

Psalm 121-127 – Chapter Study

All the psalms we'll look at tonight are called Songs of Ascent.

They were sung by the Jewish pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts.

Children grew up hearing these psalms, and in turn sang them when they had children.

Generation after generation of Jews knew & sang these.

They're like **Christmas carols**, only they sang them for the Passover & Pentecost celebrations.

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

Vs. 1-2 are the psalmist's **anticipation** of help; Vs. 3-8 are his **assurance** of it.

1 I will lift up my eyes to the hills— From whence comes my help?

2 My help *comes* from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.

As the pilgrims moved toward Jerusalem, they traveled **up** from the Jordan Valley to the ridge of hills that form the center of Israel.

Jerusalem is situated at the summit of that ridge.

That's where the temple & ark of the covenant were; the place where God had set his visible presence.

The psalmist is saying he looks to God for help.

Several of the Psalms were sung by different people or groups.

As we saw **last week** with Psalm 118; I read some, then you all read.

This psalm would be begun by having one person sing vs. 1-2, then he'd be answered by the others with -

3 He will not allow your foot to be moved [to slip]; He who keeps you will not slumber.

He's not going to fall down on the job.

4 Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither slumber nor sleep.

God doesn't get drowsy or take a nap.

5 The Lord [Yahweh] *is* your keeper; The Lord [Yahweh] *is* your shade at your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, Nor the moon by night.

God will protect you both day & night.

7 The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.

8 The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in From this time forth, and even forevermore.

One's "going out & coming in" means all your undertakings. In it all God will protect His people from evil.

But wait a minute: Does He?

Don't bad things happen to believers? Sure.

Hebrews 11, the Bible's Hall of Faith, tells of many who suffered & were killed precisely because they were godly.

Stephen, the first martyr of the church, was killed for bearing witness to Christ.

Did God's protection fail him? / Not at all.

God says He'll protect His people **not** from physical harm but from the evil effect the enemy hopes to accomplish by it.

It's the soul the devil is after, not the body. The body is simply the means by which he aims to get at the soul.

That's what persecution is about. He stirs up the ungodly to attack believers so that they'll begin to doubt the love & faithfulness of God.

And this is why the tormentors of the saints get so worked up & angry when they're attacking them but they don't break down & curse God, but instead become even more dedicated to the Lord, as Stephen did when they were attacking him.

Stories of the martyrs give abundant testimony to the fact that when God's people are being hammered by **physical** evil, God provides great grace to not just endure it, but to exalt above it.

It's as though while the abuse is heap on their body, their soul is lifted from it & preserved in peace & joy – Just as this promises.

Lawrence lived in the mid 3d Century in Rome.

As a deacon of the church, he was responsible for taking care of the poor.

The Emperor Valerian heard a report about how the church was helping so many of Rome's poor &

assumed they had vast treasures.

So he had Lawrence arrested & pressed to get him to reveal where the treasure was kept.

Lawrence promised to show Valerian where the church's treasures were in 3 days.

3 days later, Lawrence led the Emperor to a large room filled with poor people.

He said, "These are the treasures of Christ."

Valerian was furious and ordered Lawrence to be tortured for mocking him.

He was subjected to a long ordeal which appeared to have not real effect on him; he endured it passively as if bored.

Realizing they weren't really harming him, they heated a gridiron and chained him to it.

After lying on it for several minutes, Lawrence said to his tormentors, "Okay boys, I'm done on this side, it's time to turn me over."

That's just one of many stories of how the martyrs disdained death t the hands of those who hated them.

In fact, so triumphant over the ordeal of death were they history tells us being an executor of Christians was one of the surest ways of becoming one!

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for *repose*, He'll never, no never desert to his *foes*.
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to *shake*, He'll never, no never, no never *forsake*!

Psalm 122

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

¹ I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord."

Going to Jerusalem to worship at Passover was the high point in the year.

Liberal commentators love to point out what they claim is a blatant error here.

The superscription ascribes this psalm to David, yet verse 1 refers to the temple which wasn't built until David's son Solomon's time.

But v. 1 doesn't speak of the temple. It refers to the *house* of the Lord.

In fact, the word refers to *any enclosure* where someone rests, which is precisely what the tabernacle was called.

