

# The Psalms of Ascents

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

### Introduction

“It is my view that in the words of this book the whole human life, its basic spiritual conduct and as well its occasional movements and thoughts, is comprehended and contained. Nothing to be found in human life is omitted” (Athanasius, *Ad Marcellinum*).

The Psalter “might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is a fine enchiridion or handbook” (Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 35:254).

In the Book of Psalms “there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation” (Calvin, *Commentary*, p.xxxix)

In modern times the most poignant and moving use of the Psalms among Christians is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s little book *Life Together*, written just as WWII was to break out. Bonhoeffer headed a theological seminary of the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde. These young pastors would be the core of those who would oppose Hitler and Fascism in the tumultuous years that would follow. Bonhoeffer himself would be hanged for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. His theological education was new in Germany; a communal life in which Jesus’ call to discipleship was taken seriously. The Psalms were central to living under the Word, both written and living. Here are some of his ideas.

“It is God’s word and, with few exceptions, the prayers of men as well...How can God’s word be at the same time prayer to God?” He notes the difficulty we have with some of the psalms, the protestations of innocence, the bitter psalms calling on the judgment of God and the Psalms of the passion like 22. His answer:

A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here Someone else is praying, not we; that the One here protesting his innocence, who is invoking God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. He it is who is praying here, and not only here but in the whole Psalter.

The man Jesus Christ, to whom no affliction, no ill, no suffering is alien and yet who was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his Church. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### The Book of Psalms in the Bible

The book of Psalms as we know it today, 150 songs and prayers, grouped into five books, is a product of a traumatic event in the Bible that we call the Babylonia Exile.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*. Translated in 1954 by John W. Doberstein from the German first published in 1939. London: SCM Press, 2015, p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Numbering of the Psalms differs—mostly by one—between the Hebrew (*Masoretic*) and the later 3rd and 2nd Century BCE Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. Protestant

Book I: Psalms 1–41  
Book II: Psalms 42–72  
Book III: 73–89  
Book IV: 90–106  
Book V: 107–150

Many of the songs in these five books are products of the period of the monarchy 1000BCE to 587BCE brought together from their past to help them live through the trauma they were experiencing. Many of them were composed before the exile and then used during and after the exile to help people in worship experience the pain and find new hope.

What is the exile? It is that last date that is the key, 587BCE. The leadership of Judah is decimated, and its population deported to Babylon. Some flee to Egypt as well, most notably the prophet Jeremiah and found a temple there and a thriving Jewish community. In Babylon the exiles also do well, but long for home and in 539 begin, at the fall of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persians in the form of Cyrus, planning to return to Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt by 515 BCE but it bore no resemblance to the great edifice of Solomon. Ezra and Nehemiah later set out to establish the city and the law but there is always underlying questions about what had happened to Judah and its relationship to God. The questions then turn from historical to theological.

### **Key theological problems**

The Exile meant the loss of the land, the temple, and the monarchy. These had been the core elements of the relationship with God. They were tied up with promises of God, covenant promises and now all that seemed overturned. Who was God? What did God want? How should we be the people of God? Why has this happened to us?

After the Exile the temple was rebuilt (516 BCE) but it was paltry compared to its former glory and by the time Herod was to rebuild it 500 years later to a huge, glorious, edifice it was all but too late. The Romans destroyed it in 70CE and all that remains are the foundation blocks that make up the Wailing Wall.

The monarchy was never restored, although some tried, and they were never truly autonomous again until the present day. They hated their overlords but could mostly do little about them. The old way of understanding God had gone. A new way had to be negotiated. They had to find new ways of living as the people of God.

In the Psalms this is reflected in the way the Psalter is put together. Books I-III address these painful questions and if you want to get a sense of the pain and hopelessness

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translations use the Hebrew numbering, but other Christian traditions vary. Catholic official liturgical texts, such as the missal and daily office, use the Greek numbering. For the Songs of Ascents, the Greek (and Catholic) numbering is one above that of the Hebrew numbering used here.

read Psalm 89 which is the conclusion to these three Books and the fulcrum for the Psalter.

Books IV-V take a different perspective. They make the claim that it is possible to live under God's rule without temple, monarchy and land because God rules in the midst of events and circumstances that seem to belie it. God's rule is contested, will continue to be contested within and without the people of God. Exile is painful (135–137) but it is liveable.

Psalms 1–3 act like an introduction and pursue the main themes. How to live with God's blessing Psalm 1; God's anointed and the world's ridicule Psalm 2; and Psalm 3 the trials of the people of God. But the Psalter ends on a different note. Psalms 146–150 end on the note of praise. This is how it will all end. In between are the questions, the difficulties and the joys of being the people of God who live by faith and faithfulness.

These are the questions Jesus was dealing with when Jesus came. Jesus came to Israel to end the exile. That is the point of Jesus' ministry: He did not come for Christians he came for Jews. He came to proclaim that God rules. That is what the term the kingdom of God or heaven means. God rules in Jesus. Repent and trust Jesus and the exile is over. Jesus message will be contested violently but God still rules and rules to bring the exile to its end. It is the same message as the Psalms.

These Psalms stem directly from the worship of community and individuals. Worship is central and sometimes it is possible to identify particular occasions and sometimes not. For instance, the Psalms of Ascents probably reflect the worship and theology associated with pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Feast of Tabernacles. This is why most churches use Psalms in worship both private and communal.

### **Theological themes of the Psalms**

So it is that the Psalms make public the inner life of Israel both personal and communal. They express pain fears, delights, and hopes of both community and individuals.

*How then can one be happy?* Psalm 1 begins the Psalter with the affirmation that human happiness is the complete orientation to God, a God centred life. That is how God's rule works now, in the God centred life.

That is why in Psalm 2.12, another part of the introduction, *we take refuge in God* which is a description of living in dependence on God for our life and our future unlike the other nations. The Psalms are full of terms like trust, fortress, stronghold, rock to emphasise the trustworthiness of God so that we can live a God centred life.

To be happy is to trust one's whole self, existence, and future to God.

*Now we can understand terms like righteousness.* This is not a moral term but a relational one. It describes the person who takes refuge in God or depends on God or trusts in God. They are not morally superior people, the self-righteous, whose good behaviour place God under an obligation to reward them. That is how Christianity (and the OT) is often read in church and in the media.

But the righteous person are those who acknowledge their dependence on God for life an future. Their basic happiness derives from God's forgiveness and God's covenant love and God's peace. Their relationship with God has been put to rights.

Now of course, there are moral consequences of such trust but that is not what these words are about. The righteous will seek peace because they trust the God of peace and live life dependent on him.

The wicked then are not obviously bad people, rapists, murderers, thieves but people who decide to live autonomously, who live self-centred, self-directed, and self-ruled lives. If we cannot get this into our heads and persist in reading these terms as essentially moral we will misread the Psalms and the prophets. The wicked will do things that suit their life of autonomy and we will come across it and the pilgrim will feel their disdain and hostility.

It is a bit sobering that the highest value and virtue in western democracies, autonomy, is the essence of wickedness in the Psalms.

All of this only makes sense in the light of the most fundamental affirmation of the psalter.

*God rules is the fundamental view of the Psalter no matter what things look like.* The rule is opposed constantly and circumstances seem to tell a different story but trust it; God rules now.

God's rule may be opposed (Psalm 1) or God's Messiah and God's place held in contempt (Psalm 2) or God's people despised (Psalm 3) but God rules now. And this is the only true source of happiness and life even if it is counter intuitive.

Rule or sovereignty usually means the power to enforce one's will. The Psalms insist that God does not do this. God invites people to trust him enough to do his will and then offers empowerment to do so. This kind of rule is resisted. God must therefore either enforce divine will or suffer the consequences of human disobedience. It is the latter that that God chooses. So God becomes vulnerable for the sake of relating to human kind. God's power is that of unbounded love and that is the meaning of covenant love.

*From this it is clear that God wills justice and peace for all.* God wills economic and political systems that exclude no-one from access to life or future. God will be content

with nothing less than peace on earth. God will not be content until all are happy as in the definition of Psalm 1.

*Obviously then judgment will come to the self-directed* because they do not care for God's rule of justice and peace. Such judgment is not mechanical but relational and we Christians know that from the cross: Choosing to live outside the relationship of trust means rejection, by definition.

*Therefore the dominant voices in the Psalms are praise and cry.* They are as inseparable as cross and resurrection. God's choice to exercise sovereignty of justice and peace in steadfast love means praise and cry are inseparable parts of the human condition.

The Book of Psalms may begin with the pain and puzzlement of Psalms 2–3 but it ends with Psalms 148–150 the most triumphant songs of praise in the book. Why? Because that is how it all ends. It ends in praise. We live in the in-between times, between Psalms 2–3 and Psalms 148–150 and that is where the majority of the Psalms find their locus.

Our lives are lived in the realities of pain and rejection on the one hand and the glory of praise on the other. Sometimes this is given the name eschatological living; living in the present in the hope of the future. The future reality determines the present life, constrained as it may be by the human pursuit for autonomy, self-dependence, self rule, and self-direction.

That is why the Psalms are full of praise and full of cry. So dominant is this that one scholar has suggested that we ought to read the psalms with the following pattern in mind:

Psalms of orientation; when things are going well, Psalms of disorientation: when things fall apart, and

Psalms of new orientation: when we make it through the disorientation and find a new place to stand.

It is probably a bit cute but look for these kinds of movements. They correspond to life movements and worship movements. They also correspond to well-known themes in Christian life: life, death and resurrection.

### **The Psalms as worship<sup>3</sup>**

This Psalms have had a lot more influence than providing a few theological themes for the grist of OT aficionados. The Psalms have been and are the most used part of the

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon Wenham. Reflections on *Singing the Ethos of God*. *European Journal of Theology* 18, no. 22 pp.120–124. Much use is made of his insights in this section.

OT among all forms of Jews and Christians. They have exercised a powerful influence over people's lives, shaped the way people have behaved, moulded their relationship to God and informed their ethical understanding.

From that use and history three facets of their power emerge.

*First, they have been sung.*

That seems obvious but often overlooked. "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws" said Andrew Fletcher a Scottish politician in the early seventeenth century. Songs transform ordinary reality, ordinary words.

*Second, they invite us to identify with the poet.*

This is done in many ways. The poet may offer a blessing and invite the reader to enjoy the blessing. So look at Psalm 1: "Happy or blessed are those who..."

Then the author may well use the first person. So Psalm 34.1: "I will bless the Lord at all times." Then in that Psalm the author reworks it as a command in 34:8: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Then there follows a blessing in the third person on those who do so (34.8). "Blessed are those that take refuge in him". So we start with the first person that involves me personally then I follow the identification through to its conclusions. Psalm 34 is a good example and vss. 11–14 draws the lessons for life of such an identification.

