

The Way Home

Reflections on the Songs of Ascents



INTRODUCTION

This is my gift to Magdalen Road Church for the summer of 2009. Over more than a dozen years of ministering amongst God's people in East Oxford I have learned immensely from our pilgrimage together as God's people. Some of the lessons have been painful, some have been slowly learned, and many have been filled with deep joy. But there is absolutely nowhere on earth that I would rather be. Over the years I have returned to the Songs of Ascents on several occasions, and those with longer memories will remember that I have preached through them more than once.

These songs are a collection which seem to be have been gathered together for Israelites pilgrims as they travelled to Jerusalem for the three great annual celebrations: Passover, Firstfruits and Tabernacles. They consider the joys and trials of being pilgrim people, and as such are useful for Christians who are also pilgrim people, following Jesus Christ to our eternal dwelling.

I am hoping that these meditations and accompanying questions may be useful for you, perhaps as you relax on holiday, or set aside times to reflect on your walk with the Lord. More than anything I am praying that they will be another means of encouragement as we walk together on the road glory.

The theme of all the songs is that we are safe in God's hands, but we are not yet at our final destination. Even the last Psalm, which rejoices that the Temple in Jerusalem has been reached, also contains a sense of longing as they worship by night. As pilgrim people we must be ready for the long haul. As Christians we must not think it's all over. One day it will be, but it's not yet.

Let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)

Peter Comont, Summer 2009.

Psalm 120

A song of ascents.

¹ I call on the LORD in my distress,

and he answers me.

² Save me, O LORD, from lying lips
and from deceitful tongues.

³ What will he do to you,
and what more besides, O
deceitful tongue?

⁴ He will punish you with a
warrior's sharp
arrows,
with burning coals of the
broom tree.

⁵ Woe to me that I dwell in
Meshech,
that I live among the tents
of Kedar!

⁶ Too long have I lived
among those who hate
peace.

⁷ I am a man of peace;
but when I speak, they are
for war.

AS LONG AS WE THINK THE NEXT ELECTION MIGHT ELIMINATE CRIME AND ESTABLISH JUSTICE OR ANOTHER SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGH MIGHT SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT, OR ANOTHER PAY RISE MIGHT PUSH US OVER THE EDGE OF ANXIETY INTO A LIFE OF TRANQUILLITY, WE ARE NOT LIKELY TO RISK THE ARDUOUS UNCERTAINTIES OF THE LIFE OF FAITH.

EUGENE PETERSON, THE JOURNEY.

SETTING OUT

PSALMS 120-122

Every journey begins with a single step. But what a step! It is a momentous thing to follow Jesus. "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:38) No disciple will keep going very long unless there is something profound spurring them on.

Psalms 120-122 lay the foundations for a lifetime as pilgrim people. We need a distaste for this world (Psalm 120), the beginnings of confidence in God's protection (Psalm 121) and a hunger for the destination (Psalm 122). "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step" (Martin Luther King Jr).

PSALM 120

DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD

Psalm 120 establishes one vital foundation for the pilgrim life: a healthy dissatisfaction with this world. The Psalmist is distressed, at the discord of his world (vv5-7) and particularly at its lies and deceit (vv1-2).

This world is full of lies. Wealth pretends it is the answer to our problems (Matthew 13:22). Trials make us doubt God (James 1:13-18). Sin wields its power over us because it claims to satisfy when in fact it kills (Hebrews 3:13). We do not delight in God's grace and mercy because we delude ourselves that we are without sin (1 John 1:8). Behind the scenes Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44), is devoted to deceiving us. He is quite capable of deceiving whole cultures with dazzling falsehoods (Revelation 13:14).

If we do not unmask the lies of this world we will never seek God.



What lies of this world tend to deceive you?

But lies will not win. God defeats the lies of this world with expertly aimed arrows, and destructive fire (vv3-4). The lie of communism only lasted a lifetime. The lies of the 1960s that “free love” would produce a happier world are unravelling before us. The lie in our minds that we will be happier not following God will be exposed in due time.



How would your behaviour change if you completely stopped believing the lies of this world?

So, Christian, fall out of love with this world! It's beauty is, at best a pale reflection of a far country, and at worst a seductive cloak concealing destruction. No-one emigrates unless they have fallen out of love with their own land, and begun to hope that there is a better place over the horizon.

1 John 2:15-17

¹⁵Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.

PSALM 121

WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

Psalm 121

A song of ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come
from?

² My help comes from the
LORD,
the Maker of heaven and
earth.

³ He will not let your foot
slip—
he who watches over you
will not slumber;

⁴ indeed, he who watches over
Israel
will neither slumber nor
sleep.

⁵ The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at
your right hand;

⁶ the sun will not harm you by
day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from
all harm—

he will watch over your life;

⁸ the LORD will watch over your
coming and going
both now and for evermore.

How many spiritual journeys are not embarked upon due to fear. A teenager fears rejection, a single woman fears loneliness, a middle aged man fears loss of status, an elderly person fears for their health, so they will not set out on a risky journey for Christ. Parents fear for their children so they cosset them and inadvertently teach the next generation that following Christ is all about finding the easiest path. Fear is a diabolical prison which entombs God's people.

