

The Songs of Ascent
Psalm 120 - 134

For the next few weeks we will be going through fifteen Psalms grouped together as the Songs of Ascent. No one knows for sure who grouped them together or why. David wrote four, Solomon one, and the other authors are anonymous. The most widely accepted idea is that these psalms were traveling songs. Since Jerusalem is situated on a high hill, Jews making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the three appointed Jewish feasts would sing these songs on the “ascent” or the uphill road to the city. According to some traditions, the Jewish priests also sang some of these Songs of Ascent as they walked up the steps to the temple in Jerusalem. As we are pilgrims traveling through this world, let’s see what message these songs have for us as well.

Psalm 120
God’s Presence During Distress

In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me. 2) Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue. 3) What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? 4) Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals of the broom tree! 5) Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! 6) My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace. 7) I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war. NKJV

“In my distress”... I think we can easily relate to the feeling of being in distress. Just daily life in this chaotic world can grieve us greatly. The psalmist was speaking here of being slandered by others. As Christians, we seem to be constantly under verbal attack these days. We are ridiculed for our beliefs and labeled intolerant for following God’s word. The words of Isaiah 5:20 are coming to pass: *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* We see it in action every day. Being lied about rouses our anger and indignation and we want to do something to defend ourselves against the evil or fight back. How can we do that?

“I cried to the Lord”... the only solution! Trying to take care of any situation on our own never works out well. Our efforts can often make the situation worse and bring further distress. Cries to man avail nothing but cries to God bring strength. Isaiah 41:10 tells us: *“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”* When we are in distress, who should we turn to for help but our Father?

“He heard me”... what an answer to our distress! *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear.”* (Isaiah 59:1) God is always waiting for us to come to Him. He is the living God, completely in control, wanting to give us His peace in the midst of the storm!

Psalm 121
God The Help of Those Who Seek Him

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. NKJV

The singer of this Psalm was looking to the hills of Jerusalem which were probably still pretty distant. The temple is still far away but God isn't. He understood that they didn't have to be in Jerusalem to be under God's care. God was with them on the journey all of the way to their destination. His trust was not in a place but in the God who created heaven and earth. His gaze did not stop when he looked to the hills but he looked beyond to the God who created the hills.

Sometimes we put our trust in people or places or things. The world would say we have to trust in ourselves and what we can accomplish - have a positive attitude and go for it. We often trust in what we can provide for ourselves. But God wants us to trust in Him. The Psalmist goes on to remind us of God's credentials in the protection department. First, He created heaven and earth. No one else can truthfully make that claim! He will not allow your foot to be moved. The hills He created are firm and stand fast; they are immovable. Yet our human feet so easily stumble without God as our protection. Ephesians 6:13 says: *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."* He can make our foot as firm as the hills so we can stand fast.

The Psalmist reminds us our God never slumbers or sleeps. Remember when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in I Kings 18:27. When Baal did nothing Elijah mockingly suggested *"perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."* We have great joy in knowing our God never slumbers or sleeps. He is there for us 24/7. He is our protection every moment. The Israelites experienced His protection while in the wilderness with the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. The psalmist is reminding us that nothing can harm us any time of the day when God is watching over us. He is our covering in every circumstance.

Our last assurance in this Psalm is that there is no end to God's care for us. He will preserve us from evil, preserve our soul, and preserve us from beginning to end. God will keep us in His hand until the day when we finally reach our destination and stand in His glorious presence.

Psalm 122
Prayer for Jerusalem

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. NKJV

This is one of the four Songs of Ascents specifically attributed to King David. He wrote it for the Jerusalem he knew and for what it would become under his son and their descendants. During David's life there was never a temple but he made plans and preparations for the temple that his son Solomon would build. It's possible he was writing this psalm about going to the tabernacle which was regarded as the house of God in his day. But most likely he wrote this psalm in anticipation of the pilgrims who would make the journey to the house of the Lord built by Solomon.

Coming to God's house made David happy though he knew no building could contain God in all His glory. Yet at the house of the Lord he could focus his thoughts, prayer, and worship on the Lord and hear His word. This made him glad. Do we look forward to being in the Lord's house with such gladness? No building is required for us to be in God's presence but being in the house of the Lord should bring us great joy. Hebrews 10:25 instructs *"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."* The day is certainly approaching and as the body we need each other more than ever to keep on the right path: we need encouragement, exhortation, and instruction. Most of all, God still deserves all of our praise and worship.

