

1. After finishing the "mountain" that is Psalm 119, the next question is where does one go from here? The answer is to use the knowledge gained by His word to draw closer to God Himself.
  - a) That is why the biggest psalm and longest chapter in the bible (again #119) leads to another section of much shorter psalms that the bible itself calls "The song of ascents".
  - b) For religious Jews during the "bible days", (to make it simple), three times a year those people would walk from wherever they were to Jerusalem. That city is about 3,000 feet above sea level. The simple point is that it was a long climb up to where that city was located and three times per year Jewish people would walk there for holiday festivities.
  - c) All of that history leads to Psalms 120-134. The next 15 psalms in the bible were used as songs to sing as one journeyed up this mountain. Remember that people traveled in groups so think of the next 15 songs as traveling songs to keep everyone's mind occupied.
  - d) If all of this is true, why have 15 separate psalms as opposed to one big one? I suppose because each psalm has a separate purpose and together they form a journey to follow.
2. OK John, as you like to say, so what? This is interesting ancient history of one happens to care about Jewish people living thousands of years ago. How does any of this affect my life?
  - a) The point for you and me is that God always wants us to draw us close to Him. God also desires more than just us praying to Him alone or just reading our bible. Drawing close to God includes the idea of working in groups to not only make a difference for Him but to also to seek Him collectively as well as individually.
  - b) Does this mean I have to travel to Jerusalem to do this? Of course not. In fact, if one reads in the bible about celebrating these Jewish feasts (see Exodus 23:14 and 34:23), the text says it was compulsory for Jews to celebrate these specific holidays, but the text never says it was required to celebrate these holidays in Jerusalem. Let me also add that the New Testament does not require Christians to celebrate these Jewish holidays.
    - i) Even during the time of Jesus hundreds of years after these psalms were written, Jerusalem would be extra crowded during these feast days, as people would travel there to celebrate specific Jewish holidays. Jesus Himself made this same journey often spoke during the times of these celebrations.
  - c) OK John, you are slipping back into history again. Let's get back to today. To explain how it affects us, let me give my lessons title: "Understanding the importance of praying for the peace of Jerusalem". When one reads the entire bible, there are actually very few occasions where the bible bluntly tells us to pray collectively for somebody or something. While the bible is full of prayer requests, there is only a few times where the bible calls on all of us to pray for a specific thing. One of those prayers for is the peace of Jerusalem. Let me explain why I believe Christians should pray this as well:
    - i) Jerusalem is a city up in the mountains (think high hills) of Israel. Mountains surround that entire city. The point being is that this city symbolically has the concept of being protected. Jerusalem is a place where the worship of God was not only centered, but it was a place of comfort and safety.
    - ii) This leads back to you and me. This lesson is not about literally traveling to this city, but about drawing close to God. It is about taking a journey there (so to speak) in order to draw close to Him. That is why the bible encourages us to pray for the peace of this city. Yes, I literally pray for Jerusalem's peace as instructed. This is also about praying for peace to be in our lives, as we trust God to guide the life of the believer. That is the idea behind praying for the peace of Jerusalem.
  - d) With all of that said, let's start this multi-psalm journey through the next three lessons (including this one) as we go to draw close to God and what He desires for our lives.

3. Psalm 120, title: A song of ascents.
  - a) That title is repeated in every psalm through number 134. The idea here has to do with ascending (climbing) up a mountain. These psalms were organized after the time of King David and after the time of his son King Solomon. We know that because four of these psalms were written by David and one by Solomon. The others don't state an author.
  - b) So why are they called "ascents"? It is because these psalms were literally combined with the idea of using them to journey up to Jerusalem. The point is David and Solomon may not have written their particular psalms with that purpose, but the psalms were later combined as a traveling series to occupy the minds of Jewish travelers up to Jerusalem.
  - c) Like I said in my last lesson, one learns in life is that a journey to get to our destination usually has far greater rewards than actually getting to that destination. Traveling to get to our spiritual or physical destination often teaches us far more than when we get there. That is what we will discover through these next 15 psalms. I don't plan on covering all of them in this one lesson, but one will get the idea of traveling and learning as we go.
4. Verse 1: I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me.
  - a) OK John, I'll bite. ☺ Why is the psalmist in distress and how did God answer him?
    - i) The answer is that wherever he physically was, the psalmist had to deal with people who were not interested in the God of the bible. That leads to the idea of "let's forget about our problems and focus on God to help with our issues".
    - ii) The psalmist was somewhere outside of Israel interacting with nonbelievers. We know that because Verse 5 gives the psalmist location, which was outside the country. He didn't feel close to God where he literally was at that moment.