Israelite pilgrims had every reason to be fearful. As they trudged the long valleys of Palestine they knew that the hills harboured violent lawless men (v1). When they anxiously scoured the horizon, a solution presented itself. The altars on the high places, where pagan gods were worshipped, offered a quick fix for their fears. They invited the pilgrim to turn aside from the long, risky journey of discipleship, to worship at the easy shrines of other gods.

It takes guts to be a pilgrim. We must hear the voice of Jesus saying "Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid." And respond to the terrifying invitation to "come" (Matthew 14:27-29).



Can you identify aspects of your behaviour which are driven by fear?

Psalm 121 settles our nerves. The Psalmist reminds himself that his help comes from the creator God who does not sleep (vv3-4). We are promised protection against three things.

- Wandering. The promise that our foot will not slip (v3) is about wandering away from faith in God (Psalm 73:2). We will not fall (Jude 24).
- Calamity. For a pilgrim in Palestine the sun (v6) was the main natural danger. Jesus urged us not worry about physical harm. Even the hour of our death is predetermined by God (Matthew 6:26).
- Madness. The moon (v6) was seen as a source of madness – the hence the term “lunacy.” We will not lose our minds as we follow the pilgrim path. The Spirit will guide us into all truth (John 16:13) and Christ will give us wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3).

But people do wander, calamities do occur, we do foolish things! Is this a dead letter? A robust Christian faith sees a sovereign faithful God above all these things. I may stumble, and do mad things for a while, but my loving heavenly Father will discipline me and produce in me a harvest of righteousness and peace (Hebrews 12:5-11). A calamity may occur in this evil world but Jesus rules even over hidden evil powers (Colossians 1:16). He will work in all things for our good (Romans 8:28) and “will keep you from all harm... both now and forevermore” (vv7-8).

So will you live in fear of treading the pilgrim path? Will you turn aside to worship easier things – money, relationships, health, status? There is a tempting shrine on every local hill. I urge you, set out on the long journey to a better place! It feels scary, but it is actually the only safe path to tread. Because then the “the Maker of heaven and earth” will be your helper.



What false security do you need to turn away from to follow Christ?

Matthew 14:27-31

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹ “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

COURAGE IS NOT SIMPLY ONE OF THE VIRTUES, BUT THE FORM OF EVERY VIRTUE AT THE TESTING POINT... A CHASTITY OR HONESTY, OR MERCY WHICH YIELDS TO DANGER WILL BE CHASTE OR HONEST OR MERCIFUL ONLY ON CONDITIONS. PILATE WAS MERCIFUL TILL IT BECAME RISKY.

C.S. LEWIS, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS.

PSALM 122

SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE

Psalm 122

A song of ascents. Of David.

¹ I rejoiced with those who said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

² Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

⁴ That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.

⁵ There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May those who love you be secure.

⁷ May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.”

⁸ For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, “Peace be within you.”

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God.

It is said that camels can detect water in the desert as much as fifty miles away. When they catch the scent they walk unerringly towards the oasis. Christians too have been given a scent of heaven. Their nostrils have caught the smell of eternity on the wind.

This Psalm is a communal celebration (v1). We weren't meant to walk alone. It celebrates the first glimpse of Jerusalem. If, as many think, the Songs of Ascents were meant to be sung sequentially the pilgrims are still some distance from Jerusalem, but they feel like they are almost there. “Our feet are standing in your gates” (v2).

In the same way Christians enjoy together a present anticipation of our eternal home. God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ...and has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 1:3, 2:6). Like Jacob - for whom seven years' labour for his beloved Rachel seemed like only a few days – so our earthly pilgrimage will not be arduous if we have glimpsed the future.



How often do you think of your eternal destiny? Does it feel like you are almost there? Why?

David enjoys the prospect of several things in Jerusalem. He describes the city as “closely compacted” (v3). The word means “joined up.” This is a city which works, in which all parts fit and in which people thrive. People today lament the fragmentation of society, with its disorder, misery and

violence. Imagine the New Jerusalem, envisioned by John as a perfect cube of gold, with precious stones for foundations (Revelation 21:15-21). We don't know the details but we do know it will be gloriously "joined up".

Jerusalem is also the place where "the tribes go up" (v4). There all the sprawling community comes together. A good church enjoys a first taste of this, but it is nothing compared to the unutterable joy of the innumerable throng in the New Creation who are perfectly united in love, and join together to "praise the name of the Lord" (v4) forever.

There too are the "thrones of judgment" (v5). Present injustice is one of the deepest heartaches of this world. Our final destination is a place of perfect justice where every tear is wiped from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).



What do you most look forward to in eternity? What puts you off?

This glimpse of our destination evokes a passionate longing for its peace, its security and its prosperity (vv6-9). Those who have seen the future will pray for such present blessings in their churches. But, as pilgrims, they will also set out across endless trackless wastes because they have the scent of heaven in their nostrils.



What do you need to do to develop your hunger for the New Heaven and New Earth?

Colossians 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

1 Corinthians 2:9-10

⁹...“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—
¹⁰but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

THE NARROW ROAD

PSALMS 123-125

I SHALL BE TELLING THIS WITH A SIGH

SOMEWHERE AGES AND AGES
HENCE:

TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD,
AND I—

I TOOK THE ONE LESS TRAVELLED BY,

AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE
DIFFERENCE.

