my bed,  
4 I will not give sleep to  
my eyes or slumber to my  
eyelids,  
5 until I find a place for the  
Lord, a dwelling place for the  
Mighty One of Jacob."  
  
6 Behold, we heard of it in  
Ephrathah; we found it in  
the fields of Jaar.  
7 "Let us go to his dwelling  
place; let us worship at his  
footstool!"  
8 Arise, O Lord, and go to  
your resting place, you and  
the ark of your might.  
9 Let your priests be  
clothed with righteousness,  
and let your saints shout  
for joy.  
10 For the sake of your  
servant David,  
do not turn away the face of  
your anointed one.

## Obedience: How He Swore to the Lord

**ENGAGE** (15-20 minutes)

Take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

**REFLECTION & STUDY** (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 132 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in this psalm?

Psalm 132 strikes us as being different in size and scope compared to the other Psalms of Ascents. But, like many of the Psalms of Ascents, Psalm 132 begins with a picture of struggle and hardship and ends with God proclaiming his glorious victory through his anointed one.

### Part One: verses 1-10

Part one of this psalm is a familiar call to God to remember his covenant promises to his people. This covenant relationship begins with God's promises to Abraham and continues to this day in God's promises to us in Christ (Galatians 3:29).

The specific promise is that the Ark of God's presence would rest in Jerusalem, the seat of the King and the home of God on Earth. This is an event that would cull up the full regal and cultic might of Israel. Read Exodus 25:10-22 and 2 Samuel 6 to see this story in action.

Verses 8-10: See Solomon's Prayer of Dedication for the Temple (2 Chronicles 6:41-42)

The kings of Israel were always anointed. Anointed is actually a transliteration of the Hebrew for Messiah. "Christ" in the Greek also means 'anointed one'.

### Part Two: verses 11-18

Part two of this psalm relates to the specific promises of God to David. This was no mere promise but a "sure oath" of covenant.

- If the sons keep the covenant teachings then they will rule in my name forever (and have peace, protection, etc).
- What do you think Horn, Lamp and Crown signify regarding the king?
- These words in the context of Psalm 132 tell us that these promises were so important that they would have been sung regularly.
- We need to boldly and daily call upon God to remind Him of his promises and to be reminded of our call to be faithful in our covenant obligations to God (i.e. living a faithful Christian life) remembering that in all things Christ reigns supreme on our behalf.



11 The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.

12 If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne."

13 For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:

14 "This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

15 I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread.

16 Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy.

17 There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.

18 His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine."

Notice the connection between verses 16-17 and verses 9-10. This is a common poetry form (*inclusio*) which is repeated words and phrases used to show importance and contrast. Note the poetic contrast between God's people and his enemies.

- Clothed with salvation—clothed with shame
- This echo is the reminder that we are clothed in Christ, as priests of his kingdom!

This Psalm would have been sung in the exilic times, and was a reminder that God, his presence, and his Son resided in Jerusalem. This psalm would have shaped the worship life and expectation of God's people to meet him in Zion.

### **PRAYER AND APPLICATION** (10-15 minutes)

This psalm speaks to many facets of the relationship of God to his people. It speaks of rulers, worship, and the people's relationship with God. So many of these facets of Israel's life now find themselves explained in Christ for Christians.

Ultimately, we are reminded that just as God's people made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in search of God, his Messiah, and rest—we, having a Messiah, participate in a pilgrimage through life to reach him and his rest, our home with him.

Hebrews 8 speaks of Christ as a High Priest of a *better* covenant enacted on *better* promises.

All of the promises of God are *yes* in Christ—2 Corinthians 1:20-23, "For all the promises of God find their *yes* in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."

- How secure are the promises we have in Christ? (See also Romans 8:31-39).
- Do you struggle with the promises of God (his desire to protect you, give you peace, secure your eternal salvation in Christ)? List specific areas where you struggle to believe in God's promises.

Pray for each other's struggles to believe and trust God.

# Psalm 133 Community: Like the Precious Oil Upon the Head

**December 11, 2011**

## When Brothers Dwell in Unity

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!  
 2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!  
 3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

### ENGAGE (10-15 minutes)

Take time during each meeting to allow someone to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### REFLECTION & STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 133 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful, or troubling in this psalm?

Psalm 133 relates a number of images and ideas related to the unity of God's people.

**UNITY**—The unity of *kindred* (NRSV) (brothers, ESV) is as good as the oil which anoints Aaron and as pleasant as the dew which descends upon Mt. Hermon.