The psalmist proposes a relational ideal that is open to the reader to experience.

*Third, they are prayed.*

We can listen to theology lectures, we can listen to recitations of the Law as was done in the Jewish tradition, we can listen to sermons. These are on the whole silent passive affairs.

But what happens when we pray especially if the prayer is sung? Let's read Psalm 7:8–9:

The Lord judges the peoples;  
judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the  
integrity that is in me.  
O let the evil of the wicked come to an end,  
but establish the righteous,  
you who test the minds and the hearts,  
O righteous God.



The Psalmist affirms that God will judge the nations and then invites God to judge him affirming that God tests the mind and heart. This is very disturbing. Is this what you really want?

You see in theology the judgment of the nations is an academic idea to be debated. Here it is prayed and sung to be lived by. The writer, the pray-er, the singer give active consent to the standards of life implied in the Psalms. The affirmation that God will judge the wicked is turned in active prayer and worship that God will judge me.

We are performing here in prayer and song an act of commitment. So what looks like a statement of fact, “The Lord judges the peoples” become words that alter the relationship with God that mere listening does not. I am committing myself to patterns of behaviour, standards of integrity and roles in relationship with God that no theological or verbal statement would ever make me do.

## THE PSALMS OF ASCENTS

Psalm 120 is the first of 15 consecutive Psalms that bear the title Songs of Ascent. It is likely that pilgrims used these psalms on their way to Jerusalem for festal celebrations. Each Psalm is relatively short and thus easily memorisable and a variety of themes is represented.

The likelihood is that pilgrims who used these Psalms went to Jerusalem in family groups and thus they speak of the matters of daily life – place of residence 120:5–6, routine activities (121:8, 127:2, 128:2), the importance of spouse and children (128:3–4), as well as larger family and friends (122:8, 133:1). But national matters find their place too in this setting of worship (123–126; 130–132; 13).

Pilgrims also traditionally recited/sang these psalms at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn of the year. This feast commemorates God's care of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings so it reinforces the pilgrimage theme of the Songs of Ascent.

Psalm 120 begins outside Jerusalem, Psalm 122 probably heralds arrival in the city of Jerusalem and Psalm 134 acts as a benediction as the groups depart.

I need to add a note on Jerusalem or Zion. God chose this hill/mountain (743 metres) as the site of his earthly residence in order to communicate truths about himself in the cultural language of ancient Israel. In that world temples were located on mountains to symbolize the victory of the god over the forces of chaos. Zion symbolizes God's victory in the orders of creation and redemption. Thus it is holy, set apart for God's possession sealed by the presence of the Ark. It was I AM's throne. To look to this mountain was to look to I AM for help. To look at another mountain was tantamount to idolatry.

More than that though, Zion and the Temple reminded people of the Presence of God, the Shekinah of Israel. Israel's theology was always based on the Presence of God, the God dwelling among them. God clothed himself in the trappings of human life and culture and thus lived among and walked with His people. In Christianity this would be the basis for understanding the incarnation; God with us in a way not envisaged in the Psalms.

The Psalms represent a model of worship that begins outside and moves towards the centre of one's dependence, expressing one's deepest concerns, finding faithfulness and trust in dependence on a loving God and then moving back again to one's routine, mundane activities renewed in mind and spirit ready to live the life of righteousness and peace in a context of derision and ridicule and violence.

These songs contain a wide variety of psalm types. There are laments and hymns, wisdom and royal songs. In this variety they are no different from the singing that might come out of any church service or Christian meeting, Anglican or Hillsong.

## PSALM 120 PEACE

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> In my distress I cry to the Lord,  
that he may answer me:

<sup>2</sup> ‘Deliver me, O Lord,  
from lying lips,  
from a deceitful tongue.’

<sup>3</sup> What shall be given to you?  
And what more shall be done to you,  
you deceitful tongue?

<sup>4</sup> A warrior’s sharp arrows,  
with glowing coals of the broom tree!

<sup>5</sup> Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech,  
that I must live among the tents of Kedar.

<sup>6</sup> Too long have I had my dwelling  
among those who hate peace.

<sup>7</sup> I am for peace;  
but when I speak,  
they are for war.

### **Introduction**

On a first reading of 120 it may seem a strange and unlikely way to start a collection of psalms of pilgrimage, a strange and difficult little psalm. But its theme is peace, “I am for peace” (7) and this gives us the clue to its place and meaning, for it is repeated again and again in different ways in the other Songs of Ascents.

Another clue is the reference to Meshech and Kedar. The pilgrim lives outside Jerusalem in situation of hostility and alienation. These two little clues set us up for understanding what is to follow in this group of psalms and the nature of the pilgrim journey.

Psalm 120 is a prayer for help. The Psalter is full of such and Psalm 118 is perhaps one of the most significant examples.

Each Psalm has a pattern and we will try and discern that pattern in each as we go because that will help us see the movement of pilgrimage.

### **The beginning in prayer and faith (1–2)**

The psalmist remembers how God has acted in the past. He has called and God has answered (118:5). It is a common pattern for expressing faith, trust in YHWH. This becomes especially important when the writer encounters a new distressing situation. Prayer is the first move of pilgrimage. The distress can only be overcome in dependence on the Lord.

In this case it is “lying lips” and “deceitful tongues”. Lies, deceit are often cited in the Psalms as a powerful weapon of social hostility. “Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit.” (5:9) Lies subvert life; deceit undermines it; the soul is left insecure and damaged. Lies and deceit are much more socially and spiritually damaging than sexual deviance etc. Lies undermine confidence in justice, governance, church, God.

### **The movement to hope (3–4)**

The lying lips have declared war on the psalmist and his only hope is that God will turn that war back on his detractors. They have shown that they are for war and violence and the psalmist is in no position to respond so he longs for God’s justice. He believes that God will act on behalf of those who have no power, for the weak and the vulnerable, to set the record straight.

### **The longing for peace and not violence (5–7)**

The pilgrim finally states who he is and why he is a pilgrim, why he comes to worship the Lord and why he prays. “I am for peace.”

These verses describe his distress in sojourning among people who hate peace and love war. He feels like an alien from Mars. Every time he speaks of peace they want violence. It is like living in the proverbially violent places of Meshech and Kedar. North or South, wherever he goes, everything is settled with violence.

What he looks for is shalom/peace. Shalom is living a life of hopefulness and wholesomeness in dependence on the Lord and in wholesome relationship with others and the creation.

The pilgrim’s distress comes from having to live without shalom. Every time he seeks it he is met with hostility. This is why the pilgrim comes to Jerusalem; he is committed to shalom and he seeks shalom. Now he must renew his trust in the God of shalom. This is the quest of the journey.

### **Further Reflections**

This psalm hovers between the ‘now’ of hostility and violence and the ‘not-yet’ of shalom. The Christian believer understands this. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God coming in his own person as real now. It is something we can experience. God rules in and through Jesus.

But that rule experiences persistent opposition as Jesus himself was to experience in the cross. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” is immediately followed by “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ (justice) sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matt. 5.9-10).

The Christian reader may be a little alarmed at the psalmist's desire that the violent meet a violent end. But the Christian reader knows something that the psalmist did not. In the cross God meets the violent end. Jesus is killed. Violent people have their say on his words of peace. Peace will not reign. What they do not know is that God takes that violence into himself and by doing so says 'Peace will reign.'

The people of God always lead an uncomfortable alien existence amidst the reign of violence and injustice. So Peter (2:11-12) writes, dear friends,

I urge as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deed and glorify God on the day he visits us.

So this is the beginning of our journey; a pilgrim alienated from his contemporaries in his desire for shalom, for an integrated life with God with others and his material world. He rejects violence and deceit but receives it in return.

His only resource is to turn to YHWH. That turning is the rest of the journey.

### **Questions**

How powerful are words? How can we use them for good? How can we use them for ill? How has God been faithful to you when you felt overwhelmed with falsehood and deceit?

What happens to a society or church when mutual respect and truthfulness have disappeared?

## PSALM 121 PROTECTION

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup> The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.

After the experience of deceit and oppression of Psalm 120 it is no wonder then that the very next psalm is an eloquent profession of faith in God's protection and providence. It is a psalm celebrating the trust that can sustain the journeys of life and the journey that life is.

### **The lifting of the eyes (1–2) — A profession of trust by the individual**

What the psalmist has to do is to take his eyes off his surroundings, the brutality of violence and the pain of rejection, and lift his eyes. These first two verses of this psalm are some of the best known of the Psalter.

Sometimes the hills are filled with brigands and thieves, a source of danger but in this song they are the hills that surround Jerusalem. The hills are a reminder of the presence of the Lord among his people and the promises He has made to provide and protect. They are pictures, reminders.

It is to these that the writer lifts his eyes and reminds himself of their true significance. My help comes from the Lord and my Lord is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that there is, seen and unseen.

The phrase is familiar to us as it is taken up into the Apostles Creed and is made the theological basis for our trust. It tells us that the Lord whose power in help and blessing is unlimited by anything that is. In these Psalms of pilgrimage it is the affirmation that the pilgrim goes on the journey in the full knowledge that the Lord is not constrained by even the most powerful in the created order.

I want you to notice how personal this psalm is. “I” and “my” are key. Israel, the community, believes that God is Maker of heaven and earth but the pilgrim must make that theology his or her own. It must be the basis for the journey otherwise they will never take the risk and begin.

### **The Lord the travelling Companion (3–4) — A response by the ‘minister’**

Notice the change in verses 3–8. Someone else is speaking to the pilgrim. The pilgrim confesses their faith and a neighbour or a friend, a representative of the wider community of faith now encourages them to take the journey. This neighbour or friend witnesses to the character of God: It is a beautiful encouragement.

They witness to the companion God.

This image in 3–4 fits a person who is travelling on foot. One thing walkers can do is slip. And when they sleep, not in comfy motels but among the hills and valleys of Judea they are open to attack.

God is the travelling companion for the journey and he intends to “keep” the pilgrim. God is eternally vigilant; he does not slumber even though we are tempted to think that is what he does, “Arouse yourself. Why do you sleep O Lord” (Ps 44.23) is often our cry too. The pilgrim has to walk in the trust that God does not take rests.

### **The Lord the keeper (5–8)**

Next the neighbour witnesses to God the keeper. The Companion God is eternally vigilant but also like a giant umbrella giving relief from the heat of the day and the madness of the night. The sun was a deadly enemy and madness might strike at night (lunar/lunatic).