ROBERT FROST, THE ROAD NOT
TAKEN

Following Christ is always going to be a minority interest! Jesus warned us that the road to life is the narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14), and experience proves it. In Britain today there is very little wider support for followers of Christ. They commonly meet indifference and sometimes outright hostility. These three psalms help us walk this road less travelled with confidence. They deal with scorn (Psalm 123), hostility (Psalm 124) and help us to come to a settled sense of security as we follow Christ (Psalm 125).

PSALM 123

DO NOT BE AFRAID LITTLE FLOCK

Psalm 123

A song of ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to you,
to you whose throne is in
heaven.
- ² As the eyes of slaves look to
the hand of their
master,
as the eyes of a maid look
to the hand of her
mistress,
so our eyes look
to the LORD our
God,
till he shows us his mercy.
- ³ Have mercy on us, O LORD,
have mercy on us,
for we have endured much
contempt.
- ⁴ We have endured much
ridicule from the
proud,
much contempt from the
arrogant.

Richard Dawkins has recently advocated that Christians should be treated to “a display of naked contempt.” He explains that “nobody likes to be laughed at. Nobody wants to be the butt of contempt.” Although Dawkins is extreme most Christians find that the steady drip drip of opposition ranging from bemusement, to scorn and hostility, takes its toll.

The second triumvirate of songs starts with a cry for mercy in the face of such opposition. The proud and arrogant (vv3-4) will always mock true followers of Christ. After all they mocked Christ first (Matthew 27:27-31). It is no fun, and we rightly cry for mercy, but it is our inescapable calling.



Have you experienced ridicule or contempt for your faith? What hurt you most about this?

But the Psalmist has his eyes on the God who is enthroned in heaven (v1). He in turn, laughs at the pretensions of his opponents (Psalm 2:4). When God arises he will despise his enemies as fantasies (Psalm 73:20).

In meantime, however, there is a deep sense of vulnerability that Christians cannot avoid. In this psalm it is described as being like a slave or a maid (v2). On our own we feel utterly defenceless and weak. But slaves have masters and maids have mistresses. We are called to set our eyes on the ruler of heaven who cares for us. We will not receive stones and snakes from his hand but bread and fish (Matthew 7:7-11).



Where do you look for security, supply and honour? Does your life demonstrate that?

So Christian will you spend your life trying to avoid the scorn of others? Or will you set your eyes on Jesus “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2). Our decision at this point determines our honour, or our shame in eternity (Mark 8:38).

ON MONEY, FAME AND SUCCESS:

“YET I SAY TO YOU, AND I BEG YOU TO BELIEVE ME, MULTIPLY THESE TINY TRIUMPHS BY A MILLION, ADD THEM ALL TOGETHER, AND THEY ARE NOTHING—LESS THAN NOTHING, A POSITIVE IMPEDIMENT—MEASURED AGAINST ONE DROP OF THAT LIVING WATER CHRIST OFFERS TO THE SPIRITUALLY THIRSTY, IRRESPECTIVE OF WHO OR WHAT THEY ARE.”

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

Luke 12:32

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

PSALM 124

HE HAS RESCUED US FROM THE DOMINION OF DARKNESS

Psalm 124

A song of ascents. Of David.

- ¹ If the LORD had not been on our side—
let Israel say—
² if the LORD had not been on our side
when men attacked us,
³ when their anger flared against us,
they would have swallowed us alive;
⁴ the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
⁵ the raging waters
would have swept us away.
⁶ Praise be to the LORD,
who has not let us be torn
by their teeth.
⁷ We have escaped like a bird
out of the fowler's snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.
⁸ Our help is in the name of the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

Most daydreams are a waste of time. They encourage us to imagine what will never be, and to become dissatisfied with what is. However a little meditation on life without God's grace can be deeply helpful as we walk the narrow road. This is the message of this psalm.

The Psalmist uses terrifying images from the Palestinian countryside to imagine "what if the Lord was not on our side" (v1). Without him, he says, we would be engulfed, injured and snared. His focus is on the opposition of men (v2) but behind such visible opposition a Christian will spy our ultimate enemy.

Without God we would be engulfed. We would be like helpless victims of an earthquake. A chasm opens before us and we are swallowed alive (v3). We would be overwhelmed like children plunging into a raging torrent. Swept away to oblivion (vv4-5). Satan is immeasurably more powerful than us, and he is bent on our destruction. He was a murderer from the beginning and he is devoted to engulfing all people and dragging them to hell.

Without God we would be injured. The image changes in verse 6 from natural disaster to vicious predator. With the Devil it is personal and he has teeth! He is a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8) bent on savaging us.



Do you have a strong or a weak sense of the hostility of the Devil?

Without God we would also be snared. Once again the image shifts. Now we are helpless birds lured into nets and trapped (v7). The Devil works by trickery. The lie is his native language (John 8:44). He lures us into his trap like a devious hungry spider (2 Corinthians 2:11, Ephesians 6:11, 1 Timothy 3:7, 2 Timothy 2:26). And when we are hopelessly ensnared he pounces.



In what areas are you prone to being seduced by the Devil's lies?

But God has delivered us. He has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13). He has "disarmed the powers and authorities... triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). Christ took all the punishment for the sins of his people so that there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). Then he rose from the dead to defeat death itself (1 Corinthians 15:54). He told us these truths in the gospel and opened our eyes by his Spirit. We do not need to succumb to diabolical lies or be savaged and swallowed up.

