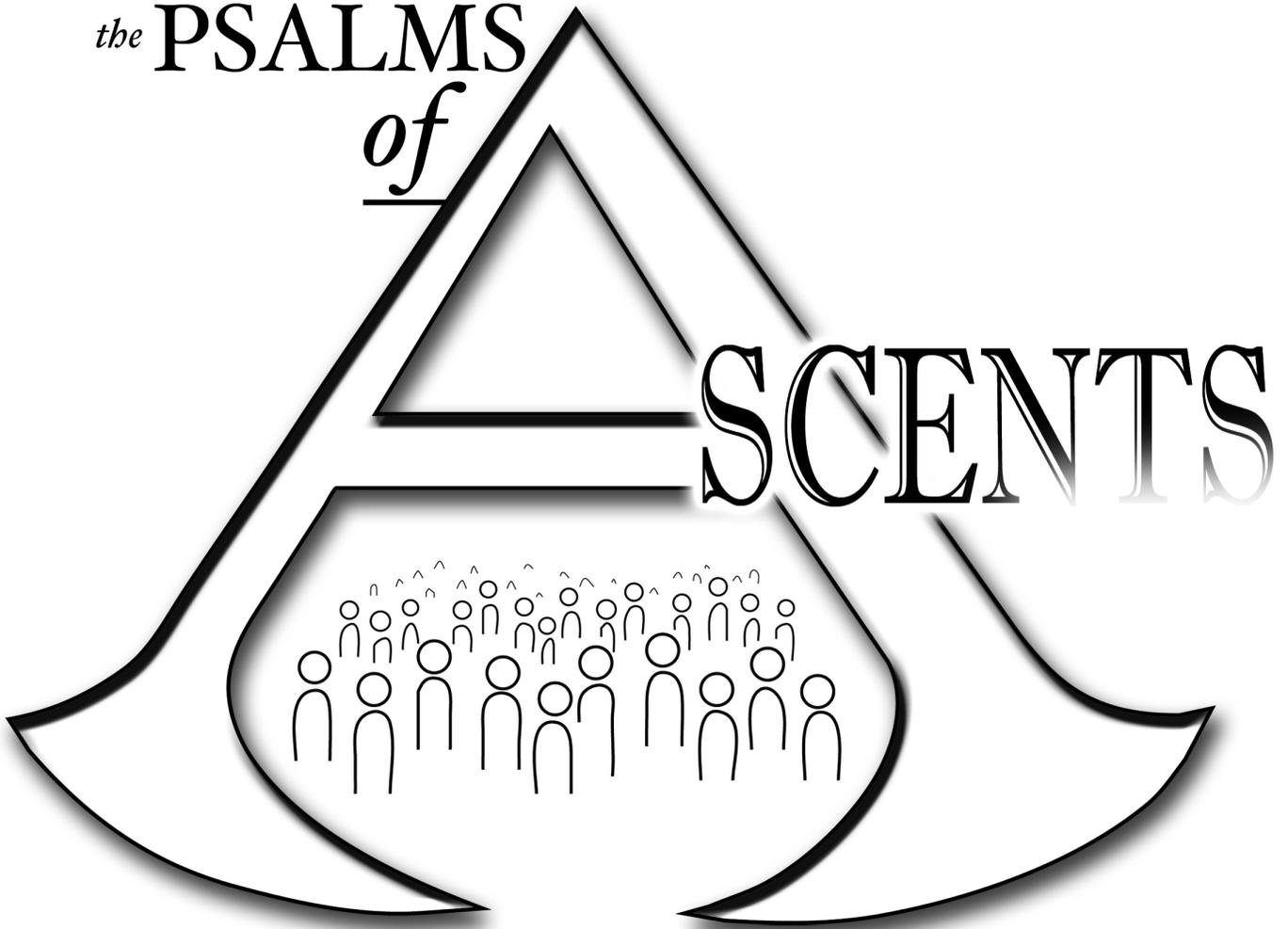


**CALVARY BAPTIST
CHURCH** *of* SANTA
BARBARA

the PSALMS
of

ASCENTS



STUDY GUIDE

September 30th ~ December 9th

The Psalms of Ascents

Calvary Baptist Church of Santa Barbara
September 30 –December 9, 2012

Study	Passage	Theme	Sermon Date
1.	Psalm 120	Repentance	September 30
2.	Psalm 121	Providence	October 7
3.	Psalm 122	Worship	October 14
4.	Psalm 123	Service	October 21
5.	Psalm 126	Joy	October 28
6.	Psalm 127	Work	November 4
7.	Psalms 128 & 134	Blessing	November 11
8.	Psalm 129	Perseverance	November 18
9.	Psalm 130	Hope	November 25
10.	Psalm 131	Humility	December 2
11.	Psalm 133	Community	December 9