But more to the point God will not allow evil to assault the pilgrim in such a way that the pilgrim will be destroyed by it. Nothing will come between God and the pilgrim for God is ‘for us’, for our life. All our arrivals and departures will not separate us from God even if they separate us from our friends and loved ones because often that is what they do.

Nothing can separate the pilgrim from the loving care of God (Rom 8.38–39).

### **Further reflections**

This Psalm like 23 is one of the most influential well known Psalms of the OT. We use when we reach for words of assurance amid the trials and turmoils of our life’s journey. We love the sense that God has not only got the whole world in his hands but has you and me, sister/brother in his hands. The psalmist affirms that the creator and ruler of the cosmos has a personal concern for each of us.

This Psalm has also been a psalm for travellers. On the morning of his departure for Africa David Livingstone read this Psalm. Some churches use the Psalm in their

Baptism liturgy and some in the funeral liturgy. From birth to death and beyond this Psalm is the psalm of journeying.

The Psalm has been called a psalm for sojourners a name given to early Christians who thought of themselves as pilgrims and sojourners (1Peter 2.11–12 aliens and exiles), as members of the Way (Ac 9.2) as people for whom the whole of life was journey (Heb 11). “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb13.14).

Of course our best example here is Jesus whose life was journey, to a Cross (Lk 9.57–62). This journey was no pie-in-the-sky escapism but an undermining of all the arrangements for power and privilege that the world then conceived. Herod, Caesar and the Jewish establishment knew what this journey meant and were heel bent on destroying it. And the good news is that God was there keeping Jesus even on the Cross, keeping his life for the biggest surprise of all. The same god is our keeper.

### Questions

Why do you think that the confession that God is maker of heaven and earth (see the creeds) is important for trusting God? Why is it important to remember this when we worship?

Why is knowing God’s character important for trusting on the way?

What are the mundane (sun and moon) and malicious things that may assail us and deflect our trust?

How can we learn to constantly lift our eyes to the hills?



## PSALM 122 PRAYER FOR PEACE

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> I was glad when they said to me,  
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'

<sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem—built as a city  
that is bound firmly together.

<sup>4</sup> To it the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the Lord,  
as was decreed for Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> For there the thrones for judgement were set up,  
the thrones of the house of David.

<sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
'May they prosper who love you.

<sup>7</sup> Peace be within your walls,  
and security within your towers.'

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, 'Peace be within you.'

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,  
I will seek your good.

The first word in this psalm is the word for rejoicing. The psalm overflows with joy at being in Jerusalem, contemplating its significance and praying for its peace.

### **The joy of arrival (1–2)**

The pilgrim has now arrived at the gates of Jerusalem (verse 2). The family groups are coming together. They invite each other to make the pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. They are happy beyond belief. They rejoice. They have moved from alienation and violence seeking peace and now they join with others to come into the presence of God. There they believe they will find what they are looking for.

### **Praise for Jerusalem (3–5)**

In verses 3–5 the city is praised for three characteristics. First, it is a place of refuge, a city built compactly and solidly. It is a place of refuge against powers both cosmic and national. That is probably the best sense of v. 3. Here people also compact together to take their stand against the powers of hatred, abuse, and violence seeking peace.

Second, it is a place of worship and praise. It is a place where God's name is thanked and praised. God's name is thanked and praised because the God of covenant love, faithfulness and peace is there.

Third it is a place of justice. This is a central attribute of God's name and character. God's rule, God's throne, is not founded upon coercion, authoritarianism or whim. It

is founded upon justice that seeks to put all things to rights. Righteousness and justice are the foundations of the throne. Taking action to put the right into place and further action to put things that are not right back to rights is a definition of God's character.

And God expects his earthly representatives, i.e. David in this case, to do the same. Jerusalem is a place that reminds the pilgrim not only of God's presence but also of the pilgrims' commitments. Under their leaders they must represent the peace and justice of God on earth.

### **Prayer for Jerusalem (6–9)**

Justice which the royal house was supposed to embody reflecting God's rule was supposed to issue in peace, *shalom*. (Pss 29.10–11; 72.3,7).

The implication is the city is not peaceful. Jerusalem has always been one of the most conflicted and contested cities in the world. And in the time of exile Jerusalem was far from secure i.e. at peace. Yet Jerusalem held this symbolic place as the place which its name implies (possession of peace or foundation of peace). Is the Psalmist simply being nostalgic, thinking back to David and Solomon? How can the city of no peace and little security be the symbol of both.

Well, nostalgia is not the clue. The unlocking of this lies in the present and the future. In the present it is a reminder of the promise of God. It is a sacrament; a reminder that God has promised peace and security. It is a visible sign that God's promise still holds. That is why when the Babylonians destroyed it they longed to rebuild it. They needed a visible reminder of God's promise of presence; I will be your God, you will be my people.

It is thus a sign of the people's desire to live "in Jerusalem" i.e. not in the geographical space but in the promise of the covenant, the promise of presence, protection and power. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem is participation in the sacrament, in the promise and in the renewal offered in the promise. Pilgrimage is the commitment to live under God's rule.

But the present reality is that Jerusalem is not secure, they still struggle with contempt and derision. They long for the new day to come that is symbolised in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. To come to Jerusalem in this sense means to enter another world, a new world, where God does reign, where God's peace is real because God's justice governs all things. Like all sacraments the pilgrimage to Jerusalem is counter-intuitive.

What this means is that although the old realities are still there, hatred and war, trouble and turmoil, something deeper is determinative of this world. To enter Jerusalem, to commit to the reality of God's reign of peace and justice in one's life and in the nation is to be transformed and empowered to live in an extraordinary manner in the mundane world. It is to see that the real determining world is God's world, all

that Jerusalem represents, and that the other world of contempt and hatred is to be swallowed up by the real real.

That is why the psalmist will pray for the peace of Jerusalem, why he will seek its welfare for his and everybody's sake. Because the world of God's reign, the promise of presence, justice and peace is the real and ultimate world and the psalmist will live so it will come to be.

### **Further reflections**

What the psalmist saw in Jerusalem was a sign that "the Lord is here." Jerusalem is not a piece of real estate to be possessed but a symbol of the presence of the God of Justice and peace who cannot be possessed.

The Lord is here among the daily realities of a dying world, a frustrating world where things never work out as they should, and we are never all we could be. Yet the sacrament of Jerusalem, the act of pilgrimage is transformational, enabling people to live in an extraordinary manner in a dangerous and difficult world.

We have come to the end of study one and what a journey it has been. Peace and protection have been our main themes but it is always peace and protection in a journey of pilgrimage or discipleship that are contested. We have arrived at Jerusalem leaving for the moment a world of hostility and derision to find ourselves entering the presence of joy.

### **Questions**

How can we find peace? How can we find unity even at a local level? Liturgically this psalm is used for First Sunday in Advent in Year A. Other readings on that day are Isaiah 2.1–5, Romans 13.11–14 and Matthew 26.36–44. We are reminded that we do not know when God will act so we live in anticipation and preparedness for God to come in time and space. How can we live like that?

When justice and peace fail then the entire land is in peril. How important is our prayer for the *shalom* of God to be with us and among us?

## PSALM 123 GRACIOUSNESS

*A Song of Ascents.*

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

<sup>2</sup> As the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,  
until he has mercy upon us.

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

<sup>4</sup> Our soul has had more than its fill  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.

So the pilgrims have arrived in Jerusalem. The next four psalms describe some of the things they do when they arrive. They petition for four needs; mercy, rescue, security and restoration.

What is their first action? That is described in Psalm 123, the fourth of the Songs of Ascents. And it is the petition for mercy.

### **They lift their eyes 1–2**

The poet declares his trust in the Lord. The first words of the psalm even in English (NRSV) as in Hebrew are “To you...” The eyes might have been deflected elsewhere, the city or their problems or those left at home. But the first act is the lifting of the eyes.

It is an act of acknowledging that they live under the sovereignty of the Lord. God rules heaven and earth. This is the key fundamental understanding of the Psalter.

The pilgrim is like a servant who comes before their master and looks to them for sustenance and help. This is a beautiful picture of our dependence on the love and faithfulness of God. In worship, as in life, this is critical for finding the refreshing we often need when we are travelling the pilgrim way. And notice the beautiful and striking feminine imagery used of God (Isaiah 66.13, Hosea 11.4 Psalm 131).

And the only petition is for mercy. They do not come in arrogance and self-assertion. The lifting of the eyes is not a demand for rights between equals. The pilgrim recognises that he or she only comes under the sovereign care of God by grace. The presence cannot be demanded. The Lord comes only in response to trust.

And they will not let God go until they find mercy. We are about to find out what mercy they require from God in the next few verses. They trust the Lord because the Lord is trustworthy even when they cannot figure it all out.

### **They pour out their souls 3–4**

So now they pour out their souls; they long for God to show them graciousness. They repeat the plea for mercy, surrounding God with their prayers. The word for mercy is a word for “be gracious.” So the petition is a bit wider and more inclusive than forgiveness. We need forgiveness of course but we need more. Once the mercy of forgiveness comes we need mercy to live out changed lives that reflect the glory of God.

The pilgrims ask for the mercy of God to be with them. They depend on God for life itself and they cry out for God to be on their side, to give them life, to make life possible. They remember that the Lord is gracious (Exodus 34:6–9). They long for His presence to make life liveable, to make life possible and hopeful. That is the mercy they seek for. That is the daily prayer for mercy we all need to pray.

The ancient church taught people to use a prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This was a prayer for every moment of the day because we need mercy all the time. The psalmist needed mercy to live out life at the bottom of the pile and still be a worshipper of the God of covenant love and faithfulness.

They are sick to death of the contempt and scorn of those among they live. We do not know what particular event lies behind this but that does not matter. This is poetry and it picks up the feeling of the event rather than the particular event itself. Psalm 44 and 79 are similar. They are feeling the impact, social and psychological, of the events after 587. They long to stand tall among the nations.

Because that is what their lives are not. They are at the bottom of the social pile. The proud and the arrogant deride them and they are in pain and fed up. What is the way out of this for the pilgrim?

### **Further reflection**

Psalm 123 can be the prayer of the people of God in every generation. It makes sense in the generation of the post-exilic era. But it makes sense in ours too. Wherever the church finds itself in trouble, treated with contempt and ridicule or worse, then this psalm speaks.

Australian Christians have rarely experienced the contempt of the powerful. We are so much part of the social furniture that we rarely create a problem. True, we can feel the contempt of the intellectual elites from time to time but a bit of verbal abuse from them makes little difference.

But we do know that the closer we embody the radical good news that God loves the world and intends that it be rightly ordered so that all may have life and peace the closer we come to trouble. That is what happened to Jesus. His call to his church to live in humble servanthood, reflecting his own life, is a life lived humbly in utter dependence on God who rules heaven and earth.