Christian, if God had not done these things where would you be? Turn to him with adoration and praise. He has given you an immeasurably glorious salvation.



What has the Lord done for you? Turn this into prayers of adoration and thanksgiving.

Ephesians 6:11-18

¹¹ Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

PSALM 125

YOU WILL NOT BE TEMPTED BEYOND WHAT YOU CAN BEAR

Psalm 125

A song of ascents.

¹ Those who trust in the LORD
are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but
endures for ever.

² As the mountains surround
Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his
people
both now and for evermore.

³ The sceptre of the wicked will
not remain
over the land allotted to the
righteous,
for then the righteous might
use
their hands to do evil.

⁴ Do good, O LORD, to those
who are good,
to those who are upright in
heart.

⁵ But those who turn to crooked
ways
the LORD will banish with the
evildoers.

Peace be upon Israel.

A quiet mind is a gift of God. As the Christian pilgrim walks the narrow way there are a thousand peace-shattering fears and contentment-robbing temptations. Psalm 123 explored the vulnerability of the life of faith. Psalm 124 considered the “what ifs” of a life without God’s rescue. This third psalm in the triplet displays a heart at peace.

As the pilgrim approached mount Zion, surrounded by the hills of Judea she had a picture of her own security (v2). The LORD encircles his people and keeps them unshakably safe for all eternity.

Most Christians live to a great or lesser extent with an inquiet mind. We are dogged with regrets about the past. We are assaulted with trials both obvious and hidden. And we are beset with worries, about home, work, family and future. Nobody sees the true depth and breadth of our struggles. The growth of interest in eastern meditation is an indication that Christians are not alone in desiring a quiet mind. It is a universal quest.



What things rob you of peace?

Perhaps one of the deepest worries for Christians is that they would fall away, or do themselves immeasurable harm. The temptations seem too strong. The difficulties too great. This psalm addresses that concern.

The psalm seems to be written in a time when Israel's enemies were ruling the land, perhaps during the exile. Verse 3 promises that evil will not rule for ever. But the reason given for this is deeply comforting. It is so that the righteous might not "use their hands to do evil."

When wickedness rules it is deeply difficult not to succumb to it. We may be tempted to play by the world's rules rather than God's. If everyone is fiddling their expenses why not me? If everyone ignores the needs of others why not me? If everyone watches rubbish and worse on the television why not me? We may be lured into ungodly ways of opposing wickedness either with our hands or our lips. Who hasn't wanted to retaliate rather than love and bless and pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44, Romans 12:14)? We may simply grow weary of doing good (Galatians 6:9) when our good deeds just disappear like water into the sand.

But God will not let evil "remain over" (v3) us in that way. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear but "will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). He promises you a harvest if you do not give up (Galatians 6:9). He is "able to keep you from falling and present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy" (Jude 24).

The closing prayer that God would do good to his people and thwart evil (vv4-5) becomes a glorious certainty in the New Testament. You can be an unshakable mountain. You can have a quiet mind amidst the turmoil of this world. Seek it with all your heart!



What hinders you from believing Psalm 125:3? What difference does it make to believe it?

1 Corinthians 10:13

¹³No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

COMING HOME

PSALMS 126-128

Psalm 126

A song of ascents.

¹ When the LORD brought back
the captives to Zion,
we were like men who
dreamed.

² Our mouths were filled with
laughter,
our tongues with songs of
joy.

Then it was said
among the
nations,

“The LORD has done great
things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great
things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with
songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him.

Christians are looking forward to an “eternal house... not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1). These psalms move, for a moment from considering the journey to the homecoming. In this life there is both the joy of being brought home and the frustration that we are not home yet (Psalm 126). We have a mandate to invest in our eternal home (Matthew 6:20, Luke 16:9) and the realisation that only God can build it (Psalm 127). Finally, however, we have the solid contentment that nothing done for God loses its reward (Psalm 128 cf Matthew 10:42). These psalms are about coming home.

PSALM 126

THEY ARE LONGING FOR A COUNTRY OF THEIR OWN

When the Israelites were exiled in Babylon their main hope was to return to the promised land. When it finally happened they were overjoyed. As the psalmist puts it here “our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy” (v2). But the first flush of excitement gave way to hard toil and disappointment. They were home but not home. They were in the land, but still under foreign rule. The cry in this psalm is “restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev” (v4).

For Christians too the joy of salvation often becomes tarnished by the painful experience of failure, disappointment and frustration. We are like the prodigal son who has come home to his father (Luke 15:11ff) but also like the virgins who are still waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 24:1ff). There is joy in being a Christian but also a deep aching longing.



Is your Christian life characterised mainly by joy, or by longing, or by something else?

What do we do with frustration of being home and not home? The psalmist knows. We sow in tears (v5). We invest in the future in the midst of the pain of the present. We set out in the morning with a bag full of seed and tears flowing down our cheeks, knowing that we will return in the evening laden with harvest and full to overflowing with songs of joy (v6).

You and I will not see the fullness of that harvest until eternity. Then we will know a rapture so irrepressible and untarnished that we will not be able to stop singing for joy. But for now our tears water the seed.