  - b) Suppose we are really worried about something. How does God literally answer us in such times? I don't believe our problems magically going away when we pray. I believe the real answer is about seeing our problems from His perspective. I have learned that the opposite of faith is fear. The question we need to regularly ask ourselves in difficult times is "Are we trusting in God or not?" That is the question of this verse.
5. Verse 2: Save me, O LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. <sup>3</sup> What will he do to you, and what more besides, O deceitful tongue?
  - i) As one reads these verses, notice the focus is on lying. The point is the psalmist is dealing with some unnamed person or group that is lying to his face.
  - b) OK John, what is going on here and why should I care? The specifics are not given. Again, we do know from Verse 5 that the psalmist was not in Israel when he wrote this psalm. I suspect the answer has to do with dealing with people who don't trust in God.
    - i) It would be like someone saying to us, "Why are you wasting all of that time going to church or reading your bible? I know what a hypocrite you really are." The response to give to such charges is that we are not better people than nonbelievers, just forgiven. We believers spend time drawing close to God in order for Him to make us better people, not for us to change ourselves.
  - c) This leads back to the topic of working our way (spiritually speaking) to Jerusalem. The point is we want to draw close to God not to avoid the lies of people who don't trust in Him, but to draw upon His power to deal with our issues.
    - i) This comes back to the idea that we can't fix ourselves. We want to draw upon God in order to deal with life, as it is much easier than trying to do it based on our own power. The response to lies about our faith is not to fix others, but to draw upon His love in order to be the type of person He wants us to be.
  - d) To put this verse into context, the psalmist is starting his journey up to Jerusalem. The starting point of this journey is in a foreign (non-Israelite) land, as we will discover in a few verses. The psalmist has to deal with the lies that the God of the bible is not the true God of this world. It would be like us being told, "You don't have to depend upon your God for survival, you can do it on your own power" or some lie like that.

6. Verse 4: He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree.
  - a) OK, who is the "you" in this verse and why is that person in so much trouble? Again, know that the psalmist is currently in non-Israelite territory, as we will read in the next verse. The psalmist is dealing with the lies of those who don't believe in the God. At this point, the psalmist is thinking in effect, "I will not worry about what you people say to me, as I know that you who don't trust in God will one day suffer for that lack of trust."
    - i) The reference to our enemies being hit by sharp arrows is a statement that God will eventually punish those who don't trust in Him. Notice that it is God (the "He" to start this verse) that does the punishing. Our job as Christians is to be witnesses to all people. It is God's job to judge eternal salvation.
  - b) Let me quickly comment on the phrase "burning coals of the broom tree". The "broom tree" is also known as the juniper bush. This bush that grows in the Israeli desert eventually turns into coal. This word picture is saying that one will suffer the heat of hell from turning from God. Does this mean hell is literally a hot place? I don't know. I just know it is a place of suffering and this verse is giving a word picture of that suffering.
    - i) We have to remember that the psalms are poetry, and sometimes it draws up colorful images in order to make its point. That point here is that we don't have to worry about the fate of those who lie to us, as in effect God Himself will deal with our enemies. Our job is to trust in Him and be a good witness for Him.
7. Verse 5: Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar!
  - a) The short version of "What are Meshech and Kedar" is that this is Arab country. I won't go into a long lecture here of what is and is not an Arab. In fact, you may be surprised to learn how many of the Middle Eastern groups technically are not Arabs.
    - i) OK, I said this is the short version and I meant it. What one has to remember is that Israel back then was surrounded by enemies just as it is today. So why do so many countries hate the existence of Israel as a country? I am convinced the hatred is Satanic in origin. Jesus in His future role as the promised Messiah will return one day to Israel. In order for Jesus to return, Israel has to exist when He returns. Satan is well aware of that fact. If the nation of Israel is not in existence, it delays Jesus return and Satan can rule over this world for a longer time frame.
  - b) OK John, that is nice theology. However you and I are not in wherever Kedar is located, so how is this relevant to us? The idea is we live in a world where the majority of people do not believe in the God of the bible. Sometimes we feel like we're a majority when we go to church, but statistically speaking, we are a minority.
    - i) The idea is that as we journey to get closer to God, our starting point is living in a world full of nonbelievers. I find that many people in effect are trying to impress God with "their good deeds outweighing their bad deeds" as opposed to simply trusting in Him for not only forgiveness but for guidance of their lives.
  - c) So does this mean God does not want us to live in Kedar, or our home country? No, it just means that He desires that we spend time getting close to Him. Remember that the Israelites had feasts several times a year. The idea is to dedicate some times of our lives to draw close to Him, and these series of psalms are describing such times.
8. Verse 6: Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. <sup>7</sup> I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war.
  - a) My paraphrase of these two verses: "There is no pleasing some people. We can say we want peace and then our adversaries want to fight us." That is another reason we look to God to guide our lives, simply because it is the only way we can achieve a sense of peace when we have to deal with adversaries.