### **Questions**

What do you need mercy for each day? How can we live humbly before our crucified God? Reflect on any experience of contempt and derision you have had? How did it affect you? Did you pray for mercy?

Some one has described this psalm as a “primer on prayer”. The psalmist “lifts his or her eyes to heaven, symbolically forswearing every other means of support” and thus “embraces the status of servant and waits, eyes fixed upon the Lord.” Does this describe your coming to and participation in worship and prayer whatever your circumstances? Reflect on your answer.

## PSALM 124 RESCUE AND PROTECTION

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> If it had not been the Lord who was on our side  
—let Israel now say—

<sup>2</sup> if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,  
when our enemies attacked us,

<sup>3</sup> then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us;

<sup>4</sup> then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;

<sup>5</sup> then over us would have gone  
the raging waters.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed be the Lord,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth.

<sup>7</sup> We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped.

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

Having had enough of contempt (Psalm 124.4), this fifth of the Songs of Ascents, asserts that deliverance from hostility and opposition is possible.

### God for us (1–5)

These verses recall a past deliverance. The writer does not describe what happened; whether an event in the history of the Babylonian exile or the resistance the returned exiles from their enemies thwarting the building of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah (Nehemiah 4.). It fits the terror of the Exile and its aftermath.

The psalmist describes the impact in images and similes; of engulfing waters, powers before which we are helpless. Poetry is so much more powerful. We can easily respond to the terrible sense of powerlessness against an overwhelming flood, a tsunami, because we are responding to common feelings of terror and helplessness.

Or perhaps in verses 6–7 they felt like trapped animals before a predator or caught in a trap set to provide a meal for a human table. Again terror and helplessness are common feelings.

The psalmist is certainly talking about an historical event; “...when our enemies attacked us.” (2) The enemy was human enough and real enough. The enemy posed a threat to their very existence. The enemy’s attack posed a question: what shall we do? But it posed other questions too. Who are we? Whose shall we be? The threat

challenged them with a question about themselves. Who shall we trust? Horses, arms, violence, trickery and cleverness? Or...?

No. The lesson they learned is that the people of God cannot live as “humankind without God” because in the politics of “humankind” they will be overwhelmed and destroyed.

### **Praise to God who is for us (6–7)**

Deliverance leads to worship and witness. Every deliverance we experience deserves witness and confession to the fact that God is for us.

This is the fundamental fact of salvation. God is for us. God is actively for us. God sets us free from the trap and the predator.

These verses explore new pictures for salvation. We are set free from terror and helplessness. We are set free to be fully alive. We have escaped; we are free. That is the good news. We need to meditate day and night on that image. It is beautiful. God has not cramped us in a religious prison: he has let us free like birds.

### **Our help (8)**

Therefore the pilgrims declare that their help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Here theology, God is creator of all, visible and invisible, meets spirituality and discipleship lived out in history, and is the foundation of unreserved trust in the Lord. The theology emphasises the absolute distinction between the Lord and the movers and shakers of human history and politics who believe that they control all things. God is the maker of heaven and earth and no-one else. This God is their God. (See Isaiah 40.12–26 God the Creator and Isaiah 41 God the Lord of history).

This verse climactically affirms the answer to the implied question underlying the Psalm: Where or who is our help? The idea of God as help is a constant theme in the Bible and speaks of a strong presence without which humankind would be unprotected and vulnerable (Ps 108.12)

### **Further Reflections**

Verse 8 is so familiar to us that we fail to grasp its profound and radical implications. To profess that God is our fundamental help means to profess that we are not sufficient to create and secure our own lives and future. We need help. Most people are quite hesitant to admit this for it undercuts one of our primary principles-God helps those who help themselves.

Psalm 124 teaches that God helps those who cannot help themselves. It is these God sets free like birds. This is what lies at the heart of the gospel: the grace of God. Discipleship and servant hood have their foundations in the confession that we owe our lives to God.



The fundamental trust that God secures our life and futures- God is for us and God is our help-is what empowered Jesus to bear a cross as a suffering servant. It is what empowers the people of God to serve even when that means suffering at the hands of those who oppose God's reign and God's will.

The worshipping community is defined as chosen and constituted by the Lord of heaven and earth. The unqualified trust in God and God's help is the defining characteristic of the Christian community, its belief and behaviour.

When John Calvin designed a liturgy for Strasburg and Geneva during the reformation he began it with the words, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." He understood that these words stated the truth about the congregation gathered for worship as well as any verse could.

**Questions:**

What role does thanksgiving play in our lives and worship? The people of God never live beyond trouble and the need for God's help (see also Psalm 108.12). What do you think? How can our worship better express our living trust in the God who is a strong presence?

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" Romans 8.31 Are we willing to live and worship in that trust?

## PSALM 125 SECURITY AND PEACE

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.

<sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the Lord surrounds his people,  
from this time on and for evermore.

<sup>3</sup> For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest  
on the land allotted to the righteous,  
so that the righteous may not stretch out  
their hands to do wrong.

<sup>4</sup> Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,  
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

<sup>5</sup> But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways  
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.  
Peace be upon Israel!

This psalm is the Sixth of the songs of Ascents. Like Psalm 122 it focuses on Jerusalem and concludes with petition aimed at the establishment of peace. In this song Jerusalem, the destination of the pilgrim, becomes the symbol of God's presence and faithfulness to the pilgrim.

### **The Lord's protection for those who trust him (1–2)**

You can imagine the pilgrims looking around at Mt Zion, an immovable rock surrounded by hills. In that picture they find their own story and the story God. Their own story is seen in the rock which is their stability founded on God.

Looking about surrounded by mountains they feel God's eternal protection for those who trust him (rely on, feel secure in). This is the first instance of the word for trust in the Songs of Ascents. The theme has been there of course in the other psalms but here it comes to explicit statement.

Relationship with God is the key to the Psalms. And this relationship is best described by trust. They trust God enough to live in a hostile world. They trust the Lord enough to undertake pilgrimage in a hostile world. Their trust in God is deeply personal, it is profoundly relational. Sometimes people read the OT as legalistic.

Jesus drew on psalms such as this.

### **Why did they want such protection? (3)**

Verse three begins with the word "Surely". If we interpret it this way we see what the Psalmist is really worried about.

It appears that the wicked (those who reject the rule of God, who are not governed by God's word Ps1 or God's messiah Ps2) are truly in control of the land. They wield authority and power and the poet is concerned that the righteous (those who live

under God's word, accept God's rule and messiah) are tempted to follow their pattern of rebellion against God. The wicked are in control. The rule of the world is in the hands of those who oppose God's kingdom of peace and justice.

This reflects the time of the exile and return when the land is dominated by others. It was the situation for years to come.

### **The response; who rules? (4–5)**

These verses accept the reality of the power of wickedness in the land, the rule of others with a very different set of agendas to the people of God. It appears the wicked rule. That is the political reality.

The psalmist knows that God reigns. So his prayer is that even in the midst of antagonism the people of God will experience God's goodness. And God's goodness is experienced in peace, that wholeness and integration life in love and justice and truthfulness. That is where peace is found in trust in the sovereign.

Those who throw in their lot with power structures of the world and sell their souls to them will find the company of the evildoers congenial.

### **Further reflections**

It is important to read these psalms with the recognition that the majority of pilgrims who made their way to Jerusalem at this time were not the rich and the privileged. They were often the victim of oppression and injustices and they felt crushed and helpless (see Psalm 120). That is the emotional and theological tone of this psalm. They have no power over the wicked.

The peace of God derived from service (Ps 123.2) under God's rule is no ordinary peace, a cessation of hostilities while the wicked regroup in order to assert their power once more. God's peace is greater than this (Phil 4.7). This peace is lived now in the midst of its opposite in the hope of its establishment. Like the NT the OT looks forward. These psalms do it all the time. The present contradicts the belief in God's peace. So the people of God live and proclaim the peace of God in the midst of a world where power is exercised for ends other than to glorify God.

Elie Wiesel the Jewish Holocaust writer addresses the ongoing opposition to the peace that God wills for the world:

Though temporary in nature, war seems to last forever. In the service of death, it mocks living. It allows men to do things that in normal times they have no right to do: to indulge in cruelty. A collective as well as individual gratification of unconscious impulses, war may be too much a part of human behaviour to be eliminated-ever.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elie Wiesel. "Are We Afraid of Peace". In *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, Knopf, 1995.

In a novel I read the following: “War is better than Monday morning.”<sup>5</sup> We find mundane things too boring. Living with each other in love, justice, truthfulness etc., is just too stupid for words.

Such evil has power to bewitch God’s people. Instead of following the more excellent way of Christ we find ourselves seduced by power. We find it all through history. The miserable behaviour of all our denominations, the seduction of Christians under Hitler, our passiveness in the face of corruption, cruelty and abuse of children or the aged, we ignore.

Yet the psalmist’s vision of trusting God in the midst of the madness of power, of living the life of peace in the midst of evil of destruction of other human beings is a confrontation with God who abides forever. This is our God and we are to live in his rule. We have to take the courage to witness to this God. Security in God does not mean life has no risks in the confrontation with evil in our own lives and in our world. It is dangerous yet paradoxically we are secure.

### Questions

Examine the way in which your life can be characterised as relying on and being secure in God. What difference does it make to live a life in this way?

What are some important ‘holy places’ in our lives? Why do they help us live of peace?

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<sup>5</sup> Walker Percy. *The Last Gentleman*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1966

## PSALM 126 RESTORE US

*A Song of Ascents.*

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

<sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
'The Lord has done great things for them.'

<sup>3</sup> The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

<sup>5</sup> May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.

<sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

This seventh song is a psalm full of tension. It is tension between what the past seemed to hold out for the future and the reality of the future that has arrived, their present reality. This is a common experience of individuals, of churches and of nations. Something seems so full of promise at the beginning but the present reality is hard to live with. So, one scholar characterises this psalm as “joy remembered and joy anticipated.”<sup>6</sup>

### **A dream come true 1–3**

Given what I have explained of the exile and its terrible questions and heart rending experiences the return would have been like a dream come true. Home at last, free at last.

But more, Isaiah 40–55 had promised that this would be a new day, a second exodus, and God’s new thing. So laughter, true laughter, not at the expense of others but in praise of God’s marvellous ways filled their days. Joy was their song. How often we are the dour and sour and yet we know what great things God has done for us. We know how God has restored our fortunes. We know we are home at last, free at last.

This was not time for long faces for them nor ought it to be for us.

More than that the nations were sitting up and taking notice. They had become in Isaiah’s terms a light to the nations (Isa 42.6). In other words there was a time when

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<sup>6</sup> James L. Mays. *Psalms* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching). Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 399.

the nations looked and wondered at what God was doing. The missionary impulse of the OT was finding fulfilment and they were overjoyed.