This study guide has been written to help us study the Scriptures on our own before we hear the sermon on Sunday. The questions are designed to get us thinking deeply about Scripture. I encourage you to join a Fellowship Group through CBC or meet together with a friend or two to discuss your responses to the questions and your reflections upon the text. I pray that it will be a rich time of deeply exploring the truths of Scripture and that by doing so you will be transformed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus our Lord.

Special thanks to Daniel McDavid for the artwork and to Bethany Miller for final edits.

SOURCES/ABBREVIATIONS

Boice	James Montgomery Boice, <i>Psalms, vol. 3</i> , (Baker, 1998).
Dever	Mark Dever, <i>The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made</i> , (Crossway, 2006).
ESV	<i>The English Standard Version of the Holy Bible</i> , (Crossway, 2002).
Kidner	Derek Kidner, <i>Psalms 73-150</i> , (Inter Varsity, 1973).
LaSor	William LaSor, David Hubbard, Frederic Bush, <i>Old Testament Survey</i> , (Eerdmans, 1996).
Lewis	C. S. Lewis, <i>Reflections on the Psalms</i> , (Harcourt, 1958).
Longman	<i>How To Read the Psalms</i> , (Inter Varsity, 1988)
NIV	<i>The New International Version of the Holy Bible</i> , (Zondervan, 1984).
Peterson	Eugene Peterson, <i>A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society</i> , (Inter Varsity, 2000).
VanGemeren	Willem A. VanGemeren, <i>Psalms</i> , in <i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 5</i> , F. E. Gaebelein, ed. (Zondervan, 1991)

All Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible unless otherwise noted.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS OF ASCENTS

Pilgrims

Pilgrimage. The word brings to mind many different images. Much of our country's heritage was established by pilgrims who fled religious persecution in England. Elvis fans make their pilgrimages to Graceland, Elvis' home in Memphis. In every major religion, annual pilgrimages — trips to sacred places — are undertaken by the faithful: Muslims to Mecca, Jews (and many Christians) to Jerusalem, and Catholics to the Vatican in Rome.

Pilgrims are not nomads. Like pilgrims, nomads are on the move, carrying their homes with them, following their herds or pursuing new markets for their handiwork. But unlike pilgrims, nomads are simply wanderers with no final destination. Wherever they make camp is home for the time being. Pilgrims, on the other hand, have a destination in mind; their journey has a purpose. Pilgrims are restless to reach their journey's end. They press on and don't linger too long in any one place.

This fall we will be focusing on this theme of pilgrimage. The image of a pilgrimage has often been used as a metaphor for the Christian life. As Christians, we recognize that we are on a pilgrimage. This world is not our true home and therefore we should never get too cozy here. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."¹ We are "looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."²

Pilgrims bound for their destination, adding to their numbers as they go, often find that the journey itself is part of the experience. This is also true for Christians. We are learning and growing as we go. Catherine of Siena wrote, "All the way to heaven is heaven, for has He not said, 'I am the Way'?"

Songs of Ascents

Our texts will come from a group of Psalms called the Songs of Ascents. These are songs that were used by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the three annual festivals — Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement.

The title *Song of Ascents* is the Hebrew phrase *shir hama'alah*. The first word, *shir*, means *hymn* or *song*. The second word, *ma'alah*, means both a *step* (or stair) and a *going up*.³ *Going up* is often used in the Bible to refer to going up to Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary would probably have sung these psalms as they went up to Jerusalem with the young Jesus. Jesus and His disciples would have sung them as they went up for the feasts. This reminds us that the life of the disciple ought to be one of ever increasing maturity. It ought to be an upward, Godward life, ever advancing from one level to the next.

¹ Hebrews 13:14

² Hebrews 11:10

³ Boice, 1068.

The content and themes of the Songs of Ascents focused the pilgrims' minds on the purpose of their journey and prepared their hearts to worship God when they reached Jerusalem. In the same way, the themes of these songs can help us on our pilgrimage. They can help us press on when we grow tired. They can inspire us when we are tempted or feel discouraged. Above all, they can keep us focused on the God who is at the heart of our true home and who is also with us on the journey.

