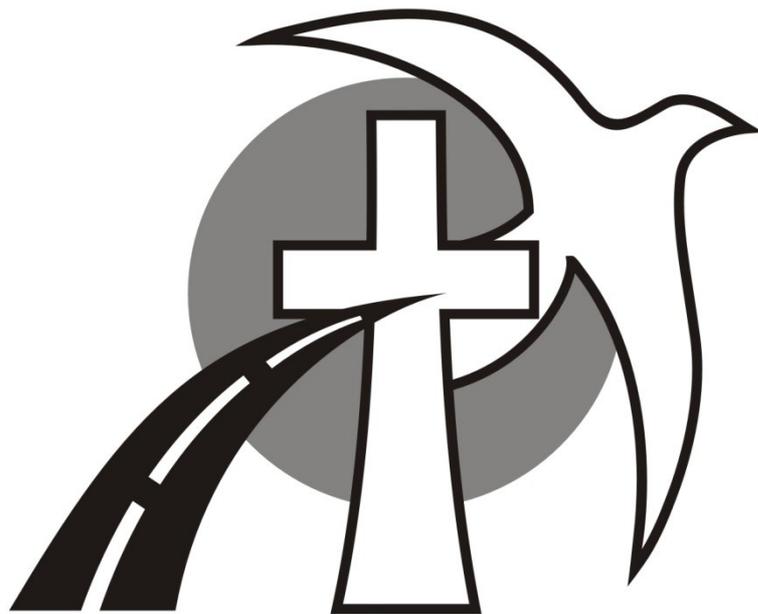


# Hearing and praising

*~ The Psalms of Ascent ~*

*13 Home Group Studies on  
Psalms 121 – 134*

*Part 1 – Studies 1-6*



**Midrand Presbyterian Church**

**M P C @ S t S a v i o u r s**

**F A I T H • H O P E • L O V E**



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

The Psalms, often referred to as the Hebrew Hymn book because they are written as poetry and most often lyrics, can be read in a number of ways, i.e. either lightly, deeply, scholastically or devotionally, but no matter how we read them they are easily accessible and a moving source of praise and encouragement and wisdom.

Because the Psalms reflect the faith of Israel as a whole, God still speaks to us through them.

Martin Luther called the Psalms "*The Bible in miniature*".

In them is a wealth of praise and thanksgiving, of complaint (lament) and of teaching.

The Psalms are a poetic record of the people of the Old Testament, straining towards God; trying to understand and make meaningful this relationship between God and humanity.

The Poems that were written to express their thoughts on these eternal questions were put to music and used as hymns – hymns to be sung at great religious festivals when celebrating God's mighty acts, eg Passover (*Pss. 113-118*); in preparation or on the way to the great feasts (*Pss. 120-136*); New Year (*Ps. 81*); Re-dedication of the temple (*Ps. 30*). There were hymns to be sung at times of great sadness, when they thought God had forsaken them and the temple had been ransacked and they were in exile (*Ps. 137*); hymns to be sung as a lonely pilgrim trudged his way through the desert, along the rocky roads, fording rivers on his way to the holy city to celebrate the Passover.

The Psalms had a unique place in the faith of Old Testament religion. So, too through the past 2 000 years they have had a very important position in the Christian Church. For the New Testament Church, the Psalms were their first hymn book. Later on Christians added their own hymns and spiritual songs, often based on, or paraphrases of, the Psalms. Most Christians have, over the years

drawn on the Psalms for spiritual strength in all types of circumstances.

Originally many of the Psalms were sung antiphonally (i.e. two opposite choirs; the one stating a fact or asking a question; the other responding.) Sometimes, as in Ps. 24, the one from within the walls of Jerusalem and the other approaching the gates.

There is much movement and procession, activity and ceremony into which these great hymns, the Psalms, fit naturally. They were seldom static or dull.

The glory of the Psalter is its overwhelming sense of the *reality* of God. How often do we not need this in our day of doubts and other distractions!