### **The longing for joy 4–6**

But...

We do not know what has happened but it has all come to grinding halt as the poet writes. The best description of the present is tears and weeping the very opposite of laughter and songs of joy.

They have become dry like the wadi in the Negev, the desert to the south. No one looks to them to find spiritual refreshment now or see in them the amazing work of God.

However, the key to this psalm is the hope deeply embedded in it. Hope lies embedded in the past. We know what God can do. God can redeem, God can set free, God can bring us home, and God can set our laughter flowing again. The past is critical to the present. It can and does in this song subvert the present and its dreariness. It offers hope. Hope is not nostalgia. Hope is the promise of what God has done in the past he will continue to do now and more, and that means that the present is not the future.

The watercourses or wadis do fill up and when they do they blossom and everyone comes to this place of renewal and life.

Sowing is an act of anticipation and hope. Tears and weeping for people who live on subsistence are the tears of hunger and hope together. If the season is poor hunger will stalk them. They must trust in hope.

And that trust will never be unrewarded. Trust feeds hope, hope feeds joy, joy feeds the shout of praise and thanksgiving.

### **Further Reflections**

The reflection on the past should be a source of joy and laughter. It is that because it is subversive of the present. The present can overwhelm us with its problems. We live the present in hope. God has done great things for us and we ought to live in that. But daily we need God's help and renewal. We live in the anticipation of what God will do.

In liturgical tradition this Psalm is used in Advent and Lent. We remind ourselves that the people of God live by memory and hope. During Advent and Lent we remember the humble and humbling circumstances of Jesus' life and death. Yet we do this in the joyful anticipation of his resurrection and the promise of the renewal of all things.

Dreaming in verse 1 is not then just a state of incredulity in the face of a divine intervention but is a state of living a joyfully visionary life. This is a life not of having

visions all the time but a life that can see the infinite possibilities that trust in God can put before us. It is the opening of the imagination to God's possibilities.

We started these studies with a plea for graciousness, a plea to escape the effects of contempt and derision, a celebration of rescue, an affirmation of security found only in God and finally laughter and joy. All of these are great themes for the pilgrim life and pilgrim worship.

### **Questions**

How can we better express our joy, our laughter, because God has brought us home? Have we become dry like a billabong in drought? What restorative work do we pray for and look forward to God doing among us? How might come to be that the nations might say of us "The Lord has done great things for them."?

## PSALM 127 REBUILD US

*A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.*

<sup>1</sup> Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labour in vain.  
Unless the Lord guards the city,  
the guard keeps watch in vain.

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

<sup>3</sup> Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.

<sup>4</sup> Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the sons of one's youth.

<sup>5</sup> Happy is the man who has  
his quiver full of them.  
He shall not be put to shame  
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

We are now at the middle of the collection, and this eighth psalm of the Songs of Ascents introduces us to a more upbeat section of this collection. In this section the people's enemies are seldom in view, receding into the background. This psalm introduces the possibility of happiness (5).

The Psalm continues to emphasise the importance of trusting in God and living in dependence on God.

What threaten the people are their own priorities (127.1–2; sinfulness (130.3), and pride (131.1). So Psalm 127 is a little turning point in the collection. Notice too that it has a unique attribution of the psalm to Solomon.

### **Unless the Lord builds the house (1–2)**

The first image here is building a house. Which house? It could be any kind of a house, a normal everyday run of the mill house. Or, by extension in the Bible, the Temple, a place to meet God in worship and praise. Or it can refer by extension to having children. Hidden in this phraseology is the idea that a house can be a dynasty (1Sam. 2.35; 2 Sam 7.27), a priestly or a royal dynasty that will provide leadership to the people of God.

And the point of the image is that without dependence on God the activity is vain-worthless, purposeless, and meaningless.

The second image is that of guarding a city, a common human activity again. In the Bible the reference to the city is richly ambiguous. It might be Jerusalem; it could be



any city or town. Guarding is about security. As we go about our business or sleep at night we worry about security. Think how important an issue it is in our world.

Guarding is a characteristic activity of God (Psalms 25.20; 34.20; 86.2; 97.10; 116.6; 121.3–5, 7–8). Without God's presence human guarding is of no avail. Security belongs to God. Now of course this is an article of faith.

The third image is that of excessive work arising from and leading to needless anxiety. This is another common modern activity. While 2d is not completely clear (NRSV) the meaning is: God provides what humans need without their excessive striving. Grace is the key. This verse is a counterpoint to Gen. 3.17–19 in that it promises provision beyond what humans can produce for themselves. It is a reversal of the Fall.

Resting secure in the God whose covenant love surrounds and desires our peace allows us to sleep in peace.

### **Unless the Lord builds the family (3–5)**

Think about how domestic this psalm is. Securing a home, establishing a safe neighbourhood, working for a living, and having children.

All of these activities can be approached in terms of human effort and accomplishment. However the psalmist insists that they should be viewed in relation to God, and in the case of children they are to be seen as God's gift.

In the context of the Exile these children are the future, they represent strength to rebuild and security against the inevitable enemies that may assault the family or the nation.

The fact that this Psalm is attributed to Solomon is very interesting. The great builder of Israel spent more time on his own house than building the Temple (13 v. 7). He had many children but many to pagan wives and that became a problem for Israel's worship and commitment to the one God. He secured the kingdom but with methods such as forced labour, royal violence, forced taxes. The result was the destruction of the united kingdom. He is a wonderful negative example of the values of this psalm.

Without God everything we do in our ordinary domestic lives is fleeting and empty.

To be content (5, see Psalm 112.1) is to be settled and at peace. It is linked to being blessed. This is the wonderful news of God's promise of presence in our mundane domestic lives that creates contentment or peace.

### **Further reflection**

Ordinary realities of life are of extraordinary significance. God cares about the mundane matters of real estate, community, work and family.

But the Psalm challenges the everyday secular understanding of these realities. On the one hand, the normal routines of life are not just irritants to be tolerated and, on the other, they are not the be-all and end-all of human existence.

Having a nice house maybe part of the Oz dream but it needs more to make it a home. Having a crime free neighbourhood does little good if all we live for is hoarded goods. Making a living is a proper activity but it means little if we do not know what it is that makes work and life worthwhile.

Our desire to assist the hungry and dispossessed in our community, our care and encouragement of seniors or our advocating for refugees need deep grounding in God's love and mercy.

These are good things but they can become 'demonic' when they express self-sufficiency, autonomy, self-centredness rather than dependence on God (Psalm 1). They become destructive when they become a means of expressing self-centredness rather than hospitality, pursuing greed rather than generosity.

The Psalm invites us to entrust our lives to God and not be so anxious about them, to pursue God's claim on us as a first priority and embody that as God's will (Matthew 6.25–34). This is the way to find contentedness.

Of course what applies to the domestic applies also the corporate lives as the people of God. Unless the Lord builds the church, those who build it labour in vain. We belong to an age of pragmatism in methods of church growth, the temptation of which is to think that we have made it ourselves.

We are prone to the temptation to take personal credit for God's work among us. It is Adam and Eve all over again.

### Questions

The poet suggests that without trust in God's agenda for us a house is built uselessly, a city is watched over uselessly and it is useless to rise early, work late and worry endlessly. Share your reflections on that.

What does contentment mean for you? How can we practise contentment in our lives? How might our own priorities militate against our contentment?

## PSALM 128 YOU SHALL BE CONTENT

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,  
who walks in his ways.

<sup>2</sup> You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;  
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

<sup>3</sup> Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.

<sup>4</sup> Thus shall the man be blessed  
who fears the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord bless you from Zion.  
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem  
all the days of your life.

<sup>6</sup> May you see your children's children.  
Peace be upon Israel!

This psalm is a companion to 127. Contentment, work and family are all continuing themes as the worshippers pay attention to daily life. Perhaps this psalm was given as a blessing by priests on the pilgrims as they attend one of the three great festivals in Jerusalem.

### **The fear of God is the beginning of happiness (1)**

We are in the same space as Psalm 1 and Psalm 112.1. To fear God means to trust God enough to put one's life one's future in God's control. It is to orient our way to God's way. It is to pick up God's agenda and run with that; to fear God is to fill human life with a trusting relationship with the God of mercy and blessing.

Blessing is not mechanistic: If I do this I will get that from God. It is not a matter of ritual of place and ceremony. That is the view of much psychobabble self-help that many folk turn to, even some Christian authors. Happiness is relational; it is the connecting of one's life to God's life and trusting that.

That happiness transforms the mundane activities of life.

### **Happiness in the mundane (2–4)**

Work and family consume most of us; even from time to time perhaps overwhelm us. In the Bible there is no right to work or family bliss or children. They are seen as blessings gifts of grace. And many can have them and not feel blessed. There is no manipulation of God to get these things. There is no formula here or elsewhere in Scripture.

Blessing is relational. Committing ourselves to God's rule mean that we see things differently. If we have work and family and children, in that context, they are not burdens but sources of God's pleasure.

They are grace given. Even when things go bad, as they often do and they become sources of pain it is our relationship with God, the presence journeying with us, that allows us to find a new orientation, a new space and place for blessing. So the images of vines and olive shoots point to productivity and fruitfulness in life producing a richness of joy and contentment.

God's blessing is the enhancement of everyday life that brings it to fulfilment. Mortals work but God's blessing brings that work to fruition. Mortals marry but God's blessing makes it good. Whatever makes life good is the effect of blessing. Without blessing , life is incomplete, frustrated.

Domestic life is central to God's rule in the world. It is where God's rubber hits the road in the midst of normal chaotic human life. We think that we may find happiness in all sorts of places but not here. We may even think that in the big scheme of things the mundane is not very important. That is not God's view of things. The ordinary, the mundane is the centrepiece of God's rule and human happiness.

Why? Because here the battle for God's rule is played out as much as it is in politics and economics. The desire for autonomy, self- directedness has its most basic form in the family. Parents and children contest and contend to answer the question who rules? And where is true happiness?

### **The happiness of peace (5–6)**

Zion and Jerusalem are imaginative triggers for the recollection and experience of the Presence; the sacraments of God's life constantly with them. It is the ongoing reminder of God's reign, God's kingdom at work. That kingdom is the source of blessing and prosperity.

The place of peace in God's reign has been addressed several times already in these studies. Peace is the wholeness and fruitfulness of life lived under God's rule and is the future even if it is not the present. And the everyday receives the most extraordinary blessing: Flowing from the joy of the mundane is prosperity and peace.

God declares a blessing on all this mundane homely activity of work and family because here the peace and prosperity of Israel will be won or lost. No wonder we Christians ought to contend for both in the public arena.

