

Psalm 124: A Song of Help

Theme: As we ascend to the house of the Lord, we remember that God is on our side.

Psalm 124

- 1 If the Lord had not been on our side—let Israel say—
2 if the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us,
3 then they would have swallowed us alive in their burning anger against us.
4 Then the water would have engulfed us; the torrent would have swept over us;
5 the raging water would have swept over us.
6 Blessed be the Lord, who has not let us be ripped apart by their teeth.
7 We have escaped like a bird from the hunter's net; the net is torn, and we have escaped.
8 Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- Who was one of your childhood best friends?
- What type of things did you do together?
- Did they keep you from trouble, or help you get into trouble?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, maker of heaven and earth, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 124 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion:

This past Sunday we explored Psalm 124 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions.

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 124 that were discussed during the sermon?

- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions or concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Quote: "This song is so vigorous, so confident, so bursting with what we can only be called reality that it fundamentally changes our approach and our questions period." Eugene Peterson, pages 66-67

God is on our side:

Psalm 124 begins with the shout, "If the Lord had not been on our side" and ends with the proclamation that "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Within the remaining verses the psalmist comes to the conclusion that yes, God is on our side!

Discuss:

- On a typical day, do you feel that you can say with confidence, that God is on our side? Why or why not?

From *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

The first lines of the psalm twice describe God as "for us." The last line is "GOD's strong name is our help, the same GOD who made heaven and earth." God is for us. God is our help.

For some people, statements like that are red flags. They provoke challenges. I, confident and assured in the pulpit, can announce, "The Lord is for us... God's strong name is our help." But no sooner am I out of the pulpit than someone is saying to me, "Look, I wish you would be a little more careful about your pronouns. How do you get this our? The Lord might be for you, he might be your help. But he is not mine. Listen to this..." Through the week I get case histories of family tragedy and career disappointment, along with pessimistic recounting of world events. The concluding line is a variation on the theme: "How do you explain that, you who are so sure that God is for me?"

I am put on the spot of being God's defender. I am expected to explain God to his disappointed clients. I am thrust into the role of a clerk in the complaints department of humanity, asked to trace down bad service, listen sympathetically to aggrieved patrons, try to put right any mistakes I can and apologize for the rudeness of the management.

But if I accept any of these assignments I misunderstand my proper work, for God doesn't need me to defend him. He doesn't need me for a press secretary, explaining to the world that he didn't really say what everyone thought they heard in that interview with Job, or that the quotation of his word by St. Paul was taken out of context and needs to be understood against the background paper that Isaiah wrote.

The proper work for the Christian is witness, not apology, and Psalm 124 is an excellent model. It does not argue God's help; it does not explain God's help; it is a testimony of God's help in the form of a song. The song is so vigorous, so confident, so bursting with what can only be called reality that it fundamentally changes our approach and our questions. No longer does it seem of the highest priority to ask, "Why did this happen to me? Why do I feel left in the lurch?" Instead we ask, "How does it happen that there are people who sing with such confidence, 'God's strong name is our help'?" The psalm is data that must be accounted for, and the data are

so solid, so vital, have so much more substance and are so much more interesting than the other things we hear through the day that it must be dealt with before we can go back to the whimpering complaints.

The witness is vivid and contagious. One person announces the theme, everyone joins in. God's help is not a private experience; it is a corporate reality-not an exception that occurs among isolated strangers, but the norm among the people of God.

Discuss:

- Do you ever feel like you need to defend God against non-believers? What was the outcome?
- Peterson suggests, "The proper work for the Christian is witness, not apology." How does our experience provide a stronger witness for God than our argument?
- What are some of the ways that continually remind you that God is on our side?
- What are some of the things that cause you to doubt that God is on our side?
- Why is this truth, that God is on our side, a struggle for so many of us to accept?
- What do you think it means that God is on our side?

Quote by Eugene Peterson

"The psalmist is not a person talking about the good life, how God has kept him out of all difficulty. The person has gone through the worst. And find himself intact. He was not abandoned but helped." The final strength is in God. Who didn't go off and leave us."

Read through verses 2-7.

- What are some of the obstacles that the psalmist lists that might have people thinking that God is not on their side?
- Remember, these are poems, and the psalmist is using metaphorical language. What might be some of the struggles that the Psalmist, or the people of Israel, face?
- Do any of these obstacles or struggles resonate with you? Which ones, and why?
- How does the Psalmist view these same examples as reasons to know God is on our side?
- In the midst of hardship, this psalm discovers God's hand of help. Share examples from this psalm. Share examples from your own life.
- How do these examples help us know that God is at work, helping us?