  - b) This is the end of the first psalm. The main point of this psalm is in effect, "We need to start drawing close to God and not focus on what others around us are doing." We will discover that having that peace is the underlying theme of all psalms in this group.

9. Psalm 121, title: A song of ascents.
  - a) Again, every psalm from 120 through 134 mentions the "ascents" aspect. Since I already discussed how this title is about drawing closer to God, I'll move on to Verse 1.
10. Verse 1: I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
  - a) In the last psalm, the psalmist was complaining about lying lips and the fact that he wants peace and his enemies want war. Now the psalmist says in effect, where do I get help in order to face my problems? Verse 2 reminds us that peace comes from knowing God.
    - i) We may not be dealing with "lying lips" or angry people at the moment.  
However, the solution to whatever is our problem still involves seeking God.
  - b) Notice the title for God in Verse 2 is the maker of heaven and earth. The point being is that God is not just for Jewish people, but the God of the entire world. So why is that emphasized here? It is not about non-Jewish people being asked to celebrate these Jewish holidays. It is about reminding us that anyone can draw close to Him because He is the God of all people and not just the Jewish nation.
  - c) Let me also discuss the word "hills" here. It is not a metaphor. Remember that this series of psalms was used to walk up hills to get to Jerusalem. No matter which way one went to Jerusalem, one had to walk up hills to get there. The point is just as the Jewish nation gathered in Jerusalem to worship God, so we look up to Him in order to worship Him.
11. Verse 3: He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber; <sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
  - a) The essential point of these two verses is that God is never asleep on the job. To use a classical line taught to children, "God loves us too much to ever take our eyes off of us."
  - b) The text says He will not allow my foot to slip. Remember the Israelites were walking up a big hill singing this psalm. This verse can be a prayer of protection as one travels there.
  - c) To put it another way, if God loves me this much, how come I still stub my foot every now and then? To expand that, why does He allow bad things to happen to me?
    - i) These verses are not saying God gives us a pain free life. These verses are saying we can trust in Him to guide our lives and lead us down the path He desires.
    - ii) So how do we know what He desires for us? Start by asking Him in prayer. Next, spend time in His word and with other believers. It is a combination of living our lives by biblical principals and then doing what we enjoy doing. I find that God then guides us to do what is His will for any moment in time. That is how He does not allow our feet to slip as He is always guiding us to do His will.
12. Verse 5: The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand; <sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
  - a) First notice the big picture concept of God guiding our life and protecting us. This psalm is about starting the journey to draw close to Him. As we make that journey in our lives, He is guiding us and protecting us at the same time.
  - b) This leads to these two verses. They are also saying that God is guiding us as we seek Him and He does protect us from harm.
  - c) So are these verses saying I will never get sunburn or hurt by moonlight? Not exactly. The idea is more about the concept that if we are living to make a difference for Him. He will guide us so we can make that difference and give us comfort through our pain.
  - d) Let me also comment about "right hand". Soldiers in those days carried shields in their left hands. The right hand held the sword (assuming one was right handed). The point is the right sides of their bodies were more exposed to sunlight and moonlight.
    - i) Again, the idea is not that God will prevent sunburns by trusting in Him. The idea is that He will protect us when we are exposed to what we face in our lives.
    - ii) This is about trusting God to guide us through danger and He is leading us down the path He desires for our lives if we are willing to be lead by Him.

13. Verse 7: The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life; <sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.
  - a) As I read through this psalm a few times, I keep coming back to the desire to draw closer to God. The idea for the ancient Israelite reading this psalm is that as they journeyed up the hills to Jerusalem, they could trust in God to protect them not only in this particular journey, but also as He guided their whole lives.
    - i) Singing this psalm (the original music is long lost) reminds people as we travel together to seek God, He is protecting us and guiding our lives.
  - b) OK John, suppose my church is not on a hill or doesn't even have steps to climb. We don't literally have to walk up a hill to seek God, but simply act out on our desire to seek Him both individually and as a group. This is the reminder that He is guiding our lives through whatever we are dealing with at the present moment.
  - c) So why make the effort to gather with believers in the first place? Know that going to church or any sort of gathering with believers as a privilege, and not a duty. We get the opportunity to collectively draw on His strength so that we (as a group of believers) can face whatever it is we have to face in life. That is the idea being taught in these verses.
  - d) With that said, I believe we are ready for Psalm 122.
14. Psalm 122: A song of ascents. Of David.
  - a) The title of this psalm not only has the comment of "A song of ascents" that is part of every psalm in this group, but it also mentions that David wrote it.
  - b) For the roughly 500-year history of the Jewish people occupying the land of Israel prior to David, the center of worship was in a place called "Shiloh". During David's lifetime, the worship capital was moved from Shiloh to Jerusalem where it remained their capital.