The Psalmists listened to the Word of God, spoken in the silence of their own hearts. They searched for the presence of God in the temple; in the world of nature; in the veld and fields; in the rugged mountains; beside still waters; they found his presence and they were moved to mighty lyrical strains. They found the presence of God in the history of their people; in the Law of Moses and the prophets and having found it, they were moved to praise and prayer. Out of their praise and prayer came trust and reliance on God and in that trust, security.

Because the Psalmists were so faithful to their religious experience, they have had such a deep influence down through the centuries. Never have there been people who have faced the problems of life more honestly. They knew that life was a mystery and however much they tried they could not find its measure. Through all the perplexities of life; all the disappointments and heartaches; all the suffering, they were driven to God and he did not fail them. God was more real to them than pain or persecution. The light of his countenance was better than corn or wine to starving people. They were indeed able to "*mount up as eagles*" in the midst of it all.

### **Psalms of Ascent**

The psalms we are going to study originate from a section of the book of Psalms called the psalms of Ascent. These psalms number from 120 to 134 and it is believed that they were sung by the

pilgrims who were making their way to Jerusalem during the compulsory feasts to be celebrated at the Temple by every Jewish male. As Jerusalem was the highest of the cities in Palestine, the pilgrims would be engaging in an uphill climb, all the way.

When studying these psalms in your Home Group it is suggested that at the beginning of each study you firstly, read the psalm quietly to yourself and then, secondly, for someone in the group to read it aloud. You will then be asked to reflect on the language and structure of each psalm as well as the context and content and how it applies to your life and relationship with God.

Our hope and desire for you is that you will discover the wonderful depth and accessibility of the psalms and how God will use them to touch your heart.

Chris & Gavin

## Week 1

### PSALM 121

#### From the word:

Read Psalm 121:1-8, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

- 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 forevermore. (NIV)

#### Going deeper:

Read the following information to help inform your understanding of the language, context, content and structure of the psalm:

...to the Hills

When this psalm was written the worship of foreign gods had become increasingly popular and most of this worship took place on hilltops where groves of trees were planted.

... will not slumber

Belief in the Canaanite god Baal was common amongst the pagan people and adherents to the Baalistic cult believed that Baal spent a lot of his time sleeping and so the priests' primary function was to wake him up so that he could pay attention to his followers. We see evidence of this in 1 Kings 18:27 with the famous 'showdown' between Elijah and the Baal prophets.

... nor the moon by night

The Israelites called the mental anguish caused by the excessive physical and psychological strain of long journeys >moonsickness=. This 'moonsickness' occurred when exhaustion, isolation, fear of attack or fear of the dangers of long-distance travel, or all of these combined, overcame individual travellers and drove them to a semi-deliriousness or dementia.

The Lord

The term here is Israel's Personal Name for God, >YHWH often pronounced Yahweh. The anglicized version is Jehovah.

This psalm is very practical as it addresses the concerns and real experience of travellers as they journeyed to Jerusalem for the great feasts – Passover, Tabernacles and Yom Kippur. For example:

- travellers may be tempted by the lure of the hilltop Baal shrines (Jer 3:23), but must instead keep their focus on God.
- travellers would fear the rigours of the journey:  
S slipping and breaking an ankle or injuring oneself  
(physical injury)

- s    dehydration and sun burn (believed to be the consequence of the evil that lived in the sun).
- S    moonsickness

Instead, they are assured that God will

- S    watch over them
- S    protect them from the sun
- S    protect them from the mental illness
- God does not need to be wakened but is always watching over his people

Note the following:

- The psalm starts with uncertainty, but as the pilgrims travel to Jerusalem so their certainty increases: from >where will my help come from?= to >the Lord will watch over...=
- This is a personal psalm directed at the individual; but it also mentions that God is active in heaven and earth (2) and in Israel (4). The psalm begins with universal terms and then speaks of protecting Israel, and then near the end, the individual.
- The most repeated theme to be found is one of protection (vs 5 - 8)
- There is a great sense of God=s eternal authority as opposed to the man made Baal:
  - S    heaven and earth
  - s    *always* awake
  - s    protects from *all* danger
  - s    protects *all* the time
  - s    now and *forever*