Through all these examples, we see that God has rescued the psalmist, and us, in ways that could only be truly declared as miraculous, not drowned or ripped apart, escaping the hunters net. If we reflect on our lives we may also be able to see how God has rescued us from uncertain danger.

Quote: "Psalm 124 is a magnification of the items of life that are thought to be unpleasant, best kept undercover, best surrounded with silence, lest they clutter our lives with unpleasantness. They are a very real part of life and they constitute a dominating, fearful background for many... Psalm 124 is an instance of a person who digs deeply into the trouble and finds there the presence of God who is on our side. In the details of the conflict, in the minuteness of a personal history, the majestic greatness of God becomes revealed. Faith develops out of the most difficult aspects of our existence, not the easiest." – Eugene Peterson

Discuss:

- How has God's working in your life, through the minuteness of your personal history, helped develop your faith?
- How can reflecting on Psalm 124 give you confidence in God, as you continue to go through the struggles of life.

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 124 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn-qWoRdmu4

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (page 330)

Covenant. Four times God is called the Lord, the God who enters into a covenant with us by Grace. This unfamiliar word means his love is "locked on to us" in unending commitment. Thus he is always for us. But the psalmist could not see what we see. God is ever on our side, because in Christ our sins can't bring us into condemnation. So not "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 39) Since the Maker of Heaven and Earth is our help, we will not fear. What could be against us?

Application: This week, take some time to reflect on how God has been on your side, protecting you from being attacked, swallowed, or swept away. Share your story with someone else.

Reflect:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 124?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 124?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.

Psalm 125: A Song of Trust

Theme: As we ascend to the house to the Lord, we trust the Lord despite our feeling or circumstances.

Psalm 125

- 1 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion. It cannot be shaken; it remains forever.
- 2 The mountains surround Jerusalem and the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forever.
- 3 The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous will not apply their hands to injustice.
- 4 Do what is good, Lord, to the good, to those whose hearts are upright.
- 5 But as for those who turn aside to crooked ways, the Lord will banish them with the evildoers.
Peace be with Israel.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- Who is one of your favorite villains? Why do you like them?
- Why are villains essential in the development of a hero?
- What makes a hero good and a villain evil?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, unshakable and eternal, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Quote by Eugene Peterson

Singing Psalm 125 is one way Christians have to develop confidence and banish insecurity.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 125 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 125 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 125 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions or concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Psalm 125 is a song of trust, but not a blind trust. It acknowledges that trust is formed in a life of faith as it overcomes obstacles. The psalmist points out three obstacles to faith that keeps us from trusting God. They are being shaken (vs 1), observing wickedness (vs 3), and turning away (vs 5). When we allow these obstacles to overtake us, our faith falters and our trust dwindles.

Have you ever...

- Have you ever been shaken in your faith?
- Have you ever questioned God's goodness when observing wickedness and injustice?
- Have you ever willfully decided to turn away from following God?

Invite group to share their experiences in these three obstacles and how that effected their spiritual journey.

From A Long Obedience in the Same Direction:

The emphasis of Psalm 125 is not on the precariousness of the Christian life but on its solidity. Living as a Christian is not walking a tightrope without a safety net high above a breathless crowd, many of whom would like nothing better than the morbid thrill of seeing you fall; it is sitting secure in a fortress. The psalm uses familiar geography to demonstrate the truth.

Jerusalem was set in a saucer of hills. It was the safest of cities because of the protective fortress these hills provided. Just so is the person of faith surrounded by the Lord. Better than a city wall, better than a military fortification is the presence of the God of peace. Geographically the city of Jerusalem had "borders and bulwarks of extraordinary variety and intricacy" 1 which illustrated and enforced the reality of God's secure love and care.

City life in the ancient world was dangerous. The outside world was filled with roaming marauders, ready to attack at any sign of weakness. Constant vigilance was a prerequisite for community life and for the development of the arts of civilization. Cities needed elaborate and extensive defense systems to make them safe. Immense effort was expended on building walls and digging moats.

We still live in that kind of world, and we still build those defenses although the forms have changed somewhat. The process is not only political but personal. The outer world is only an extension of an inner, spiritual world. Psychologists who observe us talk of the elaborate security systems (Sullivan) and the defense mechanisms (Freud) that we use to protect ourselves.