David also exhorted pilgrims coming to the Holy city to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. As we know, Israel has known much war and conflict which continues to the present day. Way back in Genesis 12:3, God told Abraham *"I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* We are still called on to pray for the peace of Jerusalem: to pray for the kind of peace that only God can bring; the peace which will produce the end to wars and strife; the peace that will come from finally accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

Psalm 123
Mercy From the Lord During Affliction

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. NKJV

The Psalmist starts by stating his intention - to lift up his eyes to the Lord. He is not focusing on his circumstances or himself, but on the Lord. This is a good reminder for us. So often we get stuck looking only at the situation we are in. We realize our inability to solve the problem, which only serves to dishearten us even more. Self-pity then takes over and the hole gets even deeper. As a last resort, when all else fails, we finally look up to the Lord for help. We could save ourselves so much distress if we sought God's help right away! Remembering God dwells in the heavens should allow us to confidently trust in His assistance. Earth may have no mercy or help, but heaven is full of mercy and help.

In the first four Psalms of Ascent, we can see a gradual progression.

- In Psalm 120 we lament our surroundings and those against us
- In Psalm 121 we lift our eyes to the hills of Zion
- In Psalm 122 we delight in the house of the Lord
- In Psalm 123 we look above the hills and temple to the Lord in heaven

We are to look to the Lord for everything “*until He has mercy on us*” - not until we get tired of waiting and try to take things back into our own hands. We want answers right now, no delay! He wants us to wait trustingly, confidently, obediently, and expectantly; to persevere patiently with our focus on Him.

Finally, the Psalmist asks for mercy to deal with the feelings of contempt placed on him by others. Sometimes we can ignore contempt for our beliefs and we let it roll right off. But there are those times when we let it get to us until we are “exceedingly filled.” Scorn is even harder to take when it comes from those who seem to have few problems or difficulties in this life. Add contempt from the arrogant and proud and it is even worse. We need to remind ourselves who is in control. The Psalmist waited for God's mercy, confident that it would triumph. In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus tells us how we should view persecution for our beliefs. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹⁾Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹²⁾Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” Look to the Lord in every situation; He is faithful and great is our reward in heaven!

Psalm 124
Thanking God For the Help Only He Can Bring

“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. NKJV

In this Psalm, King David is leading Israel in giving praise to God for His past help and expressing confidence in God’s future help. He repeats twice that their help was in God alone; if the Lord had not actively been on their side they never would have made it through. Many times because of their disobedience and unbelief, God allowed the Israelites to be defeated, taken into captivity, or wander in the wilderness so they would recognize Him as their true source of help. As His chosen people God would never forsake them; He was still on their side but they had to suffer the consequences of bad choices. Galatians 6:7 tells us *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.”*

The phrase “God is on your side” is bandied about today almost in the sense that we can do as we choose and God will still bless us. A more important question for us to contemplate would be “Whose side are we on?” When we choose to live a life of self-centeredness and disobedience we cannot expect God to be on our side and protect us from the consequences of our choices. He never leaves us but as a loving Father He must correct us. If we want God to be on our side then we must be on His. We must choose to abide in Him and follow His ways. As Joshua said, “Choose this day who you will serve...”

David described many of the troubles that face our soul. Sometimes our troubles swallow and devour us. Sometimes they overwhelm us like a flood and we are swept away in the torrent. Sometimes they totally capture us like a trap or snare. There is probably not a day that goes by that Satan does not lay some snare for our souls. Our best hope? Call on the name of the Lord for help and *“The snare is broken, and we have escaped.”*

Psalm 125
As the Mountains Surround Jerusalem

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! NKJV

This has always been one of my favorite Psalms because I love the picture it paints. ***“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion.”*** I have never been to Israel but I can imagine the sight as the pilgrims approached Jerusalem: to see the city established firmly on the top of Mount Zion. I’m sure the mountain looked strong, stable, and secure. God promised that if we totally trust in Him we can be as firm as that mountain. When we fail to trust, we often find ourselves on less secure ground. We can be like the sand, ever shifting and unstable: *“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand”* (Matthew 7:26). Or we might be like the sea, restless and unsettled: *“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”* (James 1:6) At other times we might be like the wind, uncertain and inconsistent: *“that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting”* (Ephesians 4:14) The only way we can be like Mount Zion, immovable and abiding forever, is to completely put all of our trust in the Lord. He alone is our refuge and strength.