### **Further Reflections**

This psalm points to the desire that God has for the blessing of the human race. Many forces contest that desire; economic, political and social. So it is rare that we see such contentment.

Sometimes we lose the joy of God's ongoing provision and blessing in everyday life. This psalm presses us to resist the tendency to view daily life in purely secular terms. One danger is the temptation to turn blessing into some mechanistic system of rewards and punishment or ritual. Blessing is God's gift arising from a trusting relationship. Peace and blessing always exist amidst the chaos, hostility and derision of those who reject the rule of God (see Psalm 129). So we live looking forward to a time when blessing promised will be unleashed. Christians believe that has begun in Christ and the Spirit.

God's peace and blessing is always a matter of grace for it is not as the world gives (Phil 4.7; John 14.27). Happiness is not the cause for self-congratulation but worship.

### **Questions**

This psalm suggests that well-doing and doing well are interdependent. What do you think?

As the lives of ancient Jewish people were tied up with the good of Jerusalem so in Christ the lives of Christians are bound up in Christ through whom God bestows all his blessings (Ephesians 1.3). Do you look at life through this lens? What do you see?

How can we be receptive to the blessing of God? (See Psalms 125.4; 115.13; 24.5; I Peter 1.8–12).

## PSALM 129 TIMES ARE PERILOUS

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> ‘Often have they attacked me from my youth’  
—let Israel now say—

<sup>2</sup> ‘often have they attacked me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.

<sup>3</sup> Those who plough ploughed on my back;  
they made their furrows long.’

<sup>4</sup> The Lord is righteous;  
he has cut the cords of the wicked.

<sup>5</sup> May all who hate Zion  
be put to shame and turned back.

<sup>6</sup> Let them be like the grass on the housetops  
that withers before it grows up,

<sup>7</sup> with which reapers do not fill their hands  
or binders of sheaves their arms,

<sup>8</sup> while those who pass by do not say,  
‘The blessing of the Lord be upon you!  
We bless you in the name of the Lord!’

This tenth psalm of the Song of Ascents is a tough poem. Some people see it as a lament, others a community thanksgiving or even a song of trust and assurance. Some see it as an imprecatory psalm. Such psalms express disgust for enemies and wish ill upon them.

It has all those themes.

### **Oppression of the people of God (1–3)**

The Psalm begins with a cantor or leader starting the pilgrims off and the rest of the pilgrims responding with the rest of the psalm. It shows that the psalm is liturgical in origin. Israel is here thought of as a person cf. the church’s use of the Body of Christ.

The psalm starts with an adverb that means both often (NRSV) and intense or severe (NIV). The poet articulates the reality of persistent and severe opposition to the people of God either by their neighbours, or their captors.

Even when Israel was young, a teenager, the people were subject to violent attack. Yet they learned that the attacker could not prevail even though the pain to Israel was intense. The metaphor of verse 3 paints the pain as like being laid on the ground and ploughed over. We need to note the intensity of the pain.

Note here that God’s people do not escape from pain and oppression. Indeed, they may attract it because of who they are. Note again we are not told what happened; it is very general, but it is the pain that is emphasised. This is not about history but experience, an experience we all can have and this is why the psalms speak to us in all our conditions. Poetry touches us where history cannot. We can say that we do not

share an historical experience but intense pain of rejection, violence and hatred any might experience and the powerlessness it creates in us.

#### **God saves (4)**

The reason that the enemies of Israel have not overcome them is not because they are brilliantly resilient or powerful or good. They are none of these things.

They survive and flourish because God is righteous.

God puts things to rights and he does that by cutting the cords of the wicked. Now this is not some anatomical figure of speech. Think of rope. It is about the power of rulers and oppressors to coerce intimidate, restrain in order to control and hurt their prisoners. God's rule is real and we trust it when we are completely powerless. God cuts the ropes. God sets them free; think of the Exodus.

These people live in the real world of pain and powerlessness and yet they trust God to exercise his sovereignty; the firm belief that God would put things to rights.

#### **Opposition to God's people is opposition to God (5–8)**

To hate the people (Israel) is to hate Zion (where God's presence is and God's promise is remembered). The future for God's opponents is not bright.

The agricultural images are images of life cut off, an unfruitful life, a life without blessing, and a life full of dying. The last verse is the final nail in their coffin: no-one can proffer them a blessing because their lives have been full of death not life. God cannot bless that kind of life.

This is God's opposition to the oppressor, the abuser whose whole life is given over to death, to capture, to restraining and giving pain to others.

#### **Further reflections**

From its earliest times, from patriarchs and matriarchs to the embattled generations of the post exilic era, the history of the people of God is one of opposition and inflicted pain.

Another way of looking at this, as this psalm does is to recognize that God's reign is always opposed. The people of God experience the opposition directed at God. The people live by memory and hope.

Jesus asked his disciples to live the same way. They entered God's reign and took up the cross. The history of the people of God in the psalms or the disciples of Jesus is one long passion narrative.

We live by memory, God's righteousness in the past, and hope, trusting that the future is in the hand of the same God. That is why the church has the sacraments and the Word to help live in memory and hope.

In our affluent and relatively peaceful world unrelenting oppression is not something that we have experienced. We therefore find it hard to reconcile harsh words about enemies with Jesus' ideas about loving your enemy and turning the other cheek.

We need to remember that the psalmist is praying because the poet has no capacity to do anything about the violence, injustice and suffering all around him. The psalmist prays for God to act because no one else can. The psalmist is turning the other cheek and handing it over to God's justice.

The psalmist does that in the knowledge that God opposes and confronts injustice, evil and oppression. The psalmist's prayer is for a society where such things do not exist. The anger expressed is expressed in prayer and thus submitted to the action of God.

### Questions

Do we love justice so much we hate injustice as God hates it?

Read Romans 12.19–21. What bearing might this have on the discussion?

Consider the following in relation to injustices (such as child abuse):

“We have suppressed in our Christian consciousness the idea that judgment is for the sake of justice, especially for those who are the victims of injustice, and that the purpose of this judgment is to restore everything “as it should be” - and even to confront the wicked with their injustice in such a way that they honour justice through their repentance.” Erich Zenger.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Erich Zenger. *A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Westminster John Knox Press, p. 64)



## PSALM 130 WAITING

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

<sup>2</sup> Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

<sup>3</sup> If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;

<sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

<sup>7</sup> O Israel, hope in the Lord!  
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

<sup>8</sup> It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

We are now at the eleventh Song of Ascents. The juxtaposition of the Psalms 129 and 130 serves an important purpose. Lest the people of God be tempted to self-righteousness because of their suffering for God's sake, Psalm 130 is an eloquent reminder that opposition to the reign of God is internal as well as external.

The Psalms as a whole tell two stories. One is the suffering of Israel under her enemies. The other story is that of the persistent unfaithfulness and disobedience of Israel. Sometimes you will find both themes in the one psalm.

The people of God live by the grace of a God of steadfast love, who bears opposition from all sides, including Israel and the church. In other words, we must also confront our iniquities. And another reminder of how intentional the Psalms are Psalm 131 begins on the note of humility; "O lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high." (131.1)

Psalm 130 is both a lament and a cry for help. It is the sixth of what has become known in the church as the seven penitential Psalms: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. From St Augustine to today they influence worship and Christian understanding of forgiveness, confession, and repentance. They are used in Lent and Advent. Typical of the Psalms of Ascents and the laments the voices of individual and the community blend together and reinforce each other.

Luther called this Psalm “a proper doctor and master of Scripture” meaning it encapsulated the Gospel. John Wesley read this Psalm in worship on the afternoon before his transforming experience at Aldersgate. The Psalm addresses the human predicament and its dependence on divine grace.

### **The human condition 1–2**

The writer describes it as ‘depths’. The writer names the chaotic forces that confront human life with destruction devastation and death. And water, chaotic water is the symbol. Remember the stilling of the storm in Mk 4.35–41 and other stories. The power of water, the chaos of the deep is powerfully descriptive of what we cannot control and what may overwhelm us. See Psalm 69.1–2, 14.

And it is interesting that water figures in one of our sacraments, baptism. We are plunged into the depths, only this time in these chaotic waters we find the depths of the mercy and salvation of God.

As the psalmist enters into chaos his first thought is mercy. That is all the poet can rely on. There is nothing else.

### **The human problem 3–4**

The chaotic forces facing the psalmist are here traced in this instance to the poet’s own sin. We have no idea what it was but it was enough to create chaos, destruction, a sense of being sucked down into the bottomless waters.

But the one thing he hangs onto is the trust that “there is forgiveness with you.” This goes right back to the covenant with Moses and Israel (Exodus 34.6–7) which places which places mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, at forgiveness at the heart of God’s character.

It is only God’s willingness to forgive that makes the covenant possible and its renewal. To use a modern and a biblical term this is God’s awesome thing (Exodus 34.10). It is God’s desire not just to make the covenant but, recognising that human nature is chaotic, to renew it again and again and again. His critical nature of forgiveness lies here. It is the point of renewal of the covenant and the human person.

That is why God is revered, praised, worthy of worship, trust and obedience. God does not mark iniquities. God does not have a plan for catching people out in the fine print. The principal way of God with people is not to watch for sin. God is not an owner, editor or employee of a tabloid newspaper or tabloid TV current affairs program. If this were true there would be no hope. No one could survive if that were God’s way with us.

### **Waiting for the Lord 5–6**

So now the Psalmist waits. Now this is not a word we like to hear. We like action. Get up and go. However, the primary spiritual activity is waiting.

In this psalm it is likely the poet is referring to waiting in the Temple, even overnight, to be assured of God's active presence.

Waiting is the persistent posture of God's servants based on the conviction that God is gracious and forgiving. More than that waiting assumes that God addresses us personally. Waiting is something personal. It is quiet attention the other. It quiet attention to listening to the other. There is no I'm forgiven let's go and get on with it whatever it is.

Waiting is allowing time for healing, restoration, and renewal of the lost friendship. Then we might have the confidence and hope to get up and go in the right direction. Waiting is hard to learn but it is the place of hope according to the poet. Hope begins with a renewed relationship that will take us through the circumstances in our lives that seem to deny God's reign in the world and in us. That is why we wait. For without waiting we cannot find hope.

Waiting finds hope in the promise of God, the Word of God. Waiting, promise, personal restoration and hope are the foundation of Christian spirituality and prayer as well as action.

#### **Witness to the Lord 7-8**

The poet turns from the personal and individual to the corporate. Having discovered hope in the chaos and destruction that accompanies sin, the poet witnesses to the whole of Israel. He uses his own experience of being rescued from death and destruction caused by sin but he also takes the reader back to the promises of the covenant in Exodus 34.6-7.