    - i) My point here is that if David wrote about the glories of Jerusalem, here is a man that worked to make this city the capital of that nation.
  - c) OK John, you are slipping back into ancient history. ☺ Tell me why I should care?
    - i) Besides the fact that the God of the Jewish people is also the God of the Universe, the idea is that Jerusalem represents the spiritual home of the Jewish people.
    - ii) Again, it doesn't mean, for example we have to pray towards Jerusalem. It just means that as Jerusalem represents a place of safety and "being close to God". When we as a group of believers draw close to Him, we can think of ourselves as figuratively speaking, drawing close to God in a "Jerusalem-like" experience.
15. Verse 1: I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
  - a) Considering the fact that David was a king, one gets the impression that he enjoyed the collective act of worshipping God with other people. In this verse he is saying how happy is he that he gets another chance to worship Him along with fellow believers.
  - b) Now let's come back to the point that this is a group of psalms used for traveling. One gets the impression that for this psalm, one is either in Jerusalem, or maybe the city is now in view as one is traveling up that mountain. The point is one considers it a joy to travel up to this city. David is happy he is traveling to Jerusalem not to rule or do any sort of official business, but just to go there for the purpose of worshipping God.
  - c) The point is God wants us to think of worshipping Him as a privilege, not a requirement.
16. Verse 2: Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.
  - a) Here in Verse 2, we are now at a point where the psalmist is inside the city gates. If these psalms are all about this traveling road trip, and we are already in Jerusalem in Psalm 122, what is going to happen with the next 12 psalms? The short answer is the journey is much more than the physical trip from one's starting point into this city. It is about drawing close to God, as we will discover in this lesson as well as the next two.
    - i) The point here, in the third psalm of the group, is the travelers are describing being inside the city gates. Whether or not they are actually at that point or just thinking about being at that point is not known.

- b) Let's try this concept another way: Think about going to church. Let's say we are at a point where we are now standing on church property. Should we be excited because, say we are now standing on the ground where the church is located? The idea is not about being excited about that particular piece of real estate, as much as it is the realization that we are getting to the point where we are drawing close to God.
  - c) If you have ever taken a long road trip, there is something special about finally getting to the place of one's destination. Even if we are not at our actual stopping point, the fact that "we are there" can give us a sense of accomplishment and excitement at the same time.
  - d) Now let's focus on Jerusalem again. Why get excited about this city? It is because it represents the home of God. I do know that when Jesus returns, He will rule the world from Jerusalem. (References: Daniel 9:25, Isaiah 9:7 and Luke 1:32.) Therefore, think of traveling there as focusing on the place where God will literally rule from over the world.
17. Verse 3: Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.
- a) To appreciate this verse, visualize walking up to Jerusalem and seeing how this city is compacted within its surrounding hillsides. For those who have seen Jerusalem today, it was much smaller then. Back then the entire city was only within the old city walls.
  - b) OK John, so why should I care that this city is compacted together? The idea is lots of believers gathering together in tight quarters to worship God. Now picture lots of people gathering in one's local church to worship God. There is no room for everyone to stretch out, because there is a large crowd gathering to worship God.
    - i) In short, the point is to appreciate "everyone" getting together to worship God.
    - ii) So does this mean heaven will be crowded when I get there? Just how are billions of people going to share space in heaven anyway? My personal view is that somehow we are each unique in heaven and can recognize each other, but at the same time, heaven is in more than "three dimensions" and space is not an issue.
    - iii) Just as Jesus entered a locked room, (John 20:19), I don't see that as a problem.
18. Verse 4: That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.
- a) Remember that David wrote this psalm. During his reign, Jerusalem became the capital of Israel for the first time. One has to picture for religious holidays, the whole country traveling by foot up several thousand feet to reach this city. In this verse, the praise is not given to the city but to God who is blessing the nation of Israel for worshipping Him.
  - b) So why bless God through this city? That comes back to my lesson theme. For Jewish people Jerusalem represents where God is located. For the Christian, it represents where Jesus will rule over the earth one day. It is not that Christians or even Jews today have to pray towards Jerusalem. The idea is that this city is where God chose as His headquarters on earth, and we should recognize that fact.
19. Verse 5: There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.
- a) If Jerusalem was the capital of Israel (as it is today), it would also be the place where court judges make decisions and even where the king also serves as a top judge.
  - b) So why mention here that Jerusalem is also a place of judgment as well as a place to go worship God? To understand, remember that God is not only a God of love, but also a God of judgment. The idea for the religious Jew is that they must confess their sins before Him in order to receive forgiveness and be able to worship Him.
    - i) Yes the Christian is eternally forgiven of sins. However, we still should confess our sins just to remind ourselves of what God wants us to turn away from.