### **Making it relevant – Life application:**

1. As this psalm deals with the often perilous journey to Jerusalem, share any stories you have of journeys you have taken that have been tiring or filled with apprehension or uncertainty – perhaps a long trip that involved a number of aeroplane flights or a hike through unknown and dangerous terrain or a long car journey through the night etc.

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2. The psalm addresses the very specific fears and worries that the pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem would have had and how they would have been tempted to find strength and hope in false gods and earthly things (Baal shrines in the hills) and not God. Discuss the kind of false things we are tempted to put our faith and hope in, in this life instead of in God?
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3. We consider some of the fears the pilgrims had, such as the fear of the 'evil' in the sun (sunburn and sunstroke) and the sickness from the moon as mere superstition. What are some of the fears you have that leave you paralysed with anxiety and worry? Which of them, on closer look, are actually without substance and unfounded?
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4. As we are reminded and assured from this psalm that God is our protection and hope and that he has authority over all things, give some practical suggestions of how we can keep our focus on God and not on the false gods and so not be overcome with fear on the journey of life?
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5. Note how many times the word 'watches' or 'watch' is used in the Psalm. What does this say about God and how does it make you feel?
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## Week 2

### PSALM 122

#### From the word:

Read Psalm 122:1-9, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

#### **Ps 122**

- 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, I will seek your prosperity.

(NIV)

#### Going deeper:

This psalm was most likely written after the Israelites had returned from exile in Babylon. The theme of Jerusalem unifying the tribes

speaks to the need for centralisation and unity in light of the scattering of the people through the forced exile.

It is believed that this psalm was sung on the way to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Tabernacles, given the latter part of verse four regarding the 'statute given to Israel' and that giving thanks to God for his goodness was an integral part of this particular feast.

In Deuteronomy 16:16 we read: "Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you."

All Jewish men had to gather three times a year as a nation to worship God. Jerusalem was not only the geographical and political centre of Jewish life, but more prominently the central focus of worship. Jerusalem was the place where all individuals of any standing, status, stature or class could commonly gather and become one in their worship of the God of Israel. It is what bound them as a people; it is what strengthened them as a nation and it is what gave them common cause spiritually, economically, politically, culturally and socially.

Of importance in this psalm is the word 'decree or statute'. God was instructing the Israelites to worship him. Of course, they had the freedom and the choice to disobey - it wasn't compulsory, but it was expected. Regrettably, when it comes to worship, we frequently vacillate between two extremes. Worship for us becomes either

- something we are guilt-bound to do, or
- something we must feel before entering into it wholeheartedly.

In reality worship is somewhere in the middle: it is a *response* to God in faith. Worship is something which should not be motivated by feeling (but that is not to say that we can't feel in worship) and yet it should be undertaken as an act of will in response to God's goodness in our lives. We should choose to worship even when we

don't feel like it, because of God's unconditional love and faithfulness to.

The Jews certainly would not have felt like the long journey to Jerusalem; a journey which would have cost them energy, finances and time; but when on the way they would have enjoyed the fellowship and common purpose and camaraderie of the road. Having fulfilled their obligations and honoured God at the Temple they would have had a sense of peace and purpose.

Something of interest in this psalm is the reference to the judgement and thrones in verse five. Here judgement may be best translated as, >the decisive word by which God puts things right and straightens things out=, i.e. not punishment, but justice. It is God's word in action. And it is not something that is still to come, but something that is continuously happening - even in worship. Worship in community (singing hymns/songs of praise, reading the scriptures, confession, thanksgiving, celebration) is saturated with reminders of God's word in action, of his justice and so place our focus on what God is doing.