People of faith have the same needs for protection and security as anyone else. We are no better than others in that regard. What is different is that we find that we don't have to build our own: "God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him" (Ps 46: 1) . "Mountains encircle Jerusalem, and GOD encircles his people." We don't always have to be looking over our shoulder lest evil overtake us unawares. We don't always have to keep our eyes on our footsteps lest we slip, inadvertently, on a temptation. God is at our side . He is, as another psalmist put it, "behind and before" (see 139:5). And when it comes down to it, do we need anything more than our Lord's prayer for us: "Holy Father, guard them I'm not asking that you take them out of the world I But that you guard them from the Evil

One" (Jn 17: 11, 15)? With a prayer like that offered to the Father on our behalf, are we not secure?

Discuss:

- How did the mountains surrounding Jerusalem offer protection for the city?
- How did the mountains surrounding Jerusalem illustrate God's protection for those who trust in Him?
- How does trusting God offer us security that the world cannot provide?
- How have you seen security from trusting in God in your life?

Quote by Eugene Peterson

One threat to our trust comes from feelings of depression and doubt. The person of faith is described in this psalm as "a rock-solid mountain . . . nothing can move it." But I am moved. I am full of faith one day and empty with doubt the next. I wake up one morning full of vitality, rejoicing in the sun; the next day I am gray and dismal, faltering and moody. "Nothing can move it"?-nothing could be less true of me. I can be moved by nearly anything: sadness, joy, success, failure. I'm a thermometer and go up and down with the weather.

- Is it hard to believe that someone like Eugene Peterson, who authored the Message translation, would be shaken in his faith?
- Do you resonate his struggle? Do you find it encouraging that you are not the only one who struggles with trust issues?

Peterson writes that "Discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about him or myself or my neighbors." So often our feelings and perception of experiences cause us to lose trust in God and we try to rely on ourselves and our own understanding. As Proverbs 3:5 tells us, Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding.

- Why do we tend to rely on feelings instead of the facts of faith?
- How do our feelings and understanding cause us to lose trust in God?

Psalm 125 is a song of trust in the security of Christ and not our feelings or circumstances. We sing this song to remind our spirits that we can trust in the Lord no matter what comes our way. As we sing this song, we remember that God surrounds and protects us (vs 2), that God does good to the upright (vs 4) and reprimands the evildoers (vs 5), and that trusting God leads to peace (vs 5).

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 125 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nBDdwxXc-c

Quote: Eugene Peterson

Psalm 125 says that being a Christian is like sitting in the middle of Jerusalem, fortified and secure... We are secure. God is running the show. Neither our feelings of depression nor the facts of suffering nor the possibilities of defection are evidence that God has abandoned us.

Discuss:

- What does it look like to trust in the Lord, as opposed to feeling or circumstances?
- Which promise from Psalm 125 do you need to hold on to this week, God protects, does good, or brings peace?
- What can be done to remember that you (we) are secure because “God is running the show?”
- How can this group help each other trust God and support each other?

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller’s *The Songs of Jesus* (pg 331)

Endurance. In ancient times, there was no more militarily secure position for a city than to be behind encircling mountains. Trusting in God is like being in a mountain fortress. How? Trusting God provides a superior vantage point. It helps us see our own sin and see that wickedness only pays in the short term. Trusting God is also the way to eventually get breathtaking sights of God himself. When Isaiah saw the Holy One, high and lifted up (Isaiah 6:1-8), it permanently changed his view of everything. Most of all, trusting God means connecting yourself to the one person who will endure forever, Jesus. And that means you will endure as well. In a world in which seemingly everything changes and nothing lasts, fix your mind on that.

Application: When you are feeling shaken, overwhelmed by the world, or wanting to turn your back on God, remember your feelings are fickle. Share your struggles with a trusted friend and surround yourself with God’s world, sing Psalm 125!

Reflect:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 125?
- How will this psalm help you through life’s journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 125?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.

Psalm 126: A song of Witness

Theme: As we ascend to the house of the Lord, we will face times of trouble, but will also experience shouts of joy

Psalm 126

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
- 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy.
Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
- 3 The Lord had done great things for us; we were joyful.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, like watercourses in the Negev.
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Though one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed,
he will surely come back with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- If you could learn a new skill set, what would it be and why?
- What is your typical response when you discover something is broken at your house? (for example, ignore it and hope it will fix itself, bug your spouse to fix it, call a repair person, etc.)

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, Almighty restorer and reformer, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Quote: Eugene Peterson:

Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship; it is a consequence... It comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 126 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 126 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 126 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions of concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Past, Present and Future:

We all have moment in our lives that define us, moments that we look back on and remember God's handiwork. We also have those moments that we look forward to, knowing that God will work again, to strengthen and restore is again. Psalm 126 is a song that remembers the works of God and longs for those works again. As the people of Israel sang, "When the Lord restored our fortunes," they thought of the mighty acts that God had done through their history to deliver their people. When they sang, "restore our fortunes, Lord." They longed for God to move again.