    - ii) The point as it relates to this verse is that as the believer travels to Jerusalem, the reminder is there is that this is not only a place to worship God, but that worship also includes the idea of "judgment" and that judgment requires confession of sin.
  - c) OK, enough on that tough topic. Let me move on to my favorite verse in this lesson.

20. Verse 6: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure.
- a) I have searched the entire bible to see when the bible calls on all believers to pray for something, and there are very few such requests. Let me describe a few of those requests:
    - i) Besides prayer for Jerusalem, those occasions includes prayer for workers for the harvest (i.e., people to help lead others to Christ, see Luke 10:2) and also that when the "bad stuff of Revelation starts" that people can be saved. (My paraphrase of Luke 21:36). Grant it the bible is full of references to prayer. However, I have only found a few references where it calls on all believes to pray for specific things.
    - ii) To summarize those three prayers, God wants us to pray to draw people to Him, that others join in drawing people to Him an that we should seek Him together.
    - iii) Yes there is also the "Lord's Prayer". That is about asking God for things for our own lives. My topic here is group prayer. These are some specific references on that topic of group prayer.
  - b) OK John, explain some more why praying for the city of Jerusalem is so important. If you are so "pro-Israel" why not pray for the whole country? Why pray for this specific city?
    - i) The decisions of the leaders affect that country, and those leaders are in Jerusalem.
    - ii) Even with that said, I don't think that is the point of this verse. If this is the city that is the center of worship to God, and this is the city that Jesus will rule from one day, we should pray for its peace so that people can worship there peacefully.
    - iii) But if God is going to lead from there anyway, shouldn't we not worry about that city given the fact God will do, what God will do, period?
      - a) The answer is that it is God's desire for us to get involved in "His plan". Part of prayer is for us to get His will done. God chooses to work through people to get His will done. Therefore, praying for the peace of this city is really praying that God's will be done for this city.
      - b) OK and what is God's will for this city? That this city be used forever as a place for prayer to God. It would be hard to worship there if there is war going on in that city. Throughout the history of Israel, that city is always on the verge of war. Collectively seeking God is the city's only hope.
    - iv) I am reminded of a joke between American President Ronald Reagan and Israel President Begin back in the 1980's. After a meeting, Reagan told Begin, don't forget to pray about this. Begin said, I'll pray from Jerusalem. It's a local call.
    - v) Let me explain this one more way: Satan is well aware that Jesus will rule one day from Jerusalem. He wants to delay that event as long as possible, as he knows that when Jesus returns, that is the end of his reign over the earth. If Jerusalem is at war, people can't worship there. Therefore, we pray for the city's peace as we are battling powers that we can only defeat through God's strength. That is another reason why believers are called to pray for the peace of that city.
21. Verse 7: May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels." <sup>8</sup> For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." <sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.
- a) If you are still not convinced that praying for the peace of Jerusalem is important, note that the last three verses of this short psalm encourage us to seek it's peace.
  - b) In Verse 7, the idea is that God's peace be within its walls and citadels (palaces). No it's not describing the homes of kings and rich people. The idea is that if God reigns here, then we are to bless the buildings where God reigns from and His people are living.
  - c) The idea is if the Israelites want a place where they can worship God in peace. They depend upon God to keep that city in peace. God calls on all of us to pray for the peace of that city. In Verse 8 the call in effect is to pray for the city's peace for the sake of our "brothers and friends" gathered there. The idea is that fellow believers have, are and will gather there to worship God. If they are fellow believers, we should pray for their peace.

- d) In Verse 9, the prayer is in effect that we want Jerusalem to prosper as a city because that is where the temple was located.
  - i) First a technical note. David's son Solomon built the first official Jewish temple. However, the "house of the Lord" did refer the temporary structure that existed in David's time even before Solomon built the more permanent structure.
  - ii) Now let's talk a little about the city's prosperity: Jerusalem has no natural resources that could make one rich. It always amazes me to think the world has been fighting over this city for thousands of years, and it has no resources (e.g., oil, gold, or even farm land) that anyone would want.
  - iii) So how does this city prosper? Only by visitors coming to see it. In effect God wants us to pray for visitors to that city. The more visitors come there, the more the city prospers.
- e) OK, time to end my plug for visiting Jerusalem ☺ Let us move on to the next psalm.
- 22. Psalm 123, title: A song of ascents.
  - a) This psalm has the same title as the others, so I won't comment any further on this point.
- 23. Verse 1: I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven.
  - a) This psalm only has four lines, but there is a lot to learn from these four lines. At this point in the "traveling theme", the traveler is in Jerusalem, and is now looking up to God.
  - b) The idea is in effect, "Yes I am in Jerusalem, but You God, are up in heaven. Therefore, I don't look all around me to find You. Instead, I look up to heaven in order to find you.