When David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem he erected a new tabernacle for it.

Bringing the ark to Jerusalem was one of David's chief goals as king.

He knew the nation needed a central meeting place where they could celebrate the annual feasts, renew their covenant with God and reconnect as a people.

Remember that early in Israel's history, they were 12 tribes divided into various regions.

Each tribe had its own leadership comprised of tribal elders.

It was crucial these leaders meet regularly to renew their sense of solidarity with one another or they might become factions that went to war against each other.

The 3 annual feasts the people were to attend at the tabernacle was the way their national unity could be renewed.

That's why when David chose the location for the capital, he picked Jerusalem.

It was in the center of the nation and located in the border-region between several of the tribes.

No one tribe could lay claim to it and say that David had shown favoritism to them.

² Our feet have been standing Within your gates, O Jerusalem!

The joy of finally stepping through the city gates to stand in the place that has long been their destination was a joy beyond words.

I must say, there is indeed something special about standing in Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem is built As a city that is compact together,

⁴ Where the tribes go up, The tribes of the Lord, To the Testimony of Israel, To give thanks to the name of the Lord.

When David wrote this, the city was confined to the top of a ridge; there really wasn't much to it.

The population of Jerusalem at the time of it's capture from the Jebusites was maybe a couple thousand.

Under David's reign it grew to a couple thousand more.

Then under Solomon, it thrived & grew to many thousands.

5 For thrones are set there for judgment, The thrones of the house of David.
Not only was Jerusalem the center of Israel's spiritual life, it was the seat of civil rule.

6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

7 Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces."
This builds on God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 – That those who **ble**ss Israel **will be** blessed.
We ought to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Of course, no real peace will come that's devised by the political scheming of man.

The peace we ought to pray for is the one brought by the Prince of peace – Jesus.

He's the only one with the solutions to the problems that plague that part of the World.

8 For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, "Peace *be* within you."

9 Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek your good.

What the ancient Israelite prayed for Jerusalem & his people, we ought to pray for the Church.
In Eph 4:3 Paul calls us to ...

"endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. "

It's through the peace & prosperity of the church that blessing flows to the world.

Psalm 123

A Song of Ascents.

1 Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.

As the pilgrims made their way up from the Jordan Valley, or if they were coming from the western plain they'd be looking **up** at Jerusalem, it was easy to lift their eyes just a little more to the skies **over** Jerusalem & the realization that as the eternal God, His **real abode** was heaven, not some tent or temple.

2 Behold, as the eyes of servants *look* to the hand of their masters, As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, So our eyes *look* to the Lord our God, Until He has mercy on us.

The servant watches their master for direction on what to do.

If the master's hand is stretched out **to** them, they look to see whether it's sending or beckoning.

Will the hand strike or bring comfort?

As the pilgrims make their way to Jerusalem, they declare their desire that God's hand will bestow favor on them.

3 Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt.

4 Our soul is exceedingly filled With the scorn of those who are at ease, With the contempt of the proud.

Throughout most of their history, the Jews have been a people set apart.

Their fierce faith in only one God set them at odds with the rest of the world who believed in many.

While other peoples claimed their gods were **superior** to others, they didn't deny the existence of the gods of other peoples.

But the Jews had the audacity to not only claim their God was superior, they claimed He was the only Deity!

That set the rest of the world against them, especially when they went to worship this One God at His temple.

So the pilgrims asked God to take note of the mocking & hostile tone of their enemies and show special favor as they went to renew their relationship with Him.

As the followers of Christ, living in a PC culture, we face a similar challenge ancient Israel did.

People today call us intolerant because we hold to believe in one, unchanging truth.

It's not PC to say there's only one way to God, through faith in JC.

To say that the destiny of unbelievers is eternal damnation is seen as consistent or faithful to what the Bible says, it's seen as mean-spirited & contrary to the "can't we all just get along" attitude everyone ought to have.

Because we live in a culture hostile to faith, we need these times when like the ancient Jews, we gather to worship God and renew our covenant with Him.

Psalm 124

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

This Psalm connects to the previous.

Not only was Israel **despised** by its neighbors, they'd made several attempts to wipe her out. Had it not been for God's help, Israel would be long since gone.

