

Meditations on the Psalms

Volume Thirteen: Psalms 121-130

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1. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-One

The Lord Who Keeps You

A Song of Ascents.

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.

3 He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber

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

5 The LORD is your keeper; The LORD is your shade at your right hand.

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

This psalm is the second of the Songs of Ascents. It was sung after the pilgrims' journey would from different cities to the temple of God to celebrate the feasts in His presence. This spiritual journey symbolizes every life of faith. Although the believer lives in this tiresome world, he is not of it, as Christ prayed for us, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." (John 17:15-17). Therefore our hearts are always directed heaven-ward in a spiritual journey, in order to enjoy the Lord's fellowship in His holy house.

In Psalm 120 the distressed psalmist looked forward to the spiritual journey that would lift him up from his distress because he sought the nearness of God. He left the land of drudgery behind to set off on a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But he knew that he would encounter dangers in his travels, because the roads were not safe. We know this from the parable of the good Samaritan, in which a man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers waylaid him, robbed him of his money, wounded him and left him half dead, only to be shown mercy and rescued later by a Samaritan, who belonged to another religion and a

different ethnic group (Luke 10).

The psalmist saw he that needed protection and lifted up his eyes to the Lord, from whom help and protection come. He recalled God's promise to his forefather Jacob, by which He reassured him as he was on his journey from his father's house to his uncle's house: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" (Genesis 28:15). As soon as the psalmist lifted up his voice in song, he received encouragement from his fellow-travellers, assuring him that God will keep him and them from all evil.

A person entering the temple of Jerusalem would find a small metal container mounted on the right-hand doorpost, within which there was a scroll bearing some verses from the Book of the Law, such as: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart... You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). "And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today... your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land" (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). In addition, there was also the last verse of this psalm: "The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in From this time forth, and even forevermore" (verse 8). Once the believer entered the temple, he would turn right and touch the metal container as a sign of his trust in the Lord. The Lord fulfils His promises to everyone who loves Him with all his heart and all his soul, and keeps them in their going in and out.

In the book "Pilgrim's Progress" the author John Bunyan imagined that every believer sets off on a spiritual journey from the City of Destruction to the Heavenly City, and that this journey is called at its beginning "The New Birth". At the onset of the road the pilgrim fell into the "Swamp of Despond", which could have drowned him if he had not held on to his trust in his Lord. Overcoming despair, he resumed his journey, as difficult as it was. Along this road many have given up because they did not focus on the Lord, but rather on their own abilities and on the difficulties of the road. Likewise, Satan tempts every spiritual pilgrim travelling toward the Heavenly City to turn his eyes away from God, the source of help, and thus forfeit his peace and assurance. Every spiritual pilgrim at the beginning of his journey is in great need of the words of this psalm so that he may be encouraged as well as encourage other believers. Thus they continue on the road to the end, and learn to rely on God's faithfulness alone.

The psalm contains the following:

- First: The psalmist requests help (verses 1,2)
- Second: Another psalmist requests help for him (verse 3)
- Third: The choir assures him of help (verses 4-8)

1.1. First: The Psalmist Requests Help

(verses 1,2)

"I will lift up my eyes to the hills— From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (verses 1,2). The city of Jerusalem is built on seven hills. The psalmist lifted up his eyes to the seven hills from far off and focused on the mountain on which the temple was built, in which the permanent presence of the Lord dwelt, and the priests of the Most High offered up to God songs of praise. The psalmist believes that the Lord is in His holy temple, so all the earth should keep silence before Him, and that His helping hand stretches out to His servant (Habakkuk 2:20).

Perhaps the psalmist sought the divine help because he saw a certain danger threatening him or those travelling with him to the temple. Or perhaps he saw some danger looming over the temple caused by the enemies of the Lord, of whom he had complained in the previous psalm. So he began to lift up his eyes to the hills, not looking for help from the hills, but from the Creator of the hills. The prophet Jeremiah said, "Truly, in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, and from the multitude of mountains; truly, in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel" (Jeremiah 3:23). He lifted up his eyes from the hills to the temple built on the mountain, to the house of the maker of heaven and earth, and said, "I cried to the LORD with my voice, And He heard me from His holy hill" (Psalm 3:4). "The LORD will perfect that which concerns me; your mercy, O LORD, endures forever; do not forsake the works of Your hands" (Psalm 138:8).

Generally speaking, God is present everywhere, but in the place of adoration and worship He is especially among the believers. "Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever" (Psalm 125:1,2).

In the opening verses of our psalm the psalmist expresses his trust and hope in the Lord. He is sure that he will get the divine help from the All-Powerful because He is the Creator of all things. What a world of difference between Him and the idols: "Thus you shall say to them: 'The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under these heavens.' He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and has stretched out the heavens at His discretion" (Jeremiah 10:11,12). "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). What a heavenly love offered generously and without reproach! "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has taught Him?" (Isaiah 40:13).

1.2. Second: Another Psalmist Requests Help for Him

(verse 3)

One pilgrim heard the psalmist call for the help of the Maker of heaven and earth, identified with him and joined his voice to his. He answered the psalmist with a prayer and a word of exhortation:

1. **A request: "He will not allow your foot to be moved"** (verse 3a). "He will not allow" is in the imperative in the original Hebrew. It is as though the pilgrim were saying, "I invoke God not to let your foot be moved, but to make you firm as you go up to the Lord's temple. I call upon Him to keep anxiety from controlling you, repel the danger away from you and us both, and give you peace and reassurance."

How beautiful it is to pray for one another, and join our voices to those that call out to God, for "the LORD restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10). "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chronicles 16:9). "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him" (Proverbs 15:3). "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). So let us encourage one another, being sure and confident that "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people He has chosen as His own inheritance. The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men. From the place of His dwelling He looks on all the inhabitants of the earth" (Psalm 33:12-14).

2. **An encouragement: "He who keeps you will not slumber"** (verse 3b). The traveller encouraged his companion by the fact that God is not overcome by sleep, for He does not slumber. His motto is: "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12). Perhaps the psalmist had Elijah's mockery of the idol-worshippers in mind, as they prayed to their idols: "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27).

1.3. Third: The Choir Assures Him of Help

(verses 4-8)

After the psalmist expressed his need for the Lord's help, which was answered by one pilgrim with a prayer and an encouragement, the throng of travellers joined them in one harmonious choral group.

1. **The Lord does not sleep:** "Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (verse 4). This is a confirmation of what the companion said. Sometimes we call for the help of people who are asleep, and, of course, they do not help us. But the heavenly

Father neither slumbers nor sleeps. If, in one particular night, you find it difficult to fall asleep, do not hesitate to call on your God who neither slumbers nor sleep. He will not be upset with you because you disturbed Him, for He is "delighting in mankind" (Proverbs 8:31 NIV).

The members of the choir must have remembered the history of their people as they suffered the worst sort of humiliation in Egypt under Pharaoh, and how the Lord heard their cry of anguish and saved them with His mighty hand. He even sustained them for forty years with water from the rock and manna and quail. "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night" (Exodus 13:21).

This great God, who worked such a wonderful miracle with the children of Israel desires to work miracles with you. All the hairs of your head are numbered by Him (Matthew 10:30), and He knows you by your name (Isaiah 43:1). He has inscribed you on the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16), and even if you lose the way, He knows where you have gone, and goes after you until he finds you (Luke 15:4).

2. **The Lord shades:** "The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand" (verse 5). "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty ... He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:1,4). The Lord is like "a hiding place from the wind, and a cover from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32:2). When Ruth the Moabite followed her mother-in-law Naomi, Boaz said to her, "The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (Ruth 2:12). And the Lord did repay Ruth, as she believed, and made her the grandmother of King David, the ancestor of Christ.

The singers say that the Lord is "your shade at your right hand." The Lord is nearer to every pilgrim than the city of Jerusalem to which he is making the pilgrimage. We need not go to a particular place to meet the Lord, because He is "at your right hand." The psalmist said, "I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved" (Psalm 16:8). "For He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, To save him from those who condemn him" (Psalm 109:31).

3. **The Lord protects:** "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night" (verse 6). Owing to the hot weather, a pilgrim would travel partly by day and partly by night, and rest at noon. He needed to be looked after night and day, and his companions remind him of this in these two verses. The Lord provided Jonah with this protection when he grew weary in Nineveh: "And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant" (Jonah 4:6). The ancients used to say that to sleep in a full

moon was apt to cause a mental disturbance ("lunatic" means moon-struck).

Here the singers assure those who love God that He does not allow them to be struck by the sun by day nor the moon at night!

4. **The Lord preserves:** "The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul" (verse 7). The Lord preserves the bodies of the believers, as well as their souls, from all evil. He answered the prayer of Jabez in which he said, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!" (1 Chronicles 4:10). Jabez asked both spiritual and physical blessings from the Lord. But knowing that he could enjoy the possession of so many things of this world, he also recognized that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). "The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22). Therefore Jabez asked the Lord to keep him from evil. Truly, "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred ... Better is a dry morsel with quietness, than a house full of feasting with strife" (Proverbs 15:17; 17:1).
5. **The Lord protects:** "The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore" (verse 8). Going out and coming in symbolize the starting and completion of a thing, both privately and publicly. The singers emphasize how much they need the Lord's protection at the beginning of the journey up to the Lord's temple, as well as on their journey back. In doing so the promise is fulfilled: "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out" (Deuteronomy 28:6). "He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:6). "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand" (Psalm 37:23,24). "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24,25).

1.4. Questions

1. What did John Bunyan mean by "The New Birth" and the "Swamp of Despond"?
2. What is meant by "The sun shall not strike you by day, Nor the moon by night" in verse 6 of this psalm?

2. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Two

Gladness in the House of the Lord

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

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

2 Our feet have been standing within your gates, O 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.

5 For thrones are set there for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

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

7 Peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces."

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.

This is a psalm of David. The children of Israel used to sing it on their annual pilgrimage when they reached the walls of the holy city and their feet stood within its gates. They had left behind the land of distress, of which the psalmist complained in Psalm 120, as he made his journey upwards to Jerusalem. God had answered the prayer lifted up in Psalm 121 and helped them, kept them and brought them to their destination in peace. Some commentators hold that David composed this psalm after the Ark of the Lord's Covenant was moved to his city. At that time God promised him that He would establish his throne and build him a house, i.e., give him descendants who would reign over his people.

In this psalm the psalmist says that he was utterly glad as he heard his relatives and neighbours call him to join the procession of travellers making the pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. No sooner had he stood by the gates of the holy city than his mind was filled with memories of the tribes of Israel and how the Lord dealt with them. So he prayed blessing and peace for both the place and the worshippers.

The psalm contains the following:

- First: Gladness for the safe arrival (verses 1,2)
- Second: Holy memories (verses 3-5)
- Third: A sure prayer (verses 6-9)

2.1. First: Gladness for the Safe Arrival (verses 1,2)

1. **Gladness when hearing the call:** "I was glad when they said to me" (verse 1a). Every believer feels glad when he hears the call to draw near to the Lord in obedience to the apostolic command: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). The Lord often sends us calls; first the call to repentance: "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). When we fall into sin we hear Him call, "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" (Revelation 2:5). When we grow weary and groan we hear Him call, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The Lord may call us through a verse from His holy Word, a loving touch of generosity, a correction that puts us on our guard against error, or a word from a friend who calls us to "go into the house of the LORD." How fortunate is the person who is glad to receive the call, knowing that the one who comes to God will by no means be cast out (John 6:37). He desires "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

In the parable of the prodigal son, the son was not sure his father would receive him after he had disobeyed him and squandered his money. But on the contrary, his father welcomed him and was glad to have him back. Heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents, and the penitent sinner himself is filled with joy over his own repentance. Whoever loves God will love His house and will rejoice to pray there, starting with "The LORD is my shepherd" and ending with "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:1,6). The recurring theme of prayer of such a man would be: "But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; In fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple" (Psalm 5:7). When we embark on our journey with God we discover that "Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths'" (Isaiah 2:3). For "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

2. **Gladness from the fellowship of the believers:** "Let us go into the house of the LORD" (verse 1b). The psalmist rejoiced over the invitation and over the fact that he would join a wonderful group of people who love the Lord, adore Him, and, in consequence, their hearts are filled with assurance. He was like a starving man who found someone inviting him to a piece of bread, or a thirsty man who heard someone inviting him to a spring of refreshing water together with joyful friends. The fellowship of the believers gladdens the heart, for they encourage one another. In the "Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan, the pilgrim set off alone toward the Heavenly City, but when his wife did the same, she took her children along. How happy she was to enjoy the company of all her family as they travelled together to the Heavenly City, while she seemed to say, "Here am I and the

children whom the LORD has given me!" (Isaiah 8:18).