  - c) So if God is in heaven and not in Jerusalem, why travel there? The idea is to gather with other believers to seek Him. Now that "they are there", the next step is about collectively looking up to God for guidance for our lives, which is the topic of the next verse.
- 24. Verse 2: As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.
  - a) To explain this verse, I have to explain a little bit of background of how household slaves and how maidens (think female slaves) served their mistresses. My point is such masters rarely spoke commands to their slaves. They used hand signals to gesture the slaves.
    - i) The slaves were trained to watch the master's eyes and hand gestures in order to know how to serve the master. The idea for the slave was to watch the master and learn to anticipate what were their master's needs at the moment.
    - ii) I am reminded of some fancy restaurants where waiters look for opportunities to say, change the plates or put more butter on the table when the dinner guest will not be disturbed by the actions of the waiter at that one moment.
  - b) OK John, most of us don't live a life where we are literally slaves to other people. How do the actions of slaves and mistresses affect how we look to God, as Verse 2 implies? After all, God doesn't have any hand moments. How can we serve God that same way?
    - i) The point is the way we learn what God desires of our lives, is in effect by watching Him, via prayer and regular time reading His word.
    - ii) The idea is to learn to anticipate how we can be of service to God. The one new commandment for Christians is to "love one another". (See John 13:34.) The idea is to anticipate what the needs of others are, and help before they even ask.
      - a) One has to be careful here, in that we can't help people who don't want to be helped. However, when one sees an obvious need arise, one should help and that is the word picture being painted here.
    - iii) This leads me back to the verse. The point of this verse is just as a servant watches their master's actions as to how to react, so we should watch how God works in our lives in order to know how to react. We study our bible to understand how to live our lives to be pleasing to Him. We watch the actions of what is around us in order to live to make a difference for God in our world.



- c) Now notice the end of this psalm says, "Until He (God) shows us mercy".
    - i) How does looking for God's guidance affect Him showing us mercy? First know that mercy is about avoiding the punishment we do deserve for our sins.
    - ii) The point is God allows the consequences of our sins to happen to us. Asking for His mercy is in effect to ask Him to ease up on what punishment we do deserve. By being aware of God and doing what He desires for our lives, we then get the privilege of asking Him to "ease up" on what we do deserve for our sins.
  - d) Speaking of mercy, let's take a look at Verse 3.
25. Verse 3: Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt. <sup>4</sup>We have endured much ridicule from the proud, much contempt from the arrogant.
- a) It is one thing to say, "Have mercy on us because we have sinned". It seems strange to say in effect, "Forgive us God, because we have endured the contempt of others".
    - i) If others have picked on us, it would be the natural thing to pray for God to avenge us or at least protect us from that contempt. What is going on here?
  - b) I believe the forgiveness has to do with the thoughts of taking matters into our own hands. When others have hurt us, the natural thing to do is to want to hurt them back. God is saying, "Let me take care of that contempt. You believers focus on worshipping Me and I'll deal with those who have contempt for belief in Me."
    - i) So does that mean God wants us to be pacifists? No. If you travel to Israel today, people are well armed, and I am glad it is so. If we are physically attacked, it is ok to defend ourselves. However, if we are dealing with the contempt of others, we can't fix them by lashing out back at them. We can only pray for them and say in effect, "God, I can't fix these people, they are Your problem."
    - ii) Remember that the purpose of these psalms is about traveling to Jerusalem to worship God. If we are busy focusing on those who have contempt for our lifestyle, then we are focusing on "them" and not God. That is why the psalmist is asking for mercy here, as we have our focus on the wrong thing for the moment.
26. Psalm 124, Verse 1: If the LORD had not been on our side-- let Israel say-- <sup>2</sup> if the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us, <sup>3</sup> when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive;
- a) Again, it is hard to focus on God when something else is on our mind. In these verses, people are trying to attack believers. If others were trying to attack us, or even if others are angry with us, how do we focus on Him say in a church setting? The psalmist dealt with that issue by remembering past times where God has rescued him through tough situations. That memory gave him the strength to remember the concept of, "I don't have to worry. God is in charge of the situation".
  - b) These verses says the enemies of Israel are "flaring their anger" at them. Remember that the Israelites are traveling to Jerusalem to worship God. Perhaps such believers were still in danger even within the city walls. That is why I believe one should still trust God but at the same time still be ready to defend oneself. The bible doesn't teach pacifism. At the same time, one's trust is in God to lead us to victory, not our weapons themselves.
  - c) So John, are you saying I should trust in God and keep my gun loaded?" That depends what your neighborhood is like. ☺ The idea that God wants to work through us to deal with the situations of our lives. There are times when it is best to run and there are times when it is best to stay and fight.