Another picture the psalmist paints - ***“As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.”*** Jerusalem is on Mount Zion but that is not the only mountain, nor is it the highest. It is actually surrounded by mountains much higher on every side. Though not a circular wall, the mountains stand on every side to naturally protect Jerusalem. The Lord Himself is our wall, surrounding us on every side, defending us against all dangers. God’s protection will be with us forever as He promised in Matthew 28:20: *“and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

It is true we have storms, difficulties, challenges and hardships in life but the believer is not to be moved or shaken in faith. Jesus conquered sin through His death on the cross and by His resurrection gave us victory. As we live our lives on this earthly journey, we should not be shaken or moved, because God’s agenda, even if it is tampered with by the devil, cannot ultimately be destroyed. When we trust in the Lord we can stand like Mount Zion surrounded by God’s protection on every side.

Psalm 126

The Lord Has Done Great Things

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. NKJV

This is a song of joy written after the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It seemed too good to be true that they were actually back. It was like a dream - they couldn't believe it. God had miraculously brought them back. Their joy was so great it couldn't be stifled or contained. They had to sing songs about it and share that the "Lord had done great things for them!" This sense of amazement was not confined just to the exiles. It says even the other nations proclaimed that God had done this truly great work -there was no other explanation.

At one time we were in exile; we were captive to sin and wandering far from God. We heard the gospel and it seemed unbelievable at first. How astonishing that God would send His Son to die for us! We can hardly believe God would love us but He does! Those early days in our walk were filled with an abundant joy. We had to tell everyone that God had done great things for us. Is that still true of us today? Just as the Israelites recalled God's goodness to them on their journey to Jerusalem, we need to remember that every day of our walk through this world. Matthew 5:16 tells us to "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

The joy expressed in the first half of the Psalm is only part of the picture. Complete restoration is hard work and often involves difficulty, hardship, and frustration. The exiles faced multiple adversities just trying to rebuild the wall and the temple. Our restoration calls for us to be conformed to the image of Christ. This is not a carefree journey, either. We would much rather skip over the hard parts: the sorrow, the pain, and the trials. However, trials develop godly character so that "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)

This Psalm ends with God's promise that even though we may sow in tears, we shall one day reap in joy and our harvest will be bountiful. "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart." (Galatians 6:9)

Psalm 127

God's Blessing on Man's Efforts

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. NKJV

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” Solomon, the author of this Psalm, understood that the work of man had its place but was of little value without the work and blessing of God. It's possible that the meaning of house here is actually a family (or raising a family) since he mentions children later. In that case, our family must be built with the Lord in the center to be what it should be.

“Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” The watchman has his role and should stay awake to guard the city but God is the perfect watchman who never slumbers or sleeps. Solomon understood that human participation in work was necessary but God's blessing of it was more important. He wasn't saying you shouldn't get up early or stay up late. He was saying that if you put your trust in the long hours you work and rely only on yourself rather than God, you will be miserable. Many people think they are self-made but this is totally contrary to II Corinthians 3:5 which tells us *“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.”*

“... for so He gives His beloved sleep.” The man who relies on his own work carries the anxiety that accompanies it. God's blessing is to give His loved ones sleep. They can be in peace knowing God's hand is at work and His eye watches over them even as they sleep.

“Children are a heritage from the Lord” The Lord gives children not as a penalty or a burden, but as a blessing. God entrusts us to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Solomon's comparison to arrows is very fitting in that:

- They must be guided with skill and strength in order to fly straight.
- They must be aimed and given direction; they will not find it on their own.
- They have potential for much good or much evil.
- They are in some respects launched only once.

If it is in vain to build a house or watch over a city without depending on God, it is even greater foolishness to raise children without God.