In the house of the Lord the weary finds rest for his soul, as David said, "One thing I have desired of the LORD...: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple" (Psalm 27:4).

Confronted with the question of the wicked's prosperity and the distress of the righteous, Asaph found the solution in the house of the Lord. He said, "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end" (Psalm 73:17). When the messages of the King of Babylon reached Hezekiah, mocking both him and his God, Hezekiah found his rest in the house of the Lord. "Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD" and the Lord delivered him (Isaiah 37:14).

3. **Gladness of worship:** "Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (verse 2). The world gives temporary gladness, which does not last long, but the joy of the Lord is our strength, "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10). How lovely it is to come near the Lord's house, even if we were "standing", for standing shows that we are alert and ready to obey.

2.2. Second: Holy Memories

(verses 3-5)

1. **The return to the earlier glory:** "Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together" (verse 3). Capturing the Jebusite stronghold, "David dwelt in the stronghold; therefore they called it the City of David. And he built the city around it, from the Millo to the surrounding area. Joab repaired the rest of the city" (1 Chronicles 11:7,8). However, the Babylonians came and tore down the walls of Jerusalem, ransacked its houses, destroyed its temple and exiled those of its inhabitants who were competent and learned. After seventy years the Lord restored his people to their land. Many of them returned home with the scribe Ezra and began to restore the temple. Another group returned with Nehemiah the governor, and they began to build the walls compact together, filling the gaps and repairing the breaches (Nehemiah 2:17; 7:4). Then the ruined houses were rebuilt, and the city once again had a wall, a temple and houses all completed and made new. Its inhabitants were in one accord, worshipping together and building together, in one heart and in one spirit.

The expression "compact together" can also apply to spiritual life, for although we belong to different backgrounds, cultures and various economical and social circumstances, we are still equal before God our Creator, Care-taker and Redeemer. In the church, we forget our titles and where we come from, and accept that it is enough to be known as children of the same Father. This joint belonging unites us all as one family and as brothers and

sisters to each other, or as precious living stones in one building. As branches in Christ's vineyard we hold hands together to give one message to the world, taking hold of the hope that Christ is preparing a heavenly home for us (John 14:1-4). For as pilgrims we are travelling from the City of Destruction to the Heavenly City: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

2. **Recalling the former tender mercies:** "Where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD" (verse 4). The psalmist gladly recalls that he has a rich historical heritage of adoration and celebration for God. The tribes used to set off on this journey of worship to the Lord's temple three times a year, as God commanded them; twice in spring, for the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Weeks, and once in autumn for the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 16:16,17).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the same as the Passover. It celebrates the passing of the destroying angel over the houses of the children Israel without harming them, while killing the first-born in the houses of the Egyptians. It was named the Feast of Unleavened Bread because they ate bread without yeast on that feast. The second feast, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, which was also called the Feast of Ingathering (of the firstfruits), was a thanksgiving celebration for the harvest. *Pentecost* is a Greek word that means "fifty". The Jewish tradition holds that the law was given to Moses on the fiftieth day after the Exodus. As to the Feast of Tabernacles, it serves as a reminder of the time when the children of Israel used to live in tents (tabernacles) during their journey in the desert. To celebrate this feast the Jews used to set up booths or huts on house-tops and in the open and live in them for seven days.

In every pilgrimage the children of Israel testify to God's favour toward them when He made the destroying angel pass over them, gave them the law and took care of them for forty years of wandering in the desert.

3. **Gratitude for justice:** "For thrones are set there for judgment, The thrones of the house of David" (verse 5). The Lord delegated the king to judge the people with justice. The king would then delegate judges from the royal family and the nobles of the people to sit on the seat of judgment, in order to defend the poor and render justice to the orphan and widow. Because he expects God to administer justice through the king and his men, the believer says to Him, "You have maintained my right and my cause; You sat on the

throne judging in righteousness" (Psalm 9:4). God blesses them in that "He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday" (Psalm 37:6).

Since the thrones are set there for judgment we are not to take the law into our own hands: "Do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

No doubt God's justice now, which He administers through just kings and honest judges, is a symbol of the final justice on the day when all of us will stand before the throne of Christ to give account of all that we did. There is a reference here to the happy reign of the Lord: "The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad" (Psalm 97:1).

2.3. Third: A Sure Prayer

(verses 6-9)

Reaching the gates of Jerusalem, the psalmist's heart filled with gratitude to God, and he began to pray for the great city, the home of the Lord's temple, the place in which the ark of the covenant rested and without which there was no sacrificial atonement. Today as we study this psalm, we lift up our eyes, not to a physical city located in a certain geographical place, but to the heavenly Jerusalem, as God said, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying" (Isaiah 65:17-19). Our heavenly Jerusalem is the spiritual, invisible church of Christ, of which John said, "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).

The Scripture gives this definition of the people of God: "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Romans 2:28,29). This definition explains the nature of the kingdom of God: All those who received Jesus Christ as Saviour and Redeemer, whether they are of Jewish or any other background, are to be the people of God, because "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11). Those are the true people of God. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). Weeping over the destiny of the earthly Jerusalem, Christ said to it, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side,

and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:42-44).

In light of this spiritual interpretation, let us ponder on the prayer of the psalmist.

1. **He prayed for peace for the city:** "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces' " (verses 6,7). Jerusalem means "City of Peace". The psalmist prayed that the city's name will be justified by its condition, so that it would be said, "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly " (Psalm 118:15). When this prayer is answered, the worshippers who have come to keep the feast for the Lord in Jerusalem will have prosperity, the towers on its walls will be safe from the onslaught of the enemies, and the palaces will enjoy peace owing to the prosperity and success of those within its gates. "Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; Mark well her bulwarks; consider her palaces; that you may tell it to the generation following. For this is God, our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death" (Psalm 48:12-14).

Such peace within its walls and prosperity within its palaces will happen when there are no attacks from without or divisions from within, as was the case with the early church: "Then the churches... had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

2. **He prayed for peace for the believers:** "For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, 'Peace be within you.' " (verse 8). The psalmist considers the rest of the believers his brothers and companions, just as David said to the people, "Hear me, my brethren and my people" (1 Chronicles 28:2). Likewise, Christ said, "whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). All the believers are brothers and sisters: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). When we pray for the brethren, we pray for the revival of both the church and the minister, whom Christ calls in the Book of Revelation "the angel of the church." When the believer is in revival, the whole church will be in revival. For this reason the psalmist says that for the sake of his brethren and companions who pray in the church he will say, "Peace" to the congregation of the believers. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).
3. **He asked peace for the house of the Lord:** "Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek your good" (verse 9). The house of the Lord was built in the holy city. So for the sake of the peace of the house of the Lord he prays peace for the city, because the temple is the centre of both worship and political leadership to the whole city. Nehemiah was described as a man "come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel"

(Nehemiah 2:10). Let us, therefore, seek the peace of the church, of every city that has a church and of the capital of our country, so that the Pentecost experience may be repeated with us, when "three thousand souls were added to them ... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41,47).

2.4. Questions

1. The psalmist mentions three reasons for his joy. Write them down.
2. Approaching the holy city the psalmist remembers three great incidents. Write down these three.

3. Psalm One Hundred And Twenty-Three

Have Mercy on Us

A Song of Ascents.

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

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.

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.

The psalmist opened Psalm 121 by saying: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills— From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" and the Lord lent him help on his journey. Standing at the gates of Jerusalem his soul was filled with calm and peace, and he started to sing the verses of this psalm: "Unto You I lift up my eyes, o You who dwell in the heavens" He lifted up his eyes, aware of his continuous need, and fixed them upon Him who dwells in the heavens, because He has been the living Lord, dwelling inside him. He was sure that God rewards those who seek Him diligently, so he stood in front of the temple like a servant waiting for the instructions of his master in utter humility.

The psalmist teaches us that we are always in need of lifting up our eyes to God, because both the world around us and the flesh within us draw our attention downward, hurling obstacles and hurdles in our way. When we are weary we are tempted to turn our eyes away from the Lord and set them on our own resources, or expect help from people around us. We often forget that the Lord said, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD ... Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD" (Jeremiah 17:5,7). Let us, therefore, endeavour wholeheartedly to set our eyes always on Him who dwells in the heavens.

The psalm starts off in the singular "Unto You I lift up my eyes" but it soon turns into a song that is picked up by all the believers, and then the author uses the plural: "So our eyes look to the LORD." So let us all sing this psalm in order to be encouraged and continue lifting up our eyes to the Lord "until He has mercy on us."

The psalm contains the following:

- First: A look to the heights (verses 1,2)
- Second: Pleading for mercy (verses 3,4)

3.1. First: A Look to the Heights

(verses 1,2)

1. **A look to the possessor of majesty:** "Unto You I lift up my eyes, o You who dwell in the heavens" (verse 1). In Psalm 121 the psalmist spoke about God, but in this psalm he spoke to God. He looked earlier to the mountains, but now he lifted up his eyes to Him who dwells in the heavens, and in doing so he drew nearer to Him. His relationship with God rose to a higher level and took on greater depth as he began to see the Lord as King and Judge of the whole world: "The LORD is in His holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men" (Psalm 11:4). The psalmist seems to be saying, "My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for He shall pluck my feet out of the net" (Psalm 25:15). "But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3). Seeing the Lord's glory in His temple and hearing the seraphs shout, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (Isaiah 6:3), the prophet Isaiah realized that the Holy One who dwelt in the heavens filled the whole earth with His glory. He alone deserves that we lift up our eyes to Him, because He dwells in the heavens and is at work on earth. All His ways are true. He rushes to our aid in His mysterious ways that surpass understanding, as if to say to us, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).
2. **A look to the possessor of authority:** "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" (verse 2a,b). Because he saw God as dwelling in the heavens, possessed of all authority in heaven and on earth, the psalmist perceived himself as the Lord's servant. All the believers are the Lord's servants because He has created them, sustains them and has purchased them by redemption. They are honoured to be His servants because in this servanthood is perfect freedom. It is a belonging to the Lord of all the earth. One saint said, "I need your Lordship, but You do not need my servanthood."

The title of a servant or a maidservant is cherished by the believers. It was used often of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5; 1 Chronicles 6:49), Joshua (Joshua 29:24; Judges 2:8), Elijah

(1 Kings 18:36), Daniel (Daniel 6:20), Paul (Roman 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), James (James 1:1) and of all those who were set free by Christ (1 Peter 2:16). David used it to describe his own mother: "O LORD, truly I am Your servant; I am Your servant, the son of Your maidservant; You have loosed my bonds" (Psalm 116:16). The Virgin Mary applied it to herself when she said to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant" (Luke 1:38 NIV).

The Old Testament distinguishes between the servant who was born in the house and the one bought with money. The servant born in the house is dearer because he belongs to the house (Genesis 14:14). How lovely is Timothy's house of which Paul said, "When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5).

The true believer is the one who says to the Lord, "I love my master... and do not want to go free" (Exodus 21:5 NIV). He speaks well of his master and the song of his heart says, "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God... " (as though he were a doorkeeper) "...than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10). The psalmist looked around and saw God dwelling in the heavens, and then focused his eyes and saw His hand bestowing blessings because it is loving and generous, guiding to righteousness because it is righteous and faithful not to lead anyone astray. He realized then that it was the hand of the one in authority, who ought to be obeyed, as well the hand of the one who graciously gives us all good. Let us, therefore, obey the owner of that generous hand, so that we may receive His blessings, have our eyes and ears opened to His instructions, and say to Him, "Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36). Then we will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9), saying with gratitude, "What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me? I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD" (Psalm 116:12,13).