  - d) Last night I got a call from one of my best friends, who goes to different church than mine. His church is currently involved in a potential break up over an issue. The pastor wants to get away from what that denomination teaches in terms of their views of the nation of Israel, the millennium and Jesus' return. My friend 's view is similar to mine, as does a large portion of that congregation. The pastor and some of the elders want to break away from those traditional views, and thus a church split is happening.

- e) OK John, interesting story. What does it have to do with this psalm? The point is we can gather with believers to worship God and still have to deal with those who oppose us, even if they are within our own ranks. Yes there are times just to let it go and worship God, but sometimes one has to take a stand for what is right. Wisdom is about knowing the proper time to run, the proper time to fight and the proper time to let it go and just focus on worshipping God. The psalmist here realized that if it were not for God guiding his life, he would have fallen away from what He has desired for his life.
27. Verse 4: the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, <sup>5</sup> the raging waters would have swept us away.
- a) Here the psalmist is saying that they (Israelites) would have drowned due to some sort of flood conditions. Possibilities include Noah's flood and the "crossing of the Red sea" and the fact the enemies of Israel drowned after the Israelites finishing crossing that sea.
  - b) With that said, remember that one should read a bible verse in context of the surrounding verses. In the previous verses, the psalmist was describing the fact that their enemies would have killed them if it were not for the fact that God protected them. I suspect this verse is saying that their enemies engulfed them and if it were not for God's help, they would have not lived through that ordeal.
  - c) This leads me back to my friend's predicament. I don't know what is going to happen to his church. I just know that this church's only hope is in God to deal with the situation and to protect him and his church through whatever is happening in that situation.
  - d) Now let me personalize this: We should use whatever spiritual and physical weapons God has provided for us in the battles we fight in life. At the same time, we depend upon God to lead us to victory and not say, our ability to outwit our enemies.
28. Verse 5: Praise be to the LORD, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.
- a) When in doubt about what to say to God, it is always a good idea to start with a simple point about being grateful for what He has done for our lives. Whenever one is down or in trouble, nothing picks us up like simply taking a moment to show gratitude to God.
  - b) I mention that because that is what the psalmist is doing here. Whatever tragedy the psalmist went through in the first four verses of this psalm, is now past tense.
  - c) Instead of saying, "Wow, I'm glad I outwitted my enemies, or wow, I'm glad my weapons were better than their weapons, he gave God the credit for keeping him alive."
    - i) That's the point for us. One thing we do as we travel to seek God is to take a little time to give Him the credit at the least for keeping us alive so that we can take the time to praise Him for his actions. That is what is in view here.
29. Verse 7: We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. <sup>8</sup>Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
- a) To explain this, let me explain what a "fowler" is. It is essentially a person that catches birds to collect them or eat them or both. This verse is not discussing the validity of a person that catches birds. The point is just as a bird that has escaped a trap being set for it, so our true help comes from God and not from our ability to outwit a "fowler".
  - b) The idea of this psalm and this verse is simply that we can't win battles over our enemies given our own strength and ability. Our dependence comes upon God.
    - i) With that said, let me come back to whatever "weapons" are at our disposal. The point here is that we depend upon God to lead us to victory in life. Think of the ancient Israelites. They literally fought wars. At the same time they literally depended upon God. I'm not saying we have to go out and kill whoever is bothering us. I'm just saying we can have victories over whatever issues we are facing by our trust in God. He in turn may tell us to use "these weapons" to face whatever it is we have to face or we may just have to trust Him in our situations.
    - ii) With that said, that is the end of this tough little psalm. We can move on to the last psalm in this lesson, number 125.

30. Psalm 125, Verse 1: Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. <sup>2</sup> As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.
- a) At this point in our travel journey, the psalmist is not thinking about one's enemies anymore, but is focusing back on God Himself to help him face his problems. The idea is, "If we are dependant upon God first, then let us spend some time focusing on Him".
  - b) That leads to the references in these first two verses. The focus is on the mountains that surround Jerusalem. First a technical note. Many of us think of mountains as being over, say 5,000 feet in elevation. Jerusalem is about 3,000 feet in height and the mountains that surround this city are a little higher. My point is if one travels there and one has been to high mountain peaks in other parts of the world, we may not think of Jerusalem as being that "high". Therefore, one can literally call this terrain "high hills" or "low mountains".
  - c) Now that I've got my geography lesson done, let me come back to the verses. In Verse 1, there is a reference to Mount Zion. This is a mountain that is part of the landscape that surrounds Jerusalem. Without giving a big lecture here about this specific mountain, the idea is that this "big mountain of a rock" is unmovable. Imagine trying to move a literal mountain. It can't be done. The psalmist is saying in effect, as long as the earth exists, so a mountain like this exists. As long as this mountain exists, followers of God exist.