- How have you seen God at work in your past?
- How do you long to see him work in the future?
- Do you feel like you are caught between the moments of the past and the future?
- How does the past and future help you respond the present?

Selection of Psalm 126 1-4:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy... Restore our fortunes!

From *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

The center sentence in the psalm is "We are one happy people" (v. 3). The words on one side of that center (vv. 1-2) are in the past tense, the words on the other side (vv. 4-6) in the future tense. Present gladness has past and future. It is not an ephemeral emotion. It is not a spurt of good feelings that comes when the weather and the stock market are both right on the same day.

The background for joy is only alluded to here, but the words trigger vast memories: "when GOD returned Israel's exiles. We laughed, we sang... We were the talk of the nations-' GOD was wonderful to them! ' God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people." What happened that was so "wonderful"? On nearly any page of the Bible we find the allusions and stories...

Each act of God was an impossible miracle. There was no way it could have happened, and it did happen. "It seemed like a dream, too good to be true." We nurture these memories of laughter, these shouts of joy. We fill our minds with the stories of God's acts. Joy has a history. Joy is the verified, repeated experience of those involved in what God is doing. It is as real as a date in history, as solid as a stratum of rock in Palestine. Joy is nurtured by living in such a history, building on such a foundation.

The other side of "we are one happy people"-verses 4-6-is in the future tense. Joy is nurtured by anticipation. If the joy producing acts of God are characteristic of our past as God's people, they will also be characteristic of our future as his people. There is no reason to suppose that God will arbitrarily change his way of working with us. What we have known of him, we will know of him. Just as joy builds on the past, it borrows from the future. It expects certain things to happen.

Discuss:

- What does Peterson say about reflecting on the past and future joy?
- How do the stories in the Bible help us see the rich history of God's work for his people?
- What promises can we rely on, as we joyfully look to the future?

Tears of Sorrow, Reaps of Joy:

Read Psalm 126: 5-6 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Though one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed, he will surely come back with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves.

Discuss:

- How does the psalmist compare tears and weeping with shouts of joy?
- What images do these verses implant in your head?
- How might sorrow lead to rejoicing?
- How might the understanding of future joy, give you hope during a time of great sorrow?
- How does sorrow help us understand what joy truly is?

Quote by Eugene Peterson

One of the most interesting and remarkable things Christians learn is that laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed... Joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears, and, in his resurrection work, create the smile of new life. Joy is what God gives, not what we work up.

- How does this help you understand the balance of joy and sorrow in our world?
- Why is it important to know that joy comes from God, not something we manufacture on our own?

Restore our fortunes, Lord!

Psalm 126 reflects on the past, when God's work of restoration occurred, and the joyful expectation that our heavenly father will do it again. While the theme may seem to be about God restoring joy and fortune, the central message of this psalm is not for the people of God, but for those who are watching God work in the present. It is a song of witness.

Read Psalm 126: 2-3

Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy.

Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
3 The Lord had done great things for us; we were joyful.

Discuss:

- What was the response among the nations as they saw the people of Israel "filled with laughter" and with "shouts of joy?"
- The people were to use their blessing from God, not for their own personal benefit, but to show others the glory of God. How would their praises of God's great things, bring others to him?
- Have you ever seen, in your own experience, how sharing God's blessings in your life have brought others closer to him?

- How can you use your story, to help others experience the shouts of joy that come from the Lord?

Quote by Eugene Peterson:

Joy cannot be commanded, purchased or arranged. But there is something we can do. We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own dying selves. We can decide to center ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own egos which greedily grab. One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy, the kind expressed in Psalm 126.

Discuss:

- How can choosing joy be the witness people need of God's goodness and grace in our world?
- How can you choose joy this week?
- How can the group support and encourage each other in their decision for joy?

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 126 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xur0iUAciAg

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (pg. 332)

Restoration. Israel had eras of great spiritual fruitfulness and vitality, marked by joy. But communities of faith often have times of great spiritual dryness. Sometimes a flood of God's spirit comes down powerfully and suddenly, like the streams from distant mountain rainstorms, and the community is restored dramatically. But there is also a slower path to renewal, "those who sow with tears" are those who have painstakingly prayed and wept over their sins and also over people without faith. As in actual farming, sowing does not show immediate fruit. But fruitful prayer and service will eventually bear fruit. The desert will become a garden.