Discipleship

Eugene Peterson wrote a wonderful book based on the Psalms of Ascents entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Peterson chose a particularly striking subtitle, *Discipleship in an Instant Society*. He points out that these psalms communicate a powerful message in our "instant society." He writes,

It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.⁴

The pilgrimage of the Christian is a pilgrimage of discipleship. As James Boice puts it, these are "discipleship songs."⁵ Disciples spend their lives as apprentices to their master. Christians spend their lives as apprentices to their master, Jesus Christ.

Boice goes on to write, "Christianity is a long-obedience religion, and if we do not know that about it, we know very little about Christianity. In fact, if we are not in it for the long haul, we are not even Christians."⁶

Tools

As we study these psalms we will receive indispensable tools to help us in our pilgrimage of discipleship. Here are a few:

Prayer. The Psalms provide patterns for prayer. Eugene Peterson writes, "I knew that following Jesus could never develop into a 'long obedience' without a deepening life of prayer and that the Psalms had always been the primary means by which Christians learned to pray everything they lived, and live everything they prayed over the long haul."⁷ It is no wonder that the Psalms were considered Israel's prayer book. As we study these psalms, let us not forget to also pray them.

⁴ Peterson, 12.

⁵ Boice, 1068.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peterson, 12.

Worship. The Psalms also provide patterns for praise. They were Israel’s hymn book. The title of the book of Psalms is taken from the Greek translation, *Psalmoi*. This comes from *psallo*, which means “to pluck,” used first for the playing of a stringed instrument or even for the instrument itself. Later, the word was used to describe a song (*psalmos*) or a collection of songs (*psalterion*). The actual Hebrew title is *ℓhillim* — “praises” or “songs of praise.”⁸ As Tremper Longman writes, “The Psalms are a kind of literary sanctuary in the Scripture.”⁹

Expression. The Psalms reflect the emotional responses of believers as they encounter the mysteries of God’s ways. They give dynamic expression to deep faith. John Calvin likened the Psalms to a mirror of the soul:

There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.¹⁰

Poetry. The Psalms (in general) are considered poetry. Poetry, while difficult, is a rich and textured way to communicate. In the Psalms we encounter:

- Parallelisms — Parallelisms refer to the way one phrase in the poem interacts with the phrase which follows it. For example: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger” is followed with, “or discipline me in your wrath.”¹¹
- Imagery — God is personified as a “rock,”¹² “fortress,”¹³ “shield,”¹⁴ and “shepherd,”¹⁵ to name but a few of the images employed in the Psalms.
- Simile — Similes use images to paint a picture for the reader through comparison. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”¹⁶
- Metaphor — A metaphor is similar to a simile, but more explicit and clear. “To you I call, O Lord my Rock.”¹⁷

The language of poetry is not always as clear as literal language, but it nevertheless communicates in a way that normal prose cannot. It enables us to explore God’s nature and our relationship with Him in ways not otherwise available to us.

⁸ LaSor, 430.

⁹ Longman, 12.

¹⁰ Cited in Longman, 76.

¹¹ Psalm 38.

¹² Psalm 62.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Psalm 28.

¹⁵ Psalm 23.

¹⁶ Psalm 42.

¹⁷ Psalm 28.

Relationship

The Psalms are declarations of the relationship between God and His people. The psalmists cling to God’s covenant promises of provision, protection, and preservation. What we find in the Psalms is not a neat and tidy systematic theology, but rather theological reflections on the relationship of God to His people. As C.S. Lewis points out, “The Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.”¹⁸

Whether songs of adoration, confessions of sin, protests of innocence, complaints about sufferings, pleas for deliverance, assurances of being heard, petitions before battle, or thanksgivings afterwards, the Psalms are all expressions of the unique relationship between the one true God and His people.

As we read and study the Psalms of Ascents we will learn about both God and ourselves. Our emotions will be touched, our minds informed, and our wills moved. Over the next 11 weeks, may these Psalms penetrate our souls and make us fit for the journey.

¹⁸ Lewis, 10.

STUDY ONE: PSALM 120

REPENTANCE

This seems like a strange place to start. Psalm 120 doesn't speak of going on a pilgrimage. It does, however, express the feelings of homesick people settled in a strange land. Thus the tone is set for a joyful upward journey in the psalms that follow.