1. **The hand of the Lord guides:** All through the believer's life journey the Lord stretched out His hand to him, just as He did to His people of old: "So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Psalm 78:72). All along the way he hears Him say, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye" (Psalm 32:8).
2. **The hand of the Lord gives:** This is why we neither fear nor worry -- He looks after all His creation: "These all wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good" (Psalm 104:27,28). The psalmist says, " I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). The Lord said to the prophet Elijah, "And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there" (1 Kings 17:4). God

- used the hungry ravens to serve His prophet by bringing him food.
3. **The hand of the Lord protects:** "For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield" (Psalm 5:12). The Lord reassures His people through the words David said to Goliath: "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel... for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands" (1 Samuel 17:45-47). God says of every believer, "Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him" (Psalm 91:14,15).
 4. **The hand of the Lord corrects:** He is a loving Father who takes interest in the purity of his children's lives. Because He wants them to be pure He commands them: "Do not be conformed to (have the form or appearance of) this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). We are to resist sin; but if we do not, He will discipline us to correct us just as the Scripture says, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: 'My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.' If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? " (Hebrews 12:4-7). "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).
 5. **The hand of the Lord recompenses:** It chastises us if we sin, and recompenses us if we do good, as the Scriptures said of Ezra when he led a large group of the children of Israel back to their land with permission from King Cyrus the Persian: "This Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him ... On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him" (Ezra 7:6,9). Ezra himself put it in this way: "[He] has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me" (Ezra 7:28).
 3. **A look to the possessor of mercy:** "So our eyes look to the LORD our God, until He has mercy on us. " (verse 2c). The eyes of the servants will continue to rest upon the hand of the master until he bestows mercy upon them. The two thieves blasphemed and mocked Christ, but the eyes of the one thief, hanging there on the cross, were set upon Christ.

This made him see in Him what the other thief could not: his Lord and Saviour. He found in him what the majority could not: the awaited King. Therefore he said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:42,43). What great mercy God shows to the penitent sinner! It is this mercy that spares us our well-earned punishment. "Have compassion on Your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days! " (Psalm 90:13,14).

War rages on between the serpent and the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Satan will continue fighting the believers relentlessly and ceaselessly. Let us, therefore, fix our eyes upon the Lord's hand that we may receive mercy, because He promised us victory. "Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him" (Isaiah 30:18).

3.2. Second: Pleading for Mercy

(verses 3,4)

The psalmist was overjoyed when he went up to the Lord's mountain, but he knew that he must leave the Lord's temple and go down into the valley, back to his ordinary duties among the wicked, where he would encounter troubles. It was for this reason that he pleaded for mercy.

1. **Pleading to be spared from his sins:** "Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt" (verse 3). The primary cause for contempt and disgrace is sin and being alienated from God. The psalmist, in this stance of pleading for mercy, was like the tax collector who stood afar off and would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). And "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). "He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).
2. **Pleading to be spared from scorn and contempt:** "Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud" (verse 4). The psalmist pleads to be spared from those who offend him, whom he calls "the proud" and "the arrogant". Those who are at ease are those who live in luxury and who do not care about God, but are self-centred. They are not concerned about the troubles of God's people as long as they are at ease.

All their expectations are confined to their personal resources and social or political influence, their wealth, connections or family. They ignore righteous people. They make light of living holy. They mock those who fear God. Amos, the prophet of social justice,

says of them, "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria..." (Amos 6:1).

The proud are great people - only in their own eyes. Concerning the proud the psalmist said, "The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside from Your law. I remembered Your judgments of old, O LORD, and have comforted myself" (Psalm 119:51,52).

Those who are at ease and the proud have made a habit of scorning and deriding God's people. This is what happened on the occasion when Nehemiah planned to rebuild the walls of the city of God: "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?'... Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.' Hear, O our God, for we are despised" (Nehemiah 2:19; 4:3,4). This reminds us of what happened to Christ, for He was "despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; he was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isaiah 53:3). And on the cross "And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads ... Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'... Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing" (Matthew 27:39-44). When we turn to Christ, who was tempted in all things yet without sin, we find Him able to help those who are tempted.

As we pray this psalm along with the psalmist, let us fix our eyes on God's hand, which guides and gives. Let us never turn our eyes away from it. If we experience contempt, let us lift up our eyes to the Lord, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

3.3. Questions

1. Why does this psalm start off in the singular and then turn to the plural?
2. Mention five things the Lord's hand does.

4. Psalm One Hundred And Twenty-Four

If It Had Not Been the Lord

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

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."
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.

This is the fifth Psalm of Ascents, which the Israelites used to sing on their pilgrimage to the temple, which was built on a mountain. Their ascent was both geographical and spiritual. Today we sing these psalms because we are on a rising spiritual journey, in which we go to higher heights in our relationship with the Lord and grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ. Let every day of our lives be a gradual ascent in obedience to God and love for Him and our fellow man, so that our way of life might be patterned after Christ's own life.

In the previous psalm the psalmist told of a painful experience, in which his soul was filled with contempt and scorn from the proud, so much so that he pleaded to be spared from his proud enemy, and God sent a great salvation to him. In this psalm, however, the psalmist enumerates God's benefits and calls the believers to thank and praise God and proclaim that their trust in Him.

The occasion for writing this psalm is not well known. It may have been the attacks of Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites who plotted together to fight Nehemiah and his building team (Nehemiah 4:7-23). Nehemiah and his companions prayed and stood watch over the walls day and night. Once the wall was completed, the enemies were humiliated in their own eyes and perceived that this work was done by God (Nehemiah 6:16).

The psalm contains the following:

- First: A call to thanksgiving (verses 1,2)
- Second: The Lord's many benefits (verses 3-7)
- Third: A proclamation of trust for the future (verse 8)

4.1. First: A Call to Thanksgiving

(verses 1,2)

"If the LORD had not been on our side"— let Israel say- 'if the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us' " (verses 1,2). Twice the psalmist repeats "If the LORD

had not been on our side" in order to emphasize the primary truth that "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6). The same statement was said by Jacob to his uncle and father-in-law Laban when the latter went out to attack him, only to be stopped by the Lord. On that occasion Jacob said, "Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night" (Genesis 31:42). The psalmist also said, "Unless the LORD had been my help, my soul would soon have settled in silence" (Psalm 94:17). Again Nehemiah said the same thing when they came under attack while rebuilding the wall: "Our God will fight for us!" (Nehemiah 4:20). The psalmist must have had in mind the fear of his people when confronted with the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them, while Moses said to them, "The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:14). Truly, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). "The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" (Psalm 34:7,8). "In God I have put my trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 56:11). "The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118:6).

"If the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us," (verse 2). What a difference between Him who is on our side and those who attack us! On our side is the Lord, Master over all the earth, its Creator and the One with absolute authority over it. As to the "men", they are mere mortals, created of dust. Why should we fear if mere dust rises against us? "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes" (Psalm 118:8,9). "Men attacked us" but "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ... Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident" (Psalm 27:1,3). We are made of dust, just as they are. But the Lord who stood by our side and blew into the dust that we are, and made a living soul out of it: "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Psalm 46:7).

4.2. Second: The Lord's Many Benefits

(verses 3-7)

- 1. Deliverance from being swallowed:** "Then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us" (verse 3). The wrath of the wicked was kindled against God's people. The wicked wanted to swallow them alive, at once, like the pit that swallowed the Korahites. "Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they

and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly" (Numbers 16:31-33). In every generation the wicked tried to swallow the believers alive to destroy them and blot out their memory from the earth. These attempts were carried out all through history, so much so that the Church was rightly called "the Church of the Martyrs". Yet, the blood of martyrs has always been the seed of the Church!

Nebuchadnezzar made such an attempt on the people, causing them to cry out, "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me, he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me up like a monster; he has filled his stomach with my delicacies, he has spit me out" (Jeremiah 51:34). The Lord, however, delivered His people and encouraged them, saying, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place" (Isaiah 43:2,3). For this reason the wise man gave this piece of advice to his son to stay clear of the wicked: "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, 'Come with us, let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; let us swallow them alive like Sheol, and whole, like those who go down to the Pit ... My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path" (Proverbs 1:10-12,15).

2. **Deliverance from drowning:** "Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over our soul; then the swollen waters would have gone over our soul" (verses 4,5). When the enmity of the world finds a gap, it breaks through violently to overwhelm God's people. And in the face of such floods of persecution there is no rescuer, refuge or shelter - but God. Sensing the swollen mighty waters rushing down in a torrential stream that sweeps away everything that stands in its way, the psalmist cried out, "Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless His name; proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day ... The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves. The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea" (Psalm 96:1,2; 93:3,4).

The swollen waters stand for the enemies who come like fierce, torrential waves of the sea to fall down on God's people. But God shall never leave them or forsake them, for whoever hears His sayings and does them will be likened to a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matthew 7:24). "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

3. **Deliverance from being a prey:** "Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth" (verse 6). The psalmist likens the enemies to ferocious animals that fall upon their prey and tear them apart with their teeth before devouring them. No one can rescue

the prey but the Good Shepherd, about whom the psalmist calls, "Arise, O LORD; save me, O my God! For You have struck all my enemies on the cheekbone; you have broken the teeth of the ungodly" (Psalm 3:7). "O LORD my God, in You I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me, Lest they tear me like a lion, rending me in pieces, while there is none to deliver" (Psalm 7:1,2). The enemies attempted to do the same thing with Christ, a fact which the psalmist, through the Spirit of prophecy, predicted a thousand years before He was crucified: "For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. But You, O LORD, do not be far from Me; O My Strength, hasten to help Me! Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog. Save Me from the lion's mouth and from the horns of the wild oxen! You have answered Me" (Psalm 22:16-21). Christ's prayer was heard, and He rose from the dead triumphing and victorious.

- 4. Deliverance from the snare:** "Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped" (verse 7). The psalmist compares himself to a bird threatened by a fowler's snare. Experts in the nature of birds, fowlers, know that the birds cannot see the net or evade it, and once they fall into it they cannot free themselves. How happy is the bird that has a mighty deliverer who intervenes in the nick of time, breaks open the snare and releases the bird, thus delivering many other birds who would have otherwise been caught by this snare! Blessed be the soul that the Lord watches over, as it says, "My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for He shall pluck my feet out of the net" (Psalm 25:15). Let it remember the promise: "Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler And from the perilous pestilence" (Psalm 91:3).

Satan's snares are diverse. A snare could be a strange doctrine, pride in the believer, overwhelming lust or falling into depression. All these the Lord destroys. As He releases us from them we shall be "hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8,9).

Let us give Him thanks for delivering us from being swallowed, from drowning, from the teeth of fierce animals and from the fowlers' snares, because He redeems our life from destruction (Psalm 103:4).

4.3. Third: A Proclamation of Trust for the Future (verse 8)

"Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth" (verse 8). The psalmist proclaims his trust for the future because the source of his help and hope is the King of kings, in whose hand is the king's heart; like the rivers of water, He directs it wherever He pleases

(Proverbs 21:1). He is, likewise, the Creator of all things by the word of His power, who created heaven and earth and all that is them, and He will preserve them until it is time for us to move on from His earth to His heaven: "But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You; let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them; let those also who love Your name be joyful in You. For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield" (Psalm 5:11,12).

God is the same, yesterday, today and forevermore. In the past He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, broke open Pharaoh's snare, and drowned him together with his soldiers in the sea. Therefore Moses and the Israelites sang, "The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). "Trust in the LORD forever, for in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength" (Isaiah 26:4).

4.4. Questions

1. Give three Bible verses proving that the LORD is on our side.
2. What are some of Satan's snares?

5. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Five

The Lord Surrounds His People

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.

3 For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.

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!

This psalm declares the believer's continual security because of the Lord's unchangeable power and faithfulness. They are as steadfast as the holy mountain on which the temple was built. The psalmist speaks of sweet memories that the believers exchanged after they had arrived at Mount Zion together. The etymology of the word "Zion" is uncertain. It may be related to the Arabic *sahwah*, meaning "hillcrest" or "mountain ridge." It may also be derived from a root meaning to preserve or protect. Mount Zion, i.e. "Mount of Stronghold", is a high, strong mountain; it is not vulnerable to earthquakes or the enemies' attacks. It remained

intact in the hands of Jebusites until David captured it in 1003 BC. Later he it called "The City of David" (2 Samuel 5:7) and transferred the ark of the covenant there (2 Samuel 6:12). Afterwards, Solomon expanded the city of Jerusalem to the north so that it included Mount Moriah on which the temple was built in 958 BC (2 Chronicles 3:1). At a later date, the entire city of Jerusalem was called Zion, including the stronghold and Mount Moriah.