Are you willing to sow in tears? Your harvest depends on it.



In what area of your life is the Lord calling you to “sow in tears”?

PSALM 127

NO BRANCH CAN BEAR FRUIT ON ITS OWN

Psalm 127

A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

- ¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
its builders labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain.
- ² In vain you rise early and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves.
- ³ Sons are a heritage from the LORD,
children a reward from him.
- ⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are sons born in one's youth.
- ⁵ Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

Life in our society has understandably been called “the rat race.” We frantically scamper from task to task all the time sensing the futility of it all. We find ourselves echoing Shakespeare’s Macbeth

*Life's but a walking shadow a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5)*

Solomon, who wrote Psalm 127, says “Amen.” This Psalm warns that, without God, our best efforts at being productive in life are useless. Our labour (v1) and long hours of toil (v2) to pay the mortgage, and make ends meet are futile unless God the Builder and Provider is at work. Jerusalem employed watchmen to keep it secure (v1) and we take out insurance policies but all is in vain unless God the Protector is on guard.

Christians also often feel driven to perform better in their faith. The message they hear is “we must pray more, we must evangelise more we must do more for Jesus.”

Jesus responded to such drivenness and anxiety by reminding us that God cares for us more than we imagine (Matthew 6:25-34) so we should not worry. He called us to “remain in him” because only in relationship with him is there any true fruitfulness (John 15:1-8). He invited the weary and burdened to find rest in him (Matthew 11:28-29).

This Psalm anticipates all this with a precious phrase. The NIV says “he grants sleep to those he loves” (v2). An alternative translation is “he gives to those he loves while they sleep.” Whether he is granting sleep, or granting other things while we sleep there is a rich sense of the grace of God. God provides and protects without our effort.



Do you feel driven? What difference do vv1-2 make?

Verses 3-5 appear not to fit with this theme, however the connection lies in what is truly valuable. Houses, food and security may be of value but not as valuable as people. The psalm rejoices in the gift of biological children (v3) but for Christians we must also include the family of God. Too much of life is spent chasing money, reputation or security when all along it is our investment in people which is of true value (See Luke 16:9). Those people in turn become an extension of our strength. They are like warriors' arrows (v4). On the last day they will ensure we are not ashamed of our life (v5).



Do you have a biblical perspective on what is truly valuable?

So before you throw yourself into more frenetic work throw yourself on Christ. Let him guide, enable, empower, protect, and provide for you. And focus on people. What use is it if you gain the whole world but end your life as a dry twig, and enter eternity with no one who could say to us "thank you. You gave yourself for me."

PSALM 128

A GOOD TREE CANNOT BEAR BAD FRUIT

Psalm 128

A song of ascents.

¹ Blessed are all who fear the LORD,

who walk in his ways.

² You will eat the fruit of your labour;

blessings and prosperity will be yours.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine

within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots round your table.

⁴ Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD.

⁵ May the LORD bless you from Zion

all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem,

⁶ and may you live to see your children's children.

Peace be upon Israel.

Psalm 128 completes this triplet about house and home. As Christians we are home but not home (Psalm 126). We have work to do in building but it is useless without Christ (Psalm 127). In this Psalm there is the conclusion of the matter. Frustrating as this world might be, and helpless though we may be, no work done in faith and obedient fear of the Lord is ever wasted.

The blessings mentioned are very this-worldly. Christians must always read such Old Testament promises with a stronger eternal perspective. Short term blessing is sometimes enjoyed, but eternal blessings are guaranteed.

The Psalmist promises that you “will eat the fruit of your labour” (v2). The book of Revelation describes “books” being opened on the last day (Revelation 20:12). Our every action is recorded, and every good deed is rewarded. Not even a cup of cold water is forgotten (Matthew 10:41). Our reward will include many things but centrally we will share in our master’s happiness (Matthew 25:23).



How often do you find contentment in knowing that even the smallest action for Christ will certainly not lose its reward?

The blessings mentioned are fitting for the theme of building a household. They include a wife like a fruitful vine and sons like olive shoots. They are images of beauty, and vitality. As you fear him and walk in his ways, the Lord will make you and those around you shine like the sun and the stars (Matthew 13:42, Philippians 2:15) and you will be

transformed into the likeness of Christ with ever increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18) till finally you inherit a glory which is beyond what any eye has seen (1 Corinthians 2:9).

And you will enjoy life to the full (John 10:10)! Life now which constantly bursts through the constraints and trials of our present existence (2 Corinthians 4:7-12). Life which brings with it fruitfulness, and beauty, and vigour and vitality. Life which is not even conquered by death. The Psalmist prays for long life and grand-parenthood (v6) but Christians are promised eternal life and membership of a family whose descendants are as numerous as the stars in the sky.

All this is guaranteed to the humble faithful believer. Banks may collapse, jobs may disappear, mortgages may be foreclosed, marital partners may fail us, children may not be given to us, or they may turn against us, parents may disown us, friends may betray us, but God does not forget our work, and our love for him (Hebrews 6:10).



Have you seen God beginning to create life and glory in you? Do you believe he will continue this process until completion?

Remember, living for Christ is worth it! You will be blessed as you walk in his ways. There may be tears and frustration but you will shine like the sun in the kingdom of your Father.