Psalm 128
Blessings For Those Who Fear The Lord

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! NKJV

Yesterday we saw that if God is not the center of what we do, then it will all be in vain. Today the Psalmist progresses to how important it is to fear the Lord. Of course he is not referring to the terror kind of fear. He is referring to recognizing who God truly is. Many people try to trivialize God and bring Him to their level, referring to Him as the “man upstairs.” He is not a man and we can not reach Him by climbing up a flight of stairs. He is the eternal God who spoke the universe into existence. Think about it: He said “let there be...” and it was. In our human bodies we can't even handle seeing God's face. “*You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.*” (Exodus 33:20)

Sometimes we need to bring things back into perspective: Proverbs 1:7 says “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*” When you realize God is absolutely holy and you are not, there should be a desire to find out what is pleasing to God as His child. Proverbs 13:8 further explains “*The fear of the Lord is to hate evil...*” Our world grows more evil with every passing moment and people have become tolerant of things that displease God, even in the church. Evil is always trying to get you to compromise and accept it. Sometimes we try to rationalize what we know to be sin and think it's okay. But if we are to have true fellowship with God, we must hate evil/sin as much as He does. We cannot tolerate it if we truly want to be close to God and know Him. Charles Spurgeon said, “If the heart is joined unto God, the feet will follow hard after Him.” We need to follow hard after the Lord and stay on His path and the blessings will follow.

Psalm 129
Afflicted But Confident of God's Deliverance

"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!" NKJV

This Psalm is really the testimony of Israel. The covenant descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob endured evil affliction all of their existence. The list of those intent on wiping out the Jews is long: the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Roman Catholics, the kings of Europe, the Muslims, the Czars, and the Nazis. Yet Israel remains. **"The Jews are the longest-enduring distinct ethnic people on the planet. They have been slandered, hated, persecuted, expelled, pursued, and murdered through their long existence, but they have survived intact."** (Boice) So many enemies, and yet none prevailed against them. Why? Because God promised to preserve Israel and He is a righteous God who keeps His promises. Israel's foes were strong and clever, but not greater than the God who delivers. The Psalmist closes asking that none of Israel's enemies would enjoy the blessings of God.

This testimony of Israel continues on today. Some of the same enemies are still trying to wipe the Jews off the face of the earth: hateful leaders vow to annihilate Israel. The United Nations continually condemns Israel for defending themselves from enemy attacks while ignoring atrocities by ruthless leaders in other countries. Yet God keeps His people safe. They have returned to the land He gave them and He has prospered them in the midst of affliction. His plan for Israel continues and one day they will finally accept Jesus as their Messiah. In answer to the Psalmist's request, those enemies of Israel will one day be judged for what they have done to God's chosen people.

Though this Psalm deals with Zion and its enemies, the church can count on the Lord's protection just as Israel did. Persecution of the early church began with Stephen's death and went on from there with most of the disciples dying violently for their belief. Obviously persecution still continues in our world today; many are martyred for Christ around the world. Even our "free" country censures our Christian beliefs every day. We need to remember God has a promise for us as well in John 16:33: *"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."*

Psalm 130
Out of the Depths

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. NKJV

Though not identified as such, this psalm is thought by some to have been written by David either when he was persecuted by Saul, and in great distress for his life; or else when he was greatly distressed after the many sins involving Bathsheba.

“Out of the depths I have cried to you...” Unlike many of the other Psalms, the author is not asking for God to rescue him from adversity, danger, or persistent enemies. Rather he feels overwhelmed by the depth of his sin in the presence of a Holy God and is asking God to help him overcome the sin. Sometimes in our walk when we are doing pretty good, we tend to forget how serious our sin is to God. We need to cry out to God daily with all sincerity and from the bottom of our heart. Without ceasing, we need to thank Him for His lasting compassion!

“Lord, hear my voice.” God always hears our prayers even though sometimes we think He doesn't. Usually he doesn't answer instantly and often His answer is different from what we expected or wanted. Hopefully we learn to entrust our requests to the Lord and His sovereignty because He is God and we obviously are NOT!

“If you should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” Of course God is aware of every single sin of every person, even those who think their actions are done in the dark and hidden. When God judges us according to His holy standard - no one would be left standing. But there is forgiveness for us because of His mercy when we ask for forgiveness. This pardon doesn't give us permission to freely sin; instead it should cause us to strive for a life pleasing to the one who saved us.