Application: Reflect on times you sowed in tears, yet reaped shouts of joy. Share that experience with someone.

Reflect:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 126?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 126?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.

Psalm 127: A Song of Meaning

Theme: A life not built on God is meaningless.

Psalm 127

1 Unless the Lord builds a house, its builders labor over it in vain;
unless the Lord watches over a city, the watchman stays alert in vain.
2 In vain you get up early and stay up late, working hard to have enough food—
yes, he gives sleep to the one he loves.
3 Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, offspring, a reward.
4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons born in one's youth.
5 Happy is the man who has filled his quiver with them.
They will never be put to shame when they speak with their enemies at the city gate.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- What was one of your dream jobs when you were younger?
- What work would it have taken to achieve this position?
- Why did you decide to choose an alternate career?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, eternal watcher and sustainer, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

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Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 127 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 127 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?

- Share any questions or concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Opening Quote: Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Psalm 127 shows a way to work that is neither sheer activity nor pure passivity. It doesn't glorify work as such, and it doesn't condemn work as such. If we want simple solutions in regard to work, we can become workaholics or dropouts. If we want to experience the fullness of work, we will do better to study Psalm 127.

Unless/Vain: In verse one of Psalm 127, two statements are made that begin with "unless" and ends with "in vain."

- What is the primary message in these two statements?
- What might the psalmist mean when they say, "Unless the Lord?"
- Why might a person's efforts be "in vain?"
- What does it mean that a person's work/effort is "in vain?"

Perhaps Psalm 127 echoes the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:2

(KJV) *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*

(NIV) *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

(CSB) *"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."*

Verse 2 of Psalm 127 enhances this message, *"In vain you get up early and stay up late."*

- Do you ever feel this way? Why?
- How would it feel to know that all that you work for is "in vain," "meaningless," and "futile?"
- So, if all we do is in vain, then what is the point? Is that the message the psalm is trying to convey?

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Some people have read these verses and paraphrased them to read like this: "You don't have to work hard to be a Christian. You don't have to put yourself out at all. Go to sleep. God is doing everything that needs to be done." St. Paul had to deal with some of these people in the church at Thessalonica. They were saying that since God had done everything in Christ there was nothing more for them to do. If all effort ends up in godless confusion or in hypocritical self-righteousness, the obvious Christian solution is to quit work and wait for the Lord to come. With a magnificent redeemer like our Lord Jesus Christ and a majestic God like our Father in heaven, what is there left to do? And so they sat around, doing nothing. Meanwhile they lived "by faith" off their less spiritual friends. Unfriendly critics might have called them freeloaders. Paul became angry and told them to get to work: "We're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately-no excuses, no arguments-and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty" (2 Thess 3 :11-13). How did they dare to reinterpret the gospel into a rationalization for sloth when he, Paul, from whom they had learned the gospel, worked his fingers "to the bone, up half the night, moonlighting so you wouldn't have the burden of supporting us while we proclaimed God's Message" (1 Thess 2:9).

- Have you ever known someone with the perspective to "quit work and wait for the Lord to come?" What does that look like?
- Why was Paul angry with people "slacking off" in their Christian responsibilities?

- How would that perspective produce a vain, meaningless, futile faith?
- So, what do you think is the right perspective of work, so that it is not “in vain?”

Unless the Lord builds a house... unless the Lord watches over a city—yes, he gives sleep to the one he loves. (Psalm 127:1-2)

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Our work goes wrong when we lose touch with the God who works "his salvation in the midst of the earth." It goes wrong both when we work anxiously and when we don't work at all, when we become frantic and compulsive in our work and when we become indolent and lethargic in our work. The foundational truth is that work is good. If God does it, it must be all right. Work has dignity: there can be nothing degrading about work if God works. Work has purpose: there can be nothing futile about work if God works.

- How might work be different than a job?
- How has work (not necessarily your job) provided meaning and purpose instead of futility?
- How can you find meaning and purpose in work, even when it feels futile at times?
- Peterson declares. “Work is good, if God does it.” What does it mean that God works?
- Share an experience of how joining with God in work has been good for you and others?

Trigger Warning: Verses 3-5 might be upsetting to those who have chosen not to have children, were unable to have children, or have chosen not to have a “quiver full” of them. Be cautious when discussing these verses. Thankfully Peterson helps us understand that the “children” mentioned in these verses does not have to be biological, but relational.