- 1 "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side," Let Israel now say—
- 2 "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, When men rose up against us,
- 3 Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their wrath was kindled against us;
- 4 Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, The stream would have gone over our soul;
- 5 Then the swollen waters Would have gone over our soul."

Raging waters & the sea are often used as an idiom on the Psalms & in prophecy to refer to Gentile nations.

- 6 Blessed *be* the Lord, Who has not given us *as* prey to their teeth.
- 7 Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; The snare is broken, and we have escaped.
- 8 Our help *is* in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 125

A Song of Ascents.

- 1 Those who trust in the Lord Are like Mount Zion, *Which* cannot be moved, *but* abides forever.
- 2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, So the Lord surrounds His people From this time forth and forever.

Mountains are symbols of strength.

They're made of rock which juts up out of the surrounding soil.

In this psalm, the faithful are likened to a mountain because their lives are built on God.

He is like a whole mountain range surrounding them.

- 3 For the scepter [rule] of wickedness shall not rest [remain, stay] On the land allotted to the righteous, Lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.

The idea here is that while the wicked may indeed rule over the righteous for a season, it won't be forever.

Before the righteous are so discouraged & beaten down that they turn to sin, God will deliver them.

This is what we see time & again in the Judges.

When ungodly rulers take power, the people of God must respond by pursuing a campaign of prayer for revival among the lukewarm.

The ungodly cannot rule long when the saints pray.

- 4 Do good, O Lord, to *those who are* good, And to *those who are* upright in their hearts.
- 5 As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways, The Lord shall lead them away With the workers of iniquity. Peace *be* upon Israel!

If as you read the Bible you just skim it, you may come away with the impression that when enemies came against Israel, Jews **united** against them.

It was the Israelites against the Assyrians or Babylonians or Greeks. / That's not the case.

In virtually every war Israel fought, there were Jews who **sided with the enemy**.

They were appeasers who thought war was the ultimate evil & to be avoided at all costs.

They suggested **peace** with Israel's enemies. They counseled **accommodation**.

They were **collaborators**, seduced by the promise of reward.

The psalmist prays that while those who remain faithful to the covenant will be blessed, those who turn away will be judged.

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

This was written after the return from exile in Babylon.

- 1 When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

When the exiles returned to the Land, it was like a dream come true.

They couldn't help laughing & singing for joy.

Even the surrounding kingdoms recognized the hand of God in Israel's return.

3 The Lord has done great things for us, *And* we are glad.

4 Bring back our captivity, [restore our fortunes] O Lord, As the streams in the South.

“South” is the Negev; a dry region between Israel & Egypt that sees not a drop of rain during the Summer.

But when the spring rains come, the wadis/gullies fill with water.

Israel's captivity was like the dryness of the Summer in the Negev.

Now that they've returned, he asks God to make it the Spring.

5 Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy.

6 He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves *with him*.

Those who first returned to the land after the exile found a barren wilderness filled with ruins.

Their tears flowed freely.

But they set to work rebuilding & within a few decades, things had returned to a place of blessing.

Psalms 126 follows 125 because the 2 are connected.

You see, as Psalms 126 was sung by the pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, it was a way of **linking** them to the Jews who'd returned to the city to rebuild it.

Just as it had been the duty of those first returnees to rebuild, so it was the responsibility of later generations to honor what they did & **make sure** they were **worthy** successors to their faith & work.

They must be careful not to repeat the errors of their ancestors who worshipped idols & compromised with the enemy.

That's true for us today regarding holding fast to the Biblical truths reclaimed by the Reformers who liberated the Church from **its** Babylonian captivity.

The Reformers paid a heavy price for seeking to purify the Church.

They wept many tears as they faithfully sowed a good work of reform.

And we are enjoying the **fruit** of their faithfulness.

Now we must be worthy of their hard work & struggle as we affirm the truths they lived & died to protect

- Sola **Scriptura** – by Scripture alone
- Sola **Fide** – by Faith alone
- Sola **Gratis** – by Grace alone
- Solo **Christo** – by Christ alone

Just as there were appeasers & collaborators among the Jews who wanted to accommodate with Israel's enemies, there are evangelicals today who want to compromise with the world on moral issues.