The psalm contains the following:

- First: A proclamation of trust (verses 1-3)
- Second: The request of him who trusts (verses 4,5)

5.1. First: A Proclamation of Trust

(verses 1-3)

1. **The believer's steadfastness:** "Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever" (verse 1). Mountains are symbols of steadfastness and unchangeability. In the same way Mount Zion is mentioned here because God established His temple on it. The Scripture says, "that the LORD has founded Zion, and the poor of His people shall take refuge in it" (Isaiah 14:32). The one who trusts the Lord is the one who places implicit confidence in Him practically, not just theoretically, and acts on this confidence. Such a man walks in accordance with this teaching, so that it might be said about him, "A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion. Surely he will never be shaken; the righteous will be in everlasting remembrance. He will not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD. His heart is established; he will not be afraid, until he sees his desire upon his enemies" (Psalm 112:5-8). A person who trusts the Lord is like a child whose father lifts him up on a high place and then tells him to jump down. The child jumps fearlessly into his father's arms, a calculated jump of faith, even in the dark. He ventures to jump because he trusts that his father will not let him fall, as though saying with Paul while on the verge of being shipwrecked, "We let here drive" (Acts 27:15). It was not the waves that drove them along, but the Lord of the waves. "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun ... The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:26-27). "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NIV).

The believer knows that "The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty; the LORD is clothed, He has girded Himself with strength. Surely the world is established, so that it cannot be moved" (Psalm 93:1). He trusts in the promise: " 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,' says the LORD, who has mercy on you" (Isaiah 54:10). Therefore he sings, "I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right

hand I shall not be moved" (Psalm 16:8).

Martin Luther loved Psalm 46. It was the psalm that inspired him to stand in the face of fierce opposition and threats of violence. He even set it to music, and the tune he used still inspires the believers today, as they sing, "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn" (Psalm 46:5), that is, in the darkest hours right before dawn. They are sure that the light of day will defeat the darkness, no matter how deep the darkness is!

2. **The believer's bosom:** "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever" (verse 2). It is an undeniable fact that mountains surround Jerusalem, and just as well a fact that God embraces the believer in His own bosom. This is an abiding spiritual fact that will endure from this time forth and forever, assuring the believer of security since he lives in a strong fortress. "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). The Lord surrounds the person who trusts in Him like an immovable, well-established mountain, fulfilling His true promise: "'For I,' says the LORD, 'will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.'" (Zechariah 2:5). Experiencing this very same thing, David said, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me" (Psalm 27:10).

Every time we take part in a baptismal service to join a newly saved person to the Lord we read the text from the gospels about the command to baptize. This text is preceded by and followed by a promise from Christ. The preceding promise says, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Christ has all authority in heaven to forgive the sins of those who confess them and resolve to leave them behind. He answers prayer, intercedes on behalf of those who take shelter in Him, and dispatches His angels to serve them. His authority on earth is also evident from the fact that He still lives, works miracles and delivers everyone that takes refuge in Him. The promise that succeeds the baptism, however, is: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). These two promises teach us that the Lord lovingly embraces everyone that unites himself to the Lord in baptism, even to the end of the age.

3. **The believers triumph:** "For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity" (verse 3). The sceptre is a symbol of authority and control. But because of God's promises to those who fear Him the wicked will not continue to control the land allotted to the righteous. And the righteous will say, "The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers" (Isaiah 14:5). The sceptre may rest on the righteous for a while, and the wicked may sometimes take control over the believers, but this must come to an end, lest the righteous use their hands to do evil. The believers are the people of God, and as long as they are in the world they will have tribulation; they are not immune to trials and

temptations. But the time will come when the Lord will break the staff of the wicked, and it will be said to the believers, "It shall come to pass in the day the LORD gives you rest from your sorrow, and from your fear and the hard bondage in which you were made to serve, that you will take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say: 'How the oppressor has ceased, The golden city ceased!'" (Isaiah 14:3,4).

The Emperor Trajan summoned a bishop in order to make fun of him and his Christ. He asked him, "What is your Nazarene carpenter doing now?" The bishop answered him, "He is preparing a coffin for the Roman Empire." And this is exactly what happened! Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor, came to believe in Christ. Then Constantine convened the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Three hundred and eighteen bishops attended the Council, one of whom had had one eye plucked out under torture. The Emperor kissed the scar of his plucked eye, ordered fifty copies of the Bible to be transcribed at the Roman government's expense, and made Christianity the state religion. This is how the Nazarene made the coffin. There will come a day when every knee shall bow to Christ, of those in heaven, and of those on earth (Philippians 2:10). The sceptre of the wicked shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous.

The psalmist was not concerned about the sceptre of the wicked robbing him of his possessions or ending his life. Rather, he feared that the righteous would sin, because Christ says to them, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). The authority of the wicked will not rest on the believers' portion, for they shout, "O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; yes, I have a good inheritance... For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock" (Psalm 16:5,6; 27:5).

5.2. Second: The Request of Him Who Trusts

(verses 4,5)

1. **Requesting goodness to those who are good:** "Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts" (verse 4). God is good by His very nature; He does good even to those who do not deserve it. He gives generously to all without reproach (James 1:5). There is none among mankind who is perfectly good or completely upright. There is none that deserves such goodness from God, because there is none who does good; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Psalm 14:1-3; Romans 3:23). Those who are good and righteous here are not possessed of absolute goodness and righteousness. They are those who have a good and righteous intention that seeks only to obey the Lord. They are those who are faithful and loyal to the Lord

wholeheartedly, such as the apostle Paul who said, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me" (Philippians 3:12). The Lord does good to us out of His abundant love, not because we deserve it, but because He is "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6,7). Asaph, one of the authors of the psalm, said of God, "Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart" (Psalm 73:1). Those who are good are the seed that "stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15 NIV). It was also this attribute that Nehemiah claimed for himself in his prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people ... Remember me, O my God, for good" (Nehemiah 5:19; 13:31). God does good to the righteous by granting them four things:

1. **Salvation:** "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). This is the greatest goodness that the Lord gives to those who believe and trust that the blood of Christ cleanses them from all sin "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed" (Romans 3:24,25).
2. **Forgiveness:** "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not" (Lamentations 3:22). When we ask Him, "forgive us our sins" we trust that He will answer and hear because "He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).
3. **Fulfilment of the promises:** There is a host of the Lord's promises that were fulfilled. Perhaps the greatest of them all was that the Seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent (Satan; Genesis 3:15). This promise, no doubt, was fulfilled in Christ's victory and resurrection from the dead, for thus "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:54,55). The Lord fulfils His promises and remains faithful to us, even if we are faithless. He does not change His nature (2 Timothy 2:13). "Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass ... And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed" (Joshua 21:45; 23:14). Right after the prayer for the dedication of the temple, Solomon said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that

He promised. There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised through His servant Moses" (1 Kings 8:56).

4. **Impartation of good gifts:** "I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has bestowed on them according to His mercies, according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses" (Isaiah 63:7). On offering his donation for the building of the temple, David said, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You" (1 Chronicles 29:14).
Whoever comes to grasp the Lord's lovingkindnesses will pay the tithes of his income back to the Lord, because "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).
2. **Requesting punishment for workers of iniquity:** "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!" (verse 5). In the history of Israel there are examples of those who turn aside to their crooked ways. The Israelites had turned aside when Moses said to them, "And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the LORD your God—had made for yourselves a molded calf! You had turned aside quickly from the way which the LORD had commanded you" (Deuteronomy 9:16). The two sons of Samuel also "did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice" (1 Samuel 8:3). Shemaiah, who sought to deter Nehemiah from building the walls of Jerusalem, did the same thing for the love of money (Nehemiah 6:10,12,13). "The foolishness of a man twists his way, and his heart frets against the LORD" (Proverbs 19:3), so he joins those who turn aside and depart from God, saying to Him, "Depart from us, for we do not desire the knowledge of Your ways" (Job 21:14). The Lord leaves them alone in their crookedness and delusion, to meet their dreadful destiny together with the workers of iniquity. They choose crookedness, and they have to endure the punishment for their crooked choice. For it will be said to them, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

The psalmist concludes the psalm with an invocation: "Peace be upon Israel!" (verse 5). Who are those meant to receive this peace? The Bible says, "It is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Romans 9:6-8). This means that there is "Israel" who are the descendants of Abraham, yet who do not have the faith of Abraham. These are the physical Israel. There is also "the Israel of God". They are those from every tribe and nation that believe like Abraham. The physical Israel do not receive the blessing because they rejected Christ who "came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His

name" (John 1:11,12). "The Israel of God" are the new creation that accepted Christ. They are those who bear in their bodies the marks of Christ; those who crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The scripture says, "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. " (Galatians 6:15,16). Peace be upon the spiritual Israel, i.e., all those who have the faith of Abraham, God's friend, and follow the Lord with determination and strength of heart.

5.3. Questions

1. What should be the believer's response to God's embracing?
2. Give an example proving that the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous.

6. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Six

Joy Comes after Tears

A Song of Ascents.

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."

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

4 Bring back our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South.

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.

In this psalm the psalmist recalls with tears the seventy-year captivity of the Israelites in Babylon, which began in 586 BC. Nebuchadnezzar tore down the temple, pillaged its utensils and carried off the best of the people to Babylon, where they languished in grief, pain and distress over their exile from the land of their fathers and from the Lord's temple. Then the psalmist recalls with joy the unexpected, miraculous deliverance when the Lord pardoned them and intervened on their behalf. He commanded them to return, so Cyrus the Persian issued his famous decree of their return. Some of them returned under Zerubbabel, some with Ezra the scribe, and others with Nehemiah the governor. Their return was like a dream come true; they almost did not believe it was happening. The return from the Babylonian captivity is called "The Second Exodus." It was as great as the Exodus out of the land of Egypt. Both events astonished the Gentiles beyond description.

Those who returned from the exile encountered many troubles as they began to rebuild the temple and restore the broken walls. They prayed, "Bring back our captivity, O LORD" (Psalm 126:4) as though they were faced with a new captivity. They asked the Lord to make their end as joyful as the time of harvest, although their beginning was as painful as the time of sowing, watering and waiting for the crop.

There are points of similarity between our psalm and Psalm 85, which says, "LORD, You have been favorable to Your land... You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people... You have taken away all Your wrath... Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cause Your anger toward us to cease. Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong Your anger to all generations?" (verses 1-5).

When singing this psalm let us remember that there are many types of captivity, from all of which the Lord will restore us. No only that, but He will also heal their ugly effects, whether concrete or moral, physical or spiritual. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all" (Psalm 34:19). Captivity not only means emigrating from our country to go to another, but also to emigrate from success to failure, from health to sickness, or from spiritual strength to spiritual weakness. The Lord restores us and brings us back from all of these, not only to our original state, but to even a better one. That is why we say of Him, "He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Psalm 23:3).

The psalm contains the following:

- First: The miraculous deliverance of the past (verses 1-3)
- Second: Request for a new deliverance (verses 4-6)

6.1. First: The Miraculous Deliverance of the Past

(verses 1-3)

1. **A miracle that surpassed imagination:** "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream" (verse 1). The psalmist remembers the deliverance from the distress and troubles of captivity, as well as the removal from the place of worship. Yet, he stops to meditate on the heavenly miracle that brought them back home and made them feel like dreamers. Could it possibly be a dream from which they would wake up only to face the bitter reality that they are still captive, or face a new kind of captivity? They were like Christ's disciples when Christ appeared to them after His resurrection; they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled (Luke 24:41). They were like Peter in prison as he awaited his execution on the next day, being in deep sleep. Then an angel of the Lord came to rescue him, and a light shone in the prison. The angel woke him up, telling him to gird himself, tie on his sandals and put on his clothes. Because it

was cold outside, he added that he should put on his cloak on top of his clothes and follow him. So he went out and followed him, not knowing that what was done by the angel was real. He thought he was dreaming. They went past four guard posts before they came to the main gate. The angel opened it while Peter still thought he was dreaming! Once they were out, the angel went down one street with him and immediately departed from him. At this point Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me " (Acts 12:6-11).