Read Psalm 120. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.

1. How does the psalmist describe his culture? How does he deal with his frustrations with his culture?
2. In what specific ways do you see some of these same issues in modern American culture? How do you deal with your own frustrations with things in our culture that are not as they should be?

James Boice finds two things that bother the psalmist: *lying neighbors* (verses 1-4) and *hostile neighbors* (verses 5-7). He writes, "Thus, the starting place for our spiritual pilgrimage is seeing the world for what it is in order to turn from it."¹⁹ Pilgrims are people who are dissatisfied with the way things are and therefore are on their way to someplace better. Peterson writes, "The usual biblical word describing the 'no' we say to the world's lies and the 'yes' we say to God's truth is *repentance*."²⁰

¹⁹ Boice, 1070.

²⁰ Peterson, 29.

Meshech and Kedar, mentioned in verse 5, are names of people groups. The Meshech are people who lived in northern Turkey and later pushed north and east of the Black Sea into the Caucasus, Kasakastan and Ukraine. Kedar, named after a son of Ishmael²², refers to a wild Arab tribe in the desert.²³ These people groups lived so far apart that the references can only be taken as “a general term for the heathen.”²⁴ They are examples of the warlike tribes among whom the pilgrim singers of Psalm 120 were dispersed.

6. Have you settled down in Meshech or Kedar? If so, how? Why? Or do you have no lasting or real home here and is your real home in heaven? If so, how are you living life as a pilgrim among lying and hostile neighbors?

7. What advice does Peter offer in 1 Peter 2:11-12?

8. When we make a decision to turn from our current way of seeing the world and follow God’s way, what hope can we find in Psalm 120 that God will help us?

9. In what ways have you experienced God’s help as you’ve made decisions to follow His way?

²² Genesis 25:23.

²³ Isaiah 21:16-17; Jeremiah 49:28-29.

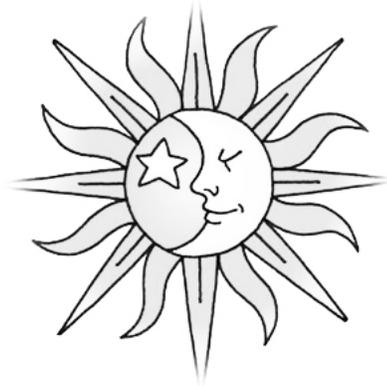
²⁴ Kidner, 430-431.

STUDY TWO: PSALM 121

PROVIDENCE

The pilgrim moves along on his journey in Psalm 121, which spurs this reflection on the Providence of God.

Read Psalm 121. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.



1. Have you ever been on a long, difficult, or unsafe journey? What was it like?

Most scholars consider this psalm to be a reflection during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which in Old Testament times was a strenuous, dangerous trek. The terrain was rocky and hilly, and many pilgrims would be traveling from lowland plains up into the hills where Jerusalem is located. For protection from bandits and wild animals, people throughout history have looked to higher sources of power. Once, every high hill had a shrine to a different deity, and people also worshiped and prayed to celestial objects like the sun and the moon.

As you read this psalm, examine the poetry and the craftsmanship of the words. Much of Psalm 121 follows a popular pattern in psalm-writing — that is, “A, what’s more, B.” For example, verse 3: “He will not let you stumble and fall; (what’s more), the one who watches over you will not sleep.”

2. Ask yourself along with the opening verse of the psalm, “Am I expecting my help from the high places of this world, or am I relying on the true Maker of Heaven and Earth?” Where do you look for guidance and protection when the pilgrimage of your life is difficult?

In verses 3-8, the “you” is actually singular in the Hebrew, which indicates that this is an inward meditation. Rather than addressing some group of pilgrims or a congregation, the psalmist is talking to his own soul. This can also be seen in Psalm 42:5-6: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

3. How does it make you feel to know that God, who watches over you, never sleeps? What if we worshiped a God who got careless or had to take naps — would you feel safe in dangerous situations if that were the case?
4. What kind of things are you in need of protection from today? Read through verses 5-8 again and replace the sun and moon with obstacles and dangers in your own life, spiritual or physical.

This psalm highlights what is known as God’s “providence,” that is, that the God who created the universe is involved in our everyday lives to keep us and watch over us — not by preventing us from experiencing trouble, but by equipping us with what we need to withstand it and grow through it. As Christians today, we can know that involvement even more intimately through Jesus Christ.