**ANOINTING**—This is a special oil and a special act reserved for priests (although we are all included). As Christians it reminds us of the anointing of Christ by Mary before his last journey to Jerusalem (John 12).

- Perfumed oil was used in the ancient Middle East as a panacea. It was used for healing, for body odor, for beauty, for protection from the sun, and for cultural and ritual purposes.
- Our unity should fill the air around us. Our unity is precious to God like nothing else. It is the heart of Jesus' prayer in John 17. We are described as the fragrance of Christ in 2 Corinthians. 2:14.
- Just as the people needed their anointed priests to enact the forgiveness of our sins, so they needed the dew of Hermon to enact the life of their crops. Spiritual life and physical life are united in this psalm.

**RUNNING DOWN**—In all of these metaphors there is a repetition of the phrase "running down". It is repeated three times in reference to the precious oil, the robe, and the dew of Hermon—a reminder that all these blessings are from God above.

**THE CHURCH**—Likewise in the church we must be reminded that our unity is a gift of God in Christ from above. The Church was initially coalesced through the down-pouring of the Holy Spirit to bless us in unity. We need to be reminded weekly that in the Church:

- We have the same God
- We are recipients of the same grace.
- We have the same goal—to glorify God.
- What are some ways we can actively pursue this unity?

### PRAYER AND APPLICATION (10-15 minutes)

- Do you struggle with unity (with friends, family, roommates, church folk, community people)? Why do you struggle with unity? Is it because of sin? Is it because of legitimate issues? Identify these things and people and spend time praying for God to give you strength to forgive and seek forgiveness.

A lack of unity affects both us and the whole body of Christ. Bonhoeffer would say that anyone's sins affect everyone's peace and prosperity.

- How can we resolve disunity?
- What part of our worship service calls us to reflect on our unity to participate?
- Why does God command and so highly value our unity?
- How is our inherent unity a reflection on Christ, his work, and our relation with God through Christ?

## Psalm 134

**November 24, 2011**  
**Thanksgiving**

### **Come, Bless the Lord**

*A Song of Ascents.*

- 1 Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord!
- 2 Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord!
- 3 May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!

## *Blessing: Blessed be the Lord and You*

### **ENGAGE** (15-20 minutes)

During this last session, take time to allow all those who have not yet shared to have a few minutes to share their journey to this point, their spiritual present, and their thoughts for the future journey.

### **REFLECTION & STUDY** (30-35 minutes)

Take a moment to read Psalm 134 out loud.

- What did you find most challenging, helpful or troubling in this psalm?

Psalm 134 closes out the Psalms of Ascents with a triptych of blessings. In verses 1 and 2 we are called to bless the Lord, and in verse 3 the God of all creation blesses us in Zion, not because we could deserve it in anyway but because in the covenant he has promised his presence with us. His presence comes in a real and solid way in Zion then, and now through his son Immanuel (Hebrews 12:22-24).

- How is even our desire and ability to “bless the Lord” a gift of grace to us?

Derek Kidner—“The exchange (we bless God and God blesses us) is quite unequal: to bless God is to acknowledge gratefully what he is; but to bless a man, God must make of him what he is not, and give him what he has not.”

- How/what do you struggle with desiring blessings that might not be godly?

Psalm 134 is a reminder that even though we started far off from God, pictured in Psalm 120 as the far reaches of the Earth—God has brought us safely to himself—idealized in Psalm 134 as Zion, the home of God. The lived and journeyed distance gives us fuel for prayer and praise. He is a God that protects and provides for us his people gathered.

- How does God’s work of grace in your life give you hope and fuel for praise?
- How does the gathered people of God give both glory to God and strength to us for praise?

Psalm 134 tells us a story with three key players: the servants, the holy place and the Lord.

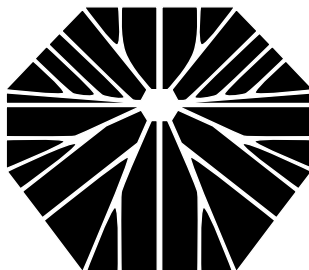
- How did Jesus fulfill, perfect and become all of these things for us?

### **PRAYER AND APPLICATION** (10-15 minutes)

Psalm 134 is a short psalm that reflects on the grace we have both to bless God and be blessed by him. Spend a short time meditating, writing, and sharing how you have been blessed by God this week.

Note some new ways that you can be a blessing to God, and ask for strength to do those things.

Spend time prayer thanking God for how he has blessed you and your group. Go boldly to the throne to ask God for his blessing in the days and weeks to come.



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