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

By joining Jesus and the psalm we learn a way of work that does not acquire things or amass possessions but responds to God and develops relationships. People are at the center of Christian work. The character of our work is shaped not by accomplishments or possessions but in the birth of relationships. We invest our energy in people. Among those around us we develop sons and daughters, sisters and brothers even as our Lord did with us...

Work is a way of being in creative relationship with another. Such work can be done within the structure of any job, career or profession. As Christians do the jobs and tasks assigned to them in what the world calls work, we learn to pay attention to and practice what God is doing in love and justice, in helping and healing, in liberating and cheering.

Peterson suggests that the work of God is found in relationships.

- Why are relationships essential to the work of God?
- How have you seen that work in your life? How have people investing their energy in your provided you with Godly meaning and purpose?
- How have you invested in others, seeing them discover their Christian meaning?
- How can the small group be an act of work and an d inspiration for it’s members to be about God’s work this week?

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 127 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWXPhcWlrao

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (pg. 333).

Prosperity and security are not ultimately your accomplishments, but God's gifts. So overwork, worry, and strain are foolish and wrong. So too thriving, happy children (relationships) are God's doing. Helicopter parenting and over involvement in our 'children's' lives, cannot insure their health and happiness. Unless the Lord enters their lives, all our watching is in vain. Giving our 'children' to God is the only way we can get to keep them. If you know that the one who loves you unfailingly is in complete charge of history, you will be able to sleep well. If you are overworked and overstressed, you are forgetting who God is. Jesus said it most bluntly: 'Apart from me, you can do nothing.' (John 15-5).

Application: Work this week. Invest in a relationship, sharing the love of Christ and provide meaning for you and those you spend time with.

Discuss:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 127?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 127?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.

Psalm 128: A Song of Blessing

Thesis: Blessing and happiness is found in fearing and following God, not the world.

Psalm 128

- 1 How happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!
- 2 You will surely eat what your hands have worked for.
You will be happy, and it will go well for you.
- 3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house,
your children, like young olive trees around your table.
- 4 In this very way the man who fears the Lord will be blessed.
- 5 May the Lord bless you from Zion, so that you will see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life 6 and will see your children's children!
Peace be with Israel.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- What is something people expect will bring the happiness, but never really does?
- How have you found disappointment in your search for personal happiness?

Opening Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian. What is hard is to be a sinner. Being a Christian is what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption. The structure of this world was created by God so we can live in it easily and happily as his children. The history we walk in has been repeatedly entered by God, most notably in Jesus Christ, first to show us and then to help us live full of faith and exuberant with purpose. In the course of Christian discipleship, we discover that without Christ we were doing it the hard way and that with Christ we are doing it the easy way. It is not Christians who have it hard, but non-Christians.

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, ever blessing ever blest, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 128 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?

- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 128 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 128 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions of concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Psalm 128:1 How happy is everyone who fears the Lord

- Does being a Christian make you happy? Why or why not?
- Do you think non-Christians think Christians are happy? Why or why not?
- Is happiness what we should be seeking?
- What do you think is the difference between world happiness and Christian happiness?

Fear the Lord: According to Psalm 128, Christian happiness is found in fearing the Lord. Like Christian happiness, this idea of fearing the lord might create imaged of terror and dread, but this is not what that term means. Let's look at what Eugene Peterson has to say on the topic.

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

"Fear GOD." Reverence might be a better word. Awe. The Bible isn't interested in whether we believe in God or not. It assumes that everyone more or less does. What it is interested in is the response we have to him: Will we let God be as he is, majestic and holy, vast and wondrous, or will we always be trying to whittle him down to the size of our small minds, insist on confining him within the boundaries we are comfortable with, refuse to think of him other than in images that are convenient to our lifestyle? The Bible talks of the fear of the Lord-not to scare us but to bring us to awesome attention before the overwhelming grandeur of God, to shut up our whining and chattering and stop our running and fidgeting so that we can really see him as he is and listen to him as he speaks his merciful, life-changing words of forgiveness.

- How does what Peterson writes help you have a better understanding of what it means to "fear" God?
- Why is it dangerous to "whittle God down to the size of our small minds"? How have you done that in your own life?
- How might a correct posture of fearing the Lord lead to happiness?

Promised Happiness and Pronounced Blessing

Psalm 128 begins with three promises for happiness and three pronouncements of blessing.

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord... You will surely eat what your hands have worked for. You will be happy and it will go well for you...

The man who fears the Lord will be blessed... you will see the prosperity of Jerusalem... and will see your children's children!

- What are the promises and what are the pronouncements?
- Are these different than the happiness and blessing that most people are seeking?