The Lord will also deliver us from diverse captivities, and bring us out laughing:

1. **Deliverance from the captivity of sin:** Guilt is harder and more cruel than any captivity. But God brings back the penitent sinner from captivity and spares him the wages of sin by forgiving him. No only that, but He also delivers him from the effects of his sins, such as fear of exposure, torment of the conscience and the anticipation of condemnation. Moreover, He delivers him from the power of sin, granting him victory over his wrongdoings, removing his deficiencies, strengthening his weakness and making him able to forgive himself and others. "If you abide in My word," Jesus said, "you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" ... "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:31-36). All mankind are God's slaves because He created them, but if they live in the slavery of sin they remove themselves from God's presence forever - they get cast into the fire that has been prepared for the devil and his hordes. The son, however, who is freed by Christ will always remain in God's presence. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, and everyone who gets saved will be like a dreamer because of the magnitude of the divine forgiveness.
2. **Deliverance from the captivity of affliction:** Affliction may be concrete or moral, or both, as was the case with Jonah inside the fish. "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction," said Jonah, "and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice ... I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God" (Jonah 2:2,6). Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said the following about an affliction that happened to him in Asia, "We were burdened beyond measure, above strength ... that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us ... and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us" (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). When anyone suffers from trouble or affliction and the Lord delivers him from it, he walks as in if in a dream, almost not believing that he has been delivered.
3. **Deliverance from the captivity of sickness:** After Job was on the point of death and took a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes

- "the LORD restored Job's losses... Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10). Job was like someone who dreams. No doubt he felt like saying, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:1-3).
4. **Deliverance from the captivity of want:** "Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing" (Psalm 34:9,10). Abraham complained to God and said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" The Lord answered, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:3,4). Years went by before the Lord fulfilled His promise. Then one day three angels came to Abraham to tell him that he would beget a son from Sarah. Sarah laughed secretly because both she and her husband were old. But "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" "And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age" (Genesis 18:10-14; 21:1-4). The child was named Isaac (which means: "he laughs"), for Abraham and Sarah were like those who dream! "God has made me laugh," Sarah said, "and all who hear will laugh with me."
 2. **The joy of those who returned:** "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing" (verse 2a). When the returned exiles woke up from the nightmare of the Babylonian captivity to the wonderful reality of being back home again, they truly realized that the Lord restored them back from their captivity. Because of this, their hearts filled with great joy, for God's mercy was far greater than their expectations. They could not help laughing till their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues expressed their joy through singing. "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly" (Psalm 118:15). They could have been truly described by the Scripture: "Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you" (1 Peter 1:8-10). Yes, "A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken" (Proverbs 15:13).
 3. **The astonishment of the nations:** "Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them'" (verse 2b). The sound of laughter, singing, and joy was loud and sincere, which made the heathens around them ask about the cause of such merriment. When they knew, they were astonished. They realized that what took place with the Israelites could not be anything but a miraculous work of the LORD. "The LORD has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of

the nations" (Psalm 98:2) "The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10).

4. **The gratitude of the returned exiles:** "The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad" (verse 3). With all thankfulness the returned exiles acknowledged the Lord's great work and proclaimed it far and wide. They did not refer this return to Ezra's righteousness or Nehemiah's high position as governor, but to the great God, while they seemed to say, "Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, you mountains, o forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel ... So the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness; sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 44:23; 51:11).

When the angel Gabriel imparted the good news to Mary that she found favour in the eyes of God, and that she would conceive and give birth to Christ, the Saviour of the world, Mary hurried to her relative Elizabeth. Once she saw her, Elizabeth blessed her because she believed that the Lord would carry out what He had promised her. In response, Mary sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior ... For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name ... He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly" (Luke 1:46-52). "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

6.2. Second: Request for a New Deliverance

(verses 4-6)

The psalmist requested a new deliverance from the Lord, which he likened to two things: the dry streams as they fill with rain water and joyful harvest after the toil of planting.

1. **He asked to be filled like the streams:** "Bring back our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South" (verse 4). The southern part of Palestine, known as the Negev Desert, is a very dry place. In summer the little streams dry up, to be filled again in autumn with rain water. When Caleb the son of Jephunneh gave his daughter Achsah the arid land of the South, she begged him, "Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water" And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs (Judges 1:15). Just like Achsah, Caleb's daughter, the psalmist asks for springs for the dry land, as though he were calling God: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:7-9). The condition of the psalmist and his people was like

the seasonal streams of the South that went dry, so he asked for an overflow of blessing to quench his thirst and bring forth vegetation, like the dry rivulets when they fill with the refreshing autumn rains. As Israel sinned and turned away from worshipping the One God, God said about them, "My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). The springs of their spiritual lives dried up, and their punishment was to be taken into exile. We, too, are like them in that we need our spiritual streams to be filled with the living water that imparts life, for He called us, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters ... Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:1,6). Christ said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37,38). This change from thirst to satisfaction takes place when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, as was said by the prophet Joel, "Be glad ... and rejoice in the LORD your God; for He has given you the former rain faithfully, and He will cause the rain to come down for you— the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month ... So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten -- ... And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:23,25,28). This prophecy was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, and it can repeat itself with us today.

2. **He asked for a harvest, just as a sower would:** "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (verses 5,6). Before the rains fall the land is black, dry and cracked, waiting for sowing and the rain. The sower then goes out with a seed bag and, with tears of labour, begins to sow the seeds, water them and wait for fruit. Once the rains fall down and the land receives its supply of water, the cracks disappear and the seeds begin to sprout. Soon the time comes for harvest, when the farmer reaps with joy and brings in his harvest with singing so as to express his thanks to God: "You crown the year with Your goodness, and Your paths drip with abundance" (Psalm 65:11).

The psalmist begged the Lord to turn his painful experience of tears into joy, gladness - and singing - which the Lord did. After the return from captivity, the walls were broken down and the temple was devastated, so the people's souls were filled with sadness. Then they set about building the temple: "But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy" (Ezra 3:12). But after the completion of building their hearts just overflowed with joy. "Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy ... And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the LORD made them joyful" (Ezra

6:16,22).

Seeing the broken walls, the people were struck with grief, but Nehemiah said to them, "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach" (Nehemiah 2:17). And again joy filled their hearts at the completion of building. "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps... Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off" (Nehemiah 12:27,43).

In our spiritual lives, too, we have sorrows followed by joys, because the Lord restores us from those sad times. So we feel like dry streams filling with rain, or like a sower enraptured with joy over the harvest after the laborious work of planting.

1. **Joy that follows sorrow for sin:** The Lord comforts everyone who feels sorry for his sins by bestowing His forgiveness upon him. Then, the heart of the penitent rejoices. He does not cover his sins, but confesses and forsakes them, and is shown mercy by God (Proverbs 28:13). Christ must have had this condition in mind when He said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

A believer who confesses his sins and receives God's mercy is prompted to pray for another sinner. He urgently prays to God to lead that person to repent. He goes out to that sinner and talks with him about the necessity of repentance to God. Then God answers the prayer and leads that sinner to repentance, to the joy of the believer who led him to Christ, and the joy of the repentant sinner who had his sins forgiven. The apostle Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase... he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building" (1 Corinthians 3: 6-9). This is what Christ said, too, to His disciples after he had won the Samaritan woman to repentance, "He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together... I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors" (John 4:36-38).

2. **Joy that follows the end of pain:** In the wilderness of life we go through diverse adversities and pains; we may sag under their pressure, grieve and fear but "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials ... Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:2,12). "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy

- comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).
3. **Joy that begins with meeting Jesus:** When Christ's ministry was almost at a close, He said to His disciples, "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy ... Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you" (John 16:20,22). The disciples were sorry when Christ was crucified, while the elders of the Jews were glad that He was removed from the scene. After the resurrection, however, the tide turned. The disciples were glad once more as Christ appeared and said to them, "Peace to you." And now, we joyfully expect Christ's return, and when He comes back those who wait for Him will break into tears of joy.

6.3. Questions

1. Mention some types of captivity.
2. What did the psalmist mean in verse 4 when he prayed, "Bring back our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South"?

7. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Seven

Family Worship # 1

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

1 Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.

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.

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

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.

Families that celebrated the feasts in Jerusalem used to sing Psalm 127 and 128. These two psalms were called "The Family Psalms". They teach us the characteristics of a happy, God-fearing family. As we meditate upon them we ask God to make our families happy and worship Him joyfully, so that we could say, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15). In obedience to the Mosaic Law, the Israelites used to go up to the temple to worship as families. That was why, when Christ was twelve years old, the holy family went up to Jerusalem to worship. In singing these two psalms every family should

recall God's favour towards them and review their spiritual state. If anyone has offended another he should apologize to him, and the offended should forgive the offender. Thus the family is reunited and becomes inseparable. The family that worships together remains together. We also learn from these psalms to build our family relationships in the light of God's holy Word so that they will be healthy relationships. The Scriptures compare God's Word to a mirror that shows us our faces, i.e. exhibits the truth about our spiritual condition as families, and reveals if we are doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves (James 1:22-24). Moreover, the holy Word is like a spiritual balance that helps us evaluate our lives and purify them from all impurities: "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word" (Psalm 119:9). It is also a focused searchlight that draws our attention to our defects in order to perfect them, because "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path ... The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:105,130). Again it is a gauge for us to compare ourselves against, which shows us how much of the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ we have attained (Ephesians 4:13).

When thinking of our families we take into consideration the extended family in which we grew up and the nuclear family with which we live. Family is something that goes on and expands. We say about it in a spiritual sense: The God of my father Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but my God, too. A family's happiness depends on the blessings that God gives them. It is He who builds the house. It is He who keeps its pillars standing and prosperous. The home is the cornerstone of society. If the family is prosperous, society prospers and grows healthy, and the Lord guards the city.

The psalm contains the following:

- First: Beginning of a house (verses 1,2)
- Second: Children in the house (verses 3-5)

7.1. First: Beginning of a House

(verses 1,2)

These two verses speak about the inefficacy of human efforts without divine help.

1. **Building the house:** "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (verse 1a). The Lord is the true builder of each and every house. Man may build a house, but he may not dwell in it (Deuteronomy 28:30). Obedience to the word of the Lord, therefore, is the foundation on which a happy house stands, as Christ said, "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock" (Matthew

7:24,25). A man may inherit or earn money, then build a house. But this material building does not build a warm home or a family that fears and loves God because "Houses and riches are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD" (Proverbs 19:14). Many people build themselves grand houses of stone but they do not enjoy a happy home life within their cold walls. In Genesis 11 you read that the people wanted to build the Tower of Babel out of defiance to God, but it soon came to nothing. Then in Genesis 12 you read how God built a house and a family to Terah, the father of Abraham, the friend of God, and that he lived a long life and that from his descendants came Christ the Saviour of the world.

2. **Guarding the house:** "Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (verse 1b). The Lord is the true Guard and without His keeping watch over the house it does not last long. The Old Testament tells us that King Ahab of Israel made a treaty with King Jehoshaphat of Judah to wage war against the Syrians to retrieve the city Ramoth in Gilead, which the Syrians had occupied. When the news of the war reached the king of Syria he charged the captains of his soldiers to shoot only King Ahab. To protect Ahab, however, King Jehoshaphat went into battle in his own royal attire, whereas Ahab went in a disguise. As a result, the Syrians attacked Jehoshaphat, who cried out to the Lord and the Lord helped him. Immediately the soldiers backed off because they knew that he was not Ahab. Meanwhile, a Syrian soldier shot an arrow at random and struck the king of Israel in a weak spot in his armour. Ahab tried to protect himself, but failed (see 2 Chronicles 18).

The Lord builds the house of married couples and gives them children, turning the house into a city. If the Lord does not guard this city there is no point in the parents trying to do so. As human beings parents try many ways to keep the city, that is their house, thriving and lively. They give their children the highest education possible and the best material provisions in terms of housing, food and clothing. The members of the family celebrate their happy events, exchange gifts and spend vacations together. Afterwards they discover that all these things did not give them a happy home. Praying together as a family, however, and going to the Lord's house together is the best means of keeping the peace of the family, because the Scripture says, "(You) ... are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

3. **The welfare of the house:** "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" (verse 2). Rising up and sitting up mean work and rest respectively. The intended meaning is that curtailing the hours of rest and extending the hours of labour are useless unless the Lord gives His blessing. He provides without limit for those who love Him without limit, even as they sleep. Solomon, the author of this psalm, was the richest, wisest and most intelligent man of his time. He was wise enough to know that "The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

A rich farmer was asked, "Why do you rise up early in the morning and stay up late at night?" "If you want to own the world," he answered, "You rise up early to seek it and search for it, and once you own it, you must stay up late to keep that which you own of it!" This is the wisdom of the world that makes a man serve the idol of mammon all day long and worry about it all night long. He presumes that through his diligence and vigilance he can make money to keep his peace of mind and secure his home and family. But "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). The Lord takes care of you during your sleep, because you can not take care of yourself, either in your sleep nor in your wakefulness! "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how" (Mark 4:26,27). It is only the Lord who gives the increase and bestows the blessing, granting peace and security to those who love Him.