Israel's future does not depend on its own worthiness or ability to save itself but on God's faithful love and desire and ability to redeem.

No sin or setback will be of sufficient depth or chaos to separate God's people from God's amazing love and faithfulness.

#### **Further reflections**

The God in the depths is the God who goes to the cross in Jesus. This is the God we meet fully and wonderfully in Jesus.

Even though the Psalmist's problem is his/her own making God is found in the depths of that. Even in the psalmists own rejection of God's rule in his life God is there. God is not easily rejected. God's presence does not go away. It is even present on a cross. No place is beyond the presence.

God is responsive to us, moved by us, affected by our cries out of the depths. This God opens up himself to a relationship with sinful, wilful, and chaotic human beings. God's sovereignty has nothing to do with sheer force and coercion but the power of committed love, faithfulness, and truthfulness.

For us we wait hoping in the Word of God, taking courage from the certainty of what is yet to be, we wait for a full redemption that at present we only experience in apart. For the moment waiting that final redemption means God's power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor.12.9).

### **Questions**

How does this psalm correct the common view that God's principal way with human beings is to watch for iniquities?

What does it mean for you that there is no place or circumstance (even our own turning away or sin) beyond the redeeming, loving presence of God?

## PSALM 131 TRUST QUIETLY

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> 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 marvellous for me.

<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

<sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the Lord  
from this time on and for evermore.

Today we begin to study the psalms that help us to return to our routine lives where God also reigns. We are about to leave Jerusalem and engage our ordinary lives. We want the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to inform and deepen our everyday journey even as we leave it behind.

So Psalm 131, the twelfth in the series, signals to us how we should begin to disengage from Jerusalem and return to world of pain and derision, of joy and happiness that is our everyday world.

It is a the psalm of an individual who witnesses in the community about how they are preparing themselves after having been in the presence of God, experienced God's unremitting love and forgiveness, found hope and now takes up the posture of waiting.

The other thing that can be said is that verse 2 (espec. 2c NRSV) indicates the poet is a woman. Women wrote a great deal of scripture (Exodus 15.20–21; 1Sam 2.1–10; Jdt 16.1–7; Lk 1.47–55). She is now preparing herself and her child for the long journey home at the end of the pilgrimage.

### **Three things I will avoid(1)**

I will, she says, avoid pride. Pride is destructive. It is the primal sin. Like Hannah she longs to be free of such arrogance 1 Sam 2.3 and longs to expel it from her thoughts. Pride begins in the hidden recesses of the heart but it is destructive of all human endeavour.

She will avoid all anxious desire to please which could destroy her life; her eyes are not lifted up.

She will avoid inappropriate ambition, things too marvellous for her. Her heart would be profoundly disturbed as any human heart is when it is driven by an ambition that centres on the self and not on God's reign.

All of the above tempt her. She consciously refuses them. She is a person in very difficult circumstances, highly socially constrained. She has little freedom in our modern sense. But she makes a choice, a spiritual choice, a moral choice.

We have considerably more choice available to us and need to take note here.

### **The one thing I have done (2)**

She has calmed her soul. What she wants as she returns, a dangerous journey with a small child, is a calmness of soul, a peace of mind and heart, that her circumstances will not immediately afford her. She will make the choice that her highly restrictive circumstances will be the place where she will find the calm soul.

She does not tell us how she has done that. Did she have a self-help book she bought in a Christian bookstore in the Temple? We want techniques and are disappointed. All she gives us is a picture.

It is the metaphor that gives us the clue. The image of the weaned child, not an infant at the breast, is very telling. The child has found acceptance and satisfaction, security and nurture with the mother and now returns to the mother's loving embrace.

The mother has found such security with God and returns to God as a child returns to its mother.

### **In that picture I find hope for us all (3)**

Now she addresses Israel, the nation, the whole community and witnesses to what she has found. If Israel wants to find hope then they need to look to the actions of a highly constrained woman and her relationship her child and her with God (Deut 1.31; Isa 66.13; Jer 31.20; Hos 11.1–9). That probably was not a very welcome message.

The vulnerable God whose choices are restricted by the rebellious stance of the wicked (129.1–2) and by the iniquities of Gods' own people (130) will lovingly embrace God's children, including both the victims of pain and those who by their iniquities have inflicted pain on others and God. Such incomprehensible behaviour is the hope of Israel, the hope of the individual and the hope of the world.

### **Further reflection**

We have found another metaphor for God today—compassionate mother, source of security, who although regularly pained, frustrated, and fatigued by her own children, welcomes them back into her arms and bears them along a difficult way.

This woman lived in a patriarchal society and her sense of being at the bottom of the pile along with her children is no doubt strong. But in her constrained life she chooses. In what she chooses, the rule of God in her life, she finds peace, acceptance, and security in an environment where she has none of those things. That is why she is such a powerful image for a tormented Israel.

This psalm does not justify oppression in any form. It simply tackles the reality of life as people lived it. In that reality hope, acceptance, love are possible because that is what God wants for all humans, male and female.

It is important to recognise how much a remarkable reversal took place when the Gospel came and women assumed leadership roles in the church. The Gospel reversed the effects of the Fall and declared what is hidden in this psalm; that we are all equal before God (Ac 18,26; Rom 16.1; 1Cor 16.19; Gal 3.28–29).

The only proper master of humans is God. Recognising God's rule does not mean setting up patterns of domination, but a community of brothers and sisters who are mutually servants, each of the other. There hopefully we can forgo pride and self-serving ambition and find the calm spirit, the quiet soul that rests in the vulnerable God.

### **Question**

Pride, haughtiness and seeking after great and wondrous things do not provide calm and quiet. What does? (Mark 10.13–16; Philippians 2.1–11)

## PSALM 132 ETERNAL PRESENCE

### *A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, remember in David's favour  
all the hardships he endured;  
<sup>2</sup> how he swore to the Lord  
and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,  
<sup>3</sup> 'I will not enter my house  
or get into my bed;  
<sup>4</sup> I will not give sleep to my eyes  
or slumber to my eyelids,  
<sup>5</sup> until I find a place for the Lord,  
a dwelling-place for the Mighty One of Jacob.'

<sup>6</sup> We heard of it in Ephrathah;  
we found it in the fields of Jaar.  
<sup>7</sup> 'Let us go to his dwelling-place;  
let us worship at his footstool.'

<sup>8</sup> Rise up, O Lord, and go to your resting-place,  
you and the ark of your might.  
<sup>9</sup> Let your priests be clothed with righteousness,  
and let your faithful shout for joy.  
<sup>10</sup> For your servant David's sake  
do not turn away the face of your anointed one.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> If your sons keep my covenant  
and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
their sons also, for evermore,  
shall sit on your throne.'

<sup>13</sup> For the Lord has chosen Zion;  
he has desired it for his habitation:

<sup>14</sup> 'This is my resting-place for ever;  
here I will reside, for I have desired it.

<sup>15</sup> I will abundantly bless its provisions;  
I will satisfy its poor with bread.

<sup>16</sup> Its priests I will clothe with salvation,  
and its faithful will shout for joy.

<sup>17</sup> There I will cause a horn to sprout up for David;  
I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.

<sup>18</sup> His enemies I will clothe with disgrace,  
but on him, his crown will gleam.'

This thirteenth Song of ascents is the longest of this group of Psalms and the importance of this song is that we come to the central meaning of the pilgrimage; Zion



is God's chosen place of presence and the seat of the righteous ruler who epitomises God's justice, David (see 2 Sam 5; 6.1–19 and 2 Sam 7).

One of the great problems of the exile was that the dynasty of David was no more and that fact drove a wedge of hopelessness into the hearts of the exiled people. God had rejected David; God has rejected us (Ps 89). We are lost.

However, Psalm 132 is placed following 130.7 and 131.3 both of which articulate hope. The people live side by side with people who deride them and oppress them. They are aware of their own iniquity. Their only hope is in the Lord and his king of the house of David. Thus the Psalm is read messianically, looking to a future for God's people in the midst of utter despair. This Psalm is a response of hope to Psalm 89.

### **A prayer to remember David 1–10**

The prayer begins with David's hardships, humiliations and difficulties that occurred as he sought to fulfil a promise he had made to find God a dwelling place (1–5). This may refer to the Ark or to the Temple as noted above. It does not really matter. David humbled himself in order to find God a dwelling place. This may seem curious to us but here it is a sign of his unwavering commitment to ensure that God would rule from Zion. It was his way of ensuring the foundation of the kingdom of God in Israel at the founding of the kingdom of David.

Now the people say why they are here, in Zion (6–7). They are here to find the presence of God and to worship in the presence. This is a critical verse for understanding worship. It is always in the presence; it is always before God. They have heard the story of the Ark and the building of the temple, now they want to find God there. Presence and worship belong together.

Now they pick up the story of the Ark and its journey and in poetic prayer join themselves to it (8–10). They are also asking God to join them on the journey so that they may meet him with joy in the celebration in the Temple. They want God's protection for themselves and for Jerusalem. They want his presence.

They pray their priests will be bearers of righteousness, the character of God to them, bearing God promise of justice and his will to put things to rights among his people. This is a profound prayer for the leaders who will, in worship and in the absence of a king, be wearers of God's clothes of justice. They are to be like fashion models who display the character of God. Then the faithful can shout for joy. While the presence of God is the ultimate source of joy in worship, faithful priesthood models that character.

But most of all they want God's promise to David fulfilled. They do not want to be a people rejected. Their rejoicing would be complete if God would restore David.

## **God's response to the prayer of the people 11–18**

David's oath to God is matched by God's promise to David (11–12). The promise is clear. God will rule his people once again through a Davidic king.

The condition of the promise is keeping covenant. That is they are required to exercise God's rule in God's way, in justice, in steadfast love, in peace and righteousness. Those are God's decrees.

The problem is that they did not do that so the exile comes upon them. The monarchy as they knew it before is gone.

Some things have been recovered. They are making a pilgrimage to Zion, the seat of the Presence. They have a restored priesthood to enable worship. But the concrete rule of God in the presence of the king is missing.

Nonetheless they must be assured that God, not David, has chosen Zion and it is the place of his Presence. They can be assured as pilgrims that they will meet the true and living God even if there is no king. And they can be assured that this God will provide for them materially. The poor will find bread from this God. The kingdom of God is theirs (Mt 5.3).

And they can be assured that their priests will be bearers of salvation, bearers of the word of peace and restoration and reconciliation. And that means worship can proceed with great joy. There is no need to be glum even in oppression, even without the restoration of the monarchy. God will pursue that promise and will do what the monarchy could or would not. Even without the Davidic king the pilgrimage into the Presence is one salvation and overwhelming joy.