Verse 6 uses an unusual word for pray, ASha=al@. This word is usually used only for the asking of ordinary things, for example, ACan I have a slice of bread please?@ Whereas the more usual or common word for prayer is APalal@. So, the Psalmist uses this particular word to remind us that to pray for the act of worship and place we worship, is an ordinary thing. Ordinary, not as in common, but rather as in natural. It should be a natural part of our spiritual lives to pray for the place and times of worship we share.

Adding to this is the word play on >praying for the peace of Jerusalem':

- s there is alliteration in verse six: *sha=al* (pray) *shalom* (peace) *yerushalom* (Jerusalem) *shalah* (prosper). This beautiful word craftsmanship encouraged us to seek the peace and prosperity of our place and times of worship.
- s There is pun in verse seven: *shalvah shalom* (security and peace) sounds almost like *yerushalom* and so reminds us of the true place where we can find these, i.e.

peace and security is not found in money, security companies or economic prosperity but in the place and act of communal worship.

**Making it relevant – Life application:**

1. This psalm reminds us of the importance of preparing and praying for worship. What preparation, if any, do you do before or on your way to worship on Sundays? What practical suggestions can you make?

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2. Scholars suggest that verse three should more accurately be translated as, O Jerusalem, thou that art built as the city by which brethren are united together. How do you experience and express unity when worshipping with other believers?

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3. How do you respond to the statement that worship is not primarily about feeling but about obedience?

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4. Nonetheless, how do you feel after having spent time in worship with other believers at church?

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5. Read verse one again. The Psalmist begins this journey by telling us that he is glad to be going off to Jerusalem to worship God with other believers. Are you glad to worship with others? You are encouraged to pray for worship on Sunday; to pray for peace, unity, thanksgiving and an experience of God's justice/judgment and righteousness. Pray for gladness in your heart at the prospect of gathering together to worship.

## Week 3

# PSALM 124

### From the word:

Read Psalm 124:1-8, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

### **Psalm 124:1-8**

- 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.

(NIV)

### Going Deeper:

This psalm, like Psalm 122, was most likely written in the period after the exile. The reasons for this are mainly literary, i.e. the use of Aramaic words, which only became part of Israel's life after the exile, and also the style and use of clauses which are characteristics of post exilic writing.

The metre of this psalm is quite chaotic, i.e. not as rhythmic as other psalms. In the original Hebrew it is 3+3 (vs 3-4, 8), 2+2+2 (vs 1, 6), 3 + 2 (vs 5, 7a), 2 + 2 (vs 7b) and 2 + 2 + 2 (vs 2). This rather chaotic metre symbolises the chaotic dangers of which the psalmist speaks - used as a literary tool to create a sense of the strong repetitive adjectives which are fired at the reader/singer/worshipper: The writer is threatened by being:

- swallowed up alive,
- swept away
- submerged
- torn apart
- trapped in a net

It is important to note the word >men= in verse 2. Through a process of elimination we can entertain the possibility that the psalmists fear was towards a group of individuals who were either political or religious opponents, or even thieves.

It is most likely that this psalm was a responsive psalm. The Priest would sing verse one with the cue, >Let Israel now say ...= and either the choir or the congregation would respond by singing the rest of the psalm.

If we look at the dangers which threaten the psalmist there are four:

- **Men:** Men who are angry with >us=.
- **Floods:** These were very common during dessert rainfall where gullies would be inundated with water which would run on the surface and gather momentum along the water channels creating very sudden flash floods, trapping anyone in its path.
- **Prey:** Here victims avoid the teeth of the prey. It is one thing to be chased by a lion, surrounded by jackals or bumped by a shark, but it is another if they get you in between their teeth.
- **Snare:** These were traps placed on the ground and made of two frames covered with a net. The frames would spring together when disturbed by a bird, encasing it in its net.

It is important to note that the Lord doesn't take away the danger, there is still the anger, floods, prey and traps, but their effect has been limited: we are not swallowed, overcome, torn or caught.