This does not mean that we should be idle, but we should see the difference between ambition and greed. Exert yourself, but do not overdo it. Tend to your affairs, but do not worry about them, obeying Christ's admonition: "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air ... your heavenly Father feeds them ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin ... Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6:25-34). "One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). There is no reason to worry. On the contrary, let us believe and be obedient to the apostle's commandment: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NIV). In this way we will enjoy the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, which will guard our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

7.2. Second: Children in the House

(verses 3-5)

The house expands as the members of the household increase in number. We often say, "The newlyweds' rest ends with the arrival of the first baby; once it cries it never stops day or night." The psalmist, on the other hand, sees it differently. He goes as far as seeing four blessings in having children:

1. **Children are a heritage:** "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD" (verse 3a). The psalmist sees that his children are the Lord's. It was the Lord who gave them to him, committed them to his care so that he may enjoy them as a gift from Him. Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, and without Him nothing was made that was made. When Esau met his brother Jacob after the latter's return from the house of their

uncle Laban, he saw the women and the children and asked Jacob, "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant" (Genesis 33:5).

The Lord gave the psalmist children so that he might enjoy them and raise them up for the Lord, that one day it will be their turn to raise up their own children: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one ... I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You. And again: 'I will put My trust in Him.' And again: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given Me.' " (Hebrews 2:11-13).

2. **Children are a reward:** "The fruit of the womb is a reward" (verse 3b). The Lord gives the children as a reward or payment to their godly parents. The psalmist did not see his children as a biological product or a mistake, but as a heavenly reward and a blessing from the Lord. "Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing ... So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him ... The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward'... 'One who will come from your own body shall be your heir' " (Genesis 12:1,2,4; 15:1-4). Abraham obeyed God and believed, so his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, and God gave him children in his old age.
3. **Children are arrows:** "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth" (verse 4). Arrows are used to defend oneself, one's honour and one's land. God gives the children of one's youth to parents as a heritage and reward to defend home and repel the attacks of the enemy. Parents are spoken of as mighty warriors just as God called Gideon a "mighty man of valor" (Judges 6:12), not because he was mighty, but because God was going to make him so. The credit of might goes to God, not to Gideon. Like Gideon, we fear the things that we have not attempted before, and are terrified of the unknown. Have you heard the cry of a child going to school the first time? Have you noticed the fear of an official assuming the responsibilities of his position for the first time? Have you observed a mother and a father welcoming their first child with a mixed feeling of joy and fear? They wonder if they could be the good parents they should be and if they could succeed in raising up such a child. The Lord, however, encourages us that the children of one's youth are like arrows in the hands of a warrior! In this verse we see the responsibility of both parents and children:
 1. **The responsibility of the parents:** A warrior has got to humbly learn and train well before shooting his arrow, because an arrow that is shot never returns, but flies out of the hand and the will of the one who shot it. As long as the arrow is still in your hand, you can affect it and direct it, but your effect on it ends as soon as you release it from your hand. Let us, therefore, be good examples and good teachers to our children as

long as they are with us. What we have planted in them will abide in them, as the wise man said, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Do not discipline your child in anger, but rather control yourself and do not panic as you train the arrow. Rely on the grace that backs you up. If you are a good role model, and if you diligently pray for them and give them advice, you will be the best parent ever. But never forget that your example must come first, and that your prayer is more effective than your repeated advice!

A wise warrior will take into account the speed of the wind that will divert the arrow in flight, i.e. the sins that so easily ensnare our children and us (Hebrews 12:1). It is only the grace of God that protects us and our children from them. Do not forget that your children are God's gift to you, and no matter how much of a "mighty man of valour" you are in terms of your mind, hand and wealth, it is the Lord who works in you. You and your children both are like Moses' staff - you can neither divide a sea nor work a miracle unless you become "the rod of God" (Exodus 4:20). Be "the man of God" (2 Timothy 3:17) to become a wise warrior who shoots arrows that hit the mark.

2. **The responsibility of the children:** An arrow is small in size, but it has a great effect. Let no child underestimate his own worth in God's eyes and his parents' eyes. God said to Jeremiah, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak" (Jeremiah 1:7). Every believer is like this: In himself he is nothing but five loaves and two fish, but in Christ's hand he becomes a blessing (John 6:9).

An arrow must be straight, likewise a believer should make sure that he bends for none but God and does nothing except in obedience to and fear of Him. "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life ... remove your foot from evil ... My son, give me your heart, And let your eyes observe my ways" (Proverbs 4:23,27; 23:26). Arrows are made by the hands of a skilled craftsman, i.e. the Lord: "Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). God has committed the responsibility of helping an arrow to be released to the parents, teachers and spiritual mentors. Every arrow-like child ought to remember God's kindness to him, as well as that of his parents, teachers and spiritual mentors. An arrow must travel far. Therefore, let us have a spiritual vision when the Holy Spirit falls upon us to carry out the plan that God made for us (Joel 2:28). An arrow must also hit the target: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

4. **Children are a line of defence:** "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" (verse 5). The psalmist blesses the father of a family who has raised up his children like arrows, for they

shall not be ashamed, but shall defend their parents and family in front of the elders and leaders who are on the enemies' side. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of such sharp arrows. Naturally quivers are not all the same size; there are big families and small families. Do not compare your family with another, or your children with each other. Happy is the man whom God gave arrows that will make his heart glad as they leave his mighty warrior's hand accompanied by the grace of God. Let parents look at their children with pride. If you hurried to rebuke your child to change his course, you will be just as happy to hurry to give him the praise due him when he hits the mark.

The house of Reverend Samuel Wesley (the father of John and Charles Wesley) caught fire while his eight children were within it. As they handed him his eighth child out of the window he said to his neighbours, "Thank you ... Now let us come and kneel down and thank God, for he has returned my eight children back to me. Let the house burn! I am still a rich man!" Here is a father who knew the value of his children. These children "shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate" Ancient cities had walls around them. They had huge gates and in front of the main gate was a public square where the elders of the city used to sit to judge disputes. If an enemy makes a complaint against a father, his good children would come to this square to defend their father verbally, or, if need be, by force of arms. Verbal battles are so frequent. Goliath attacked Israel verbally eighty times within forty days, and cursed David by his gods (1 Samuel 17:10, 43). Again, good children will not be ashamed of their parents, but defend them as David defended his people. This is the happy family through which the Lord made the father of the family a happy man. Let us remember our families with gratitude to God, and pray that these characteristics may apply to our families today.

7.3. Questions

1. How can we build a warm home?
2. Verse 4 of this psalm says, "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth" What is meant by this?

8. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Eight

Family Worship # 2

A Song of Ascents.

1 Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways.

2 When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.

3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table.

4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the LORD.

5 The LORD bless you out of Zion, And may you see the good of Jerusalem All the days of your life.

6 Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

The whole family went up, accompanied by other families, to celebrate the feast, singing "The Family Psalms," Psalm 127 and 128 to thank God for His favour. They listed the Lord's blessings and kind acts and recalled their family responsibilities. They experienced the Lord's blessings to the godly family in the form of happiness and well-being, which followed them all as long as they would live on earth, and beyond that into eternity. The God-fearing father of the family was made glad by his virtuous wife and children who shot forth like arrows and were rooted like growing plants. Martin Luther called this psalm "The Marriage Psalm," because it is a guide to every newlywed for a happy family life.

The psalm contains the following:

- First: The happiness of the God-fearing believer (verses 1,2)
- Second: The family of the God-fearing believer (verses 3-6a)
- Third: The society of the God-fearing believer (verse 6b)

8.1. First: The Happiness of the God-Fearing Believer

(verses 1,2)

The psalm starts off with blessing the God-fearing man. The word "blessed" is in the plural, as though the psalmist says, "How happy! How happy! How happy is the God-fearer!" Although every man faces both sweet and bitter experiences, some see only those things that make them wretched and say, "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). But thanks be to God for those like our psalmist, who see in life a double portion of happiness and bless themselves. Happy is every man who fears the Lord, for he has become a son of the living God and heir to the eternal glory in Christ.

1. **The bliss of fearing God:** "Blessed is every one who fears the LORD" (verse 1a). Fearing the Lord is the cornerstone of godliness and wisdom, as Job said, "The fear of the Lord -- that is wisdom" (Job 28:28). Similarly, the psalmist says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10) and the wise man adds, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:7). Fearing God is not the same as dreading God or being terrified of Him, nor is it a hypocritical fear, because perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). It is a feeling of a lover who fears he may hurt the feelings of his loved one, and says, "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). We love, revere and respect our earthly fathers, as well as praise and honour them in obedience to

the divine commandment. We do not allow anyone to hurt them and try hard to make them happy. It is the same way with God: we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We obey Him because He blesses us. We honour Him because He deserves our tribute of honour. We glorify and praise Him, and offer Him the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15). We seek His face and have life because His favour is for life (Psalm 30:5).

- 2. The bliss of obedience:** "Blessed is every one... who walks in His ways" (verse 1b). Bliss begins with repentance and the new birth, then grows bigger and continues growing as you walk in obedience to God and move forward in His ways. Moving forward implies perseverance in the face of obstacles and suffering. "If anyone desires to come after Me" Jesus said, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26). Scripture says, "Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways" (Proverbs 8:32). The ancients called Christianity "the Way" (Acts 9:2) because it is a way of life and thought that differs from any other. It is the way of life and thought that Christ had, for He said, "I am the way" (John 14:6). Christ is the main way from which branch out and in which converge all ways of goodness, mercy and love, so that we may have His mind of benevolence and self-sacrifice (Philippians 2:5) toward God, ourselves, our families, our neighbours, our church and our society. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Before receiving true happiness man had his own way, because: "He who walks in his uprightness fears the LORD, but he who is perverse in his ways despises Him" (Proverbs 14:12). After repenting and following the way of godliness, however, man begins to walk in the way of the Lord who "restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Psalm 23:3).

- 3. The bliss of work:** "When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you" (verse 2). A happy person is one who enjoys the labour of his hands, which satisfies his heart and soul. Besides, everyone who fears the Lord must work to meet his needs and those of his family because "If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks" (Ecclesiastes 10:18 NIV) and "Wise people store up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction" (Proverbs 10:14). Paul said also, "You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me" (Acts 20:34). It was Paul again who said, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

The man who fears the Lord respects the work that he does because whatever he does in the fear of the Lord is holy. "Let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28). No work is shameful

or unholy except sin. The work of the wife and the mother for her husband and children is just as holy as the work of a clergyman who discharges his religious duties. Fearing God turns hard work into a blessing, so that the Scripture is fulfilled, "The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

Sadly, some people toil and labour but do not enjoy the labour of their hands because they are sick. They do not eat what they work hard to possess! Sometimes a man labours but does not reap because an enemy robs him of what he worked for. But happy is the man who walks in the way of the Lord because he plants and reaps the produce of his labour. The Scripture will be fulfilled to him, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of My people, and My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them" (Isaiah 65:21-23).

The Preacher said, "Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:18,19).

8.2. Second: The Family of the God-Fearing Believer

(verses 3-6a)

The man is the head of the household. Every man who fears the Lord and loves Him from a pure heart will receive the Lord's blessing on his wife, children and grandchildren. In the second part of our psalm the psalmist speaks of the virtuous wife, the blessed children and the good husband. "Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches will be in his house, and his righteousness endures forever" (Psalm 112:1-3).

1. **The wife is a fruitful vine:** "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house" (verse 3a). Houses used to have a large courtyard in the middle, and the rooms were around it. In this unroofed courtyard they used to plant a vine. It would rise to cover the walls with a beautiful and fresh green colour.

The vine shaded the house from the hot sun and provided it with fresh grapes and dried raisins. A righteous wife is like a vine; she is a "virtuous wife. For her worth is far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10).