“I wait for the Lord...and in His word do I hope.” The Psalmist waited for the Lord's answer with hope in his heart. There's that word we don't like again - ***wait***; but it is coupled to a word we do like - ***hope***. He calls us wait for His answer with hope, because God always keeps His promises to us. With even more hope, we wait for the day He takes us home!

*“Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God
and our Savior Jesus Christ;” Titus 2:13*

Psalm 131
Humility and Contentment With the Lord

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. 2) Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. 3) O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever. NKJV

The Psalmist of this short song is David. There are two different thoughts on the circumstances surrounding its composition. The first might have been when Saul hunted David, and David was often accused of being ambitious for the throne of Israel. The second might be that this was David's response to his wife, Michal, when she accused him of being undignified and vulgar when he danced in the streets as they brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. Whatever the occasion, the song is a beautiful denial of pride, arrogance, and selfish ambition.

David accomplished many great things in his life. As a boy, he slew the giant Goliath with one stone from his sling shot. At a very young age he was anointed to be the next king of Israel. His great military victories brought him much praise and adoration from the crowds: "*Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands.*" It would have been very easy for him to become arrogant and proud if he gave himself all of the credit for his accomplishments. But David was a "*man after God's own heart.*" He came before the Lord in humility, already understanding that "*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" (James 4:6) He knew God's destiny for him was great, but never esteemed himself better than everyone else. Rather than making plans out of selfish ambition, he sought the Lord for counsel. He didn't question God's will or things "too profound" for him to comprehend. David was content in the Lord.

Like David, we must choose to calm and quiet our soul by stepping back and allowing the Lord to give us His peace and comfort. David compared himself with a young child to illustrate his point. A child not weaned looks to the mother with thoughts of being fed and immediate satisfaction. A weaned child looks to the mother out of a desire for love, comfort, closeness, and companionship. Before he was weaned, David needed God for what he could get from Him. After he was weaned, realizing God still loved him and cared for him, David came to love God for God himself.

When we first come to the Lord, He accepts us just as we are. However, as we grow in our walk, God wants to wean us from ourself: our self-will, self-sufficiency, self-seeking, and self-glorifying. He wants us to rely on Him rather than things of the world. His desire is for us to remove ourselves from the throne and allow Him to take the seat that rightly belongs to Him. David freely relinquished his throne, came to the Lord in humility, and found his contentment in God. May we choose to do the same!

Psalm 132
God's Sovereign Plans

Lord, remember David and all his afflictions; 2) How he swore to the Lord, and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob: 3) "Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, or go up to the comfort of my bed; 4) I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, 5) until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob." 6) Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah; we found it in the fields of the woods. 7) Let us go into His tabernacle; let us worship at His footstool. 8) Arise, O Lord, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength. 9) Let Your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let Your saints shout for joy. 10) For Your servant David's sake, do not turn away the face of Your Anointed. 11) The Lord has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it: "I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body. 12) If your sons will keep My covenant and My testimony which I shall teach them, their sons also shall sit upon your throne forevermore." 13) For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His dwelling place: 14) "This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. 15) I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread. 16) I will also clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints shall shout aloud for joy. 17) There I will make the horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed. 18) His enemies I will clothe with shame, but upon Himself His crown shall flourish." NKJV

The Psalmist begins this Psalm recounting the effort David put into building a temple in Jerusalem. After building his own magnificent palace, David realized that the ark of the Lord was housed in a tent. Thus began his quest to make a permanent home for God in Israel. He vowed he would devote himself completely to this quest, not resting until it was completed. He made plans and was ready to begin, and then he asked Nathan, the prophet, if it was a good idea. Nathan said it sounded good to him and that he should go ahead and do it. (II Samuel 7) Neither one had really asked God if He was in favor of the idea or if it was His will.

As it turns out, God's reply to the idea was, "Thank you for offering David, but no thanks. Let Me build **you** a **house** instead." God promised David that He would build *him* a house in the sense of establishing a dynasty for the house of David: an enduring legacy for David long after his death. God's plan was greater than David would have ever comprehended or dreamed of. Jesus, God's own son, came from the line of David and will reign forever on David's throne.