5. How does your relationship with Jesus affect the way you read and sing this psalm?

6. Where are you today in the pilgrimage of life? Are you crying out for protection, resting in safety, or maybe catching a glimpse of Jerusalem?

7. Think about a time when you faced major trials or temptations. Did you ask God to provide you with His providence, and did He give you what you needed to withstand and be faithful in obedience?

Even during this study, don't forget that the Psalms are songs and prayers, not lectures and sermons. Take time to sing them (or read them in a sing-song voice) to yourself or to a loved one, meditate on them and see if they speak to your own soul. Enjoy the poetry, the images, and the insights it can give you about the Lord.

8. Consider the following verses on providence. How do these texts help you to further understand God's provision for your life?
 - Genesis 45:5-8
 - 1 Samuel 2:6-9
 - Psalm 91:4
 - Matthew 6:28
 - Matthew 10:29-31
 - Luke 21:32-36
 - Acts 17:26-28

STUDY THREE: PSALM 122

WORSHIP



In Psalm 120 the pilgrims are in a foreign land, beginning to turn their faces toward God's city. In Psalm 121, the city is in sight and they are very near to the end of their journey. In Psalm 122, the travelers are filled with joy as they step foot in the holy city.

The title tells us that this psalm was written by David. Here, David paints a picture of corporate worship reminding us that there is something to look forward to when God's people come together to worship Him. It also assures us that praising God together will transform our community.

Read Psalm 122. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.

1. Many of us know that church membership has been declining in America. Yet going to church is still one of the most popular weekend activities in our country. What do you think are some of the reasons people decide to go to worship? Why do you go (or not go)?

2. In the first two verses of Psalm 122, David expresses delight at the thought of going to the Temple to worship God. Why do you think he is so excited?

3. In worship our attitude is very important. How would you describe the attitude of the worshiper in Psalm 122?

4. When you come to church on Sunday mornings, what distracts you from entering into worship with the right kind of attitude? What can you do to prepare your heart for worship before you come?

Regarding verse 3, Eugene Peterson notes:

The King James Version translates this sentence, “Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together.” Earlier, Coverdale had translated the latter phrase as “that is at unity with itself.” The city itself was a kind of architectural metaphor for what worship is: All the pieces of masonry fit compactly, all the building stones fit harmoniously. There were no loose stones, no leftover pieces, no awkward gaps in the walls or towers. It was well built, compactly built, skillfully built, “at unity with itself.”²⁵

5. How do you think this metaphor relates to the experience of corporate worship?

6. Verse 4 describes the anticipation of joining the entire nation to worship God. What are the benefits of a community having a common time and place of worship?

²⁵ Peterson, 52.

STUDY FOUR: PSALM 123

SERVICE

The author of Psalm 123 calls out to God with an attitude of expectant servanthood. As the pilgrims draw closer to the Temple, the song exhorts them to keep their eyes fixed upward on the God in whose mercy they trust.



Read Psalm 123. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.

1. In verse 1, the psalmist refers to God as “you who are enthroned in heaven.” How does that description add to the psalmist’s plea? What does it tell us about his posture before the Lord?

James Boice calls Psalm 123 “a psalm for the eyes.” He notes that the word “eyes” occurs four times in verses 1 and 2. Each usage is accompanied by one of two phrases: “lift up” (once) or “look to” (three times). Like the author of Hebrews, who exhorts us to “fix our eyes on Jesus,”²⁸ the psalmist acknowledges that our gaze reflects the desires of our heart.²⁹

Charles Spurgeon warns, “We must use our eyes with resolution, for they will not go upward to the Lord of themselves, but they incline to look downward, or inward, or anywhere but to the Lord.”³⁰

²⁸ Hebrews 12:2, NIV.

²⁹ Boice, 1089.

³⁰ Cited in Boice, 1089.

2. Consider the following list of words that Spurgeon uses to describe how we as servants should look to our master. Do they characterize how you look to God?

Reverently

Continuously

Submissively

Obediently

Expectantly

Imploringly

Attentively

Singly

3. Verses 3 and 4 describe the psalmist's motivation. What is he seeking? Why? Can you relate to his struggle?

4. In study 2, we were introduced to a common form of parallelism in Hebrew poetry: "A, what's more, B." Reflect on this pattern as you read verse 4. How does the repetition in the latter part of the verse add to our understanding? In what way is *contempt* different from *scorn* or *ridicule*?