1. **A good wife beautifies the house:** She is like a vine that beautifies her home by her

- presence; she is the crown of her husband. The wise man said, "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her." The he said to her fondly, "'Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.' Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised" (Proverbs 31:26-30).
2. **She shades the house:** A good wife, like a vine, provides shade for her children and husband: "The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life" (Proverbs 31:11,12).
 3. **She produces fruit in the house:** A good wife is like a vine that produces pleasant fruit, whether it be fresh grapes or dried raisins. Her fruit is love, kindness, humility and longsuffering. She also produces offspring whom she rears up by being a good role model and an example of godliness. As a result, they, in turn, produce fruit, at which time she says, "Here am I, and the children whom God has given me" (Hebrews 2:13). In addition, she produces other fruit for the benefit of the family: "She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands ... She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants ... She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle" (Proverbs 31:13,15,19).
2. **The children are olive trees:** "Your children like olive plants all around your table" (verse 3b). Olive trees are always green. They are useful in many ways. The Lord said to his people, "The LORD called your name, Green Olive Tree, Lovely and of Good Fruit" (Jeremiah 11:16). Therefore every member of His people says, "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the mercy of God forever and ever" (Psalm 52:8).
 1. **Living plants:** Olive trees have life within themselves; it starts when they are planted and increases as they grow. Parents feel joy as they behold their children grow year after year. They watch for that physical, spiritual and mental growth proudly and joyfully. The liveliness, activity and movements of the young ones fill the corners of the house with happiness and the sweet noise of laughter.
 2. **Promising plants:** Olive trees promise an abundant harvest. At the beginning, they do not produce fruit, but fruit surely comes. Parents, likewise, look forward to their children's adulthood and independence in their own homes. They also look forward to the time when their children produce grandchildren, who become a source of joy to both their parents and grandparents. "That the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments" (Psalm 78:6,7). It will be said about them, "You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near

- in their mouth but far from their mind" (Jeremiah 12:2). Truly, "Children's children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children is their father" (Proverbs 17:6).
3. **Plants in need of care:** Plants need to be taken care of in order to become strong, take root, grow taller and bear fruit. They need water to be nourished and a hedge to be protected from foxes and thieves. If the fruit proves to be late in appearing, one needs to dig around them and put manure. Similarly, our children often need a word of encouragement or of due praise. Let not the parents stop at just rebuking them when they make mistakes. Let the parents remember that they themselves were young and needed their own parents' encouragement. God, the heavenly Father, is the model for all parents in His love, encouragement and forgiveness.
 4. **Different plants:** Every olive plant is different, as much as every child has his own personality and distinct talents. We must not compare the children with each other or with the children of other people, especially when they are in their teens. They are no longer children, but they are not adults yet. Nevertheless, our expectations of them grow and their own expectations of themselves do, too. When they fail to meet all these expectations, they feel frustrated and make mistakes that they do not want to make. At those times they need us to listen to them, feel for them, pray for them, give them a good example and offer them our advice, rather than our reproach. We must not consider the teenager our enemy; he is an olive plant that grows and produces fruit in its due time. Let the parents heed the advice, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).
 5. **Plants around the table:** They are also olive trees around the table, where the family gives thanks and engages in delightful conversation with each other. If only we would do what Samuel did as he visited the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite! He refused to sit down to eat until little David came to share in the food, so that the joy of the elders should be made complete by his presence (1 Samuel 16:11). How happy is the house in which all members sit around the food that God provided for them, thanking Him and enjoying the company of each other, thus fulfilling the Scripture, "Better is a dry morsel with quietness, Than a house full of feasting with strife" (Proverbs 17:1).
3. **The husband fears the Lord:**
1. **A blessed husband:** "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you out of Zion" (verses 4,5a). Everyone who fears the Lord is blessed in all he does, and will hear the priestly blessing: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace " (Numbers 6:24-26). The Lord will give favour to the blessed husband because He is pleased to honour him.

The psalmist says that the blessing of the Lord comes from Zion, where God's temple and the ark of the covenant were. Blessing comes to us when we worship in spirit and truth in the house of God. The word "Zion" may be related to the Arabic *sahwah*, meaning "hillcrest" or "mountain ridge". It may also be derived from a root meaning to preserve or protect. Mount Zion, i.e. Mount of Stronghold, is a high, strong mountain; it is not vulnerable to earthquakes or the enemies' attacks. It remained intact in the hands of Jebusites until David captured it in 1003 BC. Later he called it "The City of David" (2 Samuel 5:7) and transferred the ark of the covenant to it (2 Samuel 6:12). Afterwards, Solomon expanded the city of Jerusalem to the North so that it included Mount Moriah on which the temple was built in 958 BC (2 Chronicles 1:3). At a later date, the entire city of Jerusalem was called Zion, including the stronghold and Mount Moriah.

2. **A stable husband:** "And may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life" (verse 5b). We achieve a stable life when we live in a stable country and see its good all the days of our lives. Therefore "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks (should) be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

"May you see the good of Jerusalem": this is a spiritual as well as a political wish. Jerusalem was both the political and religious capital of the Israelites, and every loyal citizen must seek the good of his country's capital religiously and politically. As we lead a godly life we seek the spiritual, political and economical welfare of our country. This welfare is, of course, a result of the godliness of society as a whole, beginning with those who love the Lord because "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34).

The God-fearing believer and his family bring about the reformation of the entire society. Let the family of the God-fearing believer be like a choice seed in good land, "That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as pillars, sculptured in palace style; that our barns may be full, supplying all kinds of produce; that our sheep may bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields; that our oxen may be well laden; that there be no breaking in or going out; that there be no outcry in our streets. Happy are the people who are in such a state; happy are the people whose God is the LORD!" (Psalm 144:12-15).

3. **A long-lived husband:** "Yes, may you see your children's children" (verse 6a). The implication is made of good health, longevity and the enjoyment of grandchildren. Job was an example of the Lord's blessing and long life. He lived a hundred and forty years after the Lord healed him from his sickness, and saw his children and

grandchildren for four generations because he was "a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 2:3; 42:10-17).

8.3. Third: The Society of the God-Fearing Believer

(verse 6b)

"Peace be upon Israel!" (verse 6b). The psalmist concludes his psalm the same way he ended Psalm 125, that is with the invocation "Peace be upon Israel!" Who are those meant to receive this peace? The Bible says, "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham... That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Romans 9:6-8). This means that there is an "Israel" that is the descendants of Abraham but which does not have the faith of Abraham. These are the physical Israel. There is also "the Israel of God." These are those from every tribe and nation that believe like Abraham. The physical Israel do not receive the blessing because they rejected Christ who "came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:11,12). "The Israel of God" are the new creation that accepted Christ. They are those who bear in their bodies the marks of Christ; those who crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The Scripture says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:15,16). Peace be upon the spiritual Israel, i.e., all those who have the faith of Abraham, God's friend, and follow the Lord with determination and strength of heart.

Let us ask God to make his divine peace prevail. Peace be upon everyone who fears God! Peace be upon our houses! Peace be upon our society and country, as Christ promised us, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

8.4. Questions

1. Why does the psalmist say that a good wife is like a vine?
2. In verse 3 the psalmist describes the children of the pious man. Explain.

9. Psalm One Hundred and Twenty-Nine

"From my Youth"

A Song of Ascents.

1 "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," Let Israel now say—

2 "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me.
3 The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long."
4 The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked.
5 Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back.
6 Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up,
7 With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms.
8 Neither let those who pass by them say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD!"

Nations usually recall their past to glory in it, and in the triumphs and accomplishments they achieved. Egyptians, for example, glory in the pyramids and the great monuments that existed more than five thousand years ago and are still standing, majestic and awesome. In this psalm the psalmist recalls his own past and that of his nation, not for the sake of personal glory, but to remember with humility the heavenly grace and assistance that kept him alive, as it was said, "But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:24). Paul also said, "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). As a result of pondering over the past, the psalmist summoned courage to face the tribulations of the present. Consequently, he lifted up his voice thanking and exalting the Lord, and called all the people to sing along with him (as he did in Psalm 124). This psalm gives every believer a motive for facing tribulations and adversities with patience: "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:3-5). Tribulations teach us that without the Lord we can do nothing, but through Christ who strengthens us we can do all things, so let the weak say, "I am strong."

The psalm contains the following:

- First: The troubles of the godly are temporary (verses 1-4)
- Second: The wicked are doomed (verses 5-8)

9.1. First: The Troubles of the Godly are Temporary

(verses 1-4)

1. Many troubles (verses 1,2):

1. **The abundance of troubles:** "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth, Let Israel now say— Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth" (verses 1,2a). The psalmist repeats that the troubles and sufferings of the godly in this present world are many, because it lies under the control of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). Christ said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The psalmist remembers tribulations that overtook him and his people from their youth. God said, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). The youth of the Israelites began with the Exodus when God said, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7,8). The Egyptians oppressed them severely: "the officers of the children of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, 'Why have you not fulfilled your task in making brick both yesterday and today, as before?'" (Exodus 5:14). So the Lord said to Moses, "Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.' So Moses spoke thus to the children of Israel; but they did not heed Moses, because of anguish of spirit and cruel bondage" (Exodus 6:6-9).

The Israelites suffered from inferiority within as well as from the taskmasters without. Suffering and humiliation had become their daily bread. Such was the suffering of the author of Psalm 13 who complained to God about God, then to God about himself, then to God about his enemies.

2. **The salvation of God:** "Yet they have not prevailed against me" (verse 2b). Those who fear God encounter many troubles, but the Lord aids them against them, so that the wicked cannot prevail against them. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all... Let Israel now say, 'His mercy endures forever' " (Psalm 34:19; 118:2). This special circumstance finds expression in the apostle's exclamation: "'For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Psalm 44:22; Romans 8:36,37).

Difficulties reveal man's weakness and helplessness to him, and lead him to take shelter with the Strong One. Tribulation moves us to seek God's protection all the more, and in this way to experience His fatherly goodness: "For the scepter of

wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity" (Psalm 125:3). Tribulations also urge us to seek divine Providence, which does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). David said to Goliath, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied ... Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands' " (1 Samuel 17:45,47). When Saint Ignatius, the archbishop of Antioch, was taken to Rome to be thrown to the hungry lions during the persecution of 107 AD he said, "I am God's wheat. The lions' teeth will crush me to make me God's pure bread." He knew that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, which Christ purchased with His own blood. Despite all these persecutions all the forces of evil will not prevail against it: "No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is from Me,' says the LORD" (Isaiah 54:17).

2. Severe troubles (verses 3,4):

1. **The severity of the troubles:** "The plowers plowed on my back; they made their furrows long" (verse 3). A furrow is a trench in the earth made by a plow. How severe were the troubles of psalmist, who was thrown to the ground, whipped and trampled on so often that his back was like plowed land. This was how severely prisoners were treated in those times. The Bible says about David that he "brought out the people who were in it (the city of Rabbah), and put them to work with saws and iron picks and iron axes, and made them cross over to the brick works. So he did to all the cities of the people of Ammon. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 12:31). This torture is also described in this way: "But I will put it into the hand of those who afflict you, who have said to you, 'Lie down, that we may walk over you.' And you have laid your body like the ground, and as the street, for those who walk over. " (Isaiah 51:23). People were cast to the ground for passers-by to walk over their backs!

The Lord may often allow those who reject His Word to meet with such severe agony to prepare their hearts to receive His Word, just as a plow tills the lands to make it good for sowing and produce good fruit.

2. **The salvation of God:** "The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked" (verse 4). The psalmist describes the Lord as righteous, just and upright in all

He does. He says, "there is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior" (Isaiah 45:21). When His people sin He allows them to go through severe troubles, but he does not desert them, as He did not desert Nehemiah and his companions. Nehemiah said as a response, "However You are just in all that has befallen us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly" (Nehemiah 9:33). He allows discipline, but He later breaks the bands that bind the oxen to the plow that plows on the psalmist's back, so the plow stops. The enemy's strength is limited no matter how strong he is and the destiny of Lord's enemies is known beforehand: "Woe to the multitude of many people who make a noise like the roar of the seas, and to the rushing of nations that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations will rush like the rushing of many waters; but God will rebuke them and they will flee far away, and be chased like the chaff of the mountains before the wind, like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. Then behold, at eventide, trouble! and before the morning, he is no more. This is the portion of those who plunder us, and the lot of those who rob us" (Isaiah 17:12-14).