THE THREAT OF SIN

PSALMS 129-131

Psalm 129

A song of ascents.

¹They have greatly oppressed me from my youth—
let Israel say—
²they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,
but they have not gained the victory over me.
³Ploughmen have ploughed my back
and made their furrows long.
⁴But the LORD is righteous;
he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.

⁵May all who hate Zion
be turned back in shame.
⁶May they be like grass on the roof,
which withers before it can grow;
⁷with it the reaper cannot fill his hands,
nor the one who gathers fill his arms.
⁸May those who pass by not say,
“The blessing of the LORD be upon you;
we bless you in the name of the LORD.”

The first triplet was about setting out, the second about walking the narrow way, the third explored themes of coming home and building a home, now this triplet comes back to consider threats along the road; specifically the threat of sin. As with each triplet it begins with a lament, this time about the sinful opposition of others (Psalm 129). It then continues to describe God’s saving work of forgiveness (Psalm 130), before exploring the peace that a pilgrim can have (Psalm 131). He is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 24).

PSALM 129

CONSIDER HIM WHO ENDURED SUCH OPPOSITION FROM SINFUL MEN

No pilgrim can expect to walk the road of discipleship without opposition of some sort. The opposition of others has been described in several of the psalms so far, and here it is again. Like ploughmen they have ploughed his back with long furrows (v3). The opposition that Christians face is rarely so brutal or sustained, but it is real nonetheless. Workplaces forbid mention of Jesus, except in expletives, families are hostile or apathetic, the media display religious charlatans, and misfits as if they were normality. In other parts of the world Christians face torture and even death for their faith. We need to remember the words of Jesus, “if they persecuted me they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

But the psalmist is defiant. They have not gained victory over him (v1) because the Lord has cut the cords which bound him (v4). Sadly we too often acquiesce and seek to avoid conflict by keeping our head down.



What has your reaction been when you have faced opposition for your faith?

The psalmist longs for God to take revenge, but the New Testament urges us to go further and bless those who curse us and pray for them (Luke 6:28, Romans 12:14). We will only find the resources to do that if we know deeply that God's verdict on us is more important than any short term victory over enemies. We also need a deep sense that such suffering is our calling and even our privilege because through it we are brought closer to Christ. You are called to "rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:13, cf Philippians 3:10).



What does God need to do in your life to enable you to respond appropriately to opposition?

So Christian seek a new work of God in your heart. Pure human will power might be able to endure opposition but only the Spirit of God can enable you to bless and rejoice at such moments.

PSALM 130

CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS

Psalm 130

A song of ascents.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you,
O LORD;

² O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be
attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, O LORD, kept a record
of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is
forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul
waits,
and in his word I put my
hope.

⁶ My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait
for the morning,
more than watchmen wait
for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, put your hope in the
LORD,
for with the LORD is
unfailing love
and with him is full
redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

Far more threatening than external opposition is the stubborn recalcitrance of our own hearts toward God. Every Christian lives with a sense of hypocrisy. Why is it that we, who set out to follow Christ, so often find ourselves stumbling on the path?

Part of the answer to this question is that we simply do not understand the depths of depravity and deceit in our own hearts. The author of Psalm 130 had plumbed some of those depths. From there he cried to God (v1), longing for God to hear (v2). He knew that his experience was common to all people. If God recorded our sins we would all be condemned (v3). But he also knew that the Lord is a God of forgiveness.



Why is God to be feared (v3) if he is the God of forgiveness?

So here he lies in the depths. A sinner crying to the God of mercy. And this psalm does not describe him getting out! Though the psalmists often do speak of being lifted out of the depths (e.g. Psalm 30:1) there is also a sense that we are still enmired in this fallen world. Our calling is to wait.

The psalmist describes his waiting with intensity and repetition (vv5-6). He is like a night watchman, battling with tiredness, shivering from the cold, numbed with the boredom and exhausted from tramping the perimeter of the premises he guards. He longs for the brightening of the eastern sky, and the first rays of sunshine. But this longing is

far deeper than that – it is

*“MORE than watchmen wait for the morning,
MORE than watchmen wait for the morning.”*

The intensity is conveyed by the repetition.

The apostle Paul says that “we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons” (Romans 8:23). We must wait patiently for the return of Christ and the end of our inward conflicts. In the meantime we cry to God for mercy.



How strong do you think your sense of your own sin is? Does it make you cry to God and eagerly await eternity?

The call of the psalmist is to confident humble hope. Our only hope is the unfailing love of the Lord (v7) revealed in his word (v5). We will never make ourselves good enough for him. This side of eternity we will never be totally liberated from the fallenness of our wayward hearts. But Christ died for sinners. As we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive (1 John 1:9). There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39) not even the ongoing brokenness and foolishness of our hearts.

Christian do you believe that? This is not a promise for those who have not bothered to set out on the journey, but it is a promise for those who stumble and struggle and fall in the ditch along the way. We are lying on our backs in the mud but we can see the stars. So we cry, and yearn, and hope, and wait with deep abiding confidence.

PSALM 131

COME TO ME... AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST

Psalm 131

A song of ascents. Of David.

¹ My heart is not proud, O LORD,

my eyes are not haughty;

I do not concern myself with great matters

or things too wonderful for me.