Consider the following quote by Eugene Peterson:

Too often we think of religion as a far-off, mysteriously run bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we feel the need. We go to a local branch office and direct the clerk (sometimes called a pastor) to fill out our order for God. Then we go home and wait for God to be delivered to us according to the specifications that we have set down.³¹

³¹ Peterson, 62.

STUDY FIVE: PSALM 126

JOY

Psalm 126 is a pilgrim song of joy. It also teaches us about the reasons for our joy. It teaches us that we can experience joy even in difficult circumstances. It looks back to God's deliverance and forward to a future where God continues to bless His people.

Read Psalm 126. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.



This psalm coincides with the period of Israel's history after a period of exile. As the psalm opens, the Jewish people return to their homeland, against all odds. But they are faced with the monumental task of rebuilding. This period of Israel's history is recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. In verses 1-3, how does the psalmist describe the feelings of the people? Why do you think they were so stunned by this experience?

2. The second half of the psalm looks to the future. What things does the psalmist expect the future to bring? Are they all good things? Would you describe the tone of this section as optimistic or pessimistic? Why?

3. According to the psalmist, what role will God play in Israel's future prosperity? What is the role of the people of God?

The farming imagery throughout this psalm shows us that it is not our efforts that ultimately contribute to our blessing, any more than the farmer can make the seed grow. But if the farmer is not obedient to God's natural laws — even when the task is difficult and filled with tears — there will be no harvest. Often the Lord works miracles of transforming blessing within the context of the obedience of His people.

4. In this psalm, what is the relationship between joy and sorrow?
5. Examine each occurrence of the word *joy* in this psalm. In each case, what has brought joy? What part does God play in each case?

The Negev, mentioned in verse 4, was a network of shallow ditches that were dry for most of the year. Sudden rains would turn them into gushing streams and bring a burst of color as flowers sprang up.

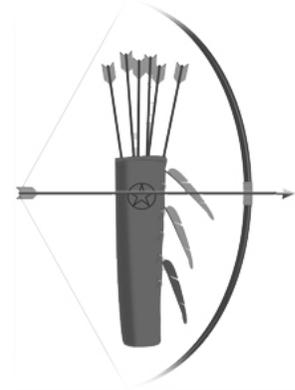
6. What does this image convey about what sometimes happens in our spiritual lives? Have you had a sudden experience of God's blessing in the middle of a dry time in your life? What happened?

STUDY SIX: PSALM 127

WORK

After a long, hard journey, the pilgrims arrive at their destination and consider the value of all their work.

Read Psalm 126. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.



1. Have you ever felt like all the hard work you do in this life is in vain? Explain.

Scholars have varied opinions on the original setting for this Psalm. Eugene Peterson imagines a group of pilgrims arriving at Jerusalem and boasting about how much work they went through to arrive at the Temple. Perhaps they were looking for bragging rights: “I got here faster!” “I brought more friends with me!” or “I came the farthest!” Then, in the midst of this prideful competition, somebody would start singing this psalm with “Unless the Lord builds the house...”

Other scholars and commentators consider this a perfect psalm for singing and praying at the birth of a child or the dedication of a new building. The prayer in this case would be not only for guidance and building but also for continued protection and blessing.

2. Think about what motivates you when you work, whether you have a full-time or part-time job, do volunteer work, raise a family full time, or go to school. Are you approaching your work as a means to accumulating wealth, possessions, knowledge, and stature? What motivates you to work?

The sin of the Tower of Babel was not the building project itself, but rather the attitude that the builders had, that they did not need God's approval or guidance; they did not ask the Lord to "build the house" and so their house, and their civilization, collapsed in confusion and turmoil.

3. One response to the sin of Babel has been to cease working hard altogether; to say, "If God is taking care of it, why bother?" Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:11-13 and consider what kind of work Paul says we should be engaged in. Write down your thoughts.

4. The psalmist moves on from work and blessing to consider children and the family. Children are not born by human effort, but by the miracle of growth and development in the womb. Does the psalmist here seem to place greater priority on the work of human hands or on the miracles of God? Which is of greater priority to you? Why?

In the Old Testament culture of Israel, children (and in those days, sons) were especially important to have early in life. Justice, family standing and protection were often dependent upon having vital children to stand up in court and in the public square to defend their elderly parents. This is why there is such an emphasis on providing justice for widows despite their lack of family to stand up for them.