The grace of God is obviously present in this psalm reminding us that the reason why we are not overcome is because:

- God is on our side (1)
- God is on our side (2)
- Blessed be the Lord (6)
- Our help is in name of the Lord (8)
- Who made heaven and earth (8)

**Making it relevant - Life application:**

1. Often in pastoral situations, perhaps after the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one or the pain of betrayal in marriage or of rejection by a child/parent or the loss of a job, Gavin and I will hear people say, "I could not have gotten through ..... without my faith or without God in my life." What do you think they mean by that?
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2. Have you ever experienced the kind of imminent danger the writer of the psalm is referring to and will you be vulnerable enough to share your experience with the group? Perhaps it was physical danger or danger of bankruptcy or danger of losing something dear to you, whether possessions or reputation or a relationship?
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3. The psalm reminds us that God is our help in times of trouble. What are some of the ways in which God helps us?

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4. This psalm is very helpful in pointing out to us that life is full of snares and dangers and being a believer is no guarantee of immunity, i.e. that God does not take the dangers away. Even the metre of the psalm represents the often chaotic and unexpected turns that life takes. Discuss.

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5. Spend some time in prayer giving thanks for the times you have experienced God's help or strength. Or, perhaps you need to cry out to God for his help because your circumstances seem to be overwhelming you.

## Week 4:

### PSALM 125

#### From the word:

Read Psalm 125:1-5, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

- 1 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.
- 2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.
- 3 The scepter 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. (NIV)

#### Going deeper:

The psalms of ascent are coloured with the most wonderful imagery because in travelling along the roads/paths to Jerusalem for the feasts most of the pilgrim's time will be spent in observing all that is around him. In this instance the psalmist uses the illustration of mountains. The psalm begins with the *holy* mount, mount Zion, which >cannot be moved, but abides forever=; and around this

mountain stands other mountains which offer protection and barriers to hostile forces.

You may remember how in a previous psalm (121) mountains were used as images of pagan shrines. In this instance mountains are used to describe how God surrounds us with his protection. Verse three raises a crucial aspect of Jewish understanding with regards to land. The Jews believed that the >Promised Land= was God-given. It was set apart for Abram, conquered by Joshua for Israel, taken away as punishment from both Israel and Judah and then restored, in part, in the postexilic period.

In the story of Naboth=s vineyard in 1 Kings 21 the evil King Ahab murders Naboth so that he can have >the inheritance of his fathers=. For the Jew land is something which belongs to God and it is entrusted to us by Him for safekeeping. Any interference in this process is an interference in God=s will. This is why the land is such a strong tool in God=s discipline of Israel and Judah - their unfaithfulness cost them the land God had given them. Thus as much as God defended the vineyard ascribed to Naboth and his forefathers and took revenge on those who had taken it illegitimately, so this psalm speaks of how God will not allow evildoers to reign over the land, in case their corruption leads the righteous astray. Preservation of the land in the hands of the righteous will ensure that the people will be free to worship God without blemish or interruption.

It is important to note that the criteria for uprightness in verse four relates not to obedience to law and ritual but rather to what is in >their hearts=. The psalmist is aware that there may be a difference between the one who is >going through the motions= and one who is truly faithful in the heart.

Those who >turn to crooked ways= - the language here is of one who was in a place of righteousness but has abandoned it for wickedness - the punishment, again, is related to land and to community. These folk are to be banished; this means that they

- lose the right to live on the land as given by God.

- lose the right to be a part of the community which has been chosen by God.

And so banishment is one of the worst forms of punishment for any Jew.

**Making it real – Life application:**

1. Remember that the psalms of ascent were sung while pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem for the great feasts. As the believer travelled and looked at the mountains and the land he was walking on, he would have been reminded of God's faithfulness and provision.

- a. What are some of the things in your life that remind you of God's provision? In other words, what is the 'land' in your life?