    - i) The point here is that as long as people are seeking God, there will be people seeking Him. Yes I understand that there is a day of Jesus' return and just as the world had a beginning, so it has to have an end one day. The point is there is a long time frame between that beginning and that ending. During that long time frame, those who trust in God in effect will "endure" (think saved) forever.
    - ii) What about people who turn from God? This is not about everyone who seeks God being saved. It is about the fact that those of us who truly seek Him and continue to focus on Him "cannot be moved" away from salvation as we trust in effect in an immovable object.
  - d) To describe these verses another way, just as mountains surround Jerusalem so God in effect, surrounds those He loves. That is why believers are encouraged to worship God in groups, to help visualize the picture of God surrounding those He loves.
31. Verse 3: The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil.
- a) Let me loosely translate: God will not allow wicked people to rule over "His land", because then God's people would be tempted to do evil things in that land.
  - b) Does that mean bad people will never be elected to rule over godly people? That has never been true throughout history. The point is the rule of such people won't go on forever, in effect because too many people who trust in God pray for justice.
  - c) This gets me back to the idea of "traveling to Jerusalem". Not in the literal sense, but in the spiritual sense of gathering with believers. The way to overcome bad leadership begins with pray and guidance from God on how to handle difficult situations. It is our trust in Him that gives us victory over bad leaders and not our ability to outfight them.
  - d) Let me get back to my friend's church situation. He is well aware of the fact that He needs to seek God's guidance on how to handle the situation. Leaving that church means the loss of income and for the time being his way of life. I am truly impressed by my friend's faith in God to provide through this whole mess and he knows that if they end up leaving that church, that God will somehow provide for him.
  - e) This leads back to you and me and seeking God. Sometimes as we seek Him, we still have to deal with evil or enemies all around us. Our dependence is on God to help us deal with those situations and not our ability to outwit our enemies. However my friend's situation turns out, I'm sure it will be God's will and those that trust in God and seek Him will have victory in life over whatever "evil" is attempted against the church.

32. Verse 4: Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. <sup>5</sup> But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers.
- a) These two verses read as contrasts to each other. In Verse 4, it is saying, those who trust in God will win out for eternity. In Verse 5 it is saying and those who are "crooked", that is, set on doing evil, will be banished from God's presence for eternity.
  - b) OK John, that seems pretty logical. What if my issue of the moment is non-biblical, or what if I am arguing with someone who also believes in God? The solution is still the same. It is about seeking His guidance on how to best deal with a particular situation.
    - i) Trusting in God is about doing just that. We get frustrated because we want God to fix things on our timing and do it our way. A big part of seeking Him is about trusting in His plans for our lives. Sometimes that even includes suffering through tough battles in order to teach us things and prepare us for other things.
  - c) That little lecture leads me back to these verses. We may not know the outcome of our particular situation at this moment, but we can have faith that those who trust in God in the course of history will win out for eternity over those who refuse to trust in Him.
33. Verse 5, part 2: Peace be upon Israel.
- a) The psalm ends with this call for peace. The idea is in effect, may those who trust in God have peace in their hearts based on that trust in God. The idea of peace is that we believe God will work out our problems, His way and on His timing, and therefore, we don't have to worry about the outcome of our situation. Therefore we can have peace as we trust in God to see us through this situation.
34. I was debating whether or not to throw in one more psalm this lesson, and I figured six psalms is enough for one week. Besides, after spending four lessons on one psalm (#119), it is enough to take on this group of six psalms here in this lesson.
- a) Let me wrap this up by coming back to my lesson theme about understanding what the word "Jerusalem" means to us. Part of it is about understanding the historical and future significance of the literal city. At the same time, it is about understanding the importance of gathering together with other believers in order to worship God.
  - b) What this collection of psalms is saying to all of us is that God desires that we gather together in groups to worship Him, seek Him for comfort, seek Him for protection and seek Him for victories in life. God does promise us all of those things, if we trust in Him and His timing to lead us through our lives. We can have a sense of peace to our lives if we are willing to let go of the results of our lives and trust in God to lead us through our lives. Therefore, this whole lesson is in effect is a reminder that the greatest purpose of living, is to live to make a difference for God in this lifetime.
35. With that said let me close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are guiding our lives to make a difference for You. We don't understand how You are going to guide us through whatever we are dealing with at the moment, but we do know that the solution involves seeking You for comfort, safety, guidance and protection. Help us both individually and as a group of believers seek You as to how to best live our lives. Help us to remember that You want the best for our lives and it is Your desire to guide us to make a difference for You. Help us to trust in the fact You are guiding us. Help us to live according to the principles taught in Your word and trust that You are there, making that difference in our lives. We ask this in Jesus name, amen.