5. Have you ever been on a missions/building trip, possibly to Mexico or elsewhere? What was the most lasting and valuable fruit of that labor of love? Was it the work project? Or, maybe even more so, was it the relationships that were formed and the love that was shared through those actions?

6. In light of the theme of this psalm, it is obvious that the builder of a home stands in need of God's help as truly as does the builder of a house. Do you think this applies equally to the builder of a business, the builder of a church, and the builder of a country? How can you ask God to build your _____?

Take some time to consider and pray whether, whatever your work may be, you are truly coming alongside God to accomplish *His* good works for the Kingdom. Read Matthew 6:25-34 and keep it in mind if you find yourself becoming anxious and worried about your labor.

7. As Eugene Peterson says, "A Christian's work is a natural, inevitable and faithful development out of God's work."³² Consider the following verses and what they say in relation to work and finding its proper place in your life, fulfilling God's purposes in whatever you are doing:

- James 4:13-15
- John 15:5
- Deuteronomy 28:47-48
- Ephesians 2:9-10
- 1 Corinthians 15:10, 58
- Proverbs 10:22
- Proverbs 21:30-31
- Mark 4:26-29

³² Peterson, 109.

The family (verses 3-4).

- How does this blessing relate to Psalm 127:3-5?

Israel as a whole (verses 5-6)

- What is the significance of this passage today?

In reflecting on Psalm 128, Eugene Peterson writes:

The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian. What is hard is to be a sinner. Being a Christian is what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption. The structure of this world was created by God so we can live in it easily and happily as his children.³⁵

3. Do you agree? Why or why not? Does this remark give you any new insight in interpreting Psalm 128?

Scholars have suggested various views on the identity of the speaker in Psalm 134. The reference to “servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord” suggests that priests and Levites are being addressed.³⁶ Derek Kidner suggests that the psalm is a call and response: the pilgrims addressing the priests and Levites with a call to worship (verses 1-2) and the priests responding with a benediction (verse 3).³⁷ Alternatively, James Boice suggests that the psalm is a song of pilgrims returning home from the Temple “encouraged to know that the priests will be remaining behind to represent them at the Temple and so they will be worshipping God there continually.”³⁸ Either interpretation reveals an eagerness on the part of the singer to bless God in response to His ample blessing.

³⁵ Peterson, 115.

³⁶ 1 Chronicles 9:33

³⁷ Kidner, 453.

³⁸ Boice, 1167.

4. John Stott wrote that “true worship is the highest and noblest activity which man, by the grace of God, is capable.”³⁹ Do you see this attitude reflected in your own worship?

5. Peterson acknowledges that we are both invited and commanded to bless the Lord.⁴⁰ How should we respond to this command when we simply don’t feel like worshipping God?

6. Put yourself in the shoes of a pilgrim who has traveled days or weeks to reach the holy city. Continually, the image of God’s holy Temple has been playing in your mind, drawing you onward. The anticipation builds as the city and then the Temple draw within sight. Picture yourself entering the gates of the Temple and standing at last in the sanctuary. How would you respond? Take advantage of this perspective as you spend some time worshipping God.

³⁹ Cited in Boice, 1165.

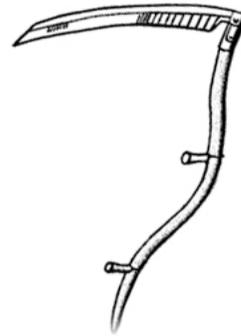
⁴⁰ Peterson, 192.

STUDY EIGHT: PSALM 129

PERSEVERANCE

In this Psalm, the pilgrim reflects on the history of Israel, all the persecution and oppression the people have undergone, and the perseverance that brought them back to Jerusalem.

Read Psalm 129. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.



This psalm was most likely written after the exile in Babylon, when the people of God were able to return to their homeland and to Jerusalem and could rebuild the Temple. The beginning of the psalm is a reflection of a long history of captivity and persecution, accompanied by gratefulness at the Lord's protection of a persevering people.

1. Think about a time you “stuck to it” through adversity and persecution by other people. How did that make you feel? How did you feel about the people who were obstructing your path?

2. What do you think of when you think of the words patience, endurance and perseverance? Do you think of a resigned, passive acceptance of the way the world is? Or do you think of an active endurance, fighting through persecution and moving from strength to strength? Explain.