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- b. What are some of the things in creation that help you see the glory and goodness and faithfulness of God? In other words, what are the 'mountains around Jerusalem' for you?

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2. Just as a matter of interest and to have a bit of biblical knowledge fun – mountains have always been a place of significance to the Israelites when it comes to encountering God. Can you name/list a few of these instances in Scripture?

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3. Discuss verse three in relation to the reality of temptation in the life of the Christian. And what promise and assurance does the psalmist give us in this verse?

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4. Verse 5 speaks of the loss of the inheritance from the Lord (loss of land through banishment) by the believer who turns away from God. What is our inheritance from God as Christians? (see Col 3:24 & Heb 9:15) How does it make you feel when you consider the possibility of not sharing in this inheritance?

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5. Read verse 4 again. How does God measure goodness?

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## **Week 5:**

### **PSALM 126**

#### **From the word:**

Read Psalm 126:1-6, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

#### **Psalm 126:1-6**

- 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. (NIV)

#### **Going Deeper:**

Many of the psalms refer to actual historical events, such as battles won or lost or people's conquered and often those historical references are lost to the modern reader. However, this is not the

case with this psalm which celebrates the return of the captives to Jerusalem after being in exile in Babylon.

You can imagine how reciting this psalm on the journey up to (ascent) Jerusalem to celebrate a feast would encourage and uplift the pilgrims.

Just as an aside, you will notice that in the first verse Jerusalem is referred to as Zion. The meaning and use of the word Zion underwent an interesting progression in usage in the bible.

The first mention of Zion in the Bible is in 2 Samuel 5:7: "David took the stronghold of Zion (that is, the City of David)." Zion, therefore, was the name of the ancient Jebusite fortress situated on the southeast hill of Jerusalem. The name came to stand not only for the fortress but also for the hill on which the fortress stood. After David captured "the stronghold of Zion" by defeating the Jebusites, he called Zion "the City of David" 1 Kings 8:1; 1 Chr. 11:5; 2 Chr. 5:2. Then when Solomon built the Temple on Mount Moriah (a hill distinct and separate from Mount Zion), and moved the ark of the covenant there, the word Zion expanded in meaning to include also the Temple and the Temple area. It was only a short step until Zion was used as a name for the city of Jerusalem, the land of Judah, and the people of Israel as a whole - Is. 40:9; Jer. 31:12. The prophet Zechariah spoke of the sons of Zion - Zech. 9:13. By the time of the writing of this psalm Zion came to mean the entire nation of Israel. In the New Testament the use of Zion is continued where it is given the Christian meaning of God's spiritual kingdom, the church of God, the heavenly Jerusalem - Heb. 12:22; Rev. 14:1.

Verse two celebrates the fact that not only did the Israelites credit God for their release and return to Judea, but so did the other nations around Judea (see Ezra 1). This would have served as a great encouragement to the Jews because of the acclaim that God would have received from nations that worshipped other gods.

The last 3 verses refers to the stark reality that faced the exiles when they returned home, i.e. that before they could harvest anything and enjoy the fruit of the land they had to go through a

season (literally and figuratively) of want. Instead of eating the seeds, they had to sow them, but while waiting for the harvest they would have struggled with hunger and worry. But, the seeds did germinate and grow and the harvest was plentiful and so after a period of struggle, they were able to rejoice in abundance.

**Making it relevant – Life Application:**

1. The first three verses of this psalm could have been written in the mid 1990's in South Africa – “When the LORD brought back the captives to South Africa, we were like men who dreamed. 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.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.” The fact is that given the history of our country, it is a miracle that we were able to transition to true democracy with relatively little blood spilled. History testifies to the role of the Church, and thereby God, in this peaceful transition. Discuss.
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2. Read Ezra 1:1-11 which is the account of the Persian king decreeing the release and return of the Jews to Israel. God can use anyone and any means to accomplish his purposes. Can you recall any events in your life or that of your family or the church where God has used the unexpected person or circumstance to bless you or your family or the church?
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3. Verse 6 speaks of perseverance and patience in trying times (sowing in tears). This is a very difficult spiritual discipline to

practice in the face of a world in which instant gratification is the demand of the day. We find it very hard to wait for much anything. Where do you experience the most impatience in your life? Are you willing or able to wait for the harvest of God's blessing in your life (marriage, work, children, parents, friends)?