- How does Psalm 128 help reshape our perspective in the things we think will give us meaning in life?

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

The world's happiness depends on taking from one to satisfy another. To increase my standard of living, people in another part of the world must lower theirs... The road we travel is the well-traveled road of discipleship. It is not a way of boredom or despair or confusion. It is not a miserable groping but a way of blessing. Christian blessing is a realizing that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." As we learn to give and to share, our vitality increases, and the people around us become fruitful vines and olive shoots at our tables.

- How does Peterson help us better understand the heart of the Christian blessing?
- How have you experienced the blessing found in "it is more blessed to give than receive?"
- How has the blessing you experiences help others experience the blessing of God?

Psalm 128:4 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house, your children, like young olive trees around your table.

Trigger Warning: Verses 4 might be upsetting to those who were unable to have children. Be cautious when discussing this verse. Thankfully Peterson helps us understand the blessing in terms of the Hebrew culture of that time.

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

The illustration is, as we would expect, conditioned by Hebrew culture, in which the standard signs of happiness were a wife who had many children and children who gathered and grew around the table: fruitful vine and olive shoots. This illustration is just that, an example that we need not reproduce exactly in order to experience blessing. (We, for instance, don't try to have as many children as possible-or try to get them to stay at home for all their lives!) But the meaning is still with us: Blessing has inherent in it the power to increase. It functions by sharing and delight in life... The characteristic of blessing is to multiply.

- What does the illustration used by the Psalmist teach us about the blessings from we receive from God?

God's blessings multiply and increase. As verse 4 says, "In this very way the man who fears the Lord will be blessed." As you join in the song of Psalm 128, may you discover the blessing God has for his people as we ascent to the House of the Lord in worship, together.

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

Everyone wants to be happy, to be blessed. Too many people are willfully refusing to pay attention to the One who wills our happiness and ignorantly supposing that the Christian way is a harder way to get what they want than doing it on their own. They are wrong. God's ways and God's presence are where we experience the happiness that lasts.

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 128 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL9MoUXUzOI

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (pg. 334)

Family. A loving spouse and growing children are a great blessing. But sin in the heart and evil in the world have disrupted the life of the human family. Many wish to have families who don't, and many who have families wish they had had different ones. There are also people who have suffered terrible abuse within their families. Jesus said that his family did not consist of biological relatives, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother:" (Mark 3:35) The church must not only support and repair families but also find a way to become the family of God where everyone, married and single, childless or not, can flourish in love.

Application: Consider ways that you can experience Godly happiness by giving to others. Perhaps the small group can do something together.

Discuss:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 128?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 128?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.

Psalm 129: A song of endurance

Theme: As you ascend to the house of the Lord, He will protect you and keep others from prevailing over you.

Psalm 129

1 Since my youth they have often attacked me—let Israel say—
2 since my youth they have often attacked me, but they have not prevailed against me.
3 Plowmen plowed over my back; they made their furrows long.
4 The Lord is righteous; he has cut the ropes of the wicked.
5 Let all who hate Zion be driven back in disgrace.
6 Let them be like grass on the rooftops, which withers before it grows up
7 and can't even fill the hands of the reaper or the arms of the one who binds sheaves.
8 Then none who pass by will say,
“May the Lord's blessing be on you. We bless you in the name of the Lord.”

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- What is something (a hobby, a course of study, a job, etc) that you gave up on, but wished you had stuck with it and why?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, Righteous Lord, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Stick-to-itiveness. Perseverance. Patience. Endurance. The way of faith is not a fad that is taken up in one century only to be discarded in the next. It lasts. It is a way that works. It has been tested thoroughly.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 129 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?

- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 129 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 129 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions of concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Endurance:

Our theme this week is a song of endurance, which could also be described as perseverance or stick-to-itiveness. AS a group, discuss what does it mean to endure and how that is a noble quality in faith.

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Perseverance is not resignation, putting up with things the way they are, staying in the same old rut year after year after year, or being a doormat for people to wipe their feet on. Endurance is not a desperate hanging on but a traveling from strength to strength. Endurance is triumphant and alive.

- How does Peterson help us understand what endurance and perseverance are and what they are not?
- Why do we often have a false understanding of endurance, thinking we need to be a doormat?
- What might Christian endurance look like, if it is not a doormat?

Biblical Endurance: Before we dive into Psalm 129, here are two passages from the new testament that talk about endurance. They show that at the start there is struggle, yet through endurance we find strength of character.

Romans 5: 3-5: Affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us.