But God will keep his promise. There is a horn of oil for anointing and lamp and a gleaming crown for God's anointed. This is an open ended promise and some understood it as a literal restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Still later the early Christians would take this theology and claim to see in Jesus of Nazareth the fulfilment of the Davidic hope and the hope of Zion, the dwelling place of God.

### **Further reflection**

Israel believed that God's rule was manifested concretely in the world of space, time and people. God's rule was manifest in history and politics, in geography and in culture and society. It was very concrete. It is all too easy to forget this and when we do our discipleship suffers. It becomes 'spiritual' and not related to everyday, concrete, living out of the rule of God. God rules in creation and history (Ps 33) and that means the concrete activities of daily life are grist for Christian discipleship. We believe in resurrection and renewal of the material order as the true goal of all things. Our reality is embodied in culture reality: It is an embodied- in-culture-in-creation reality.

Those of us who follow the liturgical year would have read this Psalm on the last Sunday before the Advent: Christ the King. You can probably see why. The scandalous particularity of this psalm; God works through a people and a king and a piece of land has not been forgotten in Christianity. Jesus is proclaimed as the royal Son who embodies God's justice, peace righteousness and love. Jesus is the incarnate presence of God, the new Temple where God dwells, a point the NT authors make regularly. He is the earthly locus of God's presence and power. In him the rule of God, the kingdom of God, has come near (Mk 1.14–15).

Psalm 132.1 has the words "all the hardships". The Jewish Translation Society has "his great self-denial." That is very suggestive and reminds us of one who took the form of a servant in Phil. 2.1–11. He has become God with us and for us, the presence and the power of the kingdom of God. The need for a Messiah who keeps the covenant and promise of horn and lamp for David to appear in Zion are fulfilled in him.

### **Questions**

Read verses 11–18 in the light of Jesus the Messiah. What do you learn? How does it give substance to hope?

## PSALM 133 HARMONY

### *A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!

<sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes.

<sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,  
life for evermore.

In this fourteenth Psalm of Ascents, we come to a subject close to all our hearts-harmony. We often live in communities that are torn by strife. Those communities may be families, extended families, churches, neighbourhoods, cities and nations. Anyone who has ever found themselves in a strife torn situation knows the pain and helplessness that goes with it. No matter what we do everything seems to spiral out of control and people solve their problems by violence, verbal, physical and emotional to such an extent that everything seems destined for perdition.

How we sigh for someone to do something to restore harmony. It is this that our little psalm endorses.

The pilgrims are getting ready to leave. They have shared trust and pain. They have found renewal in the promise and presence of God. They have experienced a harmony that they do not normally experience (see 120). We began this series with the desire for peace. They have found in the promise and presence of God a harmony they did not think was possible.

### **A proverb (1)**

This little proverb refers in the first instance to family. We all know that in family, especially extended family, harmony does not always prevail (Deut. 25.5–10). But when it does it is good and pleasant. God is described this way (135.3) and the praise of God (147.1). In other words when we do find harmony it is like being in the presence of God and like praise that brings us into the presence. It is a deeply moving God experience.

### **A simile: oil (2)**

So when the community lives together in harmony is the granting of a blessing and a rare gift. That rare gift bears comparison with the generous, even lavish, oil that is used in the chief priest's anointing (cf. Ex. 29.7). The olive oil is the oil of healing, of restoring the skin and hair ravaged by heat and wind and age (2 Sam. 12.20), and

signifies the setting apart of king (1 Sam. 10.1), priest (Lev. 8.30), and prophet (Is 61.1).

The oil, flowing down in such generous proportion, is a sign of hospitality, joy and relatedness (Psalm 23.5; 92.10; 141.5). Such hospitality and joy and being-in-relation are made holy in Aaron's anointing. The high priest is the bearer and symbol of God's hospitality to his people and the joy that brings.

So such harmony is a holy thing.

### **Another simile: dew (3)**

When the community lives together in harmony it is like the blessing of moisture that falls on Hermon some 200kms from Jerusalem. It is as though the dew from Hermon covers the city in refreshing life that lays the dust and gives clear air.

The focus shifts here to the unity of the nation found in the worship centred in Zion. It is the worship in Zion that is like the dew and the blessing is the renewing and refreshing presence of the Lord. Here they find harmony in the Presence which is the true source of their life. The life that the Lord gives his people in their unity is the supreme family value. It is the greatest good. The presence of the God of steadfast love, truthfulness, righteousness justice, and mercy defines what makes human relationships, including family and the church, healthy and vibrant. It is the presence that makes them transforms them and gives them life.

It is this life that God ordains for all, a life that like God's is for evermore. Life forevermore is a life in harmony with this sovereign God. This is God's blessing.

### **Further reflections**

This little psalm begins with a perennial concern for ancient Israel and us; family values. They and we know the significance of family for society. It is the place where we learn and experience intimacy, love and growth or their counterparts, resentment, abuse and destructive behaviour.

Clearly v.1 emphasises that first role of the family. But verses 2–3 go beyond it and put it in a larger context of God's relationship with his people. What that does is to make the family a significant and necessary part of God's purposes but it is in no way the defining institution of that purpose.

Jesus said much the same thing (Mk 3.35–36). The family must be defined by something bigger than itself; the larger family of God's people living under the sovereignty of God.

“The family is society in miniature, the place where we first and most deeply learn how to love and be loved, hate and be hated, help and be helped, abuse and be abused. It is not just a center of domestic serenity; since it involves power, it invites the abuse of power, and it is at that precise point that Jesus attacks it.

His ideal is, contrary to Mediterranean and indeed most human familial reality, an open and equally accessible to all under God. It is the kingdom of God, and it negates that terrible abuse of power that is power's dark specter and lethal shadow." John Dominic Crossan.<sup>8</sup>

It is the larger vision of the kingdom that informs the family and not the reverse. All institutions are subject to the judgment of the kingdom and its values. The family is as much subject to the values of the Sermon on the Mount as is society or the church. This wider view will save the family from itself.

We need to subject our church life to the same set of values. By church life I mean, our communal life, our life of lived relationships and I do not mean just what we do. Do we live together as the kingdom demands; in justice, in putting things to rights, in truthfulness, in humility, in mercy, forgoing the aphrodisiac of power for the good of the whole? Are our relationships of such a quality that they proclaim the justice and righteousness of the kingdom? We cannot expect anyone to listen to us if our relationships reflect secular values of power and authority.

The best description of harmony and therefore exposition of Psalm 133 in the NT is Phil 2.1–11. It is the life giving relationship with the risen Christ that we find an identity that prevents us making an idol of human familial or church reality. Harmony is a process of finding our true identity in the Risen Christ in relation to others.

### **Question**

Read the quote from John Dominic Crossan above. What do you think of his analysis? How can power and harmony work in unity?

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<sup>8</sup> John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: a revolutionary biography*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994, p.60.

## PSALM 134 PRAISE

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup> Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,  
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!

<sup>2</sup> Lift up your hands to the holy place,  
and bless the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,  
bless you from Zion.

This song is the last on our journey and is a fitting conclusion. The gathered pilgrims, having praised harmony now praise God for the last time together and are sent on their way with what they came to receive—God’s blessing.

It is evening and tomorrow the pilgrims must go home and back to what they left (see Psalm 120). Perhaps one of the priests on duty now says the final blessing with them. What will they take away?

### **Blessing God (1–2)**

That is God who in all things must be blessed. The word for blessing has as its central meaning to pay homage to a superior or to kneel (95.6). To receive blessing is to kneel and receive the gifts that your Lord has to offer.

It is in the attitude of service that one receives blessing. It is in the attitude accepting the rule of God over us and for us that we receive the gifts of blessing.

The whole experience of pilgrimage and worship has been to prepare our hearts to live in a hostile world under the blessing of the sovereign God who graces us with his presence. The gifts of blessing will be ours as we kneel in blessing to God. No wonder we lift our hands in praise and prayer, for the gesture could mean both. Blessing can only lead to praise and thanksgiving.

We could stop there but remarkably the Psalm does not.

### **The blessing of God (3)**

God blesses us. God mutually blesses us. God offers us God’s bended knee. The maker of heaven and earth joins his people not simply as sovereign but as one who blesses, who bends the knee.

We will need to explore some of the implications of the mutuality of the blessing between God and God’s people, a mutuality that bespeaks the genuine relatedness between God and the pilgrims, based ultimately on God’s redeeming love (Psalm 130.7–8).

### **Further reflections**

To bless God is to praise the one in whom alone there is life; the power to create and sustain human life. We have seen from these psalms that blessing is the Lord at work in family life, in national life, in personal life creating and sustaining life even in a world that despises peace. The blessing of the Lord is at work in human work. All of these are brought to life supporting and life fulfilling completeness and rightness.

It is only to be expected that we will kneel before this God; that is, bless God.

What is striking is the mutuality of blessing that is anticipated in v3. God will voluntarily take on the servant role that belongs to the people. This mutuality, which means God's willingness to be vulnerable, results from God's risky choice of Zion (132.13–14) and God's choice that takes on responsibility for the people (132.15–18).

This blessing of God, this risky choice, means suffering for God. Over the history of God's blessing it has cost God in steadfast love and faithfulness, in forgiveness and mercy. God's blessing comes to persistently sinful people. God will bless them from Zion. Such blessing is our only hope. That hope for Christians is portrayed signed and sealed in the incarnation of God in the form of a servant (Phil 2.5–11).

### **Question**

The pilgrimage is at an end. The people must return home. What will they take with them? What difference has been made to their lives? Was it a waste?



APPENDIX — THE PSALTER: A CHRONOLOGY

Many psalms already in circulation	Babylonian Exile 596(7)-586(7)	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40–55	Nebuchadnezzar
Throughout the Exile, and the following years Psalms are collected	First return of exiles 539(8)	Ezra 1.1–5.13	Cyrus 559–530, conquered Babylonian empire
And they are composed	Reconstruction of Temple begins 520	Haggai 1.1–15; Ezra 3–6	Darius I
And all the time they are being collated	Temple construction completed March/April 515	Ezra 6.14–15	
They begin to take their present form as Psalter	Ezra comes to Jerusalem 457	Ezra 7–10	Artaxerxes I
Other literary activity in this period included the collection and collation of the Torah, prophets, and wisdom in the forms that we now know them.	Nehemiah governor of Jerusalem 444–432	Nehemiah	
			Greeks overthrow Persians at battle of Issus 333. Death of Darius III 330
The canon of scripture now seems well established, including the Psalms.	Sirach's grandfather c 200 Sirach Greek version 132	Sirach Prologue	Seleucid or Syrian rule