² But I have stilled and

quietened my soul;

like a weaned child with its mother,

like a weaned child is my soul within me.

³ O Israel, put your hope in the LORD

both now and for evermore.

From the trials of Psalm 129 and the inner turmoil of Psalm 130 we come to one of the most peaceful psalms in the psalter. David's lifetime of painful experience did a good work in his heart. Specifically he learned a deep humility. His heart is not proud, or lifted up. And his eyes are not haughty (v1). He does not see himself as better than others and he does not look down on others.

Our culture sometimes whispers and sometimes screams another message to us. You are worth it. You must put yourself first. You can get it if you really want. We are not sinners we are simply the victims of nameless forces. We are not limited we are just the victims of negative attitudes. We are terrified of our finitude and of the brutality of our unforgiving world so we "big ourselves up" with positive thinking to help us to face it. Our world fears vulnerability because it has no grasp of the infinite love of the all-powerful God. It fears its sin because it does not know the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

David could live with a modest assessment of himself and humble sense of his own weaknesses and failings without feeling vulnerable, because he knew the protection of God (see Psalm 121:7, 129:4) and the free forgiveness of God (Psalm 130:4).



Do you feel the need to "big yourself up" or have you learned to have a sober assessment of yourself (Romans 12:3).

David knew that he would never understand fully the workings of God's mind or his Universe (Isaiah 40:13). He did not concern himself with things too big or glorious for him to fully know (v1b). He simply contented himself with the things God has told us clearly. He is with the contrite and lowly in spirit (Isaiah 57:15). He works for good in all things for those who love him (Romans 8:28). He will never drive away those who come to him (John 6:37). Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Contenting himself with such truths gave a unique quality to his inner life. He describes it as being "like a weaned child with its mother" (v2). A newborn child is dependent hourly, even minute by minute, on its mother, for food, and warmth and hygiene and life itself. Teenagers and adults are increasingly independent of their parents. A weaned child is somewhere between the two. They need food and protection, but they rest in their mother's arms with the beginnings of independence. David's soul was like a *weaned* child.



Do you feel you are too independent of God or too dependent? Why?

So stop restlessly, anxiously struggling and rest in the Lord. All around us are people who are shaped by a sense of helplessness in the face of the world's overwhelming and brutal power. But you can be shaped by a deep confidence in the Lord's care and grace. So humble yourself under God's almighty hand. Put your hope in Jesus Christ. Still and quieten your soul. And do everything in your power to make this your daily experience. This is the most precious thing in the world.

Psalm 132

A song of ascents.

- ¹ O LORD, remember David
and all the hardships he
endured.
- ² He swore an oath to the LORD
and made a vow to the
Mighty One of Jacob:
- ³ “I will not enter my house
or go to my bed—
- ⁴ I will allow no sleep to my
eyes,
no slumber to my eyelids,
⁵ till I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for the Mighty
One of Jacob.”
- ⁶ We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the
fields of Jaar:
- ⁷ “Let us go to his dwelling-
place;
let us worship at his
footstool—
- ⁸ arise, O LORD, and come to
your resting place,
you and the ark of your
might.
- ⁹ May your priests be clothed
with righteousness;
may your saints sing for
joy.”
- ¹⁰ For the sake of David your
servant,
do not reject your anointed
one.

JOURNEY'S END

PSALMS 132-134

This last triplet brings us to God's temple. Psalm 132 explores the dedication necessary to get there, whilst Psalms 133 and 134 celebrate the joy of community and worship at journey's end. But the journey is not complete. The worshippers in the temple symbolically “minister by night” (Psalm 134:1). Our earthly pilgrimage will not end until there is a new heaven and a new earth in which the light of God and Jesus makes it everlasting day (Revelation 21:23, 22:5).

PSALM 132

THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND

This psalm is about perseverance. But who is persevering? The psalm draws on 2 Samuel 7 in which David is determined to build a house for God; a temple. God's response is that he cannot build a temple, but that God himself will build a house for him. This “house”, however, will not be made of stone and wood but of people. This psalm takes up this theme by celebrating David's commitment, sealed with an oath (vv1-9) but then turning to the Lord's commitment which he is turn seals with an oath (vv10-18).

David was a man of extraordinary perseverance. He was determined to see God worshipped and in his rightful place (vv2-5). As pilgrim people we should be stirred up to determined discipleship (v7) by his great example. More than that, as Christians we have the greater example of Jesus who set his face towards Jerusalem and “for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right of God” (Hebrews 12:2).



What do you need to learn about perseverance from David and Jesus?

But David's perseverance is not the main thing celebrated here. God also swore an oath (v10). An oath to bless and satisfy and save his people so that they sing for joy forever. An oath to establish David's descendant, Jesus, as king of all the universe and defeat all his enemies, even Satan himself.

Pilgrim's need perseverance, but ultimately it is not their faithfulness but God's which will see them through. God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus is with us always to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). The Holy Spirit is given to us as firstfruits (Romans 8:22), a seal (Ephesians 1:13) and down-payment (Ephesians 1:14) to guarantee that our eternal inheritance can perish spoil or fade (1 Peter 1:4). What God has begun he will complete (Philippians 1:6).



What difference should it make in your life that God has sworn an oath about you? (See Hebrews 6:18)

So entrust yourself to the faithfulness of the God who has sworn an oath for you. Your pilgrimage may be tough, and long and full of dangers. But has made you a promise, and it is impossible for God to lie.