James 1: 3-4: The testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

In the section title "Tough Faith" in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Peterson uses the biblical examples of Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul as models of endurance.

- How did these biblical examples experience the struggle and reward of endurance?
- Can you think of other biblical examples of endurance?
- Can you think of non-biblical examples of people who have endured through adversity and developed character?

Psalm 129:2-3: Since my youth they have often attacked me, but they have not prevailed against me. Plowmen plowed over my back; they made their furrows long.

- This is a graphic picture of the oppression felt by the Psalmist.
- Have you ever felt such a continuous attack for your faith?

- Why do you think the Psalmist does not give up on his faith?
- How do you think you would respond to such oppression, and why?

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

An interesting line in Psalm 129 provides a detail that is both fascinating and useful. The sentence is "Then GOD ripped the harnesses of the evil plowmen to shreds (Message translation)." [The Lord is righteous; he has cut the ropes of the wicked. – Psalm 129:4, CSB] The previous verse provides the context: "Their plowmen plowed long furrows up and down my back." Picture Israel, the person of faith, lying stretched out, prone. The enemies hitch up their oxen and plows and begin cutting long furrows in the back of Israel. Long gashes cut into the skin and flesh, back and forth, systematically, like a farmer working a field. Imagine the whole thing: the blood, the pain, the back-and-forth cruelty.

And then, suddenly, the realization that there was no more hurting. The oxen were still tramping back and forth, the oxherds were still shouting their commands, but the plows were not working. "GOD ripped the harnesses of the evil plowmen to shreds." The harness cords, connecting plow to oxen, have been severed. The plows of persecution aren't working, and the oxherds haven't even noticed! They plod back and forth, unaware that their opposition is worthless.

The life of the world that is opposed or indifferent to God is futile. It is plowing a field, thinking you are tramping all over God's people and cutting his purposes to ribbons, but unaware that long ago your plow was disengaged. The way of the world is marked by proud, God-defying purposes, unharnessed from eternity and therefore worthless and futile.

- How can God make then persecution of those against him, become futile?
- Have you seen that in your life, or the life of others? Share examples of God's faithfulness through endurance.
- How might knowing the works of the world (the plowmen) is ultimately futile give you the strength to endure through difficult experiences?

Quote from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

The cornerstone sentence of Psalm 129 is "GOD wouldn't put up with it, he sticks with us." (vs 4)* When the Bible says that God sticks with us, the emphasis is on his dependable personal relationship, that he is always there for us. That "he sticks with us" is the reason Christians can look back over a long life crisscrossed with cruelties, unannounced tragedies, unexpected setbacks, sufferings, disappointments, depressions-look back across all that and see it as a road of blessing, and make a song out of what we see. "They've kicked me around ever since I was young, but they never could keep me down."

God sticks to his relationship. He establishes a personal relationship with us and stays with it. The central reality for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment God makes to us. Endurance is not the result of our determination, it is the result of God's faithfulness. We survive in the way of faith not because we have extraordinary stamina but because God sticks with us.

- God sticks with us. Why does God stick with us? What do we really bring to the relationship?
- God sticks with us. How does that give you confidence to endure?
- God sticks with us. How can we rely on God to give us stamina to survive the way of faith?
- God sticks with us. How does that fact encourage you, today?
- God sticks with us. Who do you need to share that message with this week?
- God sticks with us. How can this truth enhance our journey as we ascend to the House of the Lord? How does it refocus our worship experience?

* The Lord is righteous, Psalm 129:4, CSB. According to Peterson, righteousness “speaks of a personal right relationship between Creator and creation. Righteous is a term denoting relationship, referring to a real relationship between two parties.

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 129 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=egURc36QUx8

Review: Psalms 124-129

- How has or journey through these psalms help you grow in faith and community?
- What were some themes that you saw repeated through these psalms?
- Which Psalm of ascent was your favorite and why?

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller’s *The Songs of Jesus* (pg 335)

Oppression. The psalmist talks about slaves with backs scarred by whips, who are liberated by God. God works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed and hates world rulers who are tyrants, so their power is always temporary. We should therefore be working for social justice in the world. But Christians can read this at another level. There was one who voluntarily gave his back to the smiters, by whose wounds and stripes we are healed. When we meet people who oppose the gospel, we should follow Jesus by defeating evil through forgiveness and love and a calling toward repentance.

Application: Is there an area of faith that you are considering giving up on? Ask the group to help you discover how God is sticking with you even in your struggle. Pray that God will help you stick with it, as he sticks with you.

Discuss:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 129?
- How will this psalm help you through life’s journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 129?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.