They want to redefine marriage & sexuality.

Others are engaged in talks with the Vatican on how the Protestants can rejoin Rome.

Our concern isn't faithfulness to Luther or Rome. It's not Calvin or Vatican.

Our only concern is “What says the Lord? What does the Word tell us?”

Speaking of which – breaking news:

On Monday, US District Court Judge, George Steeh ruled in favor of Eastern Michigan University which removed a student, Julea Ward (a Christian) from her graduate program in school counseling over her belief that homosexuality is morally wrong.

She had filed a lawsuit against the school for removing her but the judge ruled in favor of her dismissal.

The university told her she would only be allowed to remain in the program if she went through a “remediation” program so that she could “see the error of her ways” and change her belief system about homosexuality.

Legal experts who've been watching this case are concerned that this decision can be used as a bridge to isolate & expel Christians from many different fields.

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

While I Kings 4:32 says Solomon wrote over a thousand songs, only 2 of them made it into Psalms, this and 72. The theme of this psalm is the folly of human effort that doesn't rely on God.

There is a saying, "Little is much if God is in it."

The reverse is also true, "Much is nothing if God is *not* in it."

Unless we're directed by the Lord, all we do is a waste of time and energy.

Solomon uses 4 common activities to illustrate his point.

- House construction
- Civil defense
- Employment
- Family

¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it;

There are 2 ways to build a **house**.

One is to move ahead with plans based on one's own knowledge, skill & funding; then ask God's blessing when it's done.

The other is to wait until God gives the go-ahead, then build with a sense of dependence on Him.

I shared Sunday about how we know a new facility is our future.

But we went forward with a keen awareness of our dependence on God's blessing.

We developed a plan so we could get an idea of what we were looking at.

We looked for land.

But the entire time we bathed it all in fervent prayer for the Lord's guidance.

Having shown due diligence, we realized He was directing us to put our focus somewhere else for the time being.

While we may not be digging & building, God **IS** at work setting things up for the day when we **WILL** break ground.

Unless the Lord guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.

This does not mean we should not have police or military.

It means our ultimate security is in the Lord.

Unless we are depending on Him, an armed force won't keep us safe.

² *It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.*

It's futile to work long hours if we're not in the place of God's blessing.

Scripture repeatedly calls us to diligent labor, but not with a sense of independence from God.

Both the opportunity & ability to work need to be recognized as gifts from the Lord.

That last part of v. 2 – "*For so He gives His beloved sleep,*" means that even while the godly person is asleep, their work is still bearing fruit.

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

For most of history & the world, children were the greatest treasure of all.

People saw themselves as part of an enduring family chain that had both ancestors & descendants.

Everything you did was to be worthy of those who'd come before you, & to pass on a great legacy to your children.

Life was like a crown you grew up seeing your parents wear.

They received it from their mother & father.

And while your parents wore it, they added their own gem to it.

Then when it was time, they handed it to you as a young adult.

You wore it for years before your kids, adding your unique gem to it, then passed it on to them.

That crown was the family name and the reputation that went with it.

One of the greatest tragedies to befall someone was to be childless – because it meant the family name which had been passed down from previous generations was going to end.

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

5 Happy *is* the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

Because the ancient world was an agricultural economy, large families meant more hands to work, so more income, higher standard of living.

Lots of kinds also meant more protection.

A large family stood a better chance of attack by raiders since they'd be able to drive them off.

If the family was large enough, they'd be able to negotiate from a position of strength with potential enemies.

While having children doesn't carry the same priority & urgency for us that it did in the ancient world, they are still an important part of life.

Most people still sense a responsibility to pass on the family heritage to the next generation.

There's a ***spiritual*** application here as well.

It's a principle of a health that life begets life.

It's expected that where people are walking with God and living in the Spirit, others are going to come to faith.

New spiritual births are evidence of the movement of God's Spirit.

As spiritual children mature & develop into spiritual adults, they enter the realm of spiritual warfare & join in the battle with the forces of darkness.

Then as they mature into elders, they become statesmen for the Kingdom of God & stand as good representatives to the world.

John speaks of this very thing in 1 John when he says - 1 John 2:12-13

12 I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.

13 I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him *who is* from the beginning.

I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one.