9.2. Second: The Wicked are Doomed

(verses 5-8)

1. **The wicked will be put to shame and turned back:** "Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back" (verse 5). They fight an unequal fight. They, the idol-worshippers, have pitted themselves against the stronghold on which the temple of the Lord was built. This is the stronghold of which the psalmist said, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain ... God is in her palaces; He is known as her refuge. For behold, the kings assembled, they passed by together. They saw it, and so they marveled; they were troubled, they hastened away. Fear took hold of them there" (Psalm 48:1-6). They will be turned back, willingly or not, because they fight against the One who is far stronger than they. Christ said to Saul of Tarsus, "Why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). Goads are made of iron and are used on the back of the ox to prod it to pull the plow quickly. Can an ox kick against the teeth of the plow or the goads on his back because it is enraged against the farmer without hurting itself? By kicking against the goads it wounds itself and still does not do any damage either to the plow or to its owner.

The enemy may win the battle, but he must lose the war. Final victory belongs to Him who went out conquering and to conquer. He is the One we call on, "Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O LORD! Let them be ashamed and confounded who seek my life; let them be turned back[a] and confused who desire my hurt" (Psalm 70:1,2).

2. **The wicked will perish:** "Let them be as the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor he who binds

sheaves, his arms" (verses 6,7). A kind of grass sprouts on top of mud houses after it rains. Because this grass does not have any depth of soil, it neither grows nor lasts long. It soon withers before it produces seed or yields fruit. Again because its stalks are short the reaper cannot fill his hands with it; the one who binds sheaves cannot fill his arms with it because of its sparseness. So it is with the wicked. They are like the grass on housetops that neither gladdens the hearts of the reaper nor fills the arms of him who binds it into sheaves, for evil shall slay the wicked: "In the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers" (Psalm 90:6). God said of the enemies of His people that they, "had little power; they were dismayed and confounded; they were as the grass of the field and the green herb, as the grass on the housetops and grain blighted before it is grown" (Isaiah 37:27).

3. **The wicked will not receive a blessing:** "Neither let those who pass by them say, 'The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD!'" (verse 8). Passers-by used to greet the reapers in this way, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD!" But wicked passers-by do not greet wicked reapers because they do not like each other, because their harvest is meagre or because their enemies rob them of their harvest. " 'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked' " (Isaiah 48:22).

The believers, on the other hand, enjoy the blessing of peace, as the Scripture says, "Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you!' And they answered him, 'The LORD bless you!'" (Ruth 2:4). "They shall again use this speech in the land of Judah and in its cities, when I bring back their captivity: 'The LORD bless you, O home of justice, and mountain of holiness!... For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul'" (Jeremiah 31:23-25).

This is a divine call to repentance and returning to God: "Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:6,7).

It is also a strong calling to every believer to be of good courage and strengthen his heart in the LORD, neither to be afraid nor dismayed.

9.3. Questions

1. In this psalm, why does the psalmist recall his past?
2. Explain what the psalmist meant by saying "The plowers plowed on my back." How did God save him?

10. Psalm One Hundred and Thirty

A Psalm of Repentance

A Song of Ascents.

1 Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD;

2 Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications.

3 If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.

5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, And in His word I do hope.

6 My soul waits for the Lord More than those who watch for the morning— Yes, more than those who watch for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is mercy, And with Him is abundant redemption.

8 And He shall redeem Israel From all his iniquities.

This psalm is the sixth of the seven Psalms of Repentance, which are Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. Martin Luther called four of these psalms, namely Psalm 32, 51, 130 and 143 "The Pauline Psalms". He gave them that title because they show how forgiveness of sins is for everyone who believes and puts his trust in the redemption that God provided through Christ. This is a recurrent theme in the writings of the apostle Paul. We have seen how the pilgrims have gone up to the temple in Jerusalem, presented themselves to the Lord and said, "Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!" Then they began to reminisce on God's acts of lovingkindness toward them and worshipped Him together individually and as families. Now in this joyful atmosphere one psalmist remembered his sins. He felt unworthy to stand in the Lord's presence and to enjoy offering his worship to His majesty. He, therefore, took shelter in God's mercy for him and sang the words of this psalm. When he saw the Lord's glory in His temple, he repented and cried out to the Lord because of his guilty conscience. Memories of the temple filling with clouds when Solomon inaugurated it must have filled him with awe (1 Kings 8:11). Isaiah also responded in this way when he heard the angels shout, "Holy, holy, holy." He said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

In this psalm the psalmist called his people to confess and repent in order to receive forgiveness from God. He expressed the feelings of the guilty human soul as it cries out and pleads, waiting, hoping and expecting, full of confident faith because "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

The psalm contains the following:

- First: The penitent psalmist cries out (verses 1-4)
- Second: The penitent psalmist waits for redemption (verses 5-8)

10.1. First: The Penitent Psalmist Cries Out

(verses 1-4)

1. **Feeling guilty makes us cry out:** "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (verses 1,2). The psalmist cries out "out of the depths" to express his urgent need and sense of impending danger. He sank under the weight of his sin. As the psalmist compares himself with God's holiness he cannot but say, "Lord, I have inspected the depths of my heart in the light of Your holy word. Your grace helped me to understand it. And being enlightened by Your Holy Spirit, I found myself to be a sinner. If weighed on the scales, I am lighter than air. I am unworthy to stand in Your holy presence. Therefore I cry out to You from this miserable pit because my sins have separated me from You. But I ran to You for shelter. I seek refuge in You from all my fears." "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for my God" (Psalm 69:1-3).

Then he moves on from crying out to speaking with God and pleading with Him. Feeling guilty, he shouts aloud like a scared child so that his father would hear him and rescue him. At another time he pleads in a quiet voice, knowing that the Lord's mercies will visit him and seek him out as the good shepherd seeks out a lost sheep until he finds it. And just as His divine mercy stretched out its hand to Joseph to deliver him from the cistern, and to Daniel to deliver him from the lions' den, so it would be done for the psalmist.

He was aware of God's promise to Solomon on the day he inaugurated the temple: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place" (2 Chronicles 7:14,15).

2. **Feeling guilty leads to repentance:** "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (verse 3). The psalmist recognizes that if God counts his sins against him and does not blot them out because of His mercy, there is no way for him to stand in the divine court of law! "Here we are before You, in our guilt," Ezra said, "though no one can stand before You because of this!" (Ezra 9:15). The psalmist does not plead innocent, but confesses his helplessness and unworthiness in God's presence, as Job said to God, "If I sin, then You mark me, and will not acquit me of my iniquity" (Job 10:14).

This is despair that leads to hope! It is the despair of someone who knows that "They

have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one" (Romans 3:12), that the wages of sin is death. "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him— For the redemption of their souls is costly, and it shall cease forever... But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me" (Psalm 49:7,8,15). Consequently, he casts himself wholly on the divine grace, like the tax collector who, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." and went down to his house justified (Luke 18:9-14). Martin Luther said, "I will remain, till the last minute of my life, a beggar for God's mercy" because "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NIV).

- 3. Feeling guilty leads to a godly life:** "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (verse 4). This is neither the fear of punishment, nor the despair of forgiveness, but the godly fear of the forgiven repentant sinner. It is a respectful, honouring fear of the holy God, who alone has the power to forgive sins and trespasses. "I, even I," says God, "am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25). God's forgiveness makes us love, obey and serve Him, as well as call our brethren and neighbours to repent and return to the One who blotted out our transgressions like a thick cloud, and our sins like a cloud. Let our prayer be, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You" (Psalm 51:10-13). And thus we conduct ourselves throughout our life here in fear (1 Peter 1:17).

10.2. Second: The Penitent Psalmist Waits for Redemption

(verses 5-8)

- 1. He waits for redemption because God promised it:** "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning— Yes, more than those who watch for the morning" (verses 5,6). "I wait" in the Hebrew comes from a root that signifies stretching a rope from this side to the other, with the human soul standing on one side and the divine promise on the other. This rope of waiting binds the human soul to the divine promises. It is a confident awaiting of revealed mercy: "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield" (Psalm 33:18-20). "And in His word I do hope" for God's words and promises always come true. Because God is faithful and just, the psalmist confidently waited for Him, knowing that what he waited for will surely come to pass. Yes, "more than those who watch for the morning" in

the assurance that it will surely break forth no matter how dark or long the night was. Light must shine forth and daybreak must come, and the Sun of righteousness will rise.

The psalmist was also thinking of many who were waiting for the morning:

- **The priests:** every priest whose turn it was to perform his priestly service in the temple had to wake up early before the night was over to hurry to the temple in order to offer the sacrifice for the redemption of the people. Our psalmist, too, desires to offer his service to his God.
- **The guards:** at daybreak they come to the end of their nightly watch and labour, and lie down to rest their bodies. The psalmist, too, desires rest for his soul.
- **Travellers:** they watch for the morning light to continue their journey and reach the destination that lies ahead of them. The psalmist, too, is on his way to the Heavenly City and desires to reach it.
- **The sick:** they feel lonely during the night and wait for daybreak to find someone to put them in good humour so as to overcome their sickness. The psalmist, too, feels lonely and in need of the fellowship of the believers.
- **Sailors:** they arrive at the destination by night and wait for the morning to sail into the harbour. The psalmist, too, waits for the ship of his life to cast anchor on the shore of safety and rest.
- **The sinner:** he lives in darkness and waits for the grace of God to shine on his heart and grant him the precious divine forgiveness.

We find ourselves in all those who watch for the morning. We wait for the Lord as His priests who draw near to Him and bring people near to Him, as well. We are like guards who have a responsibility, waiting for Christ's return so that our guard duty may end and we find rest in Him. We are like travellers bound for the Heavenly City, awaiting our arrival to it or the coming of Christ who will take us there. We are like weary patients, overtaxed by life, as they watch for the break of morning and hope to be refreshed by the believers' fellowship. We are like sailors who have set sail, awaiting the arrival at a safe shore, in order to see the great city, whose builder and maker is God. We are also sinners waiting for God's mercy and forgiveness more eagerly than those who watch for the morning. The approach of the blessing makes us all the more eager to receive it because "now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11,12).

2. **He waits for redemption because God is merciful:** "O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption" (verse 7). All the sins of mankind could not diminish God's mercies and redemption, not even as little as a mustard seed! Thereupon we have no escape from our sins unless He encompasses us

with His grace and redeems us with His atonement. "Is Ephraim My dear son?" the Lord said, "Is he a pleasant child?" The answer ought to be "no" because he had sinned. But the Lord goes on to say, "For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him" (Jeremiah 31:20). The tribe of Ephraim was not pleasant; he deserved punishment. God, however, did not forget him or leave him in his sins. On the contrary, He frequently remembered him and yearned for him with intense feelings, desiring to show mercy to him. This is exactly what the apostle meant when he said, "And you... were dead in trespasses and sins ... But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:1-6).

Yes, with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption because He is our great Redeemer. Christ offered Himself as atonement for all mankind once and for all, having obtained eternal redemption. This is more precious than all the Mosaic sacrifices, which were offered on a daily and a weekly basis, as well as on feast days. They were all symbols of the One and Only sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who "is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

- 3. He waits for redemption because God's redemption is complete:** "And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities" (verse 8). By "Israel" the psalmist intends the spiritual offspring of Abraham from all races and backgrounds, who have an Abraham-like faith. The redemption offered by God is complete, not partial; permanent, not temporary. God's atonement can expand to include and cover all the sins of mankind in all ages "and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin... and... from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7,9). There is no sin, regardless how great it is, that the blood of Jesus cannot atone for if we come to Him in repentance. Redemption is a divine act that issues forth from divine love. It is available to us because of the divine intervention on behalf of fallen sinners. There is hope for every sinful soul, no matter how far away it is, when it returns submissively and says, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin... Against You, You only, have I sinned... that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge" (Psalm 51:1-4). Therefore, ask for His redemption with confidence.

This psalm reveals to us the depth of the pain that guilt can cause. It encourages us to cry out for deliverance from the depth of our hearts, without making any human attempts to save our souls. All our attempts are ineffective and unsuccessful. Let us seek refuge in the divine mercy and let us rely on the divine forgiveness, which is based on abundant redemption. God

calls us, saying, "Come now, and let us reason together... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

10.3. Questions

1. Why does feeling guilty lead us to repentance?
2. Mention five kinds of souls who wait for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning.

11. Quiz

There are two questions at the end of each chapter. If you answer 15 of these questions correctly you may join our Bible school by correspondence and work toward a certificate.

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