Psalm 132 (cont.)

- ¹¹ The LORD swore an oath to David,
a sure oath that he will not revoke:
“One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne—
¹² if your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons shall sit
on your throne for ever and ever.”
- ¹³ For the LORD has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling:
¹⁴ “This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it—
¹⁵ I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor will I satisfy with food.
¹⁶ I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her saints shall ever sing for joy.
- ¹⁷ “Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
¹⁸ I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but the crown on his head shall be resplendent.”

Psalm 133

A song of ascents. Of David.

¹ How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together
in unity!

² It is like precious oil poured
on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on
Aaron's beard,
down upon the collar of his
robes.

³ It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the
LORD bestows his
blessing,
even life for evermore.

PSALM 133

KEEP THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT THROUGH THE BOND OF PEACE

Good family reunions are splendid affairs. There are a thousand unspoken understandings, countless shared experiences, and an abundant and simple joy in gathering together. This is the vision of Psalm 133.

The three annual pilgrimages of Israel culminated, not only in worship, but in joyful celebrations and feasting. Their common identity, hope and way of life transcended tribal differences and all gathered together in harmony.

The New Testament vision for God's church goes even further. Local churches are called to be united in love across all barriers of language, tribe and gender.

Psalm 133 speaks of the blessing that comes from such unity. Firstly it is "good and pleasant" (v1). There is a simple joyful wholesomeness about a united community.

But more than that, the imagery that David uses indicates some specific blessings that come. "Precious oil poured on the head" (v2) so that it runs down the beard, suggests someone being anointed; set apart to be used by God. Specifically this image is of the anointing of Aaron, a priest. A united community of God's people are anointed by God for the priestly ministry of displaying the glory of Jesus to the world (1 Peter 2:9-10). Our unity is vital to our witness (John 13:35).

More even than our witness, David tells us that our united love produces life. It is like the dew of mount Hermon coming to Zion (v3). Mount Zion was a dry place, but Mount Hermon to the north had abundant water all the year round and consequently the vegetation and crops grew in abundance. Where there is Christian love, there God bestows blessing even the blessing of eternal life (v3).



What aspect of your love for others do you need to work on, for the sake of the reputation of Jesus?

This joyful picture is not only a wonderful picture of God's church. It also looks forward to the final gathering of God's people in the new heaven and new earth, in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). In that wonderful future era promised to all believers God himself will be with us, and there will no longer be any hostility, or danger, or loneliness. Rather God's people will be gathered into a gloriously perfected community of love. On that day it will not just be "good and pleasant" but gloriously perfect and rapturously delightful. We will bask in the warmth of God's love, as spring flowers soak up the morning sun. And we will give and receive love with one another with no taint of sin, and no limitation, until our mutual love grows beyond all imaginable bounds.

Christian, this is your destiny. Hunger for it. Long for it. Yearn for it, with joyful urgency! It is the inheritance of those who trust in Jesus.



Read Revelation 21-22. Have you seen the glory of your future destiny? How can you stir up your hunger for it?

PSALM 134

NO MIND HAS CONCEIVED WHAT GOD HAS PREPARED

Psalm 134

A song of ascents.

¹ Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD

who minister by night in the house of the LORD.

² Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD.

³ May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

And so the pilgrims have arrived. The long journey to Jerusalem is completed and the pilgrims are at the Temple. Psalm 134 is a psalm of arrival. But it is also psalm of implicit anticipation.

Verse 1 describes the priests – the servants of the Lord – ministering in the Temple. But they are ministering by night. At the feast of Passover all the lambs for the feast would have been slaughtered on the Thursday afternoon before dusk. At that point the week long celebrations would begin with the Passover meal. Perhaps we are to imagine the priests going about their business on that first evening. They have completed the hard filthy labour of sacrifice, and now they are beginning the celebrations. But it is still the night. The first day of the celebrations has not yet dawned. They are celebrating but still waiting.

And so for Christians this is a peculiarly suitable psalm. We too “minister by night” as we celebrate and wait. Christ’s death on the cross as the lamb of God means that our salvation is utterly secure – it is finished. We are as good as home. But for now we serve Christ in a dark world.



What for you is the greatest frustration of “serving by night”?

But this nocturnal service is not at all joyless. The psalm begins with a great hallelujah - praise the Lord. It calls us to lift up our hands (v2) in prayer and praise. Like those servants of old, we have the inestimable privilege of being in

the “the sanctuary” because Jesus has promised to be with us eternally (Matthew 28:20) and the Spirit of God pours out his love into our hearts (Romans 5:5) so that we cry out Abba father to him (Romans 8:15).

And in this darkness before the dawn the Lord promises to bless us. Indeed he promises to turn all things for our good (Romans 8:28), to enable us to complete the journey that he has plotted for us (Philippians 1:6), and to let nothing in all creation separate us from his love (Romans 8:38-39). This is the privilege of God’s pilgrim people.



What hinders your prayers, and joy as you wait for the final day?

So Christian be joyful in the night. Do not let this present darkness rob you of the infinite privilege that you have. You are amongst the most privileged people in the whole universe.

“Praise the Lord... by night... in the sanctuary.”