How did David respond to God's "no"? Not with resentment, anger or pouting. David was humble, "*Who am I... that you have brought me thus far?*" and thanked God for all of the goodness He had shown Him. Then David continued to gather all of the finest building materials for the temple, even though his son Solomon would be the one to complete it, not him. It's not the end of the world when God says "no" because His plans for us are lovingly perfect!

Psalm 133
Dwelling in Unity

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! 2) It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. 3) It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing— life forevermore. NKJV

This is the last of the four Psalms of Ascent attributed to David. Quite likely he composed it when he was finally received by all of the tribes as the king of Israel, ending all of the discord and division of the country.

David writes for everyone to take notice of how good and pleasant it is for unity among God's people. It is good because it reflects God's heart and purpose of unity in the church. Jesus mentioned this unity in John 17:20-21 when He prayed for believers right before His crucifixion. *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."* Unity is pleasant because it makes life together as God's people so much more enjoyable than constant bickering and jockeying for position. Having peaceable relationships in the church will give us a good start on peaceable relationships with everyone. The pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem had a chance to put into practice unity on the journey. They came from different tribes, different regions, and different walks of life but they were all traveling for the same purpose - to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

It was common to anoint one's head as they entered your home to refresh the one entering and provide a pleasant smell. David talks of it as oil overflowing, not just a little dab! Unity is an abundant blessing that flows from the head, down the beard, all the way to the hem of Aaron's priestly garment.

David painted a second picture comparing unity to the dew that covers Mount Hermon, making it moist and green. This is a complete contrast to the surrounding dry wilderness found all around the mountain. Unity among God's people makes life flourishing and healthy; it stands out from the world surrounding it.

As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 1:9, *"...there is nothing new under the sun."* The call for the church to dwell in unity exists now as in the days of David. Why is it important? Jesus said in John 17:23 we should be one *"...that the world may know that You have sent Me."* When the rest of the world can't seem to agree on anything we should be a shining example of the alternative. Just like Mount Hermon flourished in the midst of the dry wilderness, we should stand out as a place of peace and unity in the midst of our chaotic, combative world. We'll be together for eternity, so let's get a start on enjoying unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ now!

Psalm 134
Lord Bless You From Zion

Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord!
2) *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord.* 3) *The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion!* NKJV

What a fitting way to end this group of Psalms - praising God and being blessed by Him. Those who had made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, are now done with their time there and are now returning home singing this song. They will not be able to worship in the temple until the next journey. As they leave they are comforted knowing the priests will remain in the temple on their behalf, worshiping God continually.

When we think of blessing it is usually God that blesses us. As He is our Creator and infinitely greater than we are, what kind of blessing can we give to Him? The idea here is that it blesses and honors God when His creatures praise Him and thank Him appropriately. We need to tell of the wonders He has wrought and exalt His name on high. A quote from Matthew Poole says, **“Do not stand there like statues, dumb and idle, but empty your hearts and tongues singing forth the praises of the Lord.”** As you praise and worship Him, God deserves your full attention. It is so easy to become distracted by random thoughts and just sing the words from memory, not even thinking of what we are saying. The enemy is very good at getting us off track; it can even be a “good” thought like noticing someone is missing and wondering if they are okay. However, the Lord is worthy of our heartfelt worship - totally focused on Him.

When the Psalmist mentions “*who stand by night in the house of the Lord,*” he is referring to the fact that priests and Levites had special duties in the temple throughout the night while Jerusalem slept. They uttered praises to God while everyone else was silent. We can do the same thing on those sleepless nights that torture us sometimes. God is always awake to receive prayer and praise from His children. Lift up your hands and praise Him no matter the time of day!

What will happen if you do take God seriously and worship him reverently, as he needs to be worshiped? The “*Maker of heaven and earth*” will “*bless you from Zion.*” The picture is that blessing from the God of all creation flows from Zion unto His people wherever they may be. This is a beautiful closing for the Songs of Ascent. The people came to Zion in pilgrimage to bless the Lord, singing the songs in Psalms 120-134. They end knowing God’s blessing went with them from Zion.

“So the thought is that if we bless God in our worship, as we must, then God will also bless us abundantly in our daily lives. This is the only ultimate goal of any Christian: to bless God and to be blessed by him – to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” (Boice)