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## **Week 6:**

### **PSALM 127**

#### **From the word:**

Read Psalm 127:1-5, first quietly by yourself and then as a group and briefly share your initial thoughts with the group on what you think the psalm is saying to you.

#### **Psalm 127**

- 1 Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor 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.(NIV)

#### **Going deeper:**

The style and content of the psalm is in keeping with an era in Jewish literary history where teachers of wisdom were promoting the >fear of the Lord= as fundamental to human happiness.

Later compilers and scribes of the psalms, because of the stylistic similarities to Proverbs (attributed to Solomon) and the events of 1 Kings 3:5 (the sleep of verse 2) and mention of building *the* house (the Temple in Jerusalem) ascribe this psalm to King Solomon

It is important to note the style of the psalm. It is clearly written in the Proverbs genre and it appears to have two disparate themes:

- vs 1-2
- vs 3-5

As we frequently see in Proverbs though (Prov 11:4-11, 30:24-28) a list of seemingly different sayings are linked together in a common theme. In this case the theme is – without God we cannot experience blessing.

There are a number of examples in the psalm which endorse this common thread:

Verse 1.... unless the Lord builds the house...

In the ancient world, belief was common that dwellings and buildings could possess inherent evil such as the curse of disease, fire, earthquakes and other calamities. Here the psalmist reminds the readers/singers that there is nothing to fear if God is the author of the builder=s confidence! Sentiments reflected in Proverbs 91:9-10 and 21:31.

Verse 1.... unless the Lord watches over ...

Human strength is futile unless God=s defence is behind it. A watching watchman can only warn of an attack not prevent it! Cities are equally vulnerable to famine, plagues and intrigue. We see this dependent upon God in Is 26:1 and Zech 2:4-5.

Verse 2.... in vain you rise up early, sit up late ...

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of the Protestant work ethic which insisted that we work hard to God=s glory. This operated effectively until the >God=s glory= bit got lost in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now our society determines a person=s effectiveness by how hard he/she works.

This psalm reminds us that if we work from early to late, our efforts are wasted unless founded in God! The literal >being late to sit down= follows the then Jewish (and now modern Palestinian) habit of eating the main meal at the end of the day after long hours of labour.

Verse 3.... Sons, a heritage from the Lord ...

According to Israelite tradition it is God who determines whether one had a son or not. If a wife was barren it was indicative of being devoid of God=s blessing. Sons were a sign of God=s favour for the following reasons:

- They ensure the survival of the family name
- They, in their youth, form a part of the defense of the home and the woman/children (arrows in the hand)
- The final verse refers to the testimony of sons, if the father is brought before judges on a charge at the city gates. This testimony from the sons will hold up against his enemies accusations.

Scholars are not entirely sure as to why this psalm is placed in the Psalms of Ascent, the most common conclusion is that it is a reminder to the pilgrims that although they journey to Jerusalem for their religious festivals, they:

- Are not blessed because of *their* efforts, but rather because of God=s involvement
- Are to lean on God for their safe journey and meaningful pilgrimage.

### **Making it relevant – Life application:**

1. What does ‘this house’ refer to in your life? How will you include God in the building of ‘the house’?
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2. Discuss verse 2 in relation to Col 3:17.

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3. There are many things in our lives that we may not recognize as blessings from God, but rather as the product of our hard work or wise decisions. The children’s song reminds us to “count your blessings, name them one by one, and then you will see what the Lord has done.” Take a few moments to list some of the blessings in your life and then share it with the group?

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