STUDY NINE: PSALM 130

HOPE

Psalm 130 is traditionally understood as one of the seven “penitential psalms.”⁴³ Consider this as you read this beautiful poem.

Read Psalm 130. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.



1. What are “the depths?” How does the description of “the depths” in Psalm 69:1-2 add to your understanding?

Psalm 130 starts in the lowest depths of despair, but it progresses steadily upward. Derek Kidner writes, “There is a steady climb toward assurance, and at the end there is encouragement for the many from the experience of the one.”⁴⁴ James Boice writes, “In this sense Psalm 130 is itself a literal Song of Ascents, for it climbs from the abyss of depression to the high ground of steadfast hope.”⁴⁵ (Boice, 1138)

2. Has God ever brought you from the abyss of depression to the high ground of steadfast hope? Are you able to share the story with a friend or with your Fellowship Group? Will you do it?

⁴³ These include Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

⁴⁴ Kidner, 446.

⁴⁵ Boice, 1138.

STUDY TEN: PSALM 131

HUMILITY

Charles Spurgeon described Psalm 131 as “one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn.” For pilgrims entering the holy Temple, it was a potent call to humility before God. As we read the psalm within today’s individualistic culture, the challenge of such a call is readily apparent.



Read Psalm 131. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.

1. Verse 1 is re-written below to emphasize its parallelism. As you read through the verse, try to identify the distinct significance of each segment. How do the thoughts build upon one another?

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;

My eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

2. The title to this psalm tells us that it is “of David.” In what way does this association with David further our understanding of the text? Does his behavior reflect this attitude of humility? Consider the following texts: 1 Samuel 24 and 26; 2 Samuel 6:16-23.

STUDY ELEVEN: PSALM 133

COMMUNITY

Some things are good, but not pleasant, and some things are pleasant, but not good. For example, some vegetables are very good for me, but are not very pleasant. Likewise, hot fudge sundaes are very pleasant to me, but, regrettably, not very good for me. One thing is, without a doubt, both good and pleasant for all of us, and that is Christian unity.



Read Psalm 133. Write down any initial thoughts, impressions or questions you have from the passage.

1. Why is unity such a good and pleasant thing?

The psalmist paints a picture of the ceremonial anointing of Aaron the high priest with oil. Lost in translation is a threefold repetition of the word “descending,” twice in verse 2 and once in verse 3. Unity among brothers is like precious oil *descending* down Aaron’s beard, *descending* down on his collar, and like dew *descending* on the mountains of Zion. Derek Kidner points out that “true unity, like all good gifts, is from above; bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement.”⁴⁹ (Kidner, 453)

2. How have you experienced the gift of unity described in this Psalm? Do you long for such unity?

⁴⁹ Kidner, 453.

Unity is granted for both great and small. Mount Hermon was the highest mountain in Israel, known for the dew that fell on its peaks. The image portrays unity as dew that falls on both great and small.

3. How ought such unity be evident in the life of a church? Do you see this type of unity in the life of Calvary Baptist Church? If so, how?

4. What do the following passages teach about unity?
 - Ephesians 4:1-3
 - Philippians 2:1-11
 - 1 Peter 3:8-9

5. Unity is a lost value in the United States these days. People today struggle not for unity, but for group advantages or individual rights. Unfortunately, local churches have not escaped the assaults on unity. How have you seen individualism and consumerism undermine the unity of the Church?

6. Read Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17:20-23. According to Jesus' prayer, what is the basis of our unity?

7. Eugene Peterson writes, “God never works with individuals in isolation, but always with people in community.”⁵⁰ Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

8. Where do you find genuine Christian community? What hinders it?

9. Unity is a powerful force. What do you think of Elton Trueblood’s comments from his excellent book *Incendiary Fellowship*?

Much of the uniqueness of Christianity, in its original emergence, consisted of the fact that simple people could be amazingly powerful when they were members one of another. As everyone knows, it is almost impossible to create a fire with one log, even if it is a sound one, while several poor logs may make an excellent fire if they stay together as they burn. The miracle of the early Church was that of poor sticks making a grand conflagration. A good fire glorifies even its poorest fuel.

10. When genuine unity within community is absent, it is easy to point the finger at others. Take some time to examine *your own* heart. How have you undermined unity in your church? Take some time to repent before God. Do you need to ask someone to forgive you?

Take some time to pray for unity in the Church in Santa Barbara and around the world. Pray also for unity in Calvary Baptist Church.

⁵⁰